

scholars have shown the influence of Catholicism on family planning advice and services in Poland and Belgium.³ Moreover, through correspondence from ‘ordinary’ Catholics regarding *Humanae Vitae*, Alana Harris has shown, how the debate ‘ventilated diverse renderings of male sexuality and spousal responsibilities’.⁴ Building on this work, and drawing on oral history interviews, letters to Archbishop John Charles McQuaid from Irish men and women, as well as correspondence in women’s magazines, this chapter will explore the significance of religious influences on individuals’ attitudes to family planning in the period following Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968.

The majority religion in Ireland at the time was Catholicism, so this chapter will focus primarily on the influence of Catholic teachings on individuals’ experiences, but the experiences of those from other faiths who were interviewed as part of this project will also be referred to in brief for comparison.⁵ I will suggest that Catholic teachings had an enormous impact on individuals’ family planning practices but that this influence was beginning to wane by the late 1970s. In addition, this chapter draws attention to the power of priests as permission granters and shows that while the Catholic hierarchy continued to be unequivocal in its support of *Humanae Vitae*, there were some dissenting voices in the priesthood as well as sympathetic priests who were beginning to challenge the status quo by providing individuals with absolution for sins relating to contraception.

5.1 *Humanae Vitae* and Responses from the Church Hierarchy and Laity

The papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was published by Pope Paul VI on 25 July 1968. For many Catholics, it was hoped that the pope’s encyclical would constitute a more relaxed approach to the issue of birth control. Austin Clarke’s 1967 poem ‘Our Love is Incorruptible’ illuminated the

Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, 2005); Rusterholz, ‘Reproductive behavior’; Hilliard, ‘The Catholic Church and married women’s sexuality’; Leane, ‘Embodied sexualities’,.

³ Agata Ignaciuk and Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska, ‘Family planning advice in state–socialist Poland, 1950s–80s: Local and transnational exchanges’, *Medical History*, 64:2, (April 2020), pp. 240–66; Anne-Sophie Crosetti, ‘The “converted unbelievers”: Catholics in family planning in French-speaking Belgium (1947–73)’, *Medical History*, 64:2, (April 2020), pp. 267–86.

⁴ Alana Harris, ‘A Magna Carta for marriage: Love, Catholic masculinities and the *Humanae Vitae* contraception crisis in 1968 Britain’, *Cultural and Social History*, 17:3, (2020), pp. 407–29, on p.423.

⁵ As noted in the introduction, the Lambeth conferences of 1930 and 1958 indicated an acceptance of contraception in the Anglican Church.

anxiety felt by couples waiting for the decision from Rome prior to the announcement of the encyclical: 'Now that the Cardinals are rubbing/ Hands, will they permit us to be rubbered?' while his poem 'The Pill' expressed a similar sentiment: 'Pessary, letter, cap. What can/ We do until they have decreed/Their will, changing the ancient creed,/But lie awake on a separate pillow?'⁶ However, to the disappointment of many Catholics, *Humanae Vitae* reinforced the Church's views relating to the purpose of marriage and condemned all methods of artificial contraception.⁷ As journalist Dorine Rohan wrote in 1969 in relation to the encyclical, 'Anger, sadness, astonishment, relief have been felt and expressed in every sphere of the community'.⁸ Rohan felt that the pope's decision on contraception would divide Irish Catholics into three groups: those who would adhere to the Church's teachings; those who would use contraception and cease going to the sacraments, and those who would continue to use contraception 'and endeavour to keep up their religion without going to confession'.⁹ The testimony of Clodagh (b.1940) is perhaps representative of how many Irish men and women felt about the encyclical:

The pope brought out the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, well, I was so disappointed when I read that, they weren't allowing contraception or nothing like for a married couples like, I could understand it if they were, you know, banning it for people who weren't married but people who were married like and like that now as I said to you maybe in the beginning when we got married, the first four or five, you kind of think, that's why I got married having kids and blah, blah and that's okay but then as time went by like and you know you realised and then you had to abstain and that caused rifts as well, you know...

Clodagh believed having children to be part of the purpose of marriage, however, after feeling she had done her duty with her first five children, could not understand why she was not entitled to contraception. Her testimony also highlights the impact that abstention as a form of family planning, in line with Church teachings, had on her relationship with her husband.

The pope had been delayed in making his pronouncement on birth control which had given rise to hope that there would be some change in the Church's stance. By the time he released the encyclical, it was well-known that he was going against the majority opinion of his

⁶ Clarke, *Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage*, p. 34.

⁷ For more on the history of *Humanae Vitae* and how the encyclical was received and engaged with in a variety of countries, see: Harris (ed.), *The Schism of '68*. On reactions from the medical profession in Dublin, see: Foley, 'Too many children'.

⁸ Dorine Rohan, *Marriage Irish Style* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1969), p. 92.

⁹ Rohan, *Marriage Irish Style*, p. 100

commission.¹⁰ Writing to Archbishop John Charles McQuaid in July 1968, for instance, a man from Cork stated ‘The manner in which the statement was made is to be regretted after the public had been prepared for the opposite decision by statement of experts and theologians etc for the past two years’. The man asserted that the majority of the members of the special commission ‘favoured a different line of thought’. He concluded his letter by saying ‘to those burdened with huge families and low incomes this encyclical is a big blow’.¹¹ Similarly, a Dublin mother of nine, wrote to McQuaid to express her ‘gratitude and admiration’ for the recent encyclical but expressed regret ‘that the statement was so long delayed and that the direction and guidance given by our priests, even here in Dublin was so divergent’.¹² Indeed, the pope’s pronouncements may have come as a surprise to members of the clergy themselves. Father Bernárd Lynch attended the Dromantine House Society of African Missions seminary in Newry, Co. Down in the mid- to late-1960s. As a young seminarian, Father Lynch and his contemporaries were so sure that a more flexible statement on birth control would be forthcoming from Pope Paul VI that the seminarians christened him ‘Pope Pill’. In Lynch’s view, this was because ‘we all thought... now, remember the sixties were something else, even in a seminary. We all thought and believed that he would allow that, it made such sense – we all came from big families’.

The encyclical sparked debate worldwide and Ireland was no exception. Letters sent to Irish newspapers indicate the problems individuals faced in trying to adhere to its guidelines. One mother of four, from New Ross, Wexford, wrote to the *Sunday Independent* in August 1968 to say that the rhythm method ‘is impossible in my case because my periods are hopelessly irregular’. She explained that ‘without the Pill, which I have been taking since last November, I would have to abstain totally from sexual relationships with my husband. Surely this would make a mockery of our marriage, which is, after all, a sacrament’.¹³ A mother of three wrote that she felt ‘rather bitter’ about the encyclical, stating ‘We are condemned to have many children because we love in our marriage’. Likewise, another woman from Greystones, Co. Wicklow, wrote of the impact of the encyclical on mothers, stating that numerous children resulted in ‘over-worked, worn-out mothers. Strain and tiredness are killers of happiness and dignity for the mother, children and husband’.¹⁴ As Deirdre Foley

¹⁰ Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, p. 199.

¹¹ Letter to Archbishop McQuaid, 29 July 1967, [DDA, xx/8/2(1–3)].

¹² Letter to Archbishop McQuaid, 1 August 1968, [DDA, xx/8/12].

¹³ ‘It’s a mockery of marriage’, *Sunday Independent*, 11 August 1968, p. 14.

¹⁴ ‘I feel bitter’ and ‘Kills happiness’, *Sunday Independent*, 25 August 1968, p. 8.

has argued, '*Humanae Vitae* created a temporary obstacle for many Irish Catholics, particularly the less well-off, in accessing artificial methods of contraception (primarily the pill) in Ireland'.¹⁵

Following the introduction of the papal encyclical in 1968, *Woman's Way* published a series of letters received on the subject of 'The Pope and the Pill'. These letters provide further insights into attitudes towards the encyclical among Irish women readers. Mrs. R.H. from Cork, who was almost thirty, explained that she had married at nineteen and had six children in eight years. She had been told by her physician 'that I am almost certain to keep having children for the best part of the next twenty years if I am not careful.' R.H. asked 'is it any wonder that there are so many women suffering from mental breakdown due to the strain of trying to manage on their incomes and living from month to month?' Mrs. M.B.D. from Tullamore stated that the safe period caused 'stress and strain that marriage in this day and age is unable to withstand' and argued that 'we all have our lives to live and the right to exercise our free will'. Mrs. Maura Hann from Arklow stated that the encyclical 'was a bitter disappointment to the majority of Catholic couples' with lack of access to contraception being 'the chief cause of the unhappiness and apathy so prevalent in Irish homes to-day.' Others were more positive about the pope's proclamation and perhaps, as a consequence of their religious views, agreed with the encyclical. 'Widow and mother of five sons' stated that the whole world should thank Pope Paul 'for the wonderful job he has made of the white paper on birth control.' Mrs. F. O'Sullivan asked 'what is all the fuss about?', stating that Catholics had never been allowed contraceptives before and the Church should not be expected to engage in 'bending over backwards to keep them Catholic by every means in her power that those who want to have their cake and eat it feel that the Pope should give his blessing on their promiscuity.'¹⁶ Evidently, there was a range of polarized views on this topic. The print media, in particular women's magazines, was an important vehicle for women to express their views on the matter.

In Ireland, as Peter Murray has argued, 'the encyclical enabled authoritarian forces to reassert themselves and paved the way for the adoption of the hard-line conservative positions that were subsequently asserted, to gradually diminishing effect, on issues of State law change'.¹⁷

¹⁵ Foley, 'Too Many Children?', p. 160.

¹⁶ 'The Pope and the pill', *Woman's Way*, 6 September 1968, p. 2-3.

¹⁷ Peter Murray, 'The best news Ireland ever got? *Humanae Vitae*'s Reception on the Pope's Green Island' in A. Harris (ed.), *The Schism of '68: Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945-75* (Palgrave, 2018), pp. 275-301, on p. 294.

Archbishop John Charles McQuaid described the encyclical as an ‘essential document’ which reiterated the teaching of the Church.¹⁸ Some went further in their condemnation of artificial contraception. The bishop of Galway, Rev. Dr. Michael Browne, in a letter following the pope’s pronouncement, focused particularly on the dangers of the pill:

there is also the publicity and the commercial drive of the big industry engaged in the manufacture and sale of expensive pills. We should remember how the thalidomide pill, which produced terrible deformities in the children, was put on sale. Another pill has now been produced, the long-term affects [sic] of which on mother and child are not certain.¹⁹

Browne’s letter here, which refers to the thalidomide disaster, focuses on the potential side effects of the contraceptive pill as a means of warning people from using it. Indeed, the side effects of the pill had sparked considerable discussion among medical experts in the UK and US in the 1960s and 1970s, and as Marks has argued, the links between the pill and thrombotic disease were particularly concerning in the wake of the thalidomide tragedy which had been especially catastrophic in Europe.²⁰ More widely, it was not uncommon for religious elites like Browne to selectively draw on concerns about the side effects of the pill in order to bolster their arguments against it. Agnieszka Kościńska has shown how in the Polish context, Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz, a devout Catholic and popular sexologist, mobilised ‘the intellectual cover and scientific rhetoric of contemporary medical knowledge’ in his arguments against the pill, also alluding to the mistakes of the thalidomide tragedy.²¹

The Irish bishops issued a statement in October 1968 in which they affirmed their confidence that the Irish people would accept *Humanae Vitae* and reminded the laity that ‘the pope speaks not as one theologian among many, but as the Vicar of Christ who has the special assistance of the Holy Spirit in teaching the universal Church’.²² Louise Fuller has suggested that this statement was ‘more humane than statements of less than ten years previously’ particularly as there was a recognition of the ‘delicate personal problems and intellectual difficulties to which this

¹⁸ ‘The encyclical: first Catholic reactions’, *The Tablet*, 3 August 1968, p. 766.

¹⁹ ‘Galway hears its bishop’, *Irish Times*, 5 August 1968, p. 11.

²⁰ Lara Marks, *Sexual Chemistry*, p. 138.

²¹ Agnieszka Kościńska, ‘*Humanae vitae*, birth control and the forgotten history of the Catholic Church in Poland’ in Alana Harris (ed.), *The Schism of 68: Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945–75* (Palgrave, 2018), pp. 187–208, on pp. 199–201.

²² Statement issued by the Irish hierarchy on the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, Maynooth, 9 October 1968, *Furrow*, 19/11 (November 1968), pp. 661–2, cited in: Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, p. 200.

teaching may give rise for some'. The bishops expressed their hope that 'priests especially in the confessional will show that understanding and sympathy which Our Divine Lord himself always displayed'.²³ However, the problem of contraception did not simply go away. As Diarmaid Ferriter has asserted, Archbishop McQuaid and his colleagues spent much of the early 1970s 'under siege' as the contraception issue was discussed so frequently on the radio and television.²⁴

5.2 Dissenting Voices

Humanae Vitae generated considerable anguish for some priests.²⁵ There were some dissenting, progressive voices within the Irish priesthood, but there were significant consequences for those who spoke out.²⁶ Father James Good (1924–2018), a lecturer in medical ethics at UCC, and Father Denis O'Callaghan (1931–), professor of moral theology at Maynooth, and chairman of the Irish Theological Association, were not afraid to criticise the encyclical.²⁷ James Good had entered Maynooth in 1941 and was ordained in 1948 before undertaking a doctorate at Maynooth and teaching at All Hallows College. He then went to Innsbrook, Austria to undertake a doctorate in philosophy before returning to Cork and teaching at UCC. In an oral history interview recorded as part of a series of interviews with individuals in Cork in 2002–2003, Good stated that in relation to *Humanae Vitae* 'I felt very strongly from the beginning that where it was necessary married couples could limit their family. I taught that in my medical ethics class'.²⁸ Good explained, 'I rejected *Humanae Vitae* publicly the day it was promulgated'.²⁹ His views on the encyclical were published in *the Tablet* where it was stated that 'he could not accept the Encyclical and thought that most theologians and lay people would reject it'. He called the pronouncement 'a major tragedy'.³⁰ Nora (b.1940) remembered Father Good's church being 'packed' because he

²³ Statement issued by the Irish hierarchy on the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, Maynooth, 9 October 1968, *Furrow*, 19/11 (November 1968), pp. 661–2, cited in Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, p. 200.

²⁴ Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, p. 415. ²⁵ Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, p. 268.

²⁶ On 'rebel priests' in Britain, such as Father Paul Weir, who opposed the encyclical, see: Harris, pp. 419–21. On opposition by priests in the United States, see Tentler, pp. 269–72.

²⁷ Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, p. 199.

²⁸ Life and Lore oral history interview with Father James Good by Maurice O'Keeffe Recorded as part of series on Cork city, 2002–2003. Accessed via: www.irishlifeandlore.com/product/father-james-good/

²⁹ Life and Lore oral history interview with Father James Good.

³⁰ 'The Encyclical: first Catholic reactions', *The Tablet*, 3 August 1968, p. 766.

was known to be sympathetic to the use of contraception. Good felt that his position as a university member enabled him to publicly denounce the encyclical, in contrast with his fellow priests and theologians:

I had a matter of conscience actually, I felt so strongly about it and I was aware that a lot of my fellow priests, particularly the theologians, they felt the same. But you see, professors of theology, Maynooth, had no right of tenure against the bishop, they could be dismissed overnight. And several of my friends who were professors in Maynooth, they got warnings: 'If you continue to say this, you will be dismissed' you know, and ordered to withdraw. So I wouldn't blame them for not coming out in the open as they would be goners. But I knew I couldn't be touched as a university member, you see. The only control bishops, or Bishop Lucey, had over me was that he could not recommend my appointment as professor of theology.³¹

As a result of his outspoken views and the fact that he was known to be giving women who were using birth control absolution in confession, Father Good was called before Bishop Cornelius Lucey. His right to exercise his priestly duties was suspended in mid-August 1968, meaning he was banned from giving mass or hearing confession.³² In an interview with the *Irish Times* in 2018, Good said, 'the process took less than an hour and I was given no opportunity to defend myself'. He recalled 'it became increasingly embarrassing for me to be saying parish Masses on Sundays and not being allowed to preach. Being banned from the confessional was also distressing'.³³ Writing in 1969, Dorine Rohan expressed the view that 'many men and women are deeply in sympathy with Dr. Good'. She wrote of one woman she interviewed who had been helped by him with her marriage problems saying to her in tears that Father Good "really cares and knows about our problems".³⁴ Father Good sent his letter of resignation from the position of professor of theology to Bishop Lucey in 1970. He recalled Lucey's response:

He sent me a little note via the chaplain of the university saying that he got my note of resignation and "I am now enclosing your salary of professor of theology". The cheque enclosed was for £40 (laughs) for thirteen years salary at £200.³⁵

Good remained a UCC staff member working in Education and continued to contribute to newspapers and broadcasts in the late 1960s and early 1970s.³⁶ He elaborated on his views in *The Tablet* in April 1969 in

³¹ Life and Lore interview with Father James Good.

³² Murray, 'The best news', p. 278.

³³ 'Humanae Vitae and the suspension of the priest opposed to it', *Irish Times*, 22 January 2018.

³⁴ Rohan, *Marriage Irish Style*, p. 96.

³⁵ Life and Lore oral history interview by Maurice O'Keeffe with Father James Good.

³⁶ Murray, 'The best news', p. 279.

an article entitled ‘‘*Humanae Vitae*, a Platonic Document’. He argued in the article that ‘the reaction from the married laity shows that the ideal of *Humanae Vitae* cannot be translated into real life as it stands’. Good felt that ‘the message has come clear and strong that for the normal couple the alternatives of abstinence or continued procreation are totally impracticable’. Good also disagreed that the rhythm method was a viable method of family planning in a real-life context. Good suggested that *Humanae Vitae* ‘has to be substantially modified’ to be transformed from an ideal to a ‘norm of practical living for real people’.³⁷ Good later moved to Kenya in 1975 to work as a missionary there.³⁸ The fact that he moved to Kenya was interpreted by some parishioners as being a punishment for his outspoken views. Nora (b.1940) recalled the affair:

There was a Fr. Good, he was up in the Lough. And there used to be loads of people go to confession with him because he believed in ... and then Connie Lucey said to him, he was the bishop at the time, he sent him out foreign, out to the missions. To Turkana Desert, or something like that. He went out there then and he retired himself, the bishop. He must have been sorry for sending Fr. Good there. He only died there some time a couple of years ago. He was very much in favour of the pill or whatever. Of trying to regulate your family.

Another outspoken voice on *Humanae Vitae* was Father Denis O’Callaghan. It is important to note that O’Callaghan’s later career was not without controversy and he was singled out in the 2011 Cloyne Report for failing to respond appropriately to allegations of child sex abuse against priests within the diocese from 1996 to 2008.³⁹ Earlier in his career, O’Callaghan contributed to the birth control debate through the publication of articles in Catholic newspapers and journals in the late 1960s.⁴⁰ In 1970 he spoke publicly at a meeting of the Medical Union on the subject of family planning alongside three gynaecologists and Senator Mary Bourke (later Robinson). At the meeting, he stated that there was no simple answer to the problem of whether it was morally right or wrong for Catholic doctors to prescribe contraception, arguing that ‘because in each situation you have four very intractable people: the doctor, the priest, the husband and the wife, and these four will very seldom agree’,

³⁷ James Good, ‘‘*Humanae Vitae*, a Platonic Document’, *The Tablet*, 19 April 1969, pp. 386–7.

³⁸ ‘*Humanae Vitae* and the suspension of the priest opposed to it’, *Irish Times*, 22 January 2018.

³⁹ See: Report by Commission of Investigation into the handling by Church and State authorities of allegations and suspicions of child sexual abuse against clerics of the Catholic Diocese of Cloyne (2011). www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Cloyne-Rpt

⁴⁰ Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, pp. 202–3.

adding that 'We are within a changing and developing situation' and that he 'would hate to lay down what sounded like rigid guidelines at this stage'.⁴¹

Archbishop McQuaid was incensed by these comments and had his secretary write to O'Callaghan asking him for a full copy of the statement made at the meeting.⁴² In his letter to McQuaid, O'Callaghan acknowledged the 'confusion in the community conscience caused by varying interpretations of *Humanae Vitae* on the part of Hierarchies in the Catholic world and by the divergent approaches in medical and confessional practice'. O'Callaghan felt that his comments at the meeting were meant 'to show that the principles of moral theology can help to find a way out of the impasse and can take account of all the factors in the situation'. He did not want to be identified with 'any extreme position and felt that his comments had been 'disjointed' in the *Irish Times* report of the meeting.⁴³ O'Callaghan asked to meet with the archbishop to discuss further but this request was not granted.⁴⁴

In order to clear up the confusion that had been caused by O'Callaghan's statements, McQuaid had a letter read at all masses in the Dublin diocese on 29 November 1970 in which he reiterated the teachings of *Humanae Vitae*. While O'Callaghan was not named in the letter, it is clear that it alluded to his recent statements. McQuaid stated 'Any writer or speaker who wishes to venture into the area of the doctrine of moral law is gravely obliged to understand correctly and to state accurately the objective moral law as the teaching authority in the Church explains that law'. The remainder of his letter went on to affirm that within the diocese, the bishop was the only teaching authority. McQuaid reiterated that 'any such contraceptive act is wrong in itself'.⁴⁵ McQuaid received numerous letters from laypeople congratulating him for the pastoral and for his courage and clarity. One Dublin couple wrote to the archbishop in November 1970 to thank him for his pastoral letter stating that they had 'been often pained by the misleading statements given prominence by the news media and the failure to point out the necessity of prayer and trust in God in coping with the difficulties of responsible family planning'.⁴⁶ Another Dublin woman, wrote to say 'it is wonderful to hear the full teaching of the Pope set out with such clarity

⁴¹ 'Birth control concession by theologian', *Irish Times*, 14 November 1970, p. 1.

⁴² Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, p. 203.

⁴³ Letter from Denis O'Callaghan to Archbishop McQuaid, 18 November 1970, [DDA, xx/54].

⁴⁴ Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, p. 204.

⁴⁵ 'Archbishop speaks on birth control', *Irish Times*, 30 November 1970, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Letter to Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, 29 November 1970, [DDA, XX/64/1].

for the faithful'.⁴⁷ Other letters highlighted the despair felt by some Catholics. One woman from Dublin writing to McQuaid in December 1970 explained 'I am sadder now, I think, than at any other time in my spiritual life.' She felt 'greatly troubled by this teaching because, not only do I not personally understand the grounds for it (altho' up to now my husband and I have adhered to it) but I also am afraid that most of the sincere Catholics I know are equally troubled and four of the five priests I know best cannot, in conscience, subscribe to the teaching'.⁴⁸

McQuaid's letter became the first of three pastoral letters he produced on the theme of 'Contraception and Conscience' with the subsequent two parts read at mass in Dublin in February and March 1971.⁴⁹ The March letter, which was also published in Irish newspapers, declared that if contraception was legalised, it would be 'an insult to our Faith; it would, without question, prove to be gravely damaging to morality, private and public; it would be and would remain a curse upon our country'.⁵⁰ McQuaid argued against the idea of contraception being a right, reiterating his previous statement that 'any such contraceptive act is always wrong in itself' and he suggested that the issue of making contraceptives available was one of 'public morality.' Moreover, he wrote that 'the public consequences of immorality that must follow for our whole society are only too clearly seen in other countries'.⁵¹ A Dublin woman, writing to the Archbishop in March 1971 stated that 'it was like a breath of fresh air to hear your letter read at mass today'.⁵² Other women wrote personal accounts of their experiences in their letters of support. A Longford woman writing to the archbishop in March 1971 apologised for writing to him 'like this' and provided a detailed account of her family's situation:

We have 12 boys and 2 girls and I lost 5. Nine of those were born and 4 dead since my kidney was removed up there in the Mater in 1951. The doctors warned me then not to have any more but what they didn't know I was three months pregnant during the operation, he will be 19 years in June. A few years later I lost 3 babies in one year. In 1960 I was unconscious for ages after a birth with a haemorrhage. Of course the doctors told me any more would be fatal but 2 years later, we had a boy. Seven years ago I was gravely ill and when the baby was born he had club feet and is now a confirmed epileptic. 13 months later we had a boy and I nearly went to the mental with nerves. I really thought we would have no

⁴⁷ Letter to Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, 29 November 1970, [DDA, xx/64/2].

⁴⁸ Letter to Archbishop McQuaid, 8 December 1970, [DDA, LVII/730/10].

⁴⁹ 'Alteration of law would be "a curse upon our country": Archbishop's pastoral', *Irish Times*, 29 March 1971, 11.

⁵⁰ 'Alteration of law', *Irish Times*, 11. ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵² Letter to Archbishop McQuaid, 28 March 1971 [DDA, xx/82/6].

more, but 2 years ago at almost 46 I was pregnant, 2 doctors refused to attend me and no home in Longford would take me in, so I spent 7 weeks in the Rotunda and had the first girl in 21 years by section operation. She is the most beautiful thing that ever came to this world.⁵³

The woman wrote “Good for you’ to have spoken out again about contraception and the pill’.⁵⁴ Although this woman had been through significantly traumatic experiences in relation to childbirth and pregnancy, it is clear that, like many others, she was unwavering in her support of the Church’s position on contraception. Numerous other letters expressed their thanks to McQuaid for his pastoral and for making the Church’s position on contraception clear, while others described the pastoral as ‘courageous’. Others wrote of their loyalty to him in the face of the ‘adverse publicity’ his letter had received.⁵⁵ Yet, a number of letters also exist in the Dublin Diocesan Archive that were written in opposition to McQuaid’s pastoral. One letter, from a male writer, explained that ‘as a Catholic who intends to marry shortly, the subject of your pastoral is one of great concern to me. I am sad that I could find no consolation in your extreme and uncompromising statement’.⁵⁶ Another, from a Dublin woman, also soon to be married, commented on the negative tone of the pastoral and asked ‘Why does His Grace frequently speak of contraception, for example? I’m getting married soon, - and at present working with housewives in the home daily, all over Dublin. Well I do think in conscience using God given reason, that planned children are the only children that should be brought into this world.’⁵⁷ This woman’s account also highlights the tension between the Second Vatican Council’s (1962–1965) ideas of ‘responsible parenthood’ and the lack of means to achieve this.⁵⁸ A Dun Laoghaire woman also wrote to McQuaid to express her ‘despair’ stating:

I do not belong to any groups or organisations, nor have I even written to anyone on such an issue before, but I have the gravest fears that should the Catholic Church in Dublin continue on this course it will soon cease to have any meaning for me, for my children, and for a large number of my friends.⁵⁹

⁵³ Letter to Archbishop McQuaid, 30 March 1971 [DDA, xx/82/28] ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5 April 1971 [DDA, xx/82/42]. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, undated [xx/106/14].

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22 February 1971 [xx/106/1].

⁵⁸ In Spain, the Second Vatican Council’s discussions about responsible parenthood led to broader discussions about family planning and contraception among Spanish Catholics.

See: Ignaciuk, ‘Love in the Time of El Generalísimo’, pp. 229–250.

⁵⁹ Letter to Archbishop McQuaid, 29 March 1971. [DDA, xx/89/2]

At the top of the letter, McQuaid wrote to his secretary who was responsible for replying to the letters to 'Just acknowledge and hope she will see the truth'.⁶⁰ A letter from the mother of five children was also sent to McQuaid with no address or name attached. The woman wrote candidly of the difficulties she experienced during her pregnancies and as a result of a spine injury and kidney trouble she had 'to spend almost six of each nine months in bed before the birth of my children'. The woman's letter highlights the problems she faced in trying to follow the Church's teachings:

The rhythm method does not work for me and speaking as a trained nurse I assure you we made no mistakes. We tried total abstinence but my husband does not agree with this and says this is not marriage and that if he had wanted to lead a celibate life he would have chosen it.

The woman explained that she had had a major operation two years previously and had been told by her doctor not to have any more children. However, her situation was causing her great anxiety:

Have you any idea of the mental and spiritual anguish of a Catholic mother placed in this predicament!! and being told by Drs that I cannot use oral contraceptive methods? [...] Your pastoral letter yesterday had an appalling effect on my husband, he told me after Mass that he was sorry but that he shall not attend Mass any more and had come to this decision having listened to your pastoral letter!

The woman wrote that her marriage was 'ideal in every way except for this big problem' and stated that she was 'now in total despair of being able to carry on'. She asked for the archbishop to show more compassion in relation to the issue of contraception and to pray for her and her family.⁶¹ Another woman from Dublin wrote to the Archbishop, as 'a young Catholic mother' and questioned how the 'enactment of such legislation would remain "a curse upon our country", this is hardly the language of temperance'. The woman closed her letter asking:

How can the Church in this country really condemn the woman who tries to elevate herself to a dignified level of womanhood. I think therefore the time has come when both Church and State must allow the women of Ireland to decide for themselves on this very personal issue.⁶²

A series of letters from women responding to Archbishop McQuaid's pastoral were also published in *Woman's Way* magazine, and again, they

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, [DDA, xx/89/2].

⁶¹ Letter to Archbishop McQuaid, 30 March 1971, [DDA, xx/89/3].

⁶² Letter to Archbishop McQuaid, 30 March 1971, [DDA, xx/89/6].

highlight the range of views on the matter. Mrs. T.D. from Kilkenny wrote to the magazine to state that she was 'very angry after having read Dr. McQuaid's letter criticizing contraception', stating that it was unfair that certain older rules of the Church such as fasting had been relaxed, while others had not. Similarly, Mrs. L. Morris from Fermanagh, expressed her disappointment in the clergy and their 'little faith in Irish mothers' and drew attention to the double code of morality in society that was 'to blame for a lot of promiscuity.'⁶³ Others were more supportive of the pastoral. Mrs. M.L. from Laois, the mother of ten children, stated that she fully supported the Church's teaching on contraception and divorce and believed that the archbishop had 'every right to speak out strongly on such objective moral laws.' Other letters highlighted inter-generational tensions. According to Mrs. M.L., 'having successfully reared my children in difficult and often poor circumstances I find it difficult to understand young couples nowadays and their comparatively easy way of living, their attitude towards their Christian way of life as regards marriage, marital rights and so on.' Arguments against the legalisation of contraception often centered on fears around young people and promiscuity, suggesting that promiscuity was the next step along a slippery slope. Mrs. Geraldine Lynch from Dundalk stated that if contraceptives became legal, it would be 'an open invitation for young couples who have become tired of drink, smoking and everything else.'⁶⁴ Similarly, Mrs. Marie C. Dunne wrote to the magazine asking 'if contraceptives were to be sold over the counter legally what would happen to our unmarried youth who took advantage of it? It could be injurious to their health, apart altogether from the moral aspect,' adding that 'a permissive society is a sick society and what sane person wants a sick society?'⁶⁵

McQuaid also received numerous letters from members of the clergy congratulating him for the letter. For instance, Bishop Cornelius Lucey in Cork wrote that the pastoral was 'thorough and yet concise; it was clear; and it was timely. God bless you for it.'⁶⁶ For many parish priests, the letter brought relief and clear guidance. A Dublin-based priest wrote 'personally I am comforted and gratified to have your guidance'. The priest explained that 'due to reading of so-called 'out dated theology' and to the loose conversation of the very many clergy I meet in my missionary

⁶³ 'Over to you...', *Woman's Way*, 14 May 1971, p. 6.

⁶⁴ 'Over to you...', *Woman's Way*, Friday, 28 May 1971, p. 6.

⁶⁵ 'Over to you...', *Woman's Way*, 4 June 1971, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Letter from Cornelius Lucey to Archbishop McQuaid, 30 November 1970, [DDA, xx/63/14].

life not excluding some of my own younger brethren, I was beginning to wonder if perhaps I was too old fashioned – maybe even a rigourist – both in the pulpit and in the confessional. You have set my mind at ease and with God's grace and many help I will with a soothed conscience remain "a Pope's man".⁶⁷ It is evident that some priests found the direct guidance useful in light of the ongoing debates in the media. Another Dublin priest wrote 'At present there are so many unusual things said by professors and others, that ordinary priests like myself begin to worry if we are just clinging on to our own prejudices or standing up for the teaching of Jesus Christ. Your Grace has done a great service'.⁶⁸

However, there continued to be some voices of dissent among the clergy. A man from Rathdrum, Co. Wicklow, wrote to McQuaid in March 1971 to report 'a scandalous occurrence' that had taken place at mass in Rathdrum church that day. The celebrant, Rev. Fr. Deane, in introducing McQuaid's pastoral letter allegedly 'proceeded to give a sermon containing his own ideas about this matter, one at least of which was clearly at variance with your letter'. Father Deane apparently only read a shortened version of McQuaid's letter 'omitting parts that he apparently disagreed with' and remarking that the Church could not 'at present change the law on contraception, that a change in the law of the country would inevitably come, and that in his opinion the minority had a right to avail of contraceptives'.⁶⁹ McQuaid was clearly enraged by this act of dissent and contacted Father Joseph Callan, the parish priest in Rathdrum. Callan replied promptly to McQuaid's letter stating that he had discussed the matter with Father Deane, as well as making inquiries among parishioners, and that it was clear that Deane had introduced the subject of contraception at some length before reading the pastoral letter. Father Callan asked him why he did this and he replied that he wanted to give the people 'the context of the debate on contraceptives; to warn the people that these things would be here at some future date, that the pastoral was educational.' According to Callan, Deane admitted that he said that there were people who had a right to contraceptives but that his preaching 'was all in favour of the teaching of the Pastoral'.⁷⁰ McQuaid replied to Callan promptly stating 'I must take a serious view of the error expressed by Father Deane and would ask you to request him never again to speak in such a fashion or to act on the principle that anyone has a right

⁶⁷ Letter from Sebastian Agnew to Archbishop McQuaid, 29 November 1970. [DDA, xx/63/12]

⁶⁸ Letter to Archbishop McQuaid, 30 November 1970. [DDA, xx/63/16].

⁶⁹ Letter to Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, 28 March 1971, [DDA, xx/106/6].

⁷⁰ Letter from Father Joseph Callan to Archbishop McQuaid, 2 April 1971. [DDA, xx/94/10].

to contraception. His preaching could not have been “all in favour of the Pastoral”. I shall see him myself later’.⁷¹

Some priests inevitably struggled with the Church’s stance on contraception. As Leslie Tentler has suggested for the United States, *Humanae Vitae* had the effect of ‘exacerbating an already corrosive crisis of priestly morale and identity’.⁷² Father Bernárd Lynch explained to me how the Church’s stance on contraception troubled him as a newly-ordained priest in 1968. Lynch was posted to Knock Shrine, Co. Mayo, in the early 1970s for a few months to take confessions with an older priest who had been one of his professors in the seminary. Many of the women who came to confession spoke of their issues in controlling their fertility:

After a while, I kept hearing confessions like, ‘Father, I’m the mother of six children and still fertile, I can’t afford to have another child.’ ‘Father, we’ve eight children, my husband is an alcoholic, comes home, demands his marital rights.’ ‘Father, I can’t feed the children I have.’ So, I’m sitting there – I’m coming from Disney World, which was the seminary, really, in this regard, Disney World – and this is the real world. And I’m supposed to be, without sounding ... I’m supposed to be an instrument of God and God’s love, and this is what ... and I’m flummoxed, I’m completely ... it took me a while, and I can’t be exactly, before I would say to a woman ... I mean, I suppose first of all I just listened, and then gave them absolution, give them whatever penance, three Hail Mary’s. But then my conscience really began to trouble me, and I was only 24.

Father Lynch began to tell women to follow their conscience. Dorine Rohan suggested in 1979 that some priests were advising women who sought their advice to take the pill while others were, like Father Lynch, leaving the decision up to the person’s own conscience. However, for other priests, the ruling of *Humanae Vitae* relieved them ‘of the unenviable onus of decision which they had to carry when married people sought their advice’.⁷³

It is evident that some priests were more sympathetic on the issue of contraceptives as a result of their experiences. Father Patrick Scott, for instance, wrote to Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave in December 1973. Scott was a Redemptorist priest based at St. Patrick’s, Esker in Co. Galway. He explained that he agreed with the Bishops ‘that the “contraceptive mentality” and the “permissive society” are socially undesirable’. However, Scott explained that he believed a change in the laws around contraception was necessary. He wrote:

⁷¹ Reply to Father Callan, 2 April 1971. [DDA, xx/94/10].

⁷² Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, p. 272. Likewise, in Quebec, some priests ‘found themselves in an untenable moral predicament. Church doctrine and married life were irreconcilable.’ (Gervais and Gauvreau, ‘Women, priests and physicians’, p. 307.)

⁷³ Rohan, *Marriage Irish Style*, p. 93.

I think this is true not for the sake of the minority just, but for all strands of the population. For the past year I have been giving missions in poorer class areas of Galway, Sligo and Waterford cities, and in rural areas too. Everywhere I have met women, in their thirties or early forties, with 5, 6, or more children, and in desperate situations. Many of them have husbands who will not or cannot practise abstinence or the safe period. Many of them cannot face the prospect of another child. Many of them are afraid to take the pill or have been forbidden by their doctors to take it. For such women I do not believe that to use a contraceptive would be a sin – it would at worst be the lesser of two evils. I do not believe that the state should forbid them. And although the law does not prohibit the use of contraceptives, it does make them unobtainable, at least in the south and west.⁷⁴

While Scott wrote that he would not like to see contraceptives ‘freely available’, he felt that they should be ‘available in a controlled way to people with genuine problems. I don’t think that would necessarily spread the contraceptive mentality’.⁷⁵

In contrast to the Catholic hierarchy’s stance, in 1971, Dr. Alan Buchanan, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin stated that he was in favour of relaxing the laws relating to contraception as long as there was some adequate control over the sale of contraceptives, while Presbyterian Church representatives expressed similar statements.⁷⁶ Alison (b.1953) who was brought up Presbyterian, did not recall the issue of contraception ever being discussed in Presbyterian Church teachings and told me ‘basically I did what I wanted’. She explained that in relation to the law on contraception in Ireland, which she viewed as ‘coming from the attitude of the Catholic Church’, she felt that ‘being Presbyterian or Protestant or whatever, things like that, it was... I didn’t feel any, under any, duress to be tied to those laws’.

Lily (b.1946) also grew up Presbyterian and did not recall hearing any teachings against contraception. She felt that with regard to the law against contraception in Ireland, ‘You would have felt a bit, um... what is the right word? Um, that they weren’t thinking of anyone else only their own religion’. Christopher (b.1946) who was brought up in the Church of Ireland, similarly felt ‘I thought it was crazy, yeah, you know, it’s a personal issue for couples to manage, let’s say as their conscience guides them. And I have a feeling let’s say that their conscience should not be guided by let’s say a single person of either sex, you know’. Others found the dominance of the Catholic Church in Ireland to be frustrating.

⁷⁴ Letter from Father Patrick Scott to Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave, 10 December 1973, [NAI, 2004/21/461].

⁷⁵ Letter from Father Patrick Scott.

⁷⁶ ‘Ireland: Church–State Controversy sharpens’, *The Tablet*, 17 April 1971, p. 389.

Edward (b.1950) who grew up in Northern Ireland in the Protestant faith, but moved to the Republic of Ireland as a young man, explained:

I hated the role of the church you know and it used to do my head in like you know, you're watching the news at night and something would happen and they'd be getting the opinion of the local priest or something like that. It's none of his goddamned business. Like we're talking international politics here and we're getting the priest, you know, to state his opinion, you know.

5.3 The Confession Box and 'Sympathetic' Priests

As Chapter 2 showed, Church teachings had an important influence on individuals' attitudes to sex, in particular, reinforcing the idea that it was sinful or 'dirty'. A mother of six interviewed by Dorine Rohan in 1969, explained her inhibitions in relation to sex, stating, 'I'd like to have a better physical side to my marriage, but it's just hopeless. I was always taught that sex was dirty and sinful, and I have never been able to adjust. No, I haven't gone to see anyone about it. I feel it's too late, but I feel guilty for my husband's sake'.⁷⁷ Similarly, a husband interviewed by Rohan said, 'Sex is the only sin in Ireland. You can go to confession and say you got drunk or were uncharitable and it doesn't matter. You are just "a hard man". But anything to do with sex, and the gates of hell are wide open for you.'⁷⁸ Numerous oral history respondents felt similarly with regard to sex which was shrouded by feelings of sinfulness and guilt. The confession box was therefore an important realm for unloading these feelings. Ellen (b.1949) for instance, felt guilty when she first became pregnant within marriage. She said:

I remember going into confession the first time that I was pregnant. I went into confession, and I told the priest I'm pregnant, and he was laughing at me, and he said it's a natural act with your husband he said, there's nothing wrong with that. But I just thought I had to, and it was a sin even to be pregnant kind of.

Ellen's testimony here highlights the guilt felt by many Irish men and women in relation to sex, and even though she was following Church teaching in becoming pregnant within marriage, she still felt that she had done something wrong. She also recalled a time when she lost a baby and her mother advised her to go to see the priest to be 'churched'. Churching was a common practice from the nineteenth century where new mothers were considered 'unclean' after they had given birth and they were required to be 'churched' or purified by their parish priest.

⁷⁷ Rohan, *Marriage Irish Style*, p. 74. ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

This process usually happened several weeks after the birth of the child.⁷⁹ While the practice of churching was beginning to die out by the 1960s, many were influenced by their mothers' attitudes and experiences. Clare (b.1936) felt that churching suggested 'It was nearly as if you had committed a sin by having a baby. Even in marriage' and she never went.

The confessional also became an important arena for priests to discourage women from using contraception. Siobhan (b.1942) from the rural Midlands told me the following about her friend Mary's experience. Mary had decided to use contraception after the cot death of her baby at six months old in 1972. Mary went to the priest for confession and told him that she had used contraception. Siobhan explained:

She went to the priest down here on Main Street in town, just down there. And she told the priest her confession and she said that she couldn't face having another baby, but she ended up having two more a good while after that. But she told the priest that she had used contraception. He told her, God, he wasn't going to give her absolution. And it broke her heart, she cried for weeks afterwards.

Siobhan's testimony about her friend is not unusual and highlights the turmoil that some women faced in deciding to go against Church teachings and use artificial contraception. For practising Catholics, the rite of confession was an important sacrament where they would confess their sins to a priest. Indeed, a four-volume survey undertaken by the Council for Research and Development in 1973–4 is testament to the enduring adherence to confession in the early 1970s.⁸⁰ It recorded that 89.8 per cent of Irish Catholics attended confession up to three times a year, 69.8 per cent about six times a year, and 46.5 per cent once monthly.⁸¹ Confession has been an important element of other studies of Catholic family planning practices. Marloes Schoonheim's work on the Netherlands from 1870 to 1970 shows how there, 'confession was not only an effective way to check people's obedience to the reproductive rules of the Church but also coach them in 'proper' moral behaviour'.⁸² Similarly, David Geiringer, in his study of the experiences of Catholic women in England, has shown how at the start of respondents' marriages, 'confession was an important part of the tactics they employed for negotiating sexual and spiritual demands'.⁸³ However, during the later

⁷⁹ Delay, *Irish Women*, pp. 183–5. ⁸⁰ Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, pp. 120–1.

⁸¹ Appendix I: Communion and Confession attendance by Irish Catholics, 1973–1974 in Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, p. 275. Source: A survey of religious practice, attitudes and beliefs in the Republic of Ireland, 1973–1974, (Dublin: Research and Development Unit, Catholic Communications Institute of Ireland, 1975).

⁸² Schoonheim, *Mixing ovaries and rosaries*, p.220. Accessed online: https://repository.ubn.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/26915/26915__mixiovanr.pdf on 03-02-2021.

⁸³ Geiringer, *The Pope and the Pill*, pp. 140–1.

phases of their marriages, many of the women interviewed by Geiringer came to see their sexual behaviour as something which 'bore little relation to matters of faith', with confession having less significance for his respondents as it had done for their parents.⁸⁴ Caroline Rusterholz's study of family planning practices in Switzerland also illustrated that for the small number of women in her study who confessed using birth control 'The moral cost of using birth control for these women seemed to be high enough to lead them to confess but not high enough to eventually lead them to comply with the doctrine of the Church'.⁸⁵ In the Irish context, as elsewhere, the confessional was an important realm where women sought permission and forgiveness for contraceptive practices, but also, for the most part, as in Mary's case above, it enabled priests to reinforce Church teachings on the issue, impact on individuals' choices by encouraging large families and compound women's feelings of guilt.

Other scholars have found that the confession box was a unique space where women attempted to negotiate their use of contraceptives. As Betty Hilliard has suggested, many women in her study had a dread of going to confession and were faced with the choice 'to stop avoiding further pregnancies or be refused absolution'.⁸⁶ A number of my interviewees recalled encounters with priests in the confession box which clearly had a significant emotional impact on them. Ellie (b.1944) and her husband used the withdrawal method in order to try and space their pregnancies. She recalled 'going to confession and saying it was the withdrawal method. And I was told that I was committing the sin that I was depriving my husband out of his pleasure'. I asked Ellie how she felt after the confession, and she said, 'I felt dreadful. I felt dreadful and I remember, he kept me for bloody ages'. Bridget (b.1945) from a small village in the south-west of Ireland, recalled her mother telling her about her experience:

Well you were expected like to ... you were expected to have a big family, like? Do you know? It was the thinking. And the Church was, that was the thinking in the Church and you were nearly praised for having this big family, do you know? Because I can even remember my mother saying that she went to confession and confessed that she only had two children. Do you know, that kind of way? And that was very hard to feel that, you felt guilty.

Bridget's view suggests that having a large family perhaps could be viewed as a form of social capital in Ireland but also highlights the guilt

⁸⁴ Geiringer, *The Pope and the Pill*, pp. 140–1.

⁸⁵ Rusterholz, 'Reproductive behavior', p. 52.

⁸⁶ Hilliard, 'The Catholic Church and married women's sexuality', p. 38.

that was felt by women who were unable to comply and produce large families. Indeed, many respondents felt that there was an expectation engrained in them from Church teachings that they should be having large families and that that the purpose of marriage was procreation. Colm (b.1940) from the rural Midlands alluded to this, stating, ‘As the priest says, “You go forward, increase and multiply”’. Likewise, Lizzie (b.1946) from a small town in the west of Ireland felt ‘if you went to the priest in those days, your duty was... it was bred in us, increase and multiply’. Several respondents reflected on the unquestionable authority of the Church. Martina (b.1955) explained. ‘Their whole teaching was procreation. It had nothing ... I mean, there was nothing to do with love or anything. It didn’t matter whether there was love or not. You just produced children and that was it. And it didn’t matter what set of circumstances you were in. That was your job. And you daren’t say anything against it’. Similarly, Kate (b.1944) said, ‘It was against the law of the church for contraception to be used. And if they said it you just didn’t question it, just like that. If they said you don’t do it, you just don’t do it and that’s it. But I suppose now you’d be questioning a lot of them. Back then we didn’t’. Likewise, Jeremiah (b.1942) explained, ‘You weren’t encouraged to question the clergy, you know?’ Indeed, Carol (b.1954) from Dublin felt that women did not have much of a say in their reproductive choices in the 1970s when she was a young woman. Referencing the Eavan Boland poem, ‘The Famine Road’, she said:

And it’s the attitudes, the disdainful attitude, and the dismissive attitude of you know, ‘Go home and grow your garden, you’ll be fine’. You know. That that was very much part of the time, the place. You know, that you didn’t have it... a say in things. You know.

This expectation was also reinforced in the confession box. Tessie (b.1938) recalled going to her local priest for confession in the late 1960s or early 1970s. She explained the encounter in the following way:

TESSIE: I would be going into confession and trying to disguise my voice and say, ‘Bless me father for I have sinned’ and he’d say, ‘Is that you, Tessie?’ And I’d say, ‘Yes, Father’. And first thing he’d say to me, ‘How many children have you got?’. And at that time I had two. ‘Still two?’ I’d say, ‘Yes, Father’. Now, he never went any further than that, but still.

LAURA: You felt kind of...

TESSIE: Yeah, oh no, no, no. Go forth and multiply. They weren’t bloomin’ well coming to feed them, were they? Look at all the unfortunates that had eight and ten children.

Similarly, Helena (b.1945) said that ‘talking to older women now at this stage of my life, and talking about that, and family planning and that

and the one thing – the one greatest insult that is put on these women was when they went to confession, the priest would ask, “What age is your youngest child?” Inferring that if they didn’t – they had to, you know, go home and make more, which is shocking’. Julia (b.1936) also recalled going to confession and telling the priest that she was abstaining from sex, ‘I remember telling him in confession you know, and ... I don’t know what now he said, what it was, it was sort of your duty to ...’ Indeed, several interviewees felt that the Church was advocating the idea that it was part of their marital duty to have sex with their husbands and produce children. Ann (b.1945) felt ‘It was just sheer lust and procreation like that the church would tell you, you know, “Oh, that’s your lot in life kind of.” That’s what you were there for. It was terrible’.

Before 1990 in Ireland, a married woman did not have the legal right to refuse sexual intercourse with her husband.⁸⁷ Some respondents recalled priests interfering directly in their marital relationships and suggesting that women should be upholding their husbands’ conjugal rights. Aoife (b.1947) for instance, experienced significant trauma during the birth of her first child who had severe disabilities. She then suffered a miscarriage a year later before giving birth to her second child the year after that. Owing to the severe stress she was feeling in her personal life and frequent experience of marital rape, she obtained the contraceptive pill from her GP, which her husband had discovered and thrown into the fire. In her words:

He said, ‘If you won’t provide me with my needs I’ll have to go elsewhere’. So, he says that he went to the Jesuits to confession or advice to ask an unmarried fella who wears dresses, you know, about family planning. Oh my God, that made me so mad and that priest told him that I had to produce as many, provide him with his needs and provide him with any number of children, that God would decide how many children I was to have, and that was it. So, Eoin came home all holy and with permission from that pup of a priest that if I didn’t satisfy his needs off he went.

Aoife’s testimony here is shocking, but this was the lived experience for many Irish women, and shows not only the interference of priests in marital relationships but also how the Catholic religion was used by some men to justify their sexual behaviour. Sally (b.1956) also recalled hearing about priests making home visits because ‘it would be that the husband would have gone to the priest to complain about not getting his marital rights’.

⁸⁷ Diver, *Marital Violence in Post-Independence Ireland*, p. 232.

Priests took a range of stances in relation to contraception. Father Michael Browne, director of the Irish Catholic Marriage Advisory Council stated in 1971 that there were very few priests who granted absolution to couples who used contraception but believed that some individuals 'shopped around' for a confessor who might understand them.⁸⁸ Mrs. E. W. from Dublin, writing to *Woman's Way* in 1971, explained how after having five children in a row, she 'plucked up courage and after making my Confession, decided to ask the priest's advice'. She explained her reasons for wanting to space her pregnancies to him, 'a 2-roomed flat, the ever-present fear of eviction, my husband's casual employment' and asked if 'anything could be done'. Mrs. E.W. was 'brusquely and unkindly' refused absolution and the priest told her to 'go home and get my husband to agree that in no circumstances would we do anything to control our family'. She then approached another priest 'who was kind, but who gave me the usual rigmarole about a large family being lucky, God's plan for me and all that.' In total, Mrs. E.W. had eleven children, nine of whom were alive. In E.W.'s view, 'the crimes perpetrated against my generation of women cannot be wiped out by allowing permissiveness to the present one'.⁸⁹ Maura, interviewed by *Woman's Way* in 1973, reported that her local priest was sympathetic to her personal dilemma about taking the contraceptive pill. Although he advised that contraception was against church teachings, he explained that 'he personally believed that it was a matter for her own conscience'. However, this may not have been a typical experience. Angela, the mother of four, went to her priest for advice and had a markedly different experience: 'He was furious. He gave me a lecture about the evilness of contraception and how I would be flaunting the authority of the Holy Father'.⁹⁰ Clare, a 28-year-old mother of four consulted her priest after difficulties using the safe period but found his attitude 'unfair and hard to accept. He just couldn't realise the emotional problems involved.' Clare's priest told her that the first duty of marriage was procreation and encouraged her to continue to use the safe period and that God 'would give us the strength to abstain'. Not seeing a moral difference between the safe period and the use of the pill, Clare decided to go on the pill.⁹¹

The moral qualms that women faced in relation to contraception were apparent to staff at Irish family planning clinics. Cathie Chappell, who

⁸⁸ Kate Kennelly, 'Dilemma: report on family planning', *Woman's Way*, 22 January 1971, p. 26.

⁸⁹ 'Over to you', *Woman's Way*, 18 June 1971, p. 6.

⁹⁰ 'Undercover on the pill', *Woman's Way*, 1 June 1973, pp. 8–9. ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

worked at the Limerick Family Planning Clinic recalled in 1979 when the Pope came to visit Ireland that ‘women came to the clinic to have their IUDs taken out for the duration of his visit. I remember that so clearly. A lot of women came. They weren’t easy with the fact that they were disobeying the rules while His Holiness was with us, you know?’ Anne Legge, an IFPA doctor, stated in 1971 that she ‘would never prescribe the Pill or any other contraceptive method for anyone with religious scruples about accepting it’, instead encouraging such individuals to go away and think about it further or ‘help them come to terms with their conscience’.⁹² Mary Fahy, a nurse at the Galway Family Planning Clinic also recalled a Franciscan priest who she and her colleagues would advise women with moral concerns about contraception to ‘go and have a chat with him and see. He was more moderate in his views about what women should and shouldn’t do’. Frank Crummey recalled advising a woman at a family planning talk at a ladies’ club to go to Father Ralph Egan, a Passionist priest based in Mount Argus for confession. However, Crummey did not realise Egan’s sister was present in the group, who went home and told her brother ‘Your name is going all over Dublin’.

Martin (b.1952) and his wife Carmel (b.1952) compared sympathetic priests who would absolve individuals for using contraception with sympathetic doctors who prescribed the pill:

MARTIN: If you found a sympathetic priest, he’d probably give you your penance and off you’d go. If you had an unsympathetic priest, he’d give you your penance and tell you, you can’t do it again. There was a difference between those who effectively turned a blind eye to the issue, and those that continued to take it seriously.

CARMEL: That was a bit like the doctors, I suppose, who were prepared to give you the pill. And then, you found him, so he obviously had a queue out the door. That was the same with the priests, you would know which priest to go to.

Indeed, on a practical level, many priests made up their own minds on the issue following the introduction of *Humanae Vitae*. Paula (b.1955) had a close relationship with her uncle who was a priest. She recalled that he worked in a deprived urban area and that women came to him ‘crying because they were pregnant again, because they were using no method, no contraceptives’. She said her uncle was ‘horrified’ hearing about these women’s experiences and he said to Paula that:

⁹² Kate Kennelly, ‘Dilemma: report on family planning’, *Woman’s Way*, 22 January 1971, p. 27.

his advice to the women would be, he'd use the phrase, 'Go get yourself a few smarties. Go do something. If your husband will not take responsibility, you go do whatever you have to use contraceptives because another child for you is just ...' They're living in poverty. The women are suffering. The men are having their pints with this back then. So he would have told me that he felt very grieved by it.

Paula felt that her uncle was seen by his parishioners 'as someone they could confide in. And women who could talk to a guy who understood the situation and who would give them empathy and empathise with their situation, just give them practical advice'.

Father Paddy Gleeson, who had been ordained in 1964, was appointed as an emigrant chaplain in Luton, Bedfordshire in England a couple of weeks after *Humanae Vitae* had been published. In his words, 'Now to say that all hell broke loose after that would be an understatement'. Father Gleeson recalled that priests at the time were being phoned by newspaper reporters to get their opinion on the new encyclical. In contrast to the 'hard-line approach' of some Irish bishops, Gleeson found the approach of the Bishop of Northampton Charles Grant to be refreshing. Grant called all of the priests in the Northampton diocese together and addressing the group said, 'There have always been hard priests and easy priests', and then he paused and he said, 'I would always want to be considered an easy priest', and he sat down. The priests present at the session were advised that 'if people came with their conscience troubled seeking forgiveness they were to be forgiven, they weren't to be as Pope Francis says, "Put through an interrogation"'. Father Gleeson found this guidance to be reassuring and stated that he 'always treasured it'.

It is possible that some Irish priests in England were more flexible on the issue. Catherine (b.1953) who lived in England, recalled her local priest, who was Irish, telling parishioners to follow their own conscience in the mid-1970s. She said, 'I suppose because he was living, I suppose, in a society where it was more acceptable, he was listening to women talk about these contraception issues they had'. Some Irish women felt that Archbishop of Westminster Cardinal Heenan had a more compassionate approach to the issue than his Irish counterparts. A woman writing to Archbishop McQuaid in 1971, for instance, contrasted Heenan's attitude with that of McQuaid's, stating, 'But for the fact that Cardinal Heenan spoke at that time and said keep going to the Sacraments I don't know what I would have done'.⁹³ In 1969, in response to an article on Cardinal Heenan and the question of conscience, a writer named Sheila Kerr, based in Belfast, said, 'I hope that all Irish priests

⁹³ Letter to Archbishop McQuaid, 30 March 1971. [DDA, xx/89/3]

will take their cut from Cardinal Heenan and show a little human kindness and charity, particularly in the confessional'.⁹⁴

Information on sympathetic priests was likely circulated by word-of-mouth among women. Nuala Fennell, who had been a member of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement wrote in her 2009 memoir that:

... there was a small network of understanding priests to whom to confess. A Dublin acquaintance of mine who was on the pill for years, travelled the three hundred and twenty-mile round trip every month to confess to a priest in Cork.⁹⁵

Some of the interviewees in Máire Leane's study also reported a priest in Cork City (likely James Good) who was willing to provide absolution to women taking the contraceptive pill.⁹⁶ Similarly, as Diane Gervais and Danielle Gauvreau found in their study of family limitation in Quebec, 1940-1970, some women there 'shopped around' for an understanding priest who would not refuse them absolution at confession, while Leslie Tentler has discussed similar practices in the United States.⁹⁷ Clodagh (b.1940) told me her doctor, advised her that if she had moral qualms about going on the pill, to 'have a chat with your confessor like and don't be going to an old lad, go to a young person'. Her doctor's testimony seems to suggest that there was a perceived shift occurring within the priesthood with the older priests seen to be more likely to refuse absolution.

Frank Crummey, family planning activist and a founding member of Family Planning Services, believed that many Irish women simply did not tell their priests about their decision to use artificial contraception. Interviewed for Rosita Sweetman's book, *On Our Backs*, in 1979, he stated:

But this business about artificial contraception being a mortal sin, I think the women just don't tell the priest anymore. I mean are the 30,000 people on our mailing list all non-Catholics? And what about the 70,000 Irish women on the Pill, are they all non-Catholics? And if they're just using the Pill as a cycle regulator then we must have the unhealthiest women in the world.⁹⁸

Women anticipated a negative reaction from the priest if they admitted using contraception. Cathy (b.1949) told me 'Oh my God, you'd be excommunicated. Well, probably not strictly speaking, but I mean if you went into confession and told them you were on contraception

⁹⁴ 'Over to you', *Woman's Way*, 28 February 1969, p. 2.

⁹⁵ Fennell, *Political Woman*, p. 79. ⁹⁶ Leane, 'Embodied sexualities', p. 43.

⁹⁷ Gervais and Gauvreau, 'Women, Priests, and Physicians', p. 313. Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, p. 244.

⁹⁸ Sweetman, *On Our Backs*, p. 157.

they'd absolutely rip your throat'. Indeed, oral history testimony confirms that many women on the pill simply did not tell their priest. When I asked Nora (b.1940) about whether she felt guilty about going on the pill given the Church teachings on the matter, she responded, 'No, I didn't really. I wasn't telling them either I was taking it, I suppose'. Similarly, Myra (b.1947) who used condoms, told me 'You know, like the contraceptives; we were all getting these but we were saying nothing'. She explained:

Oh you couldn't use it, it was a sin to use it. So if we were getting the johnnies from England, as we used to call them, we never told the priests inside of confession. I used to always say it was none of their business and well, I wasn't a bit – however I can put it. You know how some people, everything that the church says was law. I wasn't a bit like that. I did my own thing.

Siobhan (b.1942) also told me she didn't tell her priest in confession, 'No, I wouldn't. No. I know up here I know I didn't. I had sense enough. No, I wouldn't'. Others knew that the priest would be against their decision but felt it was not any of their concern. Colm's (b.1940) wife underwent tubal ligation, and in his words 'We didn't say nothing to no priest. I told them, herself and myself, "Lookit, go ahead". It's our business. Nobody else. That's it.' Similarly, Anne, a mother of four, who was interviewed by *Woman's Way*, had the tubal ligation procedure in 1987, aged 42. She explained: 'I realise that the Catholic Church is not in favour of sterilisation, but that doesn't bother me. I remain a practising Catholic. I go to Mass and the sacraments. I haven't mentioned it in Confession. I haven't discussed it with a priest. I feel it is between me and Him. It's my body. I believe I had the right to make the decision and that He will understand. It was right for me.'⁹⁹ Other women rationalised their use of contraceptives. Carol (b.1954) told me 'I think I was quite practical about things you know. I can sort of compartmentalise things. I mean I would have been uptight enough, I suppose about, let's say, certainly about getting, you know, pregnant outside marriage or whatever, you know, but no, I don't think it actually bothered me too much.' Likewise, when asked about whether she felt guilty taking the pill, Sandra (b.1951) replied. 'Not really, no, no, no. You might, at times, question yourself and say ... but then you'd say, "Well, look, I am not... I wouldn't be a good mother to a load of kids. I wouldn't be happy".'

However, other women expressed feelings of guilt and shame about using the pill. Ann (b.1945) from a small town in the southeast of Ireland, was prescribed the pill by her GP, however, she told me, 'I didn't stay on it

⁹⁹ 'The permanent contraceptive', *Woman's Way*, 18 March 1988, p. 6.

long. I think maybe I tortured myself that I was doing wrong.’ Lizzie (b.1946) from a rural area in the west of Ireland, also explained that when she was younger, her long-term boyfriend ‘pleaded with me to go on the pill and I just couldn’t do it, it was very much against my religion’. Instead, she took risks and ‘I sweated. I put myself through and I’d be like a briar’. The relationship broke up after eight years, with Lizzie telling me ‘I often think we broke up because I wouldn’t go on the pill’. Similarly, Virginia (b.1948) explained, in relation to condoms:

I still wouldn’t have been... I’d have been, felt guilty about using it, you know, that sort of thing... It wasn’t, it wasn’t something that you enjoyed doing, because there was that, um, kind of residual guilt feeling, because it wasn’t, it still wasn’t allowed.

Maud (b.1949) who lived in England, had to have a major operation for a chronic condition and was advised by her consultant not to have any more children. During her surgery, she was also sterilised. Prior to having her operation, a priest came to see her and told her that by being sterilised she was committing a sin and he refused to give her absolution. She told me, ‘I was so upset because I was going out for major surgery and he couldn’t give me absolution’. The priest returned to her later on and apologised but stated there was nothing he could do as it was ‘part of your religion’.

Feelings of guilt could persist for a couple’s entire fertile years. Julie (b.1947) from the rural west of Ireland consulted with a chaplain before her husband had a vasectomy in the late 1980s. She explained: ‘I actually felt very guilty even about Paul having the vasectomy done. I felt, I actually spoke to a chaplain inside the hospital actually, about it. I confided to him and I must say that he was very good’. She said that the chaplain told her, ‘You’ve accepted the children you had and, he pointed out it was more like responsible parenthood, rather than ... so I found that was very helpful.’ For couples who wished to use contraception, it could be difficult to reconcile their choices with Catholic teachings. In a response to a piece by an Irish priest on the theme of contraception in the *Irish Times* in 1970, one woman described about the personal conflict she felt in using contraception:

Many times I have been present at Mass in misery, staying away from Holy Communion and worrying about the bad example shown to my older children. I feel in my heart that it can’t possibly offend God to show love for one’s husband while at the same time trying to prevent conception, but after years of strict Irish Catholic upbringing, scruples are hard to overcome.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ ‘Contraception: what do you think?’, *Irish Times*, 22 December 1970, p. 6.

Through disobeying the papal teachings on contraception, this particular woman felt particular emotional distress and guilt, and while she tried to rationalise her birth control practices, she felt that a life following Catholic teachings made it difficult to avoid these feelings. Other women were content to follow the Church's teachings. Breda, interviewed by *Woman's Way* in 1973, a 36-year-old mother of seven children, lived on a council estate and felt that having children was 'what marriage is all about'. She had never attempted the safe period because her husband 'wouldn't have anything to do with it, so what's the use? I'd only wear myself out fighting about it'. In her view, 'I don't know why there's so much fuss about contraceptives. The Church is against them, isn't it? Pope Paul has said so himself, so anyone who calls herself a Catholic shouldn't think any more about it'.¹⁰¹ Similarly, Annie (b.1939) the mother of eleven children, explained to me how she was asked by her gynaecologist 'What kind of contraception would you like?' Annie, who was staunchly Catholic, explained, 'And I looked at him and I said "I don't need any." I mean, I didn't even think of such a thing. And that was it. I was kind of disgusted with him asking me'. Annie felt that the number of children she was to have was God's will and 'you know, when we got married, it was ... you just had as many kids as God sends'.

For couples who wished to adhere to Church teaching on the issue of family planning, the only Church-approved methods were calendar methods such as the unreliable safe period, the temperature method, or later the Billings Method, which began to gain popularity from the 1970s. The safe period, or rhythm method, was critically referred to by some as 'Vatican roulette'. Maurice (b.1942) for instance recalled: 'The recommended [...] was Vatican roulette, do you know? And we knew it was roulette because that's what we had been doing. (laughs)'. Christina (b.1935) and her husband used the safe period after having six children, for economic reasons, because they felt that they would not have been able to 'afford many more' but also because it was in line with Church teaching and 'being a Catholic, I don't think if there was [artificial contraception] I would've used it'.

Audrey (b.1934) from Dublin, who had four children, recalled of the 'safe period': 'Even the priest would say it to you. They'd say you were allowed to use the safe time if you...the so-called "safe time"'. Audrey married in 1957 and had her first child in 1958. She used the safe period to allow some space before her next child, stating, 'But we managed. I mean, I managed anyway. I don't know ... managed to get over two years was

¹⁰¹ 'Undercover on the pill', *Woman's Way*, 1 June 1973, p. 10.

grand.’ She also recalled being told ‘The Billings. You were told the Billings. Use the Billings. You’d want to have willpower like I don’t know what’. Clodagh (b.1940) believed that her decision to avoid artificial methods was down to the influence of the Church teachings on her, stating, ‘I’d say so because it was wrong, that’s it and your conscience wouldn’t let you do it because that’s the way we were drummed into us’. Individuals’ peers may also have helped to reinforce Church teachings. Marianne (b.1948) for instance, told her neighbour that she and her husband were using the withdrawal method. Her neighbour told her that this was a ‘mortal sin’ and that she would need to go to confession. Marianne said her neighbour told her “‘Your soul is blackened.” I lived with that, knowing that my soul was black’. Similarly, Bernadette (b.1947) decided in 1984 to undergo tubal ligation after the completion of her family. She recalled telling a friend of hers who visited her in the hospital before the operation. Her friend ‘was big into the natural method and all that, and she more or less begged of me not to do it’. Bernadette felt that her friend believed the operation would be ‘interfering with nature’.

Individuals were, however, starting to follow their own consciences on the issue. Other women were beginning to justify their decision to go against Church teachings on birth control for economic reasons. Marie Monaghan, aged 24, and the mother of six children, the youngest children being four-month-old triplets was interviewed by *Woman’s Way* in 1969 and explained:

I certainly don’t want any more children; I’ve had enough. My doctor has promised to put me on the pill and I won’t have any qualms at all about using it. People can sermonise as much as they want to about what the Pope said in the encyclical and so on, but how do you look after your large family when your husband is unemployed and the bills are mounting up?¹⁰²

Monaghan’s account here justifies her going against Catholic doctrine and taking the contraceptive pill for economic reasons, and the pill was viewed as necessary in order to better her family situation. Such testimonies suggest that some Irish women were finding ways to navigate both the legislative and religious restrictions on contraception, and that they did not necessarily have misgivings about doing so.¹⁰³ The decision to use contraception therefore often came down to personal conscience and by the late 1960s and early 1970s, many women were beginning to believe that it was a matter for themselves to decide.

¹⁰² *Woman’s Way*, 28 March 1969.

¹⁰³ Rusterholz also found that some Swiss Catholic women justified their use of birth control for economic reasons. Rusterholz, ‘Reproductive behavior’, p. 51.

And, it appears that Church teachings regarding contraception were becoming less relevant to the lives and practices of the younger respondents I interviewed. Louise Fuller suggests that by the 1970s, Irish Catholics were ‘by then picking and choosing which aspects of Catholicism (as preached by the official Church) they would give allegiance to and live out; and which they saw as irrelevant, and simply discarded’.¹⁰⁴ Cathy’s (b.1949) testimony exemplifies this. She said to me that by the 1970s ‘I stopped going to confession sometime around then. I just stopped. I haven’t been to confession in donkeys years. I never saw it as I stopped, you know, the way I picked ... I probably cherry picked what I wanted to pick for a while. Then I kind of moved away’. Indeed, it appears that the younger members of the cohort of interviewees were more inclined to come to their own decisions on the matter rather than being as influenced by Church teachings as the older respondents. Barbara (b.1950) who brought condoms back from England with her husband explained: ‘Now as the religious bit of it never bothered me because I figured this is my life’. Mairead (b.1953) also explained, ‘No, I would have kind of made my own mind up. I would have had probably thought more as a health, you know, health reasons for not using it. I wouldn’t, no, that would never have entered my, that it’s against my religion, no. I don’t think’. Likewise, Noel (b.1952) recalled that when he and his wife were getting married, they felt ‘There’s more to life than just this’. Noel explained that he and his wife discussed the issue of contraception and that his wife said ‘Who dare to tell us what we, we should act in our own home’. David (b.1948) explained that he and his wife Jean (b.1953) ‘made up our own minds’, while Carmel (b.1952) said that she and her husband Martin (b.1952) ‘just didn’t take any cognizance of that at all. We just kind of did our own thing’. However, while some interviewees did not have significant qualms about going against Church teachings, they still felt guilty. In relation to using contraception, Ted (b.1951) for instance explained: ‘we sort of felt a certain kind of guilt about that’.

Reflecting on the Church teachings of the 1960s and 1970s, many respondents expressed the view that they had changed their minds in recent years. Stephen (b.1943) explained, ‘I was brought up with a Catholic background, and Christine was also, and we were church goers every week and still are but we have a different attitude towards things now than we had fifty years ago’. Similarly, Clare (b.1936) told me, ‘I have a different idea about religion than I had when I was young’, while Jean (b.1953) expressed the view:

¹⁰⁴ Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, p. 229.

Well, I suppose the Church were very strict in certain things, sex outside marriage and all that, and you didn't have it until you got married. But then, and homosexuality, that was hardly mentioned at all. It's a terrible thing really. So I suppose you just as you got older, you read more and became more aware of what was going on. Whereas before you just listened to what was said and that was it. But I think as you got older, and a wee bit wiser and that, you came to your own conclusion about lots of things really.

Inevitably, the Church scandals of the 1980s and 1990s had an important impact on some individuals' faith. Áine (b.1949) for instance said, 'But what broke my heart about the Catholic Church was when all the abuse came out'. Noreen (b.1954) recalled the scandals of Father Michael Cleary and Bishop Eamonn Casey stating, 'You sort of ... those are the kind of things you sort of start to say, "Well, there's a law for one but not for the other"'.

5.4 Conclusion

Mrs. T.F. from Dublin, writing to *Woman's Way* in 1971 felt:

The Catholic Church has always discriminated against women and if men were having the babies, contraception would not be a mortal evil. There is not a man alive who would go on childbearing for ten or twelve years or take his temperature and write up charts every morning for three months with six or seven children screaming in the background, yet we allow ourselves to be dictated to by these men. We hear a lot of talk about self-control but what about the woman married to an alcoholic or whose husband demands his biological rights on any day of the month? These men expect women to live a life of martyrdom while they make sure that life is pretty comfortable for themselves.¹⁰⁵

By the 1970s, younger generations of Irish men and women, such as Mrs. T.F. were beginning to question the Church's teachings in relation to contraception, and many others were exhibiting resistance in their contraceptive practices. It is evident, however, that for the older generations, Church teachings had a significant impact on their family planning choices, and given that there was not only a religious ban on contraception, but a legal one too, Irish men and women who used artificial contraception may have had their guilt compounded, compared to Catholic men and women living in countries where contraception was legal.

Although it is clear that the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* caused considerable anguish for some members of the priesthood, speaking out against papal teachings could have serious consequences, as shown in the cases

¹⁰⁵ 'Over to you...', *Woman's Way*, 9 July 1971, p. 6.

of Father James Good and Father Denis O'Callaghan. Many priests toed the line and the confession box was an important sphere where priests could continue to exert power over women's family planning choices. Yet, it is clear that some priests were also beginning to follow their own consciences, and used the confession box compassionately to assist individuals who were troubled by their decision to use contraception. From the 1970s, it is evident that many Irish men and women were beginning to pick and choose the elements of Catholic teachings they wanted to adhere to, and for some, Church doctrine on contraception was one of the aspects being abandoned.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, p. 229.