

*Sightings* 9/19/05

Control Issues  
-- Martin E. Marty

Twice a year, two-score Midwest historians of Christianity, more of them Roman Catholic than not, gather at the Cushwa Center at the University of Notre Dame. We celebrate and criticize one book each meeting. This time it was Catholic University of America Professor Leslie Woodcock Tentler's *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* -- a prize winner, and deservedly so. Two Catholic historians offered formal critical responses, and then the rest of us joined in.

Professor Tentler is not an ideologue or an angry rebel. There was anger, but more than that, pain was evident in the book and in her presentation -- though both the pain and the anger were enlivened by humor. She chronicles the attempt by bishops and priests to enforce anti-birth control measures in the first half of the previous century, and then observes the devastation to church discipline and authority that followed when too few Catholics believed in the strictures, or found that the strictures did not match their experiences.

Tentler tells of the millions of Catholics who tried -- oh! they tried -- to follow the teachings, and how at first they enjoyed the adjustments that came with gradual support for "family-planned" "natural methods" of limiting numbers of children. As an old hell-spotter on the margins of texts, I found the margins of my copy of the book getting cluttered with notations of "hell" and "purgatory." Women who really believed in the values of obedience and confession had to confess, and regularly heard that if they remained engaged in family planning, hell was their destiny. Mission preachers in religious orders were most up-front, mainly because they could move on a few days after preaching a mission. Parish priests often came across as a much more understanding and humane lot, since they dealt continuously with parents of eleven or twelve children who could not, in Depression times, bear having a thirteenth.

"Don't profane your holy matrimony with practices which fill heaven with disgust and hell with chuckling grins," preached one missionary against coitus interruptus. New York's Archbishop Hayes: "To take life after its inception is a horrible crime; but to prevent life that the Creator is about to bring into being is satanic ... [because] not only a body but an immortal soul is denied existence in time and eternity ... [through that] diabolical thing," birth control. Something had to give, and most everything did, after Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* in 1967, against the advice of most of his appointed counselors. He argued that to depart from the teaching of previous popes would lead to loss of papal authority. It turns out that not departing did.

Today there are movements among some Catholics to counter the practices most have adopted, as they advocate "natural methods" or ascetic life among married couples. Tentler would probably enjoy overhearing authorized and encouraged dialogues and arguments between that minority and everybody else. But, she and others rued, since *Humanae Vitae*, after which such dialogue was discouraged or forbidden, "we lack a structure for even discussing these things." Lacking a structure means that battles are fought among activists and editorialists who can blast the "other side," but find no forum to talk to the other, or to listen. Such a breakdown of

structure afflicts many non-Catholic Christians, too. Catholics report that priests today rarely bring up the subject. Silence.

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at [www.illuminos.com](http://www.illuminos.com).