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OF HUMAN LOVE
Catholics Campaigning for Sexual Aggiornamento in Postwar Belgium
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In no other northwestern European country, save for Ireland (as explored in Peter Murray's chapter), was the Catholic church so ubiquitous, so influential and so unrivalled by other religious denominations until well-after the Second World War than it was in Belgium. As testimonies from those who lived through these so-called 'silent years' clearly reveal, the disciplining impact of a conservative clergy on many Belgians' sexual lives during the 1940s and 1950s is hard to overstate, especially when it came to birth control. The Belgian church had, in fact, spearheaded the Catholic fight against contraception at the start of the twentieth century as the first to issue concrete directives regarding 'conjugal onanism' in 1909. In so doing it set an example for other ecclesiastical provinces to follow and laid the foundations for what would, in 1930, become the encyclical *Casti Connubii*.¹

Belgian Catholicism's conservative leadership on birth control during the first half of the century makes its role as a leading champion of change on this issue at the Second Vatican Council all the more remarkable. As this chapter will show, from the late 1940s onwards, a new generation of Belgian progressive theologians, inspired by personalism and moved by the plight of the pious, committed itself to relaxing the restrictions imposed by *Casti Connubii*.² With their intellectual headquarters at the Catholic University of Leuven, they turned to science and sexology in order to build a case for reform. Leuven became an international nerve center of the growing movement within the church for sexual *aggiornamento* from 1958 onwards. In the decade to follow, some of the most influential figures who lobbied the Vatican on behalf of 'the pill' were part of what the Italian press referred to as *la Squadra belga*.³ In the end, of course, their high hopes were shattered by *Humanae Vitae*, and the encyclical's promulgation in 1968 coincided with national political events to provoke a massive backlash against clerical authority among Belgian Catholics.

One consequence of this backlash has been a tendency to recall the role of the clergy at this important juncture in modern history as that of one homogenous reactionary force, particularly in the historiography of sexuality. A contributing factor in this regard was probably that a fair few of the sexual revolution's early chroniclers (and pioneers of sexual history) often had their reasons for feeling hostility towards the church.⁴ As a result, still few histories of sexuality in Belgium have zoomed in on the strong divisions over issues such as birth control and sexual reform even among the hierarchy. In this regard, the work by such church historians as Lieve Gevers may serve as a guiding light for a new generation of scholars to complicate our perspective; an important task, not only in Belgium, at a time when Christianity's (and religion's) oversimplified identification with obdurate conservatism in all matters sexual has become so commonplace.⁵

The present chapter can only be part of that task. Its first half aims to demonstrate how Belgian attempts to revise the magisterium's near-total ban on contraception began at least

¹ My thanks go out to the Belgian American Educational Foundation and to the Research Foundation – Flanders for making this research possible.

two decades before *HV* marked their failure. The second one will render more intelligible the disappointment and the frustration that informed the country's particular spirit of '68 in ways complimentary to Gerd-Rainer Horn's more secular focus on the "peculiarities of Belgium".⁶ There can be little doubt that *HV* contributed to a schism of sorts, as this volume's title suggests, even though there was much more at stake in that fateful year than the issue of birth control alone. But the encyclical was, in many ways, the final straw. As a concluding section will lay out, its publication did much to loosen the already weakening grip of the church on Belgians' lives in general, and on their sexual lives more particularly.

Periodical abstinence and moral confusion

Almost as soon as *Casti Connubii* was published, medical and theological innovations began putting pressure on the teachings which the landmark encyclical affirmed. A better understanding of the menstrual cycle was making reliance on the so-called 'rhythm method' more realistic than it had previously been. Authoritative Catholic moralists like the Jesuit Arthur Vermeersch, who masterminded the Belgian campaign against Neo-Malthusianism and who was a major force behind *Casti Connubii*, warned that periodical abstinence was a slippery slope, and that it opened the kind of door to intemperance and birth control which the encyclical had purposefully sought to close.⁷ But such warnings could not preclude the development of a sophisticated casuistry about what forms of sex and contraception were and were not allowed under Thomistic teachings.

For example, what of *amplex reservatus*, i.e. coitus without any emission of seed inside or outside the womb? This practice could allow couples to enjoy sexual pleasure without committing the sin of Onan, could it not? Clearly, it was a way to enjoy carnal pleasure, but was that enough to render it immoral per se? Could the enjoyment of such pleasure not be condoned among married couples if the sexual acts themselves were not contrary to nature? If so, then what to think of sex during the sterile period of the menstrual cycle? That practice had been allowed by the Penitentiary since 1880, but it did waste seed in the process.⁸ Of course, in an imperfect world pure moral choices rarely present themselves, and Thomism therefore taught that two goods or evils needed to be weighed against each other. Thus, cutting of a leg to save a person's life constituted a moral act. So was the same not true for a vasectomy in certain cases? Surely, contraception was allowed if it would save lives? Would this not be the case even more if less intrusive measures could be found to prevent life-threatening pregnancies? What if there were measures to regulate the irregular menstrual cycles of women with severe gynecological conditions? Was that not merely 'correcting' an unbalanced natural function? And what if, in the process of 'correcting' those cycles, one could also cure endometriosis, dangerously excessive menstrual bleeding, or debilitating menstrual pains?

Whereas theologians busily addressed such questions over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, the most important question for lay Catholics was if they were allowed to 'enjoy' marital privileges and under what specific conditions periodical abstinence could be utilized in order to avoid conception. However, on this crucial point instructions could be highly contradictory and confusing. That much is clearly shown by an abundance of cheap little guides to good Christian life from the early 1940s, which offer typical examples of the ways

in which church doctrine was translated to lay audiences. Among them many catered to the growing demand for guidance on questions pertaining to sexuality and birth control, bearing such titles as: *The Natural Foundations of Marriage and the Family*, *The Primary Purpose of Marriage and the Consequences of Unnatural Practices* and *Prudent People and Periodical Abstainers*.⁹ Wrapped in a biting critique of modernity in its entirety, the latter of these did not shrink from depicting people who practiced any form of contraception, including periodical abstinence, as morally bankrupt hedonists who ‘listen to the deafening noise of jazz on the radio to muffle the voices of their own conscience.’¹⁰ From the very same series, however, a booklet named *Family Planning* sang a very different tune. Despite strong reservations about any form of frivolous intemperance, it argued ‘that there really can be valid social and economic reasons to raise the question of birth control.’¹¹

Personalism, pastoralism and birth control

After a long period of declining fertility rates since the late nineteenth century, Belgium’s liberation by the Allied Forces was followed by a baby boom that lasted until the late 1960s.¹² Many families consisted of ten or more children. Especially in the Catholic countryside, women often became pregnant until menopause set in, which regularly resulted in dangerous complications. Women’s lives in these rural areas were geared towards hard work and self-sacrifice, acquiescence and conformity, and the unquestioning acceptance of male and church authority. Moreover, a culture of silence regarding all things sexual produced the kind of ignorance that commonly led to relational problems. Many men were incapable of expressing affection or simply indifferent to the sexual and emotional needs of women.¹³ One Catholic doctor later remembered how his daily confrontation ‘with the desperation of exhausted mothers in my poor moorland village’ troubled him deeply. Like many others, he grew increasingly disillusioned by the ‘baffling arrogance’ of many clergymen who, ‘marinated in their own sense of self-worth’, remained utterly unmoved by the difficulties couples faced.¹⁴

A new generation of clergymen was more attuned to such difficulties, especially with regard to birth control. Their ‘personalism’ was part of a much broader intellectual movement that had ripened during the 1930s in response to the socially atomizing effects of capitalist individualism on the one hand and to the collectivist disregard for the individual under totalitarian regimes on the other.¹⁵ Personalists took lived experience and intersubjectivity as the starting points for a moral philosophy rooted in notions love, personal growth and relational fulfillment. Applied to conjugal morality, these views reduced the biologicistic stress on reproduction in order to emphasize the importance of love and mutual affection as the principal goals of marriage.¹⁶ In 1944, the Holy Office explicitly deemed this reassessment of the primary ends of marriage “not appropriate”.¹⁷ But this shot across progressives’ bow failed to dissuade them from listening to lay concerns and from nurturing the precedence of couple’s conscientious decisions over any blind adherence to authority or doctrine. A programmatic booklet on the *Changes in Perspective Concerning Conjugal Morality* from 1950 by the Belgian canon Jacques Leclercq began by acknowledging that:

There should be no mistaking that many priests, and even the very best ones, presently find

themselves embarrassed by the traditional solutions offered by moral theology concerning conjugal ethics.¹⁸

Since the 1930s, Leclercq and others at home and abroad had felt that the forbidding tradition offered little to Catholics living and acting in good faith. Immediately after the war, the foundation of Catholic family groups like the Brussels-based one that published the monthly *Feuilles familiales (Family Pages)*, had heralded the birth of a grass-roots movement. Although the bulletin was primarily written by and for laymen and women, the driving force behind it was a young priest named Pierre de Locht. In 1948 he agreed to devote an entire issue of the publication to the Ogino method.¹⁹ Sex was fast becoming an emotive issue. That same year the first Kinsey report took the world by storm and in 1949 Paul Chanson of the French Association for Christian Marriage added fuel to the fire by publishing two hugely controversial books on the *Art of Loving* for a Catholic audience.²⁰

Initially, personalists like de Locht needed to tread with care. The suffragan archbishop Leo-Jozef Suenens muzzled him after giving a provocative speech on *The Attitudes of Priests and the Confessor Towards Certain Delicate Problems Concerning Conjugal Morality*.²¹ Things changed rapidly, however, after Pius XII's famous speech before the Italian Catholic Society of Midwives in 1951, when he permitted the use of birth control through periodical abstinence for 'serious' eugenic, social and economic reasons, while also embracing sexual 'pleasure and happiness in body and soul' as a marital virtue.²² To de Locht's surprise, Suenens now suddenly began to encourage him 'very expressly to continue exploring this area of primary importance!'²³ Meanwhile, other young personalists were also gaining influence. Only a year before, in 1950, the moralist Paul Anciaux was appointed at the Grand Seminar of Mechelen, and at the Catholic University of Leuven the priest and theologian Louis Janssens had been teaching moral theology since 1942.²⁴ During his lectures Janssens would often emphasize how much he owed to his rural background and how much his contact with ordinary people had brought him to reconsider the meaning and the true purpose of sexuality. Thus he taught whole generations of students 'that professorate and science are not only born from books and learning, but also from listening to people', as one of his former students later remembered with affection.²⁵

Building the case for change

Pope Pius XII's limited endorsement of periodical abstinence in 1951 was partly informed by the moral problems raised by demographic developments on a global scale. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the United Nations had begun publishing alarming projections about the explosive growth of the population in developing countries.²⁶ The Vatican successfully scrambled Catholic countries, including Belgium, to oppose WHO-sponsored birth control programmes²⁷, but the specter of overpopulation required a more scientific and interdisciplinary analysis of sexuality on the part of Catholics too. Founded in 1945, the Catholic School of Family Sciences offered an early example of this realization in France.²⁸ In Belgium, the Catholic medical review *Saint-Luc médical* began to reflect the rapidly intensifying efforts made at the Catholic University of Leuven to build a center of expertise concerning sexual problems from the late 1940s onwards.²⁹ Here, physicians, sociologists,

psychologists, psychiatrists, criminologists, moralists and educators alike shone light on the intersections of abortion, artificial insemination, eugenics, contraception, the use of anesthetics during labor, prenuptial check-ups, hormonal therapy, impotence, sexual education, ‘mental hygiene’, demography and conjugal ethics.

Always drawing on the latest scientific findings, Louis Janssens soon emerged as a highly authoritative champion of what he called ‘virtuous fertility’: a positive embrace of the marital act, periodical abstinence and family planning in good Christian spirit. In 1956 he and Anciaux were co-founders of the advisory Marriage and Family Councils, which reached large groups through the local branches of Catholic institutions such as the Federation for Large Families, the Catholic Farmers’ Union, the Christian Workers Movement (KAV-KWB), parents’ associations, parish societies, and many others.³⁰ With growing self-confidence, Janssens asked *Is the Inhibition of Ovulation Morally Lawful?* in an article from 1958.³¹ He welcomed progesterone-based pills like the recently marketed Enovid in the United States because they allowed for the regulation of the menstrual cycle and only postponed ovulation temporarily, without destroying any egg cells. Several of Janssens’ colleagues had strong reservations about the use of chemical anovulants, but they nonetheless endorsed the kind of research conducted behind the scenes by scholars like the endocrinologist Jacques Férin, who were placing Belgium at the forefront of international gynecological medicine.³² Nothing, however, marked 1958 more clearly as a tipping point than the cautious campaign for doctrinal change which was launched that year by the rising star of the Belgian church: Leo-Jozef Suenens.

In 1958 the Brussels World Fair drew more than 41.5 million visitors to Belgian capital and made it the site of numerous prestigious symposia, among them the First Catholic World Health Conference.³³ In his widely acclaimed opening address to the conference, Suenens called upon Catholic scholars across the globe to buckle down in addressing problems of sexuality and human reproduction, arguing that: ‘We do not have the right to ask people to obey the law without simultaneously doing everything within our power to render such obedience possible; without investing all our energy in clearing a path.’³⁴ As several of his closest collaborators have later recalled, Suenens was less a studious theologian than he was a man of calculated action.³⁵ From 1959 onwards, he began hosting what came to be known as Leuven’s annual International Sexological Colloquia, which commenced as small and highly exclusive gatherings and grew in size and scope over the years with about half of the attendants coming from abroad.³⁶ Here, the idea was first raised for the foundation of an interdisciplinary Institute for Family and Sexological Sciences, which enrolled its first post-graduate students in the fall of 1961.³⁷ Around the same time, Suenens succeeded archbishop Van Roey as prelate of the Belgian church and Rector of the Catholic University of Leuven.

An amiable man and a polyglot, Suenens came to play a pivotal role in its organization in the years leading up to the Second Vatican Council.³⁸ He entertained warm relations with Pope John XXIII, who made Suenens a cardinal in 1962. By that time, German, English, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese versions of his popular layman-orientated companion to *Love and Control. The Contemporary Problem* (1960) had appeared, making him an international authority on Catholicism and sexuality.³⁹ In the spring of 1963, Suenens obtained permission from the ailing pope to set up a secret pontifical *Groupe d’études sur la population*.⁴⁰ Its six initial members, presumably handpicked by Suenens, were all regulars at Leuven’s

International Sexological Colloquia at Leuven.⁴¹ The three Belgians among them were close confidants of the cardinal and reflective of Leuven's interdisciplinary approach: a physician, an economist and a sociologist-demographer.⁴² The group's other half consisted of the French Jesuit and family sociologist Stanislas de Lestapis, the British physician John Marshall, and the Swiss Dominican Henri de Riedmatten who worked in the Holy See's Secretariat of State and served as a Vatican observer at the UN in Geneva. When the group first convened in 1963, it tellingly did so in Leuven rather than the Vatican.

High hopes and heavy lobbying

From early on, one common quip participants used to describe the disproportionate influence that Belgian reformers were having on the Council was to call it 'Concilium Vaticanum II, Lovaniense I'.⁴³ This description was especially fitting insofar as the push for doctrinal change on conjugal morality was concerned, to which the untimely death of Pope John in June 1963 presented a major setback. His successor, Paul VI, allowed the renamed *Commissio pro studio populationis, familiae et natalitatis* to expand over the years, adding fellow conservatives as well as progressive thinkers, which included such Leuven reformists as Pierre de Locht, Paul Anciaux, Jacques Férin and even Suenens himself.⁴⁴ However, as the voices of reform sounded louder, opposition to them began to bolster in the course of 1963 and 1964.

The televised endorsement of birth control by the Dutch bishop Wilhelmus Bekkers in March 1963 was a source of considerable irritation in curial circles, as Dols and Van den Bos have also explored. That fall, Jacques Férin and Louis Janssens published articles that came out strongly in favour of the pill, greatly adding to the growing indignation among conservatives, particularly in the United States, where they caused an uproar.⁴⁵ Joseph Reuss, the auxiliary bishop of Mainz, endorsed Janssens' views and in April 1964 Thomas Roberts SJ, the maverick archbishop of Bombay, disavowed the belief that contraception was intrinsically evil on the front page of the London *Times* as Harris's chapter illustrates. When asked by reporters what he thought about the positions taken by Janssens and Roberts, Suenens replied that scientists were working on a pill that would soon allow Catholic families to engage in family planning without violating church teachings.⁴⁶ The Vatican promptly responded with a circular forbidding any further public statements on the issue of birth control.

Despite mounting frictions, in October 1964 Suenens and de Locht still successfully lobbied for the inclusion of married laymen and women in the *Commissio* by encouraging the Belgian couple Herman Buelens and Lena Gijzen to address a broadly supported *Appeal to the Holy Father Paul VI and the Bishops of the Catholic church*.⁴⁷ That same month, as the Council fathers arrived at the discussion of the contentious issue of matrimony and the family, Suenens drew applause in Saint Peter's Basilica by imploring his 'brother bishops' to embrace science and thereby 'avoid a new Galileo affair'.⁴⁸ Afterwards, Jozef Heuschen, bishop of Hasselt in Belgium's east, took the lead in redrafting the famous chapter in Schema XIII on marriage. A close comrade of Suenens, Heuschen appealed to Leuven-trained theologians such as Philippe Delhaye, Victor Heylen and Edward Schillebeeckx to make the text as personalist as possible.⁴⁹ When, in closing the Council by the end of 1965, this

Schema became the *Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World*, known as *Gaudium et Spes*, it raised high hopes by stipulating that ‘[m]arriage is not instituted solely for procreation’ and by suggesting that, when it came to family planning, ‘[t]he parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God.’⁵⁰

Meanwhile, the papal *Commissio* kept working and in the spring of 1966 its theologians voted that *Casti Connubii* was not irrevocable and contraception not ‘intrinsically evil’ by fifteen votes to four.⁵¹ A year later, the commission’s final report appeared. It stated that ‘married people need decent and human means for the regulation of conception’ if they were to be able ‘to observe and to cultivate the essential values of marriage’.⁵² But a hard-lining conservative minority, which had the pope’s ear, was discretely moving to immunize Catholic doctrine against contamination by the sexual changes taking place in the lay world, with Karol Wojtyła, the future John Paul II, prominently among them, as Agnieszka Kościńska’s chapter makes clear. The once friendly relations between Suenens and Paul VI soured as the former frantically tried to sway the pope. In the summer of 1967, Suenens convinced 27 cardinals and bishops at the first Council of the Bishops’ Conferences to sign a plea drafted by Reuss urging doctrinal change. Amongst the signatories were the archbishops of Utrecht, Turin, Reims and Barcelona.⁵³ Meanwhile Julius Döpfner, the cardinal and archbishop of München and Freising, informed the pope that German bishops had voted in favor of change by a margin of 34 to 5.⁵⁴ None of it had any effect and by the spring of 1968 Suenens resorted to increasingly desperate pleas in the name of collegiality. On 29 July of that year, Paul VI promulgated *Humanae Vitae* to the astonishment and the indignation of progressive Catholics worldwide.⁵⁵

When the pope wrote to ask for his support, Suenens replied that the church now faced the most serious crisis in its history⁵⁶ and stalled to prevent any rash response to the encyclical on the part of the Belgian episcopate. He set a group of bishops and theologians with the task of drafting an official reaction. Among others it included Heuschen, Heylen, Anciaux, de Locht and Janssens.⁵⁷ Contacts were also established with church leaders in the Netherlands, Federal Germany, Austria, Switzerland and England, and they agreed to meet on 9 September at Essen.⁵⁸ By that time, however, the Belgian and West German episcopacies had already been the first in Europe to release their official statements on the encyclical, the latter Königstein declaration directed by fellow commission member Cardinal Döpfner as Ebner and Mesner’s chapter explores in more detail.⁵⁹ Both the Belgian and West German responses stressed that *HV* was not an infallible declaration of doctrine, but the Belgian formulation was arguably the more explicit in championing the liberty of each Christian’s well-informed conscience with regard to birth control:

Someone [...] who is competent in the matter under consideration and capable of forming a sound personal judgment [...] may, after a serious examination before God, come to other conclusions [than the ones drawn in the encyclical] on certain points. In such a case he has the right to follow his conviction provided that he remains sincerely disposed to continue his inquiry.⁶⁰

Moreover, the Belgian statement went on to note provocatively that when it came to contraceptives, ‘certain arguments’ laid out by the pope did ‘not have the same convincing character for everyone.’⁶¹

The anti-authoritarian backlash

In the weeks and months to come, declarations from Asian, African, Latin American, Southern and Eastern European churches were more welcoming to the encyclical. But, with varying points of emphasis and degrees of dissent as examined within various chapters of this volume, the bishops of several Western countries followed the example set by Belgium and Germany. That both countries' leading church dignitaries had long been part of the pope's intimate circle made their open revolt carry particular symbolic weight. Paul VI had, after all, made Döpfner and Suenens two of the Council's four key moderators back in 1963. Moreover, Suenens and Montini had been close since before the latter's papacy.⁶² It was therefore an unmistakable sign of how profound the crisis caused by *HV* was when a radicalized Suenens gave a shock-interview in May 1969, pillorying the lack of collegialism and the way power was exercised in the church. Responding to questions about his recent book on *Coresponsibility in the Church*, Suenens urged the Vatican to 'take note of the fact that the ancien régime is over'.⁶³ As far as he was concerned, the recent Council had been characterized in no small part by the 'grim and skillful fight of a curial minority against the efforts of the conciliar majority'.⁶⁴ *Time* magazine called the widely translated and hugely controversial interview 'perhaps the most encyclopedic indictment of outdated church practices by a ranking Roman Catholic cleric in modern times'.⁶⁵ It gained Suenens an international reputation as a leading proponent of reform and anti-authoritarianism in the church. To make matters worse, he went on to come out against mandatory priest celibacy at the Conference of European Bishops of Coire in July of 1969, and publicly requested an open discussion about the issue on several occasions in 1970 and 1971.⁶⁶

Ironically, however, Suenens himself had meanwhile come to be viewed as the personification of Catholic authoritarianism in his own country, and especially in Flanders. Since the war, Belgium had become increasingly divided along linguistic lines.⁶⁷ Social tensions and profound economic changes popularized calls for self-rule on both sides of a language barrier officially charted during the early 1960s. The nation's beating heart of Catholic cultural and intellectual life that had long been the University of Leuven thus became a bilingual anomaly within Flanders. With reference to emancipatory movements abroad, and the historical association of French as the language of a patronizing elite, Flemish students began vocally to demand the relocation of the university's French-speaking half. Suenens and his bishops, who oversaw the institution, had to try to pacify and adjudicate this situation.⁶⁸

Violent street riots broke out in Leuven when the episcopate condescendingly refused to split the university up in May 1966. Symbolizing a peculiar mix of nationalism, left-wing liberationism and anti-authoritarian resentment, students gave turns to singing the Flemish anthem and *We Shall Overcome*, while calling for the expulsion of Walloons, bourgeois and bishops all at once.⁶⁹ As the crisis deepened, political tensions flared and cracks appeared in the episcopal front. When the French-speaking branch of the university announced new building plans, more violent student protests shook both Leuven and the entire country in January 1968. Dutch-speaking members of the Christian-Democratic party felt they could no longer support their government's backing of the bishops. The Prime Minister tendered his resignation and early elections were called. The coming years would see the first in a long

series of constitutional reforms that set Belgium on a steady path towards defederalization. Followed by the other major political families, the Christian-Democratic CVP-PSC was to break up into separate Flemish and French-speaking parties, but not before it split the university of Leuven in the summer of 1968 against the will of the church. The breach of confidence between the Catholic population on the one hand, and the nation's clerical hierarchy on the other, fundamentally damaged the moral authority of the church.

HV did nothing to rebuild that authority. On the contrary, it only served to reinforce the wide-spread sense that the church was an oppressive institution. With regard to sexuality, a small-scale Kinsey-inspired survey among youths had already concluded in 1962 that 'the connection between religion and sexuality is essentially a negative and a repressive one.'⁷⁰ In 1967, the deliberately incendiary sex issue of Leuven's Flemish Catholic students association went so far as to accuse the church's 'celibatarian dictatorship' of inciting child abuse.⁷¹ That same year, a televised debate caused uproar when the mostly Catholic panel members failed to oppose the progressive moralist Jaap Kruithof's support for young couples' 'right' to buy and use contraceptives.⁷² Even Louis Janssens and Victor Heylen rushed to reject all premarital and purely hedonist sex in the press, thereby showing how even more liberal voices on the issue of conjugal morality inside the church still sought to hold people to standards that were widely being rejected. Signaling the realization that recourse to doctrine was falling out of favour fast, the moralist and co-director of Leuven's progressive Johannes XXIII seminary Fons D'Hoogh wrote:

We [clergymen] must honestly ask ourselves if our reliance on authority is not born from intellectual laziness, or out of an attempt to escape taking responsibility.⁷³

After *HV* was promulgated, Suenens seemed temporarily able to preserve unity among his bishops and to form a common front with the country's moral theologians who assisted in drafting the Belgian church's official declaration about the encyclical. In actuality, however, only an epic show of cunning and willpower on his part had made that declaration at all possible. Led by Léonce-Albert Van Peteghem, the conservative hardliner from Ghent, four of Belgium's eight bishops had been opposed to the document's critical tone, with one absent, one on the fence and only two strongly in favor, i.e. Heuschen and Suenens himself. Much of the necessary support to get a consensus passed had come from the auxiliary bishops.⁷⁴ To Suenens' chagrin, a group of moral theologians began working on a separate declaration based on a draft by, among others, D'Hoogh and Janssens, which rejected the biologicistic inspiration of the encyclical in much stronger terms than the bishops' had. In a bid to maintain unity, Suenens prohibited the publication of this declaration, but it was leaked to the press anyway and appeared in *De Standaard* on 16 October 1968.⁷⁵

Soon thereafter, any remaining semblance of unity collapsed when Van Peteghem demanded loyalty to the pope in a stern pastoral letter issued in November.⁷⁶ Heuschen, by contrast, almost simultaneously drew up highly permissive instructions for his own diocese.⁷⁷ That the Catholic lay community did not linger in breaking away from a divided hierarchy over *HV* was clear from the fact that the editors of the influential Catholic magazine, *De Maand*, had not hesitated in calling the pope's 'lonely decision' a 'mistake' as early as September.⁷⁸ That same month, the Christian Workers Association (KWB) had made its

‘fundamental objections’ to *HV* known in its magazine *Raak*.⁷⁹ The association recognized that the church had every right to inform Christians’ consciences, but none to prescribe in detail what people could or could not do, and it insisted ‘that everyone may develop their own personalist outlook on marriage.’⁸⁰ In similar fashion, the Christian Workers Women’s Guilds (KAV) also distanced themselves from the encyclical.⁸¹

Towards ‘cultural Catholicism’

Karel Dobbelaere, the leading sociologist of religious life in Belgium, has rightly warned against oversimplified histories that see *HV* as a singular, sudden and clear-cut breaking point.⁸² Strong generational differences and fast-changing living standards attributable to postwar economic growth had gradually fueled a culture of self-affirmation and anti-authoritarianism among the baby boomers. More specifically with regard to sexuality, the ‘detraditionalization’ of marriage accompanying women’s growing participation in the labour force and the increasing accessibility of ‘the pill’ from the early 1960s onwards also played a big role. The combined crises brought on by the Leuven question and *HV* nevertheless acted as explosive accelerants to a wildfire that had been spreading for some time and now threatened to burn the entire house down. Dobbelaere has described the period between 1968 and 1973 as one characterized by a ‘drastic collapse of piousness’, with roughly 800,000 Belgian Catholics ceasing to practice in a timespan of only six years.⁸³ Regular mass attendance still numbered about 50 per cent of the population in 1950 and had steadily declined to 42.9 per cent by 1967. Six years later, in 1973, the national average plummeted another ten points, down to 32.3 per cent.⁸⁴ After that, the steady decline continued. When regular measurements were ceased in 1998, no more than 11.2 per cent of Belgians still regularly went to church.⁸⁵

None of these figures should be read as wholesale abandonment of Catholicism overnight, but rather as a growing rift between the institutional church as such and the extensive body of social organizations that formed the Catholic ‘pillar’ of society on the other. If anything, the late 1960s and the early 1970s catalyzed the transition towards what could be referred to as ‘cultural Catholicism’. Especially in historically devout Flanders, this term may serve to point out how the rate of Catholic baptisms, marriages and funerals also declined during these years, but not nearly as fast as regular mass attendance did.⁸⁶ While the number of vocations fell steeply and that of priests leaving the church peaked, the membership of most Catholic social organizations remained steady or even continued growing.⁸⁷ In Flanders, the share of Catholic secondary school students hovered steadily at about 70 per cent, and the strength of Christian syndicalism consolidated further.⁸⁸ While slowly declining, the political dominance of the two Christian-Democratic parties – largely based on Flemish votes – also persisted until 1999.⁸⁹ The primary outcome of the religious crisis of the late 1960s, therefore, was to weaken the ‘clerical’ character of the Catholic pillar and to greatly diminish the direct influence of the clergy and church hierarchy on Catholics’ lives.

The fast-changing attitudes towards contraception offer a very good marker of the population’s alienation from restrictive church doctrine. When a government survey explored attitudes to birth control in 1952, 43 per cent of Belgians declared themselves in favour of contraception and 42 per cent against.⁹⁰ By 1965, another poll showed that 70.4 per cent now

favoured family planning, with only 27 per cent opposing.⁹¹ From a sample consisting of people married in 1962, 54.6 per cent admitted that they had already practiced some form of contraception, and of the minority that had not, a further 34.2 per cent indicated that they would use birth control at some point.⁹² Clearly, people's views on contraception had already shifted substantially by middle of the 1960s, but subsequent years would see a dramatic hastening of this attitudinal change. The first large-scale government studies showed that condom use doubled in the five years between 1966 and 1971, while use of the pill tripled.⁹³ A follow-up later showed that young couples took to chemical anovulants in droves between 1966 and 1976, despite *HV*'s forbidding tone. A sample of those under 25 years of age indicated that reliance on periodical abstinence fell from 60 to 24 per cent during this decade, while use of 'the pill' shot up from a mere 10 to 61 per cent.⁹⁴

Policies shifted in response to this change in practice. By 1970 a legal framework was created to regulate and subsidize the existing family planning counselling centers.⁹⁵ The most progressive (non-Christian) ones amongst them had been operating in a legal grey zone since their creation in the mid-1950s because any 'propaganda' for contraceptive measures remained criminalized under article 383 of the penal code. The Christian-Democratic parties agreed to lift this ban in 1972 in a concession that served to block any decriminalization of abortion, which socialist MP's had first called for in 1971 and which stirred a huge public debate on the issue in 1973.⁹⁶ The legalization of abortion would not happen until 1990, after the deeply pious king created a constitutional crisis by refusing to sign the bill into law. But the scrapping of article 383 had rendered possible an open discussion about and normalization of contraceptive use from the early 1970s onwards.

In his Pentecostal letter from 1976, Cardinal Suenens responded to a recent declaration by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the 'confusion of minds and relaxation of morals.'⁹⁷ The letter made no mention of birth control and explicitly endorsed priest celibacy. Suenens did recognize that the sexual dimension of human life had long been 'ignored or underappreciated' but went on to state that '[n]owadays, it would appear that the physical dimension of sexuality is overappreciated'.⁹⁸ His long campaign on behalf of a more personalist conception of love and marriage had always argued that both the church and the world were excessively preoccupied with the flesh and the physical aspects of sex. This campaign's ultimate failure and the sexual revolution of recent years had, to his mind, produced an unhelpful polarization between prudery and profligacy. This, Suenens felt, was a fallacy and a tragedy of the excluded middle:

A healthy evolution in morality has removed certain taboos. The relation between husband and wife has also become a more natural one. We must steer a middle course and strike a balance between a Jansenist-ridden past and a present of free reins.⁹⁹

The calls for sexual *aggiornamento* had been drowned out by the voices of austerity and of sexual revolution on either side of the personalist center, so much so that the vicennial campaign by progressive Catholics on the behalf of the church's embrace of the pill and of 'virtuous fertility' is now often forgotten or overlooked. *HV* marked a watershed, not just in ending that campaign, but also in the way that, half a century down the line, it still serves to

foster the commonly held view in a thoroughly secularized society like Belgium's that religious conviction and sexual pleasure are mutually exclusive by necessity.

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