

February 19, 1969

The Rev. John A. O'Brien
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556

Dear Father O'Brien:

Thank you for your note of February 7 and the reprint "Birth Control and the Catholic Conscience".

You set a difficult task to suggest only a very brief comment on this contentious issue, which can be explored at so many different levels. Furthermore, I fully recognize my limitations as someone outside your church. Some points are, however, so obvious as to need little apology. The church will destroy itself if communicants are not given the right to appeal to individual conscience. The world has already suffered a great deal at the hands of monolithic authority and we must find new ways to live happily and fruitfully in new times. I admire your own courage in expressing your conscience as clearly and forthrightly as you have, plainly motivated by a profound loyalty to the moral foundations of your church.

Your writing has eloquently shown that the real issue is the role of enlightened conscience. I am not so easily convinced that the encyclical bears witness to Paul VI's acquiescence in this principle, and I will therefore be quite surprised at any rescission. However, as you pointed out, this teaching is not cloaked with infallibility and there can be little doubt that if the church is to survive at all, it must legitimate the role of enlightened conscience. The question now is how many years of torment must precede such an evolution.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics