

Cardinal says 'Humanae Vitae' cut off church from many people

ROME – Italian Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini said the 1968 encyclical “*Humanae Vitae*” (“Of Human Life”) has cut off the church from many of the people who most need its advice about human sexuality.

The encyclical, which taught that artificial birth control was morally wrong, caused a large number of people to stop taking the church’s views into serious consideration, Cardinal Martini said.

“Many have distanced themselves from the church, and the church from the people. Serious damage was done,” he said.

Cardinal Martini, an 81-year-old Jesuit and the former archbishop of Milan, made the comments in a book-length interview titled “Nighttime Conversations in Jerusalem.”

The cardinal did not address specifically the issue of the morality of contraception. He suggested, however, that the whole question might be better approached from a more pastoral perspective.

“Today we have a broader horizon in which to confront the questions of sexuality. The needs of confessors and young people, too, need much more attention. We cannot abandon these people,” he said.

Cardinal Martini noted that when Pope Paul VI wrote the 1968 encyclical he set aside the advice of a commission of experts and made a “highly personal” decision.

“In the long term, the solitary nature of this decision has not proven to be a favorable premise for treating the theme of sexuality and the family,” he said.

He said Pope John Paul II pressed for a strict application of the encyclical’s teaching, lest doubts arise.

Today, he said, the church might be able to adopt “a new vision” and indicate “a better way” than it did in “*Humanae Vitae*.”

"The church would regain credibility and competence," he said.

"Knowing how to admit one's errors and the limitations of one's previous viewpoints is a sign of greatness of soul and confidence," he said.

Cardinal Martini said it was unlikely that Pope Benedict XVI would ever withdraw "*Humanae Vitae*," but he said the pope "could write a new encyclical that could be its continuation."

He said the church should take a positive approach to human sexuality, with less emphasis on prohibitions.

"In the past, the church has said perhaps even too much about the Sixth Commandment. Sometimes it would have been better to remain silent," he said.

He recalled the Gospel account of the woman caught in adultery. Asked by the scribes whether the woman should be stoned, Jesus does not respond, but instead criticizes the scribes for making the woman into an object and failing to listen to her, the cardinal said.

"The church should always treat questions of sexuality and the family in such a way that a leading and decisive role is up to the responsibility of the person who loves," he said.

"Whatever the church affirms, it should be supported by many people, by responsible Christians who want to be conscientious in love," he said.