

VATICAN'T

PROVIDING THE COMMENTATING community with a bit of relief from Iran-contra, along comes what might be called Vatican't. The new prohibitions from Rome are outlined in a document entitled "Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation: Replies to Certain Questions of the Day." (The document is not, repeat not, entitled "Sex Tips for Modern Girls from Sixty-Year-Old Bachelors Who Have Taken Vows of Chastity.") Surrogate motherhood is out, artificial insemination by donor is out, in vitro fertilization of wives by husbands is out. And of course contraception, still, is out. Having been told they have to get pregnant, women are now being told they can't. More precisely, fertility is mandatory for those who are able to conceive but don't want to, forbidden for those who want to conceive but aren't able to. Catch-XXII.

The Sunday morning talk shows, secular humanism's answer to hymns and sermons, zero in on the Vatican document. A personable young Irish monsignor answers respectful questions via satellite from Rome. Back in the studio, bishops and senators react. The American clerics interviewed seem glumly aware that Catholics who badly want children will be apt to choose parenthood over obedience. A questioner points out to a bishop that the prohibition against in vitro fertilization appears to fly in the face of both charity and experience, and says she can't understand the argument against it. "The argument is an argument from faith," the bishop replies irritably. His curtness surprises me. There must be more to it than that.

Curious, I dig out the previous Wednesday's *New York Times* and read

the full text of the Vatican's instruction. Sure enough, there is an argument of sorts buried in the dense prose of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It is the same as the argument against contraception. There is an "inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning." Contraception is forbidden because it sacrifices the procreative meaning to the unitive, in vitro fertilization because it sacrifices the unitive to the procreative. Q.E.D. The argument is coldly and relentlessly deductive, depending as it does upon a bald assertion of what is "willed by God." A Catholic couple unable to conceive without medical help might protest that the husband's low sperm count is also "willed by God"; more to the point, so is the human ingenuity that enables them to overcome it. But the argument is over. The bishop was right after all: it's an argument from faith, which in this case means an argument from authority. Take it or leave it. And the anguish of the couple? "Spouses who find themselves in this sad situation," replies the document, "are called to find in it an opportunity for sharing in a particular way in the Lord's Cross, the source of spiritual fruitfulness."

This is not to say that there is nothing for a secular humanist like me to admire in the Vatican document. It is refreshing, even uplifting, to read a committee-produced 1987 text that has so little awe of modern science and modernity in general, that asserts that no human being can "be reduced in worth to a pure and simple instrument for the advantage of others," that is so manifestly unguided by public opinion polls, and that nowhere contains the word "incentives." Yet there are unwelcome reminders of the old authoritarian ways. Artificial insemination by donor, for example, is not only proscribed for Catholics; it is also, if the Church has its way (admittedly a highly unlikely prospect), to be criminalized in civil law. And of course non-Catholics thus forced into barrenness by state power would be denied even the dubious comfort of metaphorical crucifixion. William Jennings Bryan, where are you?

I HEAR a startling report from Alabama, where a federal district judge named W. Brevard Hand—known to courthouse regulars as Unlearned Hand—has rendered a decision banning forty-five textbooks from the public schools. According to Judge Hand's reasoning, since the textbooks in

question do not promote Christianity, it follows that they promote "the religion of secular humanism." Therefore the textbooks constitute an establishment of religion by the state of Alabama. This is unconstitutional, as Judge Hand learned when an earlier decision of his got blown away on appeal. That was the one where he declared that it was perfectly O.K. for Alabama to have an established state religion, adding that (a) the Bill of Rights only applies to the feds and (b) "a member of a religious minority will have to develop a thicker skin if state establishment offends him." The new Hand decision won't last long either, but for now it seems that secular humanism is indeed an officially recognized religion. This is welcome news for the unchurched among us, who didn't even know we had a religion until the fundamentalists gave us one. I suggest to my fellow secular humanists in the Cotton State that they hasten to claim the privileges to which their new station entitles them: clergy parking spaces; favorable consideration in the awarding of UHF television licenses; and (since both the federal and state governments are secular humanist institutions) the total deductibility of all tax payments from taxable income. If my calculations are correct, this should reduce secular humanist tax liability to zero. But better act fast. Judge Hand may like us, but the Supreme Court isn't as hospitable to our religion as it used to be.

—Cambridge Diarist, *The New Republic*, April 6, 1987