

Disagreements with authority plague the Catholic Church on many levels: how we use the Bible, how we celebrate the sacraments, and how we establish sexual morality. Fr. Andrew Greeley, a sociologist, says the event that changed Catholic authority was Pope Paul VI's encyclical on human life in 1968. That was the first church document to exclude the usage of artificial means of birth control. In the years preceding that encyclical, many Catholics were using the pill on the good advice of pastors and theologians. In fact, most of the pope's consultants believed that the use of artificial contraceptives fit Catholic morality very well, but Pope Paul argued that God had established certain natural laws for the birth of humans and that it was not right to intervene with artificial methods. He encouraged parents to regulate the number of births, but with natural, not artificial methods. Statistics say that 80% of Catholic couples defy this authority and use artificial contraceptives. On the other hand, couples who regulate births naturally praise the practice for the way it draws them together. Greeley says when Rome refused to accept artificial birth control, it hurt the credibility of leadership. That caused a rippling effect diversifying the views of the faithful on everything from attendance at Sunday mass to acceptance of other church teachings on sexuality ranging from mandatory celibacy for priests to a place for homosexual relationships within the framework of the church. Greeley believes from a sociological point of view that the main reason we face authority problems in the church in this generation stems from disagreements over artificial birth control.

Around the turn of the second century, the challenge to authority stemmed from a different source, disbelief in the doctrine of eternal life. So, a document appeared that tried to reassert church authority. We heard a passage from it today in our second reading -- the Second Letter of Peter. It appears today because it describes the transfiguration. The author provided this description to affirm church authority. At the time, some people were complaining that the church was just teaching a bunch of myths, that it was no better than the old Greek religions, for example. The Second Letter of Peter says, "We did not follow cleverly devised myths. We were eyewitnesses of the majesty of Jesus Christ." Then follows the description of the transfiguration. The author's point is, you may think the promise of eternal life is a bunch of hooey, but there were witnesses. People caught a glimpse of eternity when Jesus was transfigured and God said, "This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In order to boost the credibility of authority, the letter appealed to personal experience of Jesus.

Disagreements with authority are nothing new to the church. Their resolution depends on the credibility of our leaders and on the willingness of the faithful to give them a hearing. The Second Letter of Peter gives this advice to people struggling with the pronouncements of authority in the church: "You will do well to be attentive to the prophetic message, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." Be attentive to the message of Jesus. It will provide a light where there is darkness. For the faithful and our leaders, if we are true to the word of Christ, he will be that morning star breaking the

darkness of any night that threatens the agreement of our belief.