“Lead us not into temptation” is the sixth petition of the Our Father. Πειρασμός (Peirasmòs), the Greek word used in this passage for ‘temptation.’, means a trial or test. Disciples petition God to be protected against the supreme test of ungodly powers. The trial is related to Jesus’s cup in Gethsemane, the same cup which his disciples would also taste (Mk 10: 35-45). The dark side of the interior of the cup is an abyss. It reveals the awful consequences of God’s judgment upon sinful humanity. In August, 1968, the weight of the evangelical Πειρασμός fell on many priests, including myself.

It was the year of the bad war, of complex innocence that sanctified the shedding of blood. English historian Paul Johnson dubs 1968 as the year of “America’s Suicide Attempt.” It included the Tet offensive in Vietnam with its tsunami-like effects in American life and politics, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee; the tumult in American cities on Palm Sunday weekend; and the June assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy in southern California. It was also the year in which Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical letter on transmitting human life, Humanae Vitae (HV). He met immediate, premeditated, and unprecedented opposition from some American theologians and pastors. By any measure 1968 was a bitter cup.

On the fortieth anniversary of Humanae Vitae, I have been asked to reflect on one event of that year, the doctrinal dissent among some priests and theologians in an American Archdiocese on the occasion of its publication. It is not an easy or welcome task. But since it may help some followers of Jesus to live what Pope Paul VI called a more “disciplined” life (HV 21), I will explore that event.

The summer of 1968 is a record of God’s hottest hour. The memories are not forgotten; they are painful. They remain vivid like a tornado in the plains of Colorado. They inhabit the whirlwind where God’s wrath dwells. In 1968 something terrible happened in the Church. Within the ministerial priesthood ruptures developed everywhere among friends which never healed. And the wounds continue to affect the whole Church. The dissent, together with the leaders’ manipulation of the anger they fomented, became a supreme test. It changed fundamental relationships within the Church. It was a Πειρασμός for many.

Some background material is necessary. Cardinal Lawrence J. Shehan, the sixth Archbishop of Baltimore, was my ecclesiastical superior at the time. Pope Paul VI had appointed him along with others as additional members to the Papal Commission for the Study of Problems of the Family, Population, and Birth Rates, first established by Blessed Pope John XXIII in 1963 during the II Vatican Council. There had been discussions and delays and unauthorized interim reports from Rome prior to 1968. The enlarged Commission was asked to make recommendations on these issues to the Pope.

In preparation for its deliberations, the Cardinal sent confidential letters to various persons of the Church of Baltimore seeking their advice. I received such a letter.

My response drew upon experience, both personal and pastoral. Family and education had given me a Christian understanding of sex. The profoundly Catholic imagination of my family, friends and teachers had caused me to be open to this reality; I was filled with wonder before its mystery. Theological arguments weren't necessary to convince me of the binding connection between sexual acts and new life. That truth was an accepted part of life at the elementary school connected with St. Joseph's Passionist Monastery Parish in Baltimore. In my early teens my father had first introduced me to the full meaning of human sexuality and the need for discipline. His intervention opened a path through the labyrinth of adolescence.

Through my family, schools, and parishes I became friends with many young women. Some of them I dated on a regular basis. I marveled at their beauty. The courage of St. Maria Goretti, canonized in 1950, struck my generation like an intense mountain storm. Growing into my later teens I understood better how complex friendship with young women could be. They entered the spring-time of my life like the composite rhythm of a poem. To my surprise, the joy of being their friend was enriched by prayer, modesty, and the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist.

Later education and formation in seminaries built upon those experiences. In a 1955 letter to a friend, Flannery O'Connor describes the significance of the virtue of purity for many Catholics at that time. "To see Christ as God and man is probably no more difficult today than it has been. ... For you it may be a matter of not being able to accept what you call a suspension of the law of the flesh and the physical, but for my part I think that when I know what the laws of the flesh and physical reality really are, then I will know what God is. We know them as we see them, not as God sees them. For me it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws. I am always astonished at the emphasis the Church places on the body. It is not the soul she says that will rise but the body, glorified. I have always thought that purity was the most mysterious of the virtues, but it occurs to me that it would never have entered human consciousness if we were not to look forward to a resurrection of the body, which

will be flesh and spirit united in peace, in the way they were in Christ. The resurrection of Christ seems the high point in the law of nature." O'Connor's theology with its remarkably eschatological mark anticipates the teaching of the II Vatican Council, "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light" (Gaudium et Spes 22). In those years, I could not have used her explicit words to explain where I stood on sexuality and its use. Once I discovered them she became a spiritual sister.

Eight years of priestly ministry from 1958 to 1966 in Washington and Baltimore broadened my experience. It didn't take long to discover changes in Americans' attitudes towards the virtue of purity. Both cities were undergoing sharp increases in out-of-wedlock pregnancies. The rate in Baltimore's inner-city was about 18% in 1966 and had been climbing for several years. In 1965-1966 the Baltimore Metropolitan Health and Welfare Council undertook a study to advise the city government in how to address the issue. At that time, the Board members of the Council, including myself, had uncritical faith in experts and social research. Even the II Vatican Council had expressed unfettered confidence in the role of benevolent experts (Gaudium et Spes 57). Not one of my professional acquaintances anticipated the crisis of trust which was just around the corner in the relations between men and women. Our vision was incapable of establishing conditions of justice and of purity of heart in which wonder and appreciation can find play. We were already anachronistic and without hope. We ignored the texture of life.

There were signs even then of the disasters facing children, both born and unborn. As a caseworker and priest throughout the 1960's, part of my ministry involved counseling inner-city families and single parents. My first awareness of a parishioner using hard drugs was in 1961. A sixteen-year old had been jailed in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. At the time of my late afternoon visit to him, he was experiencing drug withdrawal unattended and alone in a tiny cell. His screams filled the corridors and adjoining cells. Through the iron bars dividing us, I was horror-stricken watching him in his torment. The abyss he was looking into was unimaginably terrifying. In this drugged youth writhing in agony on the floor next to an open toilet I saw the bitter fruits of the estrangement of men and women. His mother, separated from her husband, lived with her younger children in a sweltering third floor flat on Light St. in old South Baltimore. The father was non-existent for them. The failure of men in their paternal and spousal roles was unfolding before my eyes and ears. Since then more and more American men have refused to accept responsibility for their sexuality.

In a confidential letter responding to his request, I shared in a general fashion these concerns. My counsel to Cardinal Shehan was very real and specific. I had taken a hard, cold look at what I was experiencing and what the Church and society were doing. I came across an idea which was elliptical: the gift of love should be allowed to be fruitful. These two fixed points are constant. This simple idea lit up everything like lightning in a storm. I wrote about it more formally to the

Cardinal: the unitive and procreative meanings of marriage cannot be separated. Consequently, to deprive a conjugal act deliberately of its fertility is intrinsically wrong. To encourage or approve such an abuse would lead to the eclipse of fatherhood and to disrespect for women. Since then, Pope John Paul II has given us the complementary and superlative insight into the nuptial meaning of the human body. Decades afterwards, I came across an analogous reading from Meister Eckhart: “Gratitude for the gift is shown only by allowing it to make one fruitful.”

Some time later, the Papal Commission sent its recommendations to the Pope. The majority advised that the Church’s teaching on contraception be changed in light of new circumstances. Cardinal Shehan was part of that majority. Even before the encyclical had been signed and issued, his vote had been made public although not on his initiative.

As we know, the Pope decided otherwise. This sets the scene for the tragic drama following the actual date of the publication of the encyclical letter on July 29, 1968.

In his memoirs, Cardinal Shehan describes the immediate reaction of some priests in Washington to the encyclical. “[A]fter receiving the first news of the publication of the encyclical, the Rev. Charles E. Curran, instructor of moral theology of The Catholic University of America, flew back to Washington from the West where he had been staying. Late [on the afternoon of July 29], he and nine other professors of theology of the Catholic University met, by evident prearrangement, in Caldwell Hall to receive, again by prearrangement with the Washington Post, the encyclical, part by part, as it came from the press. The story further indicated that by nine o’clock that night, they had received the whole encyclical, had read it, had analyzed it, criticized it, and had composed their six-hundred word ‘Statement of Dissent.’ Then they began that long series of telephone calls to ‘theologians’ throughout the East, which went on, according to the Post, until 3:30 A.M., seeking authorization, to attach their names as endorsers (signers was the term used) of the statement, although those to whom they had telephoned could not have had an opportunity to see either the encyclical or their statement. Meanwhile, they had arranged through one of the local television stations to have the statement broadcast that night.”

The Cardinal’s judgment was scornful. In 1982 he wrote, “The first thing that we have to note about the whole performance is this: so far as I have been able to discern, never in the recorded history of the Church has a solemn proclamation of a Pope been received by any group of Catholic people with so much disrespect and contempt.”

The personal Πειρασμός, the test, began. In Baltimore in early August, 1968, a few days after the encyclical’s issuance, I received an invitation by telephone from a recently ordained assistant pastor to attend a gathering of some Baltimore priests at the rectory of St. William of York parish in southwest Baltimore to discuss the encyclical. The meeting was set for Sunday evening, August 4. I agreed to come.

Eventually a large number of priests were gathered in the rectory's basement. I knew them all.

The dusk was clear, hot, and humid. The quarters were cramped. We were seated on rows of benches and chairs and were led by a diocesan inner-city pastor well known for his work in liturgy and race-relations. There were also several Sulpician priests present from St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore to assist him in directing the meeting. I don't recall their actual number.

My expectations of the meeting proved unrealistic. I had hoped that we had been called together to receive copies of the encyclical and to discuss it. I was mistaken. Neither happened.

After welcoming us and introducing the leadership, the inner-city pastor came to the point. He expected each of us to subscribe to the Washington "Statement of Dissent." Mixing passion with humor, he explained the reasons. They ranged from the maintenance of the credibility of the Church among the laity to the need to allow 'flexibility' for married couples in forming their consciences on the use of artificial contraceptives. Before our arrival, the conveners had decided that the Baltimore priests' rejection of the papal encyclical would be published the following morning in The Baltimore Sun, one of the daily newspapers.

The Washington statement was read aloud. Then the leader asked each of us to agree to have our names attached to it. No time was allowed for discussion, reflection, or prayer. Each priest was required individually to give a verbal "yes" or "no."

I could not sign it. My earlier letter to Cardinal Shehan came to mind. I remained convinced of the truth of my judgement and conclusions. Noting that my seat was last in the packed basement, I listened to each priest's response, hoping for support. It didn't materialize. Everyone agreed to sign. There were no abstentions. As the last called upon, I felt isolated. The basement became suffocating.

By now it was night. The room was charged with tension. Something epochal was taking place. It became clear that the leaders' strategy had been carefully mapped out beforehand. It was moving along without a hitch. Their rhetorical skills were having their anticipated effect. They had planned carefully how to exert what amounted to emotional and intellectual coercion. Violence by overt manipulation was new to the Baltimore presbyterate.
The leader's reaction to my refusal was predictable and awful. The whole process now became a grueling struggle, a terrible test, a Πειρασμος. The priest/leader, drawing upon some scatological language from his Marine Corp past in the II World War responded contemptuously to my decision. He tried to force me to change. He became visibly angry and verbally abusive. The underlying, 'fraternal' violence became more evident. He questioned and then derided my integrity. He taunted me to risk my ecclesiastical 'future,' although his reference was more anatomically

specific. The abuse went on.

With surprising coherence I was eventually able to respond that the Pope's encyclical deserved the courtesy of a reading. None of us had read it. I continued that, as a matter of fact, I agreed with and accepted the Pope's teaching as it had been reported in the public media. That response elicited more ridicule. Otherwise there was silence. Finally, seeing that I would remain firm, the ex-Marine moved on to complete the business and adjourn the meeting. The leaders then prepared a statement for the next morning's daily paper.

The meeting ended. I sped out of there, free but disoriented. Once outside the darkness encompassed me. We all had been subjected to a new thing in the Church, something unexpected. A pastor and several seminary professors had abused rhetoric to undermine the truth within the evangelical community. When opposed, they assumed the role of Job's friends. Their contempt became a nightmare. In the night it seemed that God's blind hand was reaching out to touch my face.

The dissent of a few Sulpician seminary professors compounded my disorientation. In their ancient Baltimore Seminary I had first caught on to the connection between freedom, interiority, and obedience. By every ecclesial measure they should have been aware that the process they supported that evening exceeded the "norms of licit dissent." But they showed no concern for the gravity of that theological and pastoral moment. They saw nothing unbecoming in the mix of publicity and theology. They expressed no impatience then or later over the coercive nature of the August meeting. Nor did any of the other priests present. One diocesan priest did request privately later that night that his name be removed before the statement's publication in the morning paper.

For a long time, I wondered about the meaning of the event. It was a cataclysm which was difficult to survive intact. Things were sorted out slowly. Later, Henri de Lubac captured some of its significance, "Nothing is more opposed to witness than vulgarization. Nothing is more unlike the apostolate than propaganda." Hannah Arendt's insights have been useful concerning the dangerous poise of 20th century western culture between unavoidable doom and reckless optimism. "It should be possible to discover the hidden mechanics by which all traditional elements of our political and spiritual world were dissolved into a conglomeration of where everything seems to have lost specific value, and has become unrecognizable for human comprehension, unusable for human purpose. To yield to the mere process of disintegration has become an irresistible temptation, not only because it has assumed the spurious grandeur of 'historical necessity', but also because everything outside it has begun to appear lifeless, bloodless, meaningless and unreal". The subterranean world that has always accompanied Catholic communities, called Gnosticism by our ancestors, had again surfaced and attempted to usurp the truth of the Catholic tradition.

An earlier memory from April 1968 helped to shed further light on what had happened in August, 1968 along with de Lubac's words about violence and Arendt's insights into the breaking point reached by Western civilization in the 20th century. During the height of the 1968 Baltimore riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I had made an emergency call to that same inner-city pastor who would lead the later August meeting. It was one of numerous telephone conversations I had with inner-city pastors during the night preceding Palm Sunday. At the request of the city government, I was asking whether the pastors or their people, both beleaguered, might need food, medical assistance, or other help.

My conversation with him that April night was by far the most dramatic. He described the view from the rectory while speaking on the phone. A window framed a dissolving neighborhood; his parish was becoming a raging inferno. He said, "From here I see nothing but fire burning everywhere. Everything has been set ablaze. The Church and rectory are untouched thus far." He did not wish to leave or be evacuated. His voice betrayed disillusionment and fear. Later we learned that the parish buildings survived.

'Sorting out' these two events of violence continued throughout the following months and years. The trajectories of April and August 1968 unpredictably converged. Memories of the physical violence in the city in April 1968 helped me to name what had happened in August 1968. Ecclesial dissent can become a kind of spiritual violence in its form and content. A new, unsettling insight emerged. Violence and truth don't mix. When expressive violence of whatever sort is inflicted upon truth, the resulting irony is lethal.

What do I mean? Look at the results of the two events. After the violent 1968 Palm Sunday weekend, civil dialogue in metropolitan Baltimore broke down and came to a stop. It took a back seat to open anger and recriminations between whites and blacks. The violence of the priests' August gathering gave rise to its own ferocious acrimony. Conversations among the clergy, where they existed, became contaminated with fear. Suspicions among priests were chronic. Fears abounded. And they continue. The Archdiocesan priesthood lost something of the fraternal whole which Baltimore priests had known for generations. 1968 marked the hiatus of the generational communio of the Archdiocesan presbyterate, which had been continually reinforced by the seminary and its Sulpician faculty. Priests' fraternity had been wounded. Pastoral dissent had attacked the Eucharistic foundation of the Church. Its nuptial significance had been denied. Some priests saw bishops as nothing more than Roman mannequins.

Something else happened among priests on that violent August night. Friendship in the Church sustained a direct hit. Jesus, by calling those who were with him his 'friends,' had made friendship a privileged analogy of the Church. That analogy became obscured after a large number of priests expressed shame over their leaders and repudiated their teaching.

Cardinal Shehan later reported that on Monday morning, August 5, he “was startled to read in the Baltimore Sun that seventy-two priests of the Baltimore area had signed the Statement of Dissent.” What he later called “the years of crisis” began for him during that hot, violent August evening in 1968.

But that night was not a total loss. The test was unexpected and unwelcome. Its unhinging consequences continue. Abusive, coercive dissent has become a reality in the Church and subjects her to violent, debilitating, unproductive, chronic controversies. But I did discover something new. Others also did. When the moment of Christian witness came, no Christian could be coerced who refused to be. Despite the novelty of being treated as an object of shame and ridicule, I did not become “ashamed of the Gospel” that night and found “sweet delight in what is right.” It was not a bad lesson. Ecclesial obedience ran the distance.

My discovery that Christ was the first to despise shame was gut-rending in its existential and providential reality. “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.” Paradoxically, in the hot, August night a new sign shown unexpectedly on the path to future life. It read, “Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered.”

The violence of the initial disobedience was only a prelude to further and more pervasive violence. Priests wept at meetings over the manipulation of their brothers. Contempt for the truth, whether aggressive or passive, has become common in Church life. Dissenting priests, theologians and laypeople have continued their coercive techniques. From the beginning the press has used them to further its own serpentine agenda.

All of this led to a later discovery. Discernment is an essential part of episcopal ministry. With the grace of “the governing Spirit” the discerning skills of a bishop should mature. Episcopal attention should focus on the break/rupture initiated by Jesus and described by St. Paul in his response to Corinthian dissenters. “You desire proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we shall live with him by the power of God. Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves” (2 Cor 13: 3-5).

The rupture of the violent death of Jesus has changed our understanding of the nature of God. His Trinitarian life is essentially self-surrender and love. By Baptism, every disciple of Jesus is imprinted with that Trinitarian water-mark. The Incarnate Word came to do the will of him who sent him. Contemporary obedience of disciples to the Successor of Peter cannot be separated from the poverty of spirit and purity of heart modeled and won by the Word on the Cross.

A brief after word. In 1978 or thereabouts during an episcopal visitation to his

parish, I was having lunch with the Baltimore pastor, the ex-Marine, who led the August 1968 meeting. I was a guest in his rectory. He was still formidable. Our conversation was about his parish, the same parish he had been shepherding during the 1968 riots. The atmosphere was amiable. During the simple meal in the kitchen I came to an uneasy decision. Since we had never discussed the August 1968 night, I decided to initiate a conversation about it. My recall was brief, objective and, insofar as circumstances allowed, unthreatening. I had hoped for some light from him on an event which had become central to the experience of many priests including myself. While my mind and heart were recalling the events of the night, he remained silent. His silence continued afterwards. Even though he had not forgotten, he made no comment. He didn't lift his eyes. His heart's fire was colder now.

Nothing was forthcoming. I left the matter there. No dialogue was possible in 1968; it remained impossible in 1978. There was no common ground. Both of us were looking into an abyss - from opposite sides. Anguish and disquiet overwhelmed the distant hope of reconciliation and friendship. We never returned to the subject again. He has since died while serving a large suburban parish. The only remaining option is to strike my breast and pray, "Lord, remember the secret worth of all our human worthlessness"

Diocesan presbyterates have not recovered from the July/August nights in 1968. Many in consecrated life also failed the evangelical test. Since January 2002, the abyss has opened up elsewhere. The whole people of God, including children and adolescents, now must look into the abyss and see what dread beasts are at its bottom. Each of us shudders before the wrath of God, each weeps in sorrow for our sins and each begs for the Father's merciful remembrance of Christ's obedience.

J. Francis Cardinal Stafford
Major Penitentiary of the Apostolic Penitentiary