

The Papal Teaching on the Contraceptive Pill

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Arrangement & Notes : Rev. M. Catarinich. Linguistic Consultants : Rev. B. Hudspeth, S.J., Rev. R. Mulkearns, D.C.L. In spite of the importance of the directions given by Pope Pius XII in September, 1958, about the use and the abuse of anovulant drugs, it is almost impossible to find a copy of the original text for reference or consultation.

This pamphlet is intended to fill this need. It brings together the address of Pius XII and the later reference to it by Pope Paul VI in July, 1964, in which he affirmed that the principles laid down by Pope Pius still had the force of law.

A further statement on this matter can be expected in the not very distant future. It will be published, when it becomes available, as Part 2 to this pamphlet.

[Webmaster's assistant's notes: This important Pamphlet was published in 1965 when there was a massive propaganda campaign, mounted by modernist clerics within the Church, to denigrate the traditional Catholic moral stance against artificial contraception and its accompanying contraceptive mentality. Bishop Mulkearns, and others, saw that the reproduction of this directive of Pope Pius XII would be the quickest way to dismiss the modernist tendencies of the time, while waiting for a more definitive encyclical from Pope Paul VI. Such an encyclical, "Humanae Vitae", was issued in 1968. It can be read on the Vatican website here... www.vatican.va Meanwhile, we in turn, have reproduced this pamphlet to demonstrate, yet again, the consistency of Catholic moral teaching throughout the ages.]

AN ADDRESS TO A GROUP OF DOCTORS WHO WERE ATTENDING THE SEVENTH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF HAEMATOLOGY IN ROME. DELIVERED BY HIS HOLINESS PIUS XII ON 12th SEPTEMBER, 1958, ONE MONTH BEFORE HIS DEATH.

(Acta Apostolicae Sedis, Vol. XXV, No. 14-15, pp. 732-740.)

This Address has been translated from the original French, in which it was delivered by Pope Pius XII. Headings have been added to outline the sequence of the reasoning, and for the purpose of quick reference. These have also been put into the form of a summary ahead of the actual translation, so that the lay-out of the instruction can be seen at a glance before it is read in detail.

The Address has also been broken into shorter paragraphs than in the text in the Acta Apostolicae Sedis. This has required at times the addition of a reference back to the preceding section for the sake of clarity. These references have been bracketed in each instance. The only brackets in the original are those which enclose the words "and eugenic indications can be of a serious character".

Finally, it will be noticed that the medical cases, which the Pope used to exemplify the teaching, were drawn from the experience of the particular audience that he was addressing. But the principles he lays down apply to all cases where family limitation is in question, whether the reason is medical, eugenic, economic or from social necessity.

SUMMARY OF THE ADDRESS

[A short section at the beginning of the Discourse has been omitted. His Holiness, in this earlier part, discussed and rejected artificial insemination from a third party as a solution to two matrimonial situations, namely, that of a sterile husband, and that where the husband is the carrier of an hereditary factor which could cause damage to the offspring of the marriage. He then discussed this second case in greater detail, widening the example to include also the alternative possibility: the transmission of hereditary defect by the wife.]

Because of the improvement in drugs, two solutions to this kind of problem are becoming increasingly popular: -

- (1) Sterilization of the person.
- (2) Sterilization of the act itself.

The reaction of some groups of theologians.

Discussion of the Moral Principles Involved in Each Proposal

- (1) Sterilization of the Person.

Direct sterilization is always wrong. Indirect sterilization is sometimes justified. Application of these norms to the use of the contraceptive pill. The principle "It is lawful to correct nature's defects" has not an absolute value, and cannot be applied at the expense of other moral principles.

- (2) Sterilization of the Act itself.

The use of contraceptives violates the natural law. The Ogino-Knaus Method does not conflict with nature, and proportionally serious reasons justify its use. The positive matrimonial duty to procreate does not oblige in all circumstances.

Pope Pius XII said:

Another Solution Proposed:

"Sterilization of the person, or of the act itself, is also put forward as a solution. For biological and eugenic reasons these two methods are now coming into greater favour and are gradually spreading, thanks to new drugs which are becoming increasingly more effective and convenient to use."

The Reaction of Some Groups of Theologians:

"The reaction of some groups of theologians to this state of things is symptomatic and somewhat alarming. It discloses a deviation of moral judgement, accompanied by an over-anxiety to revise generally accepted positions in the light of modern techniques.

"This attitude stems from a praiseworthy intention which, in order to help those in difficulties, refuses to discard too hastily any new possibilities of a solution. But this effort at adaptation is applied in this instance in an unfortunate way, either because some principles are poorly understood, or because a sense of importance is attached to them which they cannot possess.

"The Holy See is then in a similar position to that of Blessed Innocent XI, who on more than one occasion was obliged to condemn moral theses put forward by theologians, themselves inspired by an indiscreet zeal and an undiscerning self-confidence." (Cfr. Denzinger, No. 1151-1216, 1221-1288.)

Discussion of the Moral Principles involved in Each Proposal.

(1) STERILIZATION OF THE PERSON

Direct Sterilization is Always Wrong:

"On several occasions already, We have made our position clear on the question of sterilization. We stated in substance that direct sterilization is not included in man's right to do what he chooses with his own body, and cannot therefore be looked upon as an acceptable solution for preventing the transmission of hereditary disease.

"We said on 29th October, 1951:

'Direct sterilization, i.e., that which aims either as a means or as an end, to make procreation impossible, is a grave violation of the moral law; and therefore it is illicit. Even public authority has no right under any pretext whatever to allow it, much less to prescribe it, or to have it implemented against innocent people. This principle is already proclaimed in the Encyclical of Pius XI on Marriage, "Casti Connubii". Also, when about ten years ago sterilization began to be much more widely used, the Holy See was obliged to declare positively and publicly that direct sterilization, permanent or temporary, either of man or of woman, is illicit by virtue of the natural law, from which, as you realize, the Church has no power to dispense.' " (A.A.S. XXXXIII, pp. 843 et seq.)

Indirect Sterilization is Sometimes Justified:

"By direct sterilization We intended to specify the action of a person who intends to make procreation impossible, either as an end or as a means. But We do not apply that term to every action which does in fact make procreation impossible. The truth is that man, even when he has foreseen it, does not always intend to bring about the effect which stems from his action.

"Thus, for example, the removal of diseased ovaries will have as a necessary consequence that procreation is made impossible. But this impossibility cannot be intended either as an end or as a means.

"We have offered these same explanations in detail in Our Address of 8th October, 1953, to the Congress of Urologists. The same principles hold good in the present case, and forbid a person to regard as licit the destruction * of glands or sex organs with a view to thwarting the transmission of defective hereditary characteristics." [* Although "l'extirpation" is the word used here, in the Address to the Urologists the Pope included the two procedures: the removal of a healthy organ, or rendering it non-functional.]

Application of These Norms to Use of Contraceptive Pill:

"They [the above-mentioned principles] also enable Us to resolve a question much discussed these days by doctors and moralists:

"Is it licit to prevent ovulation by means of pills used as remedies against excessive reactions of the uterus and of the organism, *even though this medication by preventing ovulation also makes conception impossible?*" ['An organism' is 'a complete living unit'. Hence, 'the human system' would probably be its nearest equivalent in this context.]

"Is this [treatment] allowed to the married woman who, despite this temporary sterility, wishes to have relations with her husband?

"The intention of the person determines the answer.

"If the woman takes the medicament, not with the idea of preventing conception, but solely on the advice of her doctor as a necessary remedy for a disorder of the uterus or organism, she is causing an indirect sterilization, which is allowed according to the principle governing acts with a double effect.

"But a sterilization which is direct, and therefore illicit, is produced when ovulation is suppressed so that the uterus and organism may be saved from the consequences of a pregnancy that they are not capable of supporting. Some moralists claim that it is lawful to take the medicaments for this purpose; but that is wrong.

"Equally to be rejected is the opinion of several doctors and moralists who allow their use [the medicaments] when a conception occurring too quickly is undesirable because of a medical indication, or in other similar cases which would be impossible to mention here. In these cases the use of the medicaments has for its purpose the prevention of conception by preventing ovulation. It is therefore a matter of direct sterilization."

False Application of a Principle:

"To justify this [direct sterilization], a principle of morality is sometimes cited, which though right in itself is wrongly interpreted:

"'It is lawful to correct nature's defects' is quoted; and, since in practice it is sufficient to have a reasonable probability for this principle to be applied, it is claimed that this is a case of correcting a natural defect.

"If this principle had an absolute value, the science of eugenics could unhesitatingly use the drug method to prevent transmission of an hereditary defect. But it is also necessary to ask by what manner the natural defect is corrected, and to take care that other principles of morality are not violated."

(2) STERILIZATION OF THE ACT ITSELF

Discussion on the Use of Contraceptives and the Ogino-Knaus Method:

"Another means is suggested as a possible way of preventing the transmission of an hereditary defect: the use of contraceptives and the Ogino-Knaus method. Specialists in eugenics approve of both these systems when there are serious hygienic indications, though they condemn them absolutely when it is a question simply of giving rein to passion. They consider them a lesser evil than the procreation of defective children."

The Use of Contraceptives Violates the Natural Law:

"Even if some approve of this position, Christianity has followed and continues to follow a different tradition. Our predecessor, Pius XI, expounded it in a solemn manner in his Encyclical, "Casti Connubii," of 31st December, 1930. He brands the use of contraceptives as a violation of the natural law; an act, to which nature has given the power to generate new life, is deprived of it by the intention of man. 'Any use of matrimony whatever,' he wrote, 'exercised in such a way that the act, by human wilfulness, is deprived of its natural power of generating life, is an offence against the law of God and of nature. And those who act in this way are defiled by the guilt of grave sin.' "

The Ogino-Knaus Method Does Not Conflict with Nature:

"On the other hand, to use to advantage the natural period of temporary sterility of the Ogino-Knaus method does not transgress the natural order as does the practice described above, for the conjugal relations are in keeping with the will of the Creator. When this method is employed for proportionately serious reasons (and eugenic indications can be of a serious character), it is morally justified.

"Already in Our Address of 20th October, 1951, We have spoken about this practice, not in order to expound the biological or medical viewpoint, but to put an end to the conscience worries of many Christians who were using it in their married life. Besides, Pius XI in his Encyclical of 31st December, 1930, had already set out the basic position: 'Nor are those married couples considered to be acting against the harmony of nature who use their rights in a proper and normal fashion, even though new life cannot begin from this because of the natural causes of time or of certain defects.' "

The Positive Matrimonial Duty to Procreate Does Not Oblige in all Circumstances:

"We have made it perfectly clear in Our Address in 1951 that married couples who make use of their conjugal rights, have a positive obligation, in view of the natural law that pertains to their state, not to exclude procreation. The Creator indeed wishes that the human race should propagate itself precisely by the normal use of the sexual function.

"But We apply to this positive law * "[* The difference between positive and negative law can be clearly seen in the command to attend Mass on Sundays and the prohibition against adultery. Genuine difficulty can excuse from attending Mass; but, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery', binds in all circumstances.] "the principle that is valid for all other [positive laws] - namely, they do not oblige to that extent where their fulfilment involves notable inconveniences, which are not inseparable from the law itself nor inherent in its accomplishment, but which come from another source. And therefore, the legislator had no intention of imposing them on men when he promulgated the law."

[In the final paragraph of the Address, the Pope discussed adoption as a solution to the difficulty of the couple who have an hereditary genetic problem; and he proceeded then to answer various questions on pre-marital and post-marital counselling of such couples. But these matters are not pertinent to our subject.]

THIS STATEMENT IS TAKEN FROM THE REPLY OF

POPE PAUL VI

TO THE CARDINALS ON THE OCCASION OF THEIR OFFERING HIM GREETINGS FOR THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF HIS ELECTION, 23rd JUNE, 1964.

(Acta Apostolicae Sedis, Vol. LVI, No. 9, 31st July, 1964, pp. 588-589.)

This Discourse was delivered in Italian. The text is complete as it is set down here; but in its original form there were two paragraphs only. In our translation we have broken the text into smaller sections for convenience; and the very important directions of the Pope in the latter part of the address have been printed in bolder type.

Pope Paul VI said:

"A MOST SERIOUS MORAL PROBLEM."

"The problem everyone is talking about is that which goes by the name of Birth Control - the problem of increasing populations on the one hand, and that of family morality on the other. It is an extremely serious problem: it touches on the sources of human life, and also on the feelings and the interests that are deepest in the experience of man and woman. It is a problem that is extremely complex and delicate.

"The Church recognizes its manifold aspects, which extend into many spheres. Amongst these that of the spouses is certainly pre-eminent - their liberty, their conscience, their love, their duty.

"But the Church must also affirm what is her concern - namely, the law of God which she interprets, teaches, promotes, and defends. And the Church must proclaim this law of God in the light of the scientific, social and psychological truths, which in recent times have had new and very extensive study and documentation.

"It is necessary to face squarely this theoretical and practical development of the question. And that is what the Church is doing at the moment. The question is under study - a study as broad and as deep as possible in that serious and honest manner which is due to a subject of such importance.

"It is under study, We repeat; and with the help of many illustrious scholars we hope to quickly conclude it. We will issue the findings as soon as possible in the form considered most suitable to the subject dealt with and the object to be attained.

"But meanwhile We say frankly that We have not yet any sufficient motive for considering as overthrown, and therefore not binding, the norms given by Pope Pius XII in this matter. These therefore are to be considered valid, at least as long as We do not feel obliged in conscience to modify them.

"In a matter of such gravity, it seems proper that Catholics should wish to follow one single law, authoritatively pronounced by the Church. And therefore it appears opportune to recommend that nobody for the present should take upon himself to make any statement on this matter in terms different from the norms now in force."
