

Birth Control

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Birth Control is by now so widely practised that it has been called a national habit. It is not too much to say that the great majority of married couples in this country, if they are not Catholics, take it for granted. They may have some lingering twinges of conscience. They may, in some cases, refrain from using the means provided by the chemist's shop. But the majority would say that they see no harm in using other means than self-control to prevent the birth of children beyond the number which they consider convenient or desirable.

Catholics know that birth prevention (to give it its proper name) is a grievous sin. But Catholics live in the same world as others. They have the same difficulties to face. They have the not unreasonable desire to avoid what seem heavy burdens. And so the practice of birth prevention is a standing temptation to Catholics also.

'It is not easy to be a good Catholic layman, Father,' said one man to the priest who had just baptized his fourth child. The priest understood very well what he meant. And the priest sympathized profoundly with his difficulties. But both priest and layman knew that real married happiness does not come from avoiding burdens. God made marriage and God's laws are the only recipe for true married happiness.

It should be understood at the outset that when we say birth prevention is a sin we are not talking about a law made by the Church. We are talking about a law of God. The law forbidding us to eat meat on Friday is simply a law of the Church. The Church makes the law of Friday abstinence as a measure of discipline, to train us in self-control and to ensure a minimum of penance in our lives. The Church could change that law to-morrow. But the law defining the proper use of marriage is a law of God. It therefore binds everyone, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. The Church, even if she wished, could no more permit birth prevention than she could permit blasphemy.

Sometimes even Catholics are not clear as to what is meant by birth prevention. Let us put it bluntly: to destroy, block or spill the seed deliberately, either by using anything or by interrupting the act of marriage, is a mortal sin.

It is not the first time that Catholics have had to stand alone in the world, nor will it be the last. Every age brings its particular temptation. The first Christians had to stand out, even to death, against the idol worship of the pagans. Our Catholic forefathers in these islands had to bear heavy fines and even death rather than consent to join the new Protestant religion. For centuries they were shut out from the life of the country. They could not be members of parliament, lawyers, officers in the army; they had to be a kind of outlaw in the country. They bore the burden and kept the Faith.

In our days it is the defence of Christian marriage which is our special task. Divorce and birth prevention are now commonplaces. But the Catholic must stand by the law of God. In doing so he is side by side with all those who have defended the Faith in the ages past.

Why Birth Prevention is a Sin

Let us see first how we know that birth prevention is against the law of God.

We learn God's will in two ways. Either we find out by using our own unaided reasoning powers or we find out by God's telling us. Some things we know in both ways. And the right use of marriage is one of these things. Reason itself condemns birth prevention, as we shall see. But when self-interest is involved it is very easy for the reason to be blinded. We can find a hundred excuses to obscure the clear command of the mind and will. So God makes His law sure for us by telling us what it is. God spoke to us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. During the time His Apostles were with Him He formed their minds and judgement to see things as God sees them. When He died He promised them He would guide them and prevent their making any mistake in handing on His teaching. Now from the time of our Lord the Church has always taught that birth prevention is against the law of God. We know for certain, therefore, that the Apostles received this teaching from Him. When our Lord condemned impurity, this was one of the things He was condemning. When He spoke to them of the holiness of marriage, they understood that birth prevention sinned against that holiness.

We must not imagine that birth prevention is a new sin. It is no doubt more widely spread to-day than ever before, but the sin itself is as old as mankind, and the Church has always had to warn against it. In our own times Pope Pius XI wrote:

'The marriage act is destined first and foremost by nature for the begetting of children. So those who, in using it, deliberately thwart its natural power and purpose sin against nature. They commit a deed which is shameful and wicked in itself.'

Go back nearly 200 years. In a prayer book used by our ancestors here in England in 1786, the Penal days, you can read in an examination of conscience before confession:

'Have you been guilty of any irregularity in order to hinder your having children?'

Take up the Catechism of the Council of Trent published in 1566 after the great Council of the Church which reformed abuses and affirmed the Faith in the face of Protestant errors. (Birth prevention was not a Protestant error. Until the growth of modern paganism, Protestants were at one with Catholics in condemning it as a grave sin.) We read there a warning against 'the most serious sin committed by those who prevent conception'.

Earlier still, read the great St Augustine who died in the year 430:

'Intercourse even with one's legitimate wife is unlawful and wicked when the conception of children is prevented. Onan the son of Juda did this and the Lord killed him for it.'

The case of Onan which St Augustine refers to is a good example of the different ways in which a law of God may bind. There was a law for the ancient Jews that if a man died childless his brother should take his widow and raise up children who should bear the dead man's name. If he refused he was publicly denounced and disgraced but no further penalty was inflicted. That was a law approved by God for the special purpose of continuing His chosen race. That law might be changed, and was changed, when the purpose no longer needed to be fulfilled. But Onan not merely broke this law. He broke the law which God had made part of nature, for all times.

'He went in and spilled the seed upon the ground lest children should be born in his brother's name.'

'And therefore the Lord slew him because he did a detestable thing.' (Genesis xxxviii. 9, 10.)

The detestable thing was the sin against nature—birth prevention. The example of Onan was known to the Apostles as it was to our Lord. The example is still valid for us.

This then has always been the teaching of the Church. Sometimes a Catholic may go so far as to say: 'The Church doesn't understand my difficulties. God understands me. I can be a good Catholic and still go my own way in the matter of birth prevention.' To speak like that is to deny the Faith. The Church has authority from God to teach both Faith and morals. To deny the Church's right to teach on moral questions or to say the Church has gone wrong in her moral teaching is just as bad as to say the Church can go wrong in the Faith. A Catholic who practises birth prevention and conceals it in confession, or receives Holy Communion without confessing the sin, adds the guilt of sacrilege to the other sin. He may also be guilty in his mind of heresy.

Natural Repugnance

The sin of birth prevention has been referred to here as a sin against nature. St Paul in the inspired word of God speaks of the law which is written in our hearts (Rom. ii. 15). Everyone whose instincts are not corrupted realizes that certain sins are clearly vicious in themselves. There is a natural repugnance felt by any decent person, for instance, for unnatural vice between members of the same sex. Or, again, we are disgusted when we hear of the ancient Romans' habit of gorging themselves and then provoking a vomit so as to be able to gorge again. We may not be able at once to say why precisely we *are* disgusted. But we realize that sins like these turn everything topsy-turvy. There is a way of living which is natural and right. There are actions which are unnatural and wrong. This natural disgust is reasonable. Nature (that is, God's plan) attaches a considerable pleasure to certain important actions. Eating is pleasurable in order to induce us to eat and so to keep alive. Sex is pleasurable to induce us to continue the human race. But to take the pleasure and prevent the purpose is to go against nature. And nature in us revolts—which is to say provokes a natural disgust; we find such actions revolting.

Birth prevention provokes just such a natural disgust when our mind and will are healthy. But habit can harden the conscience. Which is why so many people now can take for granted what would once have revolted them.

Always bear in mind that 'Nature' simply means God's plan. To thwart nature is to attempt to defeat God, to change His plan.

The Control of Sex

Here we must face a difficulty. Are we not constantly thwarting nature when we control natural forces? Leave a river to nature and it overflows its banks and devastates the countryside. So we control it by dykes—we dam it and use its power to drive turbines; we even change its course. Leave a field to nature and it is soon full of weeds. And is it not 'natural' for a man to go without clothes—to kill one who does him wrong—to be a savage? We control the river, the field, our savage instincts. Why cannot we control nature in the matter of sex?

Now it is not natural for man to be a savage. It is natural for man to control his savage instincts by his intelligence and his free will. In the same way we not only can, but we must, control sex. But we must do so in accordance with nature, otherwise disaster will follow. Take the example of the river.

Flood control is a skilled and scientific task. It does not try to stop the river's flow—because it is the nature of a river to flow. But we control the river to prevent it flowing wild. Try to bury the river, to treat it against its nature, and you will fail—you find it bursting out elsewhere.

Take a field. Weed it, plough it, sow it, and it will prove fruitful and fertile. But abuse it against its nature and you produce a desert, as the Arabs did with fertile North Africa, or the Americans who made a dust bowl out of the fertile prairie.

The intelligent and natural way to control sex is within the limits of marriage. Those limits are God's way of control revealed to us. And inside marriage, sex must be controlled according to its nature. 'Birth control' is not natural control—it is an attempt to reverse nature. And disaster will follow as surely as it followed the Arabs in the desert, the Americans in the dust bowl.

Sex not merely a Personal Matter

This is not a medical pamphlet. Birth prevention is wrong not because it may be unhealthy but because it is an offence against God. But it is well to remember that nature cannot be thwarted without grave consequences. There are good medical grounds for holding that the practice of birth prevention can cause sterility, neurosis and other evils. There is no room for doubt that widespread birth prevention—and once it is accepted as a normal thing it inevitably becomes widespread—can ruin a nation. There is a desert of men as well as a desert of crops. The degenerate Roman Empire was overrun by the Barbarians. There are modern examples for us to see. When France collapsed, one spokesman gave as a contributing cause 'too few babies'. The newspapers reviled him. When someone later wrote: 'A contributing factor in the disaster was France's relative demographic position vis-à-vis Germany' this was hailed as a thoughtful and true analysis of the situation. But this is only to say in a dozen words what 'too few babies' says in three short ones.

Sex is not simply a private matter. It is not merely nor even first and foremost for the good of the individual. Sex is first and foremost for the good of the human race. Very clearly sex is designed for the peopling of the world. Incidentally it gives pleasure and has important effects on the persons who use it. But these effects are only incidental. The satisfaction of the individual is a by-product. And a baby is not a by-product. To use sex for one's own benefit and to prevent the main purpose is to do what is against the right order of things.

Suppose a man has the job of administering a public fund. Incidental to his job he has a car, a house, a salary provided. These come out of the funds and he has every right to them. But if he proceeds to divert the funds exclusively to his own use and to prevent the use for which they were intended, he is guilty of embezzlement.

Notice that he is not obliged to take the job, just as no one is obliged to marry. But once the job is accepted it must be done properly, the funds administered honestly. If the officials of the Treasury were all swindlers, national bankruptcy would follow. Birth prevention is swindling the human race. Bankruptcy of men will follow just as surely as the other.

God's Designs

Now all that we have written of birth prevention as a crime against nature is true and useful in helping us to understand how God has designed the world of men and things. But it would be idle to pretend that such reasoning will move a man who has an invalid wife or no home in which to bring

up his children. The mind may see the argument is sound. But the mind often fights a losing battle when the passions are aroused. When distress is severe or when self-interest is strong we are not moved by philosophy. We *are* moved by love, the love of God given to us by grace. The only way to see the duties of married life aright is to see them from God's point of view. The love of God and, above all, the trust in God which springs from that love can guide us when argument or reasoning fails.

What is marriage from God's point of view? It is a union not only of two but of three—husband, wife and God. When the hands of bridegroom and bride are clasped together God clasps those hands in His own. He calls them to share His creative work. He guarantees His help at all times.

Because God is a partner in the marriage He will take His share of responsibility for the success of the marriage.

He does not guarantee that everything will be easy. 'For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health'—the words of the marriage service warn us not to expect to escape the ordinary hazards of life.

But God does guarantee that it will always be possible to keep His law. 'God is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able; but will make also with temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it.' (1 Cor. x. 13.)

So when the marriage is consummated God is present too. Husband and wife form of their own substance the body-to-be of a child. God creates, out of nothing, a soul for that body. When a child is conceived there begins to live a new creature who will live for ever. And for ever that creature will be the image of father, the image of mother and the image of God. There will be a family likeness for all eternity.

Consider now what the act of birth prevention means. Two people say, in effect, to God: 'We shall have the pleasure, You shall not have the soul. We shall make it impossible for this creature to be born. There shall not be a child because we do not trust You to do Your share if a child is born.' Or: 'No doubt You will provide what is needful—but we are not prepared to do our share.' So God is cut out of the central act of marriage.

When our Lord spoke of the consummation of marriage He said: 'They two shall be in one flesh. Therefore now they are not two, but one flesh. What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.' (Matt. xix. 5, 6.) The act of birth prevention is an attempt to 'two in one flesh' rejecting 'what God hath joined together'.

On the other hand—love God, trust God, use marriage in God's way and God will provide. Maybe the way will be hard, but the reward will far outweigh the burden. Every child will be a witness for all eternity to the love and trust of the parents in Almighty God.

The Question of Sterility

What is to be said, then, of cases where it is quite certain that a child will not be conceived even though the parents use marriage in full accordance with God's law? When they are beyond the age of child-bearing, for example, or when wife or husband is sterile? Is it wrong for them to use their marriage? No, it is not wrong. In these cases God does not see fit to create a soul. But it is God who decides. The partners have used their marriage in accordance with nature. They have not attempted

to suppress the natural purpose of the act. God has not completed it by creating a soul. The completion of the act is God's province, He decides as He wills. So long as the partners do their part without interfering with God's part they have a perfect right to use their marriage.

To sum up, then, as far as we have gone. Birth prevention is a sin. It is a form of impurity which the Christian conscience, formed by our Lord, has always rejected. It drew down the wrath of God on Onan in ancient days. It is a sin against nature because it takes for the benefit of an individual what is meant for the benefit of the human race. It cuts God out of the supreme act of married love. It implies either distrust of God or a selfish refusal of a task He gives.

'A Hard Saying'

'This saying is hard and who can hear it?' said the people when our Lord told them He would give them His flesh to eat and His blood to drink. St John adds: 'After this, many of His disciples went back and walked no more with Him.' (John vi. 67.) The Christian teaching on marriage is also a 'hard saying'. Because of it many to-day refuse to walk with our Lord. In fact the Church's teaching on birth prevention has been called the 'biggest road-block on the way to conversion to-day'. And yet on the other side there is the sure guarantee from God: 'My grace is sufficient for thee.' (2 Cor. xii. 9.) No difficulty is so great as to make it impossible to keep God's law. Let us consider briefly some of the very real difficulties that face married people to-day.

We must at once be clear that no difficulty can justify breaking God's law. A business man who cannot make ends meet is not therefore justified in using dishonest means to make a living. A man who says: 'My wife is an invalid and cannot share the marriage act' would not be justified in taking a mistress. Everyone sees this is true. Yet many think that because of similar difficulties they are justified in using methods of birth prevention inside marriage. Let us take the main difficulties one by one.

Some Difficulties Examined

'We cannot afford any more children.' In this matter it is important to be very honest with oneself. Every married couple, especially young people, know from hard experience that it is no small task to balance the family budget to-day. But before we say the task is impossible we must examine our consciences very honestly and very exactly. 'We cannot afford it' often means 'We cannot afford to have another child *and* keep a car.' But well below the level of the car-owners there is the same sort of outlook. There are families where father and mother spend each week on tobacco as much as would keep a child more than adequately. Quite modest homes have a television set; everybody has a wireless; in the same homes, you may see fantastically expensive toys provided for the children. If we are to be frank with ourselves we must admit that very often to-day we regard as necessities what are, in fact, luxuries.

We often say we live in hard times. What we forget is that in many ways we live in very privileged times. It is a fact that every child born in England to-day can be sure of clothing, food and education. And that is something almost unique in history. We may grumble about excessive interference of the state in welfare and social services. But the welfare and the social services are a fact. They make it certain that everyone has at least the minimum needed for life.

'But', says a good parent, 'I want to give my children more than a bare minimum. It isn't a question of selfishness. I am prepared to make sacrifices. And I want to give my children a good education; I want my wife to have time to look after them properly, to bring them up well. She can't do it if there is a new baby every year.'

That is not an unreasonable thing to say, though as a matter of fact the large family develops habits of mutual help and self-reliance which make the parents' task much easier and much happier than it seems to the outsider.

Nevertheless, it would be very foolish to try to dismiss airily the real burdens of a large family. Every priest knows how much devotion and self-sacrifice is needed on the part of parents. Every priest knows wonderful examples among the parents of his parish. But he knows, too, the joys that go with those burdens. And parents of large families who have been anxiously wondering 'where the money was going to come from' have found over and over again that God does provide in a wonderful way. As the Portuguese proverb has it: 'Every child is born with a loaf of bread under its arm.'

It remains true, however, that it is no part of Catholic doctrine that parents have unlimited children. It is not unreasonable to desire a small rather than a large family.

But if a parent prefers to bring up a small family, in more comfort and with larger opportunities than are possible in a big one, he cannot expect to do it by breaking the law of God. 'I am prepared to make sacrifices', he says, and thank God so many parents are prepared to make sacrifices. The question is: 'What sacrifices?' The hardest sacrifice is the one involved in self-control. That is the test of sincerity. And that is the only solution in other much more difficult situations.

Take, for example, the wife who has been told by the doctor that she will have more children only at the risk of her life. It is true that doctors often say this far too easily. There are plenty of cases where the doctors have been proved wrong. But no one can blame parents who take a doctor's word when he is speaking in all honesty in a matter in which he is, after all, an authority.

Or take a young couple who have no house, who are living in rooms, and who know that the appearance of a baby will mean notice to quit.

First of all notice that difficulties are a spur to discoveries. When the invasion of Europe was being planned the general staffs faced the difficulty of finding harbours. They had to solve it. And they did so in a way that astounded the world. They built harbours and towed them across the Channel.

If the housing problem were a problem of war it would be solved equally readily. There might have to be curtailment of many other things. But homes would be built willy nilly. If there were not the too easy solution of birth prevention, if every couple begot children, the pressure of events would force a solution of the housing problem.

And if birth prevention were universally regarded as out of the question medical research into the problems of invalid wives would be much more urgent and fruitful. The greatest progress of mankind has always been made by the stimulus of difficulties to be overcome, obstacles to be surmounted.

Self-control and the 'Safe Period'

It still remains true that there are cases where a married couple may in all honesty and sincerity say: 'We cannot have any more children' or 'We cannot yet start a family'. It would be wrong to pretend that only selfishness moves them. There are cases where anyone who knows the facts must be moved to a profound sympathy and understanding of the difficulties which face the married couple. Theirs will be the way of the cross—sometimes in an heroic degree. They will need to practise self-control which will call perhaps for a very high standard of self-sacrifice.

It may be that they need to refrain from using their marriage only during certain times in the month. It is possible in some cases for doctors to calculate which days are fertile and which are not. There are what is known as 'safe periods' when marriage may be used according to nature and yet conception does not follow. There is no wrong in confining one's use of marriage to these times provided that: (1) there is serious cause for doing so; (2) both partners are agreed on this course; (3) there is no danger of either falling into sin through this abstinence. It is well therefore to consult one's regular confessor before making a decision. If these conditions are fulfilled, then the married couple who decide to use their marriage in this way are not acting against the law of God. At these times it is God who does not see fit to complete the act by creating a soul. The decision in each instance is God's.

This is not the place to discuss or explain this so-called 'safe period'. For certain persons it does not exist. In any case, the calculation is a personal matter or one needing the advice of a competent doctor.

But this form of self-control is very different from what is popularly called birth control. Here no positive action on the part of the couple thwarts the act. The act is complete as far as they can make it. Nature, God's design, is here complete when the two have accomplished their part. Doubtless, here is a natural check designed by God Himself.

It would be very wrong however to consider the 'safe period' as a sort of God-given 'birth control' to be used indiscriminately. In his address to midwives in October 1951 the Pope gives a grave warning in this matter. Suppose even one of the partners marries with the intention of using the 'safe period' exclusively. If by that is meant that the other partner has no right even to request the marriage act outside the 'safe period'—then the marriage is null and void. Marriage gives a right to its use permanently and continuously. To marry with the intention of conceding only partial rights is to have no intention of making a proper marriage at all.

Suppose, on the other hand, that the partners are agreed that their rights remain intact but consent not to use their right outside the 'safe period'. Then the marriage is certainly valid. But partners can only make such an agreement for grave reasons under the conditions enumerated above. If no such grave reasons are present they do wrong by using the 'safe period' exclusively. They are satisfying their sensuality whilst refusing without sufficient cause the duty of fruitful marriage.

Abstinence

There still remain cases where complete abstinence from the use of marriage for a greater or lesser period, or even for life, is the only way. This indeed can be a high way of the cross. It is here that we must remember that we do not carry the cross unaided. Our Lord will never refuse to help us. The greater our need the greater His help. Other and heavier crosses have to be borne by many. The

world at large is too ready to declare that the cross of chastity is impossible. The example of millions is there to prove that it is possible with the help of God's grace.

'Do not be misled by all this large talk of impossibility,' said the Pope in the address to midwives. And he goes on to point out that in our own days men and women are performing acts of heroism that would have seemed impossible in days gone by. We wrong our fellow men if we think them incapable of heroism in the control of their passions and natural inclination.

In fact in every marriage there are times when abstinence must be observed. At times of sickness and separation, for example. If married people have never practised self-control there will at these times be grave danger of falling into sin either alone or with others. It is wise, therefore, to set out in married life with a resolve to observe a certain moderation even in the lawful use of marriage. Some married people forgo the use of marriage in Lent, Advent and at other times. It is not that they regard the act as a weakness of the flesh, still less as a sin. It is good as wine is good. But it is also good to train oneself to be temperate even in the use of what is good.

Trust in God

When people write and speak of marriage nowadays the stress is all too often on the burdens and the difficulties. When the Scriptures speak of marriage, as the Pope points out, their whole theme is the joy of fruitfulness, the blessing of children. If marriage is inspired by that ideal then all difficulties are reduced to their proper proportions.

A happy marriage, a holy marriage, is a work of art. Like every other work of art, it calls for a sense of dedication in the artist. There is need of patience, self-sacrifice, willingness to accept the conditions of the task. In marriage, to-day especially, there is need for the great virtue of hope, trust and confidence in God. Remember that God is in the marriage. Keep always in touch with God. Use the means He has given for keeping close to Him: confession, Holy Communion, daily prayers said together, better still, said together with the whole family. Then no cross is too heavy, every burden becomes a prize.

'Know you not that your members are the temple of the Holy Ghost who is in you, whom you have from God; and you are not your own? For you are bought with a great price. Glorify and bear God in your body.' (1 Cor. vi. 19, 20.)
