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CONSCIENCE AND CONTRACEPTION: REFLECTIONS ON *HUMANAE VITAE*

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Artificial contraception is so completely ingrained in the mentality of the Western world that its basic immorality is passed over too often even by priests and moral theologians. Some, claiming to follow their consciences without forming them, find justification for a position which condones or encourages contraceptive use. For the average married couple, perhaps, the dilemma is somewhat simpler and more human. Recognizing sex as an important part of their lives, and recognizing contraception as a means to reduce the inconvenience associated with frequent intercourse, such couples hastily brush aside the moral issue and genuinely hope—hidden under the covers, as it were—that in all the confusion of the twentieth century, the problem will simply go away. In the article that follows, William A. Marra challenges all men and women to put forth the mental effort necessary to truly understand sexuality, and to pray for the spiritual strength to integrate into their wedded lives the objectively beautiful teachings of the moral law.

ALL CREATION IS A SOURCE OF WONDER AND SURPRISE TO THE REVERENT PERSON. How well made are the things around us, how lovingly and carefully put together are marbled rocks and seashells and robins and cedar trees! But the greatest wonder accessible to us is the human person himself. A parent appreciates this when he looks lovingly upon his child. Here is a full person, although small and even helpless; here is one who can know and understand, who can will to do evil or good, who can love and rejoice and sorrow. And this new human has materialized, as it were, from nowhere. A short time ago, he did not exist. And now he takes his place in the theatre of humans, a three dimensional character in his own right. He is so much a real individual, so original and fresh, that no parent truly believes that the child can be explained by reference to the parents alone.

It is when we think of such things that the power of human sex begins to disclose its mystery to us. For although sex may not explain the new person, nonetheless it occasions him. Some divine power stirs when two human adults come together sexually and the woman conceives. An immortal person is begun, discreetly and silently. Human sex is connected to another great mystery, as the power to express and complete in a bodily way the union already achieved in wedded love. This unitive function rightly plays a great role in the consciousness of the spouses. Even so, human sex may never be arbitrarily isolated from its procreative function—as if the pregnancy that results from intercourse is some sort of absurd and luckless accident which just happens to follow the ‘pleasant experience’ of the intercourse itself. Pope Paul in *Humanae Vitae* speaks of “the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.”¹

This same encyclical invites us to a reverent contemplation of the sexual powers within the human person. It invites us to understand these powers within the frame of a God-centered, Christ-illuminated view of the universe. As Paul VI remarks, “married persons are the free and responsible collaborators of God the Creator.”² Or again, the

question of human sexuality and married love “like every other problem regarding human life, is to be considered, beyond partial perspectives—whether of the biological or psychological, demographic or sociological orders—in the light of an integral vision of man and of his vocation, not only his natural and earthly, but also his supernatural and eternal vocation.”³

The image that is sketched is one of grandeur. The human person is taken seriously, his link to God is emphasized and, not least, women are understood as destined to be infinitely more than the sexual playthings of men. Married persons are urged to gauge legitimate concerns about the size of their families against truly worthy measures: the moral law, the holiness of Christian marriage, the vocation of us all to a full human and Christian perfection.

All of this is in contrast to the view from without, where sociological and economic considerations are made to be decisive. One no longer looks with reverence upon a beloved child. Nor does one see the preciousness of each human life, as bearer of a divine imprint and as destined for an immortal existence beyond this world. Rather, each new baby is looked upon as still another unwashed body unwillingly called upon to join the proliferating multitudes and put further strains upon the Earth’s resources. Pregnancy, in this perspective, within marriage or not, has come to be looked upon as a disease.

Inconsistently enough, however, sexual intercourse is never acknowledged as the sole cause of the disease. On the contrary, apologists for artificial contraceptives, including the most vociferous opponents of *Humanae Vitae*, seem to look upon unrestricted sexual intercourse as an innate and absolute right of every person, or at least of every married person. This must never be compromised, never regulated, never diminished—most of all, never suppressed. But its consequences, the human persons occasioned by the union, must be controlled by whatever means are available, with no regard at all to holiness, morality, or—as in the case of abortion—even the basic parental instinct found also in brute animals.

Two points of the encyclical call for special notice here, namely, the essential difference it declares between artificial contraception and rhythm from the moral standpoint, and its pastoral part where compassion for the sinner is urged simultaneously with condemnation of the sin. Some have tried to make of this second part a “merciful counterpoint” to the main body of the encyclical which may somehow allow the individual conscience to override even the solemn teaching of the Magisterium. We hope to show the falsity both of this pastoral posi-

tion, and of the position which asserts in criticism of the encyclical that there is no moral difference for the Christian between artificial contraception and rhythm.

THE MORAL DIFFERENCE

It seems to us that the key sentences in *Humanae Vitae* showing forth the moral difference between artificial contraception and rhythm are these:

But to experience the gift of married love while respecting the laws of conception is to acknowledge that one is not the master of the sources of life but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator. Just as man does not have unlimited dominion over his body in general so also, and with more particular reason, he has no such dominion over his specifically sexual faculties, for these are concerned by their very nature with the generation of life, of which God is the source. For “human life is sacred”—all men must recognize that fact, as our predecessor, Pope John XXIII, recalled, “since from its first beginnings it calls for the creative action of God.”⁴

At the heart of this moral difference is the reverence that humans must show to the sacred quality of human sex, whereby a man is called into being. To illustrate and further analyze this basic difference, let us outline two cases, that of the rhythm couple and that of the contraceptive couple. Let us assume that the following characteristics apply to each couple:

1. The spouses love each other with a genuine spousal love;
2. They are married, *i.e.*, they have freely committed themselves to a life together with a bond that is now invulnerable to future changes of heart or will;
3. They have a serious reason to avoid another pregnancy. The reason may be rooted in a grave medical danger to the wife which another pregnancy may entail or in a personalistic concern for the well-being and education of the children already in existence, or in any other reason of importance.

The one couple shares these common characteristics with the other. What is not shared, however, is the attitude and practice of the couples when each strives to

avoid another pregnancy even while continuing to exercise the prerogatives of marriage.

The attitude of the rhythm couple, if it is morally correct, may be expressed as follows:

“We know that our bodies, though separately sterile, possess the awesome power of procreating another human life when they are joined in intercourse. Although the intercourse may be fully justified for reasons apart from procreation, and although these reasons may fully preoccupy our attention, we understand that this cannot lessen the objective link which God has established between the marital act and procreation. Knowing that God Himself might stir and call into being an immortal identity upon the occasion of our having intercourse, we will refrain from exercising our power when there is the possibility of conception. We will in no way dare to unite sexually and simultaneously tamper with the process whereby God is called upon to stir and to create. We so respect and reverence the process itself, and the power we have of initiating it, that we will refrain from its exercise when we have valid reason to fear its possible consequences.”

The attitude of the contraceptive couple, in its ideal articulation, will be as follows:

“We too know that the marital act has been joined by God to procreation; not that every such act results in procreation, but every coming into being of a man—barring a supernatural exception—results from such acts. We, however, are not overawed by this God-willed link, at least not to the point of treating it as something sacred, never to be severed by human acting. When we have valid reasons to avoid pregnancy, therefore, and valid reasons to join in sexual intercourse, we will sever the link between sex and procreation by using contraceptive instruments and techniques.”

There is clearly a profound difference between the attitude of this couple and that of the rhythm couple. This difference is obviously not reducible to any of the characteristics held in common: the intention of married lovers to avoid conception and still to engage in intercourse. The difference lies in their response to a process which has to do with the transmission of human life. The rhythm couple sees the process as a sacred absolute, beyond human competence to touch. The contraceptive couple sees the process as just one more natural sequence which human knowledge can make subject to human intervention.

Dietrich von Hildebrand, in a work preceding *Humanae Vitae* by several years and foreshadowing its

profound teaching, characterizes the attitude of the contraceptive couple as basically one of irreverence:

We are here confronted with the basic sin of irreverence towards God, the denial of our creaturehood, the acting as if we were our own lords. It is the basic denial of the *religio*, of our being bound to God; it is a disrespect for the mysteries of God’s creation, which increases in its sinfulness the higher the rank of the mystery in question. It is the same sinfulness which lies in suicide and euthanasia, in both of which we act as if we were the masters of life. It is the same irreverence which ignores the indissolubility of marriage, and in which marriages are contracted and ended as one would change gloves.⁵



COMPASSION AND CONSCIENCE

Pope Paul himself noted of his encyclical, which but reinforced and developed the previous teaching of the Magisterium, that “to many it will appear not merely difficult but even impossible to observe.”⁶ Had he then taken the popular sociological route in ethics, which pretends to derive what ought to be done from what is in fact the practice of persons, the Pope would have repudiated in the pastoral part what he had taught in the first part of the encyclical. He of course did no such thing. Rather he explicitly recalled that it is not in his power to change a moral commandment of God:

Since the Church did not make either of these [natural and evangelical moral] laws, she cannot be their arbiter—only their guardian and interpreter. It can never be right for her to declare lawful what is in fact unlawful, because this, by its very nature, is always opposed to the true good of man.⁷

It is extremely important that this fact be realized. The great clamor raised against the encyclical seems to have behind it for the most part the assumption that the Pope need but change his *will*—as if his teaching were some positive law, such as concerns fasting in Lent

or the vernacular in the liturgy, which he is free to abrogate at his pleasure. This assumption must surely be the reason for the unprecedented pressure tactics employed against the teaching, not merely by irresponsible journalists or by professed enemies of the Church, but also by Catholics and even some theologians. These persons seem committed to the notion that a groundswell of resistance to the encyclical can force the Pope to change his teaching. But if the truth is, as quoted above, that the moral law is of God, then the Church is powerless to change it. The only hope for the dissenters then would lie in the direction of showing that the Church remains in error about the meaning and scope of the moral law. In this case, the Pope would be asked to change his *mind*, to perceive that artificial contraception is, after all, quite innocent. But for the Pope to perceive this, it must somehow be made evident by valid proofs and arguments. Sociological and psychological arguments have indeed been brought forward against the teachings, but these arguments were mostly considered and rejected by the Holy Father in the very exercise of his teaching office which resulted in *Humanae Vitae*. Hence the resort to pressures. But pressures of whatever kind are absolutely foreign bodies here. The theme is evident truth which convinces minds. Pressures, threats, bribes, and even torture have often enough been employed to force a person to change his will. But when any of these is used to change a person's conviction about an alleged truth, then we may well suspect the validity of his conversion.

But what of conscience? Has it not been rightly said that the voice of conscience is so sacred that a person must follow even an erroneous conscience under pain of sinning? Is it not possible, then, that a mature Christian may listen dutifully to the papal arguments against contraception, and may then consult his conscience—which then bids him act in a manner contrary to the papal teaching? Can we say that the person sins if he does this? Or must we rather say that he sins if he does not follow his conscience?

The correct understanding of conscience is essential if we are to resolve these questions. We must see, first, that conscience is not the organ whereby we grasp the goodness or badness of an action. Rather, only when we know (or at least believe) that such and such an action is evil, does our conscience urge us to desist from it. If, notwithstanding the pleas of conscience, we do what we deem to be evil, our conscience troubles us, nags us, gives us little peace. Only when we finally confess the sin and somehow atone for it, does our conscience leave us in peace.

Von Hildebrand calls conscience the *advocatus Dei*,⁸ a kind of second ego wholly concerned with pleading the cause of the morally right side in any given situation. But, as noted above, conscience presupposes a prior grasp of good and evil. If I have been taught, or have somehow come to believe, that smoking tobacco is sinful, then my conscience will plead with me not to smoke if ever I am tempted to do so. On the other hand, if I see nothing wrong with using contraceptives, then my conscience will be serenely at peace as I resort to them.

Again, conscience is concerned only with the possibility of my own sin. When I hear of a moral evil done by another person, I may be fearful, or indignant, or sorrowful, but my conscience is not involved. It does not plead with me or trouble me. Only to the extent that my very knowledge of something might demand some action from me, the omission of which would be sinful, does my conscience enter into the case at all. Given this understanding of conscience, then, we must now analyze the ways in which the voice of conscience may somehow find itself in conflict with a moral authority. Five possibilities must be distinguished.

The first is the easiest to understand and perhaps the most frequent. It involves the command of someone in authority over me for me to effect, by action or omission, something that I believe to be sinful—not simply unwise, or useless, but sinful, morally evil. For example, if I am in the army and my commanding officer gives me a direct order to kill some prisoner of war, there is a clear case of conflict between authority and conscience. On the one hand, a man who by hypothesis has the right to command me in certain things orders me to do X. On the other hand, my conscience pleads with me not to do X because this would be sinful. My conscience says, as it were: “Remember, to kill an innocent is morally wicked; you will offend God and soil your soul. The Almighty has forbidden you to shed innocent blood.” In this case, of course, my moral duty is clear. Here is operative in the full sense the dictum that we ought “to obey God rather than men.” I must refuse, therefore, to obey a sinful order of my commanding officer.

The next four cases concern not a command which orders me to do what I think to be evil but a teaching which declares that such and such a deed is morally evil. Obviously, the dispute over *Humanae Vitae* and the individual conscience must be inserted into this context. For it is not the case that the Pope commands women to put away their contraceptives—as indeed an army officer might command me to kill prisoners. Rather, the Pope teaches that the use of contraceptives is sinful. We are

asked, not to obey him, but to accept his teaching as true. If and when we do so accept it, then our conscience, which hitherto was not bothered when we used contraceptives, will now begin to plead with us to refrain from their use, for such is now believed to be sinful on the moral authority of the Church.

The second case, then, will be as follows: the Magisterium of the Church teaches that X is sinful and we “see nothing wrong with it.” Moreover, this teaching is expressly declared to be infallible. No crisis of conscience will appear in this case for the believing Catholic. His conscience has up to this point been quiet. When now he is taught, infallibly, on God’s own authority, that something he had always casually believed to be innocent is instead morally evil, then he gratefully receives this enlightenment.

In the third case, the Church—once more infallibly—teaches that X is evil and I, on the contrary, think that not to do X is evil. An example, admittedly farfetched but still useful, would be as follows. During the American Civil War, I give shelter to runaway slaves so that they may safely make their way to the free states in the North. I think this to be not simply an allowable, but even a mandatory, good act. I should deem myself guilty unless I hid the slaves. Now suppose an infallible teaching of the Magisterium branded this kind of deed as “always sinful inasmuch as slaves are the property of their masters and we may never deprive a person of his proper goods.” Here indeed I shall have a crisis of conscience; even though no command is involved, but rather a teaching, I am torn between two forces: on the one hand I think that I see clearly that I am morally obliged to do X and, on the other, the divinely constituted Church teaches solemnly that to do X is always sinful. My conscience will reproach me, therefore, if I follow the Magisterium here. Nevertheless, the resolution of this crisis is easy to state: I must either accept the teaching as true, or else undergo a crisis of faith which shatters my belief that the Magisterium correctly declares the truth of God when it solemnly teaches anything dealing with faith or morals. In this latter case, I simply leave the Church; my faith in its divine nature is shattered by this conflict with conscience. If, however, I have no faith crisis, if I continue to believe that whoever hears the Church hears Jesus Christ, the Divine Teacher, then I accept even this teaching as true. And, however heavy my heart at first, I no longer do X *lest I sin*.

All the above seems grotesque for the simple reason that the example was farfetched and involved a situation in which the Church is imagined to have taught as

true something that is obviously false, namely, that it is sinful to hide a runaway slave. The opponents of *Humanae Vitae*, in order truly to show that married couples are bidden by their consciences to disregard the teaching of the Magisterium, would have to show that something similar to this grotesque example has actually occurred in the real world. They would have to show that what the official teaching authority of the Church solemnly taught as evil and to be avoided was actually a positive good, not only permissible, but perhaps mandatory.

Let us proceed to the fourth and fifth cases. They are similar to the last two just discussed with this important exception, that the teaching is not declared to be infallible, although it is certainly taught as true. Case four involves the Magisterium’s teaching that “X is evil” whereas “I see nothing wrong with X.” Here again my conscience is *silent*. Since I see nothing wrong with X, the matter is indifferent to my conscience. I certainly cannot say that I fear it will involve me in sin if I allow my conscience to be formed by the Magisterium’s teaching. There is thus no chance of a genuine conflict between conscience and authority in this case.

The fifth case, however, is different. Here a non-infallible teaching is assumed to declare that X is evil whereas I, on the contrary, am convinced that X is mandatory, that not to do X is in fact the sinful thing. Again, the hiding of a runaway slave might be a good, if farfetched, example. The difference now, however, is that the teaching has not been proposed as infallible—and neither does it exhibit clearly the conditions for infallibility; thus, it just might be wrong. In this case, obviously, a faithful Christian might say—in fear and trembling, to be sure—“if I follow my conscience and hide the slave, I do what the Magisterium declares to be sinful; but if I follow the Magisterium, I must do what my conscience says is sinful. And since I think I really grasp the evil of denouncing a slave to his master, who searches him out so as to return him to slavery, I may be permitted to think that in this case, the Magisterium is in error.”⁹

One thing must be noted about this fifth case: it bears little real relation to the alleged problem of *Humanae Vitae* versus the individual conscience. This problem really fits into case four, where the Magisterium says that X is evil and where “I see nothing wrong with X.” In other words, the typical contraceptive couple does not claim that contraceptives are morally mandatory, that not to use them is wicked and sinful. Rather, the spouses profess to see nothing wrong with contraceptive use, and they are perplexed when the Magisterium solemnly (although perhaps not expressly infallibly) teaches that this

is always objectively a sinful deed. Thus, they might find following the Church teaching here difficult and even almost impossible. But by no stretch of the imagination could they contend that it was *sinful*. Hence, in accordance with the previous explanation of what conscience is, they could never invoke *conscience* as a pretext for not receiving the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*.¹⁰

If, in fact, they do not receive this teaching, that fact has nothing to do with *conscience* at all. It means that as a practical matter they have rejected the truth set forth by the Magisterium as the standard by which they must form their consciences. Once they have rejected the Magisterium in this fashion on any issue such as artificial contraception, it is all too likely that they will go on to reject the truth of the Magisterium's teaching in other matters as well.

Moved by a false compassion, certain confessors admit that they tell their penitents that, although the Pope teaches that contraception is wrong, nevertheless the couples are obliged to follow their consciences—while of course taking into consideration the papal teaching “as one important input for the decision.” These confessors even go so far as to assert the nobility of this advice inasmuch it demands that the penitents obey their consciences—and thus, indirectly, God—rather than men, even the Pope. The shallowness and falsity of this

view should be evident from what has been said previously. Genuine compassion would never for a moment minimize the objective sinfulness of contraceptive intercourse. But it should move the confessor to exhort the penitents to pray for the mercy of God, that He will grant them strength to be able to abide by His holy laws.

A world separates that false compassion by which couples are told that contraception may somehow be morally acceptable for them in their particular situation and that their own consciences must be the final judge, from the true compassion which identifies the sin as indeed evil but which attempts to quicken in the souls of the couple the necessary prayers and dispositions to look to the Divine Physician for health in moral sickness and for strength in infirmity.

In a paragraph explicitly directed to priests, Pope Paul said: “To diminish in no way the saving teaching of Christ constitutes an eminent form of charity for souls. But this must ever be accompanied by patience and goodness, such as the Lord Himself gave example of in dealing with men. Having come not to condemn but to save, He was intransigent with evil, but merciful towards individuals.

“In their difficulties, may married couples always find, in the words and in the heart of a priest, the echo of the voice and love of the Redeemer.”¹¹

NOTES

¹*Humanae Vitae*, No. 12.

²*Ibid.*, No. 1.

³*Ibid.*, No. 7.

⁴*Ibid.*, No. 13.

⁵Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1966) p. 98. The treatment of this theme of irreverence was amplified in a subsequent work expressly devoted to the encyclical: *‘Humanae Vitae’: A Sign of Contradiction* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1969).

⁶*Humanae Vitae*, No. 20.

⁷*Ibid.*, No. 18.

⁸See von Hildebrand, *Morality and Situation Ethics* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1966), p. 138ff.

⁹[Editor's Note: It is difficult to conceive of the Pope himself pronouncing directly on a matter of faith or morals without fulfilling implicitly the conditions for infallibility set forth by Vatican I.]

¹⁰[Editor's Note: It should be stated that *Humanae Vitae* itself exhibits the conditions for infallibility.]

¹¹*Humanae Vitae*, No. 29.