

NOTES AND COMMENTS

ON "CONSCIENCE AND THE PAPAL ENCYCLICAL"

● P. J. Talty, C.S.S.R.

May I be permitted to comment on the query and solution given in your January issue under the title: "Conscience and the Papal Encyclical"? I do not wish to contradict what Msgr. John V. Sheridan has written. He understands the circumstances of his own country. But I should like to put the matter in a simpler pastoral setting more suited, I think, to conditions here in the Philippines. I wish also to dismiss some of the irrelevancies that have caused so much confusion in this question in other places.

In his reply the monsignor evidently has in mind the line of action adopted by many bishops in various countries. Although they accepted the encyclical, some of the practical rules they gave for its implementation were very vague and ambiguous, to say the least. No doubt the bishops did this quite deliberately for pastoral reasons. Weakness of faith and confusion of mind in those countries might easily induce many to abandon the Church on this issue. To make matters worse, many priests had already been giving wrong advice to the laity on this question for some years. Happily this state of affairs does not exist in the Philippines, at least not to any notable extent. Here it would be bad pastoral practice to promote a climate of uncertainty. Rather we should do what the Pope has asked and speak without ambiguity on this subject.

The gynecologist whose case is given by the monsignor, is evidently an expert in his own field, but he does not understand well what the teaching authority of the Church really means and what it implies. He is suffering from an acute and perhaps agonizing emotional dis-

turbance, but it would be inaccurate to call it crisis of conscience. The point of conscience is clear. His conscience is simply erroneous and needs to be instructed and right. An experienced confessor will recognise the case at once. Such cases are not confined to the contraception issue. In these circumstances it is for the confessor to judge whether it is wiser to leave the mental emotional block as it is; time and prayer can remedy it. If he decides to give absolution, he should at least insist that the penitent keep his views to himself, so as not to injure the common good and undermine the law of God.

The gynecologist needs to be told that the main teaching of the encyclical and the reasons that accompany it are two distinct things. A competent person may consider that he is qualified to question and dispute these reasons; but this does not invalidate the central teaching of the document. That teaching does not ultimately depend on the accompanying reasons. It is an authentic interpretation of divine law that rests on the authoritative mandate given by Christ to His Vicar. This is a field in which scientists and theologians have no critical competence. Here they are no longer teachers but disciples, just like the rest of the faithful.

I do not mean to imply that the reasoning of the Pope is unsound or that his critics are necessarily right, because they happen to be eminent in their own fields. This is an open question that can be discussed like any other. I merely wish to point out, and to stress, that the central teaching of the encyclical is above and beyond all this. It claims our acceptance in its own right independently of such reasoning.

It has been the constant teaching of the Church that contraception is wrong and nothing can make it right. In re-affirming this traditional teaching, the Pope makes it plain that he is exercising the mandate given to him by Christ, that he is speaking with the special assistance of the Holy Spirit which attaches to that mandate, and that he is giving an authentic interpretation of divine law.

We know that there are medical cases which do not really involve direct and intentional contraception; cases of treatment for irregularity, treatment during the lactation period or at the menopause, etc. Such treatments may still be quite lawful. There can also be cases where only one party is guilty and the other may be free from sin; there can

be cases that are morally equivalent to rape. But all this pertains to the ordinary principles of theology and is not peculiar to the problem of contraception. It all leaves the central truth untouched: contraception is wrong and nothing can make it right.

The Vatican Council takes this Catholic attitude for granted. It says: "In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. The Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that Truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origin in human nature itself." (Declaration of Religious Freedom. no. 14.)

It tells married people that "they cannot proceed arbitrarily. They must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive towards the Church's teaching office, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel." (Church in Modern World. no. 50.)

Again it says: "Sons of the Church", (and no exception is made for scientists), "may not undertake methods of regulating procreation that are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church in its unfolding of the Divine law." (Church in Modern World. no. 51.)

Many irrelevancies have been introduced into this question that have served to make it doubly confusing for the laity and sometimes even for priests. I shall mention only three: conscience, infallibility and reformability.

We know that conscience is the immediate norm of moral conduct but it is not the ultimate authority. The final and real law is the Will of God. Conscience is only a mirror designed to reflect that Will by means of reason. Since the Fall of man that mirror has been notoriously unreliable. Often, in fact, it has reflected little more than the elementary principle that man should avoid evil and do good. Ignorance, passion, prejudice and self-interest have only too often blurred and distorted the image. They continue to do so even among Christians, who have the additional light provided by Revelation. Then there are always

more obscure areas where only the special guidance of the Holy Spirit can show us the right way. Hence the need we have of the moral magisterium of the Church. Who but God Himself can say what perfection He requires of our nature under the influence of grace? And what theologian would venture to claim that something is impossible, when grace is there to assist?

If we had to depend on reason alone, an impressive case could be made, at least in certain circumstances, for pre-marital sex, fornication, occasional adultery, divorce, suicide, euthanasia, abortion, sterilization and homosexuality. In practically all these cases we depend ultimately on the teaching authority of the Church to give us certain guidance. It is the same authority that is exercised in the case of contraception.

It is therefore quite irrelevant to invoke conscience in an area that transcends the ability of conscience to function securely, without aid from the teaching authority appointed by God for this precise purpose.

A second irrelevance in this question is the appeal to infallibility. Rarely, if ever, does the Church exercise infallibility in moral matters. The nature of the case does not call for it, and we have no right to expect it. All we need in moral matters is moral certainty and the magisterium guarantees us this; otherwise there would be no such thing as a magisterium. This moral certainty excludes all reasonable fear of error. No one will find a convincing reason against it. He may have doubts, even considerable ones; but he does not have certainty. As we have said already, from the very nature of the case his reason cannot move with certainty in this area. He solves his doubts in practice by accepting the authoritative ruling given in God's name.

On this precise point there has been something close to intellectual dishonesty on the part of certain writers. They have quoted alleged errors in other Papal Encyclicals and in various other papal pronouncements. Even if we were to admit such errors and to add more to their number from the two thousand year's history of the papacy, we must say in all honesty that none of the examples cited comes within hailing distance of the present case. It is one thing to have errors in a papal encyclical and quite another thing when the Pope goes out of his way, whether by encyclical or not, to give a moral decision on a thorny

question that has divided the world. And in giving such a decision, when he makes it plain that he is exercising Christ's mandate, that he is speaking with the special assistance of the Holy Spirit and is authentically interpreting the law of God, no one should speak of error, unless he wishes to overthrow the whole idea of a magisterium in morals.

A third irrelevance is the hope that this teaching may be changed. We know that an infallible statement is irreformable of its very nature. Any statement which is less than infallible is not irreformable in itself. But it may still be irreformable on others grounds. The Pope has indicated that this is the case here. When something has been so constantly and expressly condemned by the Church precisely because it is against the moral nature of man, we should not expect that this teaching will be changed. Let us transfer the question from the field of infallibility, where it does not belong, to the ordinary field of moral certainty, where it does belong. Then the question would be, not: "Can this teaching be changed?" but, rather: "Will it be changed?" And the answer is: "No."

It is a sobering thought for us priests, as well as for theologians and scientists, to recall that among Our Lord's greatest opponents were many of the theologians and scripture scholars of the day. Even Divine Wisdom could not convince them. He was compelled to say of such (and they knew He was referring to them and they actually would have arrested Him, only they feared the people): "Truly I say to you, the tax-gatherers and the harlots go into kingdom of heaven before you." (Matt. 21:31.). And to Nicodemus, one of the best of them, He had to say: "Are you teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?" (John, 3:10.). He actually thanked His Father for having "hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes." (Luke, 10:21.). A truly great theologian is the humblest of men and the most docile to the voice of truth.

In his address to the Latin American bishops at Bogota in August, 1968, the Pope is reported as having said: "Sad to say, even some of our own theologians are not always on the right road. We greatly need and respect the work of good and capable theologians. They can be providential scholars and skilful expounders of the faith, if they themselves remain intelligent disciples of the Church's magisterium, which

Christ set up as the guardian and interpreter of His message of eternal truth, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

"But to-day some theologians have recourse to ambiguous doctrinal expressions. Others take the liberty to proclaim their own personal views, investing them with the authority which they more or less covertly question in him who possesses by divine right this awesome and carefully guarded charism."

In some English translations of the Encyclical, the following passage, addressed to priests, was somehow omitted; it reads: "Speak with confidence, beloved sons, fully convinced that the Spirit of God, while He assists the magisterium in proposing doctrine, illumines internally the hearts of the faithful, inviting them to give their assent." We have abundant evidence of this, thank God, in the hearts of our Filipino people.

Perhaps as a practical means of helping our people, we priests could do more to encourage among Catholic doctors a deeper study of this problem, so that distressing cases might be relieved. Perhaps, also, we might well counter the exaggerated "population explosion" propaganda by telling the full truth. This is that there is a greater "food explosion" and a greater "wealth explosion" in the world. The latter is the real problem. And the remedy has been indicated by Vatican II: "a world-wide charity explosion." It is for us priests to give the lead in promoting this.