

CASES AND QUERIES

CONSCIENCE AND THE PAPAL ENCYCLICAL

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Q: I am a physician specializing in gynecology. A friend of mine in the same field is the father of a large family and, like myself, a practical Catholic. Both of us I am sure, subscribe to every word and implication of Pope Paul's recently expressed credo. Both of us attend Sunday Mass with our families and receive the Sacraments regularly. Neither of us, as far as I know, has ever recommended artificial contraceptives.

Now my question. My friend assures me that he is simply unable to accept as moral absolutes some of the statements made in the recent papal encyclical. What, then, becomes of his Catholic Faith? Is he supposed to give up the reception of Holy Communion? For so far he and I are seeking consolation in the authentic nature of the encyclical. What implication does the authentic, as distinct from the infallible, character of this statement of the pope have for my friend or for others like him? No one has yet really clarified this point for the layman.

A: Your friend seems to have a sincere problem of conscience: so let's begin by saying that he does not have to, nor indeed can he, abandon his Faith or give up the reception of the Sacraments because of this problem.

At its most profound level a man's conscience is his moral consciousness and, in the case of a Catholic, his consciousness of right and wrong is and should be formed and illuminated in and through the

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community of the Church. It is imperative to remember then that the Church's teaching ministry has always an essential relation to, a claim, on the attention of the believing Catholic conscience, this follows from the Catholic's recognition of his Church's position as the Divinely appointed guide to God's will and of his recognition in the Church of a special teaching ministry — the pope and bishops. It is thus the responsibility of every adult Catholic to try, through God's grace, to prayerfully assimilate and assent to every authentic expression of the Church's teaching ministry, even when he cannot immediately, or after reflection, recognize its forcefulness.

There is, however, a great difference between the Church's authentic and its infallible teaching. The inability or refusal of a person to accept its infallible teaching places him outside the Church's actual membership. All the Church's doctrines, including its infallible doctrines, are of course subject to further growth, expression and clarification. But there is a definitive element in an infallible doctrine that must be recognized as such and that cannot be rejected without cutting oneself off from the Church.

Authentic teaching, like infallible teaching, involves not merely the opinions or conclusions of theologians, or of individual bishops; it involves the belief of the whole Church as expressed in different ways, including statements of its teaching ministry, of which the pope is the supreme spokesman; it involves a special and direct help from God given to the Church (and to the pope in the Church) at a particular period of its history, and without which the Church's visible continuity or unity could not survive.

Monsignor Lambruschini, who presented the papal encyclical on family responsibility to a group of newsmen, said that "from a theological viewpoint the document is not to be considered infallible but . . . an important sign of pontifical unity in the traditions of Pope Pius XI and Pius XII. . . The faithful know that the pope, the successor of St. Peter and the Vicar of Christ, has a special assistance of the Holy Spirit which goes with the mission of confirming in the Faith, and in the ways of the Lord, all the members of the people of God, including the brothers in the episcopate. And this assistance does not restrict itself to infallible definitions. . . Loyal and full assent, interior and exterior,

must be given in proportion to the level of the authority from which it emanates. In this case," he said, "the authority is that of the supreme pontiff, and its object is most serious since it is a matter of the tormented question of birth regulation" . . . which should not be left in . . . "a (permanent) condition of vague problematics."

But the internal religious assent to the noninfallible but authentic teaching of the Church as expressed in a particular papal statement is or may be provisional or conditional. It is motivated not by a clear recognition that it is God's direct and immutable command, nor by the intrinsic persuasiveness of the particular statement, but by an obedience or submission to a Divinely established (but human) teaching ministry without which the Church could not survive. Understand, the Church's authentic teaching is geared not merely to affirm or clarify God's voice but to protect its members from the constant fear of serious error in Faith and morals and to provide a practical and justifiable basis for their Christian life and action. The Church or pope may, absolutely speaking, alter, modify or even reverse some aspects of its authentic teaching in response, e.g., to the further study and illumination of God's word or to radically new knowledge acquired in the fields of anthropology or psychology. Monsignor Lambruschini was reported by the Associated Press to have said that, "The ruling (on contraceptives) is not unreformable."

The religious assent due to authentic teaching is based on a humble readiness to learn and assimilate the mind of the Church at a given moment of history and to commit oneself to Christ within the framework of the Church at that moment. But if, as in the case you mention, an informed Catholic, after having struggled with his conscience, finds it impossible to accept or assimilate a particular authentic, as distinct from infallible, statement, then he may act personally and privately in accordance with his own conscientious conviction. Obviously, however, he cannot or should not make his own conscientious conviction a basis for challenging or usurping the magisterial ministry of the Church, or confusing others who appreciate, need and accept the guidance of the Church on this as well as on other matters.

We should not forget that in the case of the present encyclical, the pope has had, of course, the help of the Holy Spirit, but also access to

all sources of relevant information and all kinds of expert thinking and that his statements came after long and suffering deliberation. If we are reflectively and prayerfully honest with ourselves, then, we will try (even at great personal sacrifice) to see and follow the pope's teaching on the subject. His Holiness, himself, made the point that it would be impossible for some to accept his teaching without a special grace. It is worth remembering, in this connection, that we cannot live any of the deeper demands of Christian morality without special Divine help. This does not mean that Christianity is joyless. Christian self-giving is the best guarantee of genuine joy.

Further, in situations involving hard personal discipline, physical or intellectual, we can be dishonest with ourselves even while we claim or feel we are acting from motives of the purest honesty. Illicit birth control is a peculiar species of sin or temptation that, though rooted in crass selfishness, will always find eloquent and emotional defenders. The mental image of a suddenly exploded, famine-ridden population, of congenital disease or of large poverty-stricken families of irresponsible parents can so easily relieve the pangs of conscience and justify the self-indulgence of those deliberately childless ones who can afford to have a family.

Finally, ours tends strongly to be a hedonist-humanist culture where everyone, including Christians, can be deluded into thinking that genuine Christianity and responsible love are possible without prayer and sacrifice. I think the burden of all the pope's recent statements has been to react to and refute such delusions, to restress and reaffirm those basic (but forgotten) values without which Christian humanism is a name only. If we see his encyclical in this context we will find it easier to respond prayerfully to its demands.