

CASES AND QUERIES

"FOLLOW YOUR INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE"

Married couples' problems centering on the necessity of limiting the family size weight heavily upon the responsibility of confessors, as they come up in an ever increasing number. To those of us ordained ten years ago, these problems are rather new and of no easy solution.

In the course of a Holy Retreat for priests, where these pastoral problems came up for discussion, it was indeed surprising, to put it mildly, to hear with an air of "take it or leave it", that where the parties concerned are very reluctant to practice sexual abstinence, let's say, for a week or so, and furthermore the "rythm" has been tried and failed, whether or not these couples can make use of the contraceptive now enjoying an exceptional demand—the pill (2-1/2 mg.), should be left "to the individual conscience." To make this consultation brief and useful, could you, Reverend Father, shed some light on the five following questions —

- a) *Should we priest-confessors insist with prudence and tact, a great deal more on the moral practical possibility of practicing sexual abstinence for long periods, where it becomes necessary?*
- b) *Are priest-confessors acting intelligently in recommending the use of the "Rythm", as an effective means of spacing births, in spite of physicians claiming that it is practically unsafe, simply it doesn't work, many say?*
- c) *In advising the married couples to follow their individual conscience, in cases as the one just referred to above, does the conscience of the priest-confessor get morally involved, if the penitent resorts to the use of the contraceptive pill?*

- d) *Is the permissive-directive "follow your individual conscience" theologically correct and sound?*
- e) *The fact that the priest is celibate, does it disqualify him to speak with authority on the moral, pastoral aspects of marriage, and marriage problems?*

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A) Indeed, the need of the hour is to live an *authentic christian life*, and this way of life calls for a degree of self-denial, self-mastery far greater than most of us care to believe in and practice.¹ The ability to sublimate sexual forces for the sake of a higher goal represents a *basic possibility* in man and essential attribute distinguishing him from the animal, and this will become a happy reality if man grows morally while it develops physically and intellectually.²

Paul VI in a speech delivered at St. Peter's on Feb. 12, 1966, to participants in the XIII National Congress of Italian women, a Congress held at *Domus Mariae* said in part: "La nuova Pentecoste della Chiesa che tutto il Popolo di Dio ha demandata intensamente nella preghiera di questi anni, e che speriamo la misericordia di Dio abbia a donare alla sua Chiesa, *non potrà essere un tempo di maggiore facilità morale, ma piuttosto di maggiore impegno per tutti, anche per gli sposi cristiani*" "Entrate per la porta stretta. . . stretta e la porta e impervia la via che conduce alla vita." (Mtt 7, 13-14) AAS., 58, n. 3 31 martii, 1966, p. 224. Cfr L'Osservatore Romano (French edition) 25 Fevrier, 1966, p. 1. col. 5. l. 71).

Periodic continence or sexual abstinence is a necessary part of every marriage, worthy of this sacred name. If not adopted for higher considerations, it will be imposed by illness, childbirth, absence from home, and so on. The idea of restraint of the sexual faculty is *not* to be regarded as a remote level of virtue to be attained only by those of exceptional

¹ *Toward a Theology of Self-denial*, by Donald W. Kraus. Rome, 1965, Catholic Book Agency; pp. 48-57. *Allocutio of Paul VI*, Cfr. "L'Osservatore Romano," July 8, 1965. *Marriage and the Sex Problem*, by F. W. Foster, "The indispensability of the ascetic ideal": Chapter IX, pp. 127-162.

² *400 German Doctors Memorandum*. Cfr. Herder Correspondence, II, n. 4, April, 1965; pp. 110-112.

character or unusual piety; rather it is the way humans have to live often enough, in many circumstances of ordinary existence, if *they do factually try to preserve their self-respect at all.*³ In the context of christian teaching and life *marital chastity*⁴ is not only a possibility, it is a blessed and most uplifting reality. Thousands of married couples stand "witnesses" to man's God given power and practical ability for self-mastery in the area of sex.⁵ The christian soul may well proclaim with St. Paul: "Nothing is beyond my power, thanks to the strength God gives me" (Phil. 4:15). To married people as well as to the unmarried the following words of a well known German theologian may have a salutary and reassuring effect. Writes K. Rahner, S.J.:

"If we Christians, when faced with a moral decision, really realized that the world is under the Cross on which God himself hung nailed and pierced, that obedience to God's law can also entail man's death, that we may not do evil in order that good may come of it, that it is an error and heresy of this eudemonic modern age, to hold that the morally right thing can never lead to a tragic situation from which in this world there is no way out; if we really realized that as Christians we must expect almost to take for granted that at some time in our life our Christianity will involve us in a situation in which we must either sacrifice everything or lose our soul, that we cannot expect always to avoid a 'heroic' situation, then there would indeed be fewer Christians who think that their situation requires a special ruling which is not so harsh as the laws proclaimed as God's laws by the Church, then there would be fewer confessors and spiritual advisers who, for fear of telling their penitent how strict is God's law, fail in their duty and tell him instead 'to follow his conscience', as if he had not asked, and done right to ask, which among all the many voices clamouring within him was the true voice of God, as if it were not for God's Church to try and distinguish it in accordance with his law, as if the true conscience could speak even when it had not been informed by God and the faith which comes from hearing."⁶

³ *The Ovulation Method*, by John Billings, M.D., The Advocate Press, Melbourne, 1965, p. 14 ff.

⁴ UNITAS, Sept. 1966: pp. 419-420.

⁵ *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, by C. E. O'Neill, O.P., Alba House, Staten Island, N.Y., 1964: pp. 272-273.

⁶ *Nature and Grace*, by K. Rahner, S.J., Sheed and Ward, London, pp. 102 ff.

May I add that these words are a faithful summary and echo of the morality of the Gospels and St. Paul's.⁷ No *substitute* in pills present or future; no substitute for self-discipline and self-mastery. The very use of the "pill" itself calls for the this sterling quality. To the men and women of little faith in the power stemming from humble trust in God, the happy reality of our faith ought to be stressed more frequently and, whenever possible, more effectively. When marital chastity is practiced, very often it *marks* the thoughtful, intelligent, successful; authentic Catholic couple.

B) It would be a timely reminder to some expert priests "*stop practicing medicine without license*", but a priest is far from *practicing medicine* when he commends directly or indirectly the use of "Rhythm" method in association with the use of *basal temperature* readings. The *progressive* women theologian, Mrs. Rosemary Haughton, has this much to say on the reliability of the Rhythm:—"Let it be said at once that the *safe period*, properly understood and practiced, *is safe*, and the remarks about it are made by people who haven't studied the subject properly. It is *unsafe* when used with insufficient instruction and care—not enough calculation; in fact, its disadvantages are not due to its *unsafeness*, but to the sometimes too long periods of continence it imposes. . . ."⁸ What happens, in many instances, is this: instruction in sex and Rhythm is obtained thru hearsay, casual reading of popular culture media, and this kind of information and subsequent use often leads to disastrous, disappointing results. Conscientious and intelligent physicians, willing to be of service to the best interests of their patients, should know there is available scientifically reliable information, and look for it.

But in the words of Dr. Ch. Rendue, "competence is not enough for the Catholic physician who wishes to come to the aid of married couples; it is necessary that he himself live an *interior life as intense as possible*, nourished in a most special manner by *prayer*. . . It should not be assumed that this is outside the point, when we are rather at the

⁷ *Theology of the New Testament*, by John Bonsirven, S.J., Burns and Oates, London, 1963, p. 125 ff.

⁸ *New Blackfriars*, September 1966: pp. 636-646. "Sex, Sterility and the Catholic", by Don and Helen Kannabay, Alba House, Staten Island, N.Y., 1964: Chapters II and VI.

very core of the problem. God is Love and Fecundity. The fertile couple is an image of God (Gen. I, 27-28). One deprives himself of an indispensable light on human love and fecundity, if one does not foster a life of intimate, reverent familiarity with the most Holy Trinity".⁹

C) Not infrequently it is assumed that one's individual case is not covered by the law of God or of the Church, and therefore one may safely follow the course of action the *here and now* circumstances suggest to be a satisfactory solution. I believe a great deal of self-deception is taking place, which in the name of intellectual honesty ought to be dispelled.

Still others keep on resorting to the "pill" as a means of regulating the ovulation cycle. The threefold action of the pill is well known today, whereas its subsequent regulating effect of the slightly irregular ovulation cycle (within normal) has not been scientifically established; far from that, Hence numerous married women keep on taking the "pill" as a regulating factor, indefinitely, for fear of being caught unaware. . . .

Finally, the much advertised fact that a high percentage of Catholics thruout the world resort today to the use of the "pill" as a contraceptive, plus the overestimated theological opinion of Catholic writers, laymen and clergymen, has tended to create a sort of practical doubt in some quarters, as to *the here and how binding force in conscience* of the statement of Paul VI of June 24, 1964, which disapproves of said practice.¹⁰

In the three just stated cases, if the confessor, in answer to the penitent's request for light, says "follow your individual conscience", he is morally involved in the course of action taken by the penitent.

D) The permissive-directive "follow your individual conscience" given in the context of the three situations as viewed under section C) is definitely *w r o n g* in the light of Catholic doctrine. Vatican Coun-

⁹ *La regulation des naissances dans le cadre familial et chretien*, by Dr. Charles Rendu. Cfr. *Nouvelle Revue Theologique*, n. 6, juin 1965. The paper is worthwhile reading and meditating. Dr. Ch. Rendu is a well-known international authority in this field of work.

¹⁰ AAS, 55, 31, iulii 1964; p. 588: "Un gravissimo problema morale".

cil II, *The Church Today*¹¹ No. 51, teaches that "when there is question of harmonizing conjugal love with the responsible transmission of life, the moral aspect of any procedure does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives. *It must be determined by objective standards.* These, based on the nature of the human person and his acts, preserve the full sense of mutual self giving and human procreation in the context of true love. Such a goal cannot be achieved unless the virtue of conjugal chastity is sincerely practiced. Relying on these principles, sons of the Church may not undertake methods of regulating procreation which are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church in its unfolding of the divine law." The Decree on *Religious Freedom*¹², No. 14, contains some very pertinent doctrine. "In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the certain and sacred doctrine of the Church. The Church is the will of Christ, the teacher of the 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."

It is one's individual conscience that we are entitled to follow, *when and after it has been dutifully informed*, as to which of the many voices it hears *is the true voice of God*, and consequently it is to be presumed that when a catholic couple calls on a confessor and asks to be informed on what *to do or not to do*, it simply means here and now they wish to have their conscience dutifully and rightly instructed concerning God's will, and know thereby the direction their human activity ought to take. Fear of telling one's penitent how strict is God's law should not lead to the fatal mistake of his "follow your conscience" (Rahner).

Protestant situation ethics teaches, it is true, that no law, no authority, no church can manifest to the individual conscience which for that individual conscience as such, in the given situation, is here and now the will of God, for this judgment of conscience has no other norm

¹¹ *The Documents of Vatican Council II*, Walter M. Abbot, S.J., Gen. Editor: Herder and Herder, 1966, p. 256, n. 51.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 694-695, n. 14; *The Church Today*, n. 16; pp. 213-214.

than the *situation-as-a-revelation* of the will of God, and this *personal revelation* may, on certain occasions, be opposed to abstract norms of the natural law, or even the divine positive law¹³. This doctrine paves the way to moral subjectivism and amorality.

Rejecting Protestant situation ethics — *authentic catholic doctrine* teaches us that it is the personal judgment of conscience vis-a-vis a situation that reveals God's will here and now, and consequently what is wrong and what is right, in the light of the objective order which God has established, and thereby manifests to us His Holy Will. "We are convinced"—say Y. Congar, o.p.,—"that the authentic demands of an ethic of God's immediate will (or "situation ethic") are met by the thomist theology of action, with its enlightening ideas in the practical order, of prudence and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit"¹⁴.

Man's practical daily life must conform to the *demands of reality*, to the principles of the moral order as declared and confirmed by the teaching authority of the Church,—a God given authority for our own good: catholic writers laymen and clergymen alike ought not to assume an authority equal or even at times superior to that of the Supreme Pontiff, thus creating enormous confusion, leading ultimately to *immoral practices and a moral living*¹⁵.

Finally, our consultant will do well to read the Allocutio of Paulus VI printed in this same issue of the *Boletín*¹⁶ for it does away with inaccurate, wide-spread beliefs, such as, contraception is forbidden *by Church law*, a law therefore which she *may, will, must change*¹⁷ or one may well

¹³ *Dieu et l'homme*, by E. Schillebeeckx, O.P., Ed. cep./Bruxelles, 1965: pp. 253-269. Cf. *La Coscienza* by Pietro Palazzini. Studi Cattolici Roma, 1961: "la coscienza nella teologia protestante", pp. 276-288.

¹⁴ *Modern Catholic Thinkers*, Vol. II, Harper Torchbook: "In the world but not of the world", by Y. Congar, O.P., p. 279.

¹⁵ *Psychology vs. Morality*, by Rimaud, Jean, Cross Currents, winter, 1951, pp. 26. Cfr. Ford and Kelly: "Psychiatry and moral responsibility", in *Theological Studies*, March 1954, pp. 59 ff.; Proceedings of the Catholic Philosophical Association: "Ethics and other Knowledge": Vol. v1, 1957: pp. 106 ff.

¹⁶ B.E., above, p.---

¹⁷ *Jubilee*, December 1965: pp. 40-41. "The Church will not change", by John Cavanagh, M.D.

presume such law is not binding under pain of grave sin, at a time when the problems are still under study! . . .

"We express our confidence — the Pope speaks to Obstetricians and Gynecologists — in your authoritative understanding and your free collaboration concerning *a norm which the law of God* far more than our authority—and the supreme interest of human life considered in its integral fulness, dignity and destiny—far more than any partial interest—make into the best and most sacred norm for us all". "Meanwhile . . . : *the norm till now taught by the Church*, integrated by the wise instructions of the Council, demands faithful and generous observance. *It cannot be considered not binding*, as if the magisterium of the Church were in state of doubt . . .". It is the natural law; it is a divine law rather than a human law, we are dealing with; the implications and full understanding of this law admit of degrees of knowledge. That is why the church is in a state of reflection, but no change by human authority may be contemplated.

E) The validity of what the priest has to say on the foregoing marriage problems is in no way conditioned or dependent on existential knowledge of marriage problems. One needs, above all, the right perspective to see things as they are; *neither too close nor too far* from the object.¹⁸ *Empathy* rather than *sympathy* is necessary for correct judgment of these marriage problems. Let us keep in mind that the role of the priest here *is not the counsellor's* role, but *the role of the theologian*. The priest speaks for the Church. Now, "The attitude of the Church to *birth control* does not rest on the arguments put forward by her theologians. That these arguments are valid in their own sphere and that they develop the meaning of marriage is not being called into question; but because they are arguments of human reason concerning a natural institution, they are incapable of expressing *all that the Church knows* about marriage. These arguments derive from natural ethics, and as such have their own demands to make on human reason. They show how the teaching of the Church is a *defense of human nature and of the dignity of man*. But they fail utterly to convey or to give the compelling

¹⁸ *The Meaning of Christian Marriage*, Edited by E. McDonagh, Gill and Son, Dublin, 1963, p. 192-193.

reason why the Church's teaching is what it is. Those who do not accept her authority *as guardian and interpreter* of revelation are incapable of appreciating the divine certainty of her doctrine on marriage. It is part of her mission to try to convince the unbeliever by rational arguments. For her own children she has a greater treasure, and she exacts from them, in virtue of her divine mission, a greater obedience of faith which holds fast to the word of God, *even when unaided reason would hesitate*. For the Church there is only one true happy ending, the face-to-face vision of God. She is romantic about conjugal happiness, only when it means that the story will end in heaven"¹⁹.

As long as laity and clergy keep on listening to *the morally highly polluted new magisterium of public opinion*²⁰, while the so-called "ordinary universal magisterium of the Supreme Pontiff"—"ad regionem rerum opinabilium fere relegatur"²¹ we shall see nothing but additional muddy thinking in the area of sex with endless misuse and degradation.

It is true, that as a rule, the confessor is not in possession of the *existential* knowledge of marriage; but there is little evidence of some "enlightened catholics" being in possession of *existential* knowledge of *virginity*. Both are needed. *Marriage and virginity* are two christian mysteries in human existence *that face and illumine each other*²². The Church knows plenty about them, and the world has much to gain by listening attentively to what the Vicar of Christ on earth has to say, for our own good, on this matter, for "...he who heareth you heareth Me (Lk. 10:16)

F. DEL RIO, O.P.

¹⁹ C.E. O'Neill, O.P., *op. cit.*, pp. 258-259.

²⁰ VERBO, serie IV, n. 37-38; pp. 389-404—Archbishop Marcel Lefevre.

²¹ AAS, 1966, pp. 659-661. Sacra Congr. pro Doctrina Fidei. Epistula ad Card. Ottaviani, 24 iulii, 1966.

²² *Marriage in the Modern World*, by Bernard Haring, c.s.s.r., the Mercier Press, Cork., 1964; p. 295 ff. *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, April 1966. The Dilemma in B-C, by D' Callaghan.