



The problem dealt with here is not a new question. Vigorously debated in the years immediately following the publication of the Encyclical *Humanae vitae* (25 July 1968), it is still raised occasionally by some theologians, and in current pastoral practice it has not been resolved in a way everyone accepts. There is significant confusion even with regard to the Magisterium. It is precisely on this point that the present study wishes to shed some light, limiting itself to a question which could be formulated in this way: In the Church's universal Magisterium, is the sinfulness of contraception considered grave or light matter? It might be unnecessary but still helpful to recall that "universal Magisterium" means only that of the Supreme Pontiff and of an Ecumenical Council. I will refer only to this Magisterium.

According to many scholars, the judgment that contraception is gravely sinful matter goes back to the Encyclical *Casti connubii*, where we find its most solemn and clear-cut formulation. The essentials of this teaching are expressed in these words: "No reason, however grave, can make what is intrinsically contrary to nature to be in conformity with nature and morally right. And since the conjugal act by its very nature is destined for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose are acting against nature, and are doing something that is base and intrinsically immoral". Up to this point we are dealing with the "intrinsic immorality" of contraception. A little further on its seriousness is discussed: "The Catholic Church ... raises her voice as a sign of her divine mission, and through Our mouth proclaims anew. any use of marriage exercised in such a way that through human effort the act is deprived of its natural power to procreate human life violates the law of God and of nature, and those who commit such an action are stained with the guilt of grave sin".¹

Many maintain that in its later documents the Magisterium clearly kept the first part of that doctrine, i.e., the intrinsic immorality of contraception, but did not retain the second, i.e., the gravity of the sin. In this "silence" of the Magisterium, these same scholars see a sufficient reason for asserting that the moral gravity of contraception is no longer part of the Church's teaching on the matter. As a result, the use of contraception is not to be considered gravely sinful matter and, therefore, using contraceptives is not a mortal sin. In my opinion, however, the problem should be dealt with more carefully. It must be determined whether the Magisterium has really dropped the substance of that teaching, or whether it has merely given it a different formulation. In other words: it is a question of determining whether or not the gravity of the immorality constituted by contraception is still asserted by the Magisterium in different but substantially equivalent terms.

The first thing to be noted is that the Magisterium's alleged "shelving" of the Encyclical *Casti connubii* on this point is anything but obvious. On the contrary, it was explicitly confirmed by the Second Vatican Council. In n. 51 of *Gaudium et spes* the statement that "In questions of birth regulation the sons of the Church ... are forbidden to use methods disapproved by the Magisterium" refers, in its famous note 14, to the documents containing this condemnation. The first one mentioned is "Pius XI, *Litt. Encycl. Casti connubii*: AAS 22 (1930), pp. 559-561; Denz. 2239-2241 (3716-3718)", i.e., the passage quoted above in its essentials, where contraception is declared a grave sin. It is hard to imagine a more authoritative and solemn confirmation. It is hardly "silence" or the abandoning of this teaching of *Casti connubii* by the later Magisterium! The point of departure for the theory proposed by these scholars, however few or many, is anything but solid.

Pope Paul VI

Let us go further, however, in the examination we have proposed. In this study, great weight must be put on the Encyclical *Humanae vitae* (25 July 1968) and its author, Paul VI. This document is constantly referred to, in fact, by later documents, including the most authoritative one, the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (22 November 1981).² Obviously, no one knows better than Paul VI what he meant to teach with the Encyclical he published.

For the problem we are concerned with there are several helpful statements that he made a few years prior with regard to the problem that would be the theme of the Encyclical, whose title is *De propagatione humanae prolis recte ordinanda*, or "The correct regulation of human birth". On 23 June 1964, using the opportunity presented to

him by the offering of name-day wishes by the Cardinals and the Roman Curia, Paul VI announced that a pontifical study commission had been set up by his predecessor John XXIII and he made a few clarifications about the problem of birth regulation. Our interest here is how the Pope described the problem, which clearly concerned the moral evaluation of the ways or means for properly regulating births: "an extremely serious problem: it concerns the sources of human life; ... It is an extremely complex and delicate problem ".³

Scarcely had the Encyclical been published on 29-30 July 1968 in L'Osservatore Romano, when the Pope devoted his General Audience of 31 July to it, offering valuable interpretive keys to reading the document.⁴ For our problem several passages are of particular interest; there we can clearly see the importance that the Pope puts on the problem and on the solution given to it: "It clarifies a fundamental chapter in the personal, married, family and social life of man". He says this at the beginning of the address, and towards the end he insists: "it is a question that deals with an extremely delicate and important aspect of human existence". Thus the same idea expressed in the address of 23 June 1964 is stated again in other words.

A preliminary conclusion is clear: one of the most important issues is this problem and the solution given to it by the Magisterium, an essential part of which includes the moral condemnation of contraception.

A significant confirmation of this judgement, also contained in the address of 31 July 1968, is the Pope's dramatic and painful seriousness in confiding that he spent four years of reflection, study, consultation and prayer to reach the certitude of giving the Church and the entire human race the confirmation of a moral truth guaranteed by its conformity with "God's plan for human life". Extended passages of the address should be quoted here. But I have to restrict myself to a few sentences. "The first feeling was that of a very grave responsibility... We confide to you that this feeling caused us much spiritual suffering. Never before have We felt so heavily, as in this situation, the burden of Our office". And further on: "How often have We felt almost overwhelmed.... How -many times, humanly speaking, have We felt the inadequacy of Our poor person to cope with the formidable apostolic obligation of having to make a pronouncement on this matter! How many times We trembled before the alternatives of an easy condescension to current opinions, or of a decision that modern society would find difficult to accept, or that might be arbitrarily too burdensome for married life!".

Nothing could be clearer than the fact that for Paul VI the problem and its solution had

such weight and importance that one cannot accept the hypothesis that a slight moral disorder, on the lines of "venial sin", is at stake. It is clear then, merely on the basis of these few points, that for the Magisterium contraception is such a morally disordered form of behavior that it constitutes gravely sinful matter.

We must ask, however, what grounds does the Magisterium offer for this sort of position. But before moving in this direction, I think it would be helpful to clarify a few things about "grave matter". In every form of human behavior, one or more values are at stake, for example, life, love, fidelity, solidarity, etc. When important values are at stake, and a given way of acting seriously compromises them, this serious compromise of an important value is what constitutes gravely sinful matter. Therefore, we will find an answer to the question we raised, if we gather from the teaching of the Magisterium an indication of the important values at stake in the conjugal act and the serious way they are compromised by the use of contraceptives.

Pope John Paul II

It is inevitable in this research that more attention should be focused on the Magisterium of John Paul II, without disregarding, of course, that of Paul VI. It is actually the current Pope, who, thanks to the developments gradually made by anthropology and the human sciences regarding the meanings and values of human sexuality, has been able to give a broad, systematic development to the anthropological and theological foundations of the Church's moral doctrine in this area. He has done so in many addresses, and more extensively and systematically in the last part of his well-known Wednesday catechesis on Human Love in the Divine Plan.

A detailed analysis of all this material is simply unthinkable in this essay. I will have to limit myself to a few essential elements, with some quotations among the many that could be adduced, but which I hope will be sufficient for our purpose.

I would first like to stress that Paul VI, the Council, but even more John Paul II have clearly shown that they have accepted and utilized the recent advances in the conception of human sexuality as language, i.e., as the sensible expression of the person's interior realities in an interpersonal relationship. In this perspective, the discovery and presentation of the ethical demands inherent in the exercise of sexuality becomes clearer and more persuasive, when its genital component is also involved in this exercise, as occurs in the conjugal act. These demands, in fact, follow the pattern of those required for interpersonal communication that corresponds to the dignity of each

of the two partners.

In *Gaudium et spes*, the conjugal act is seen as the privileged and characteristic expression of conjugal love (n. 49), and in its turn, conjugal love is said to be constitutionally ordered to the transmission of life, or procreation (n. 50). "Love" and "Life" are thus the two essential values at stake in the conjugal act - values obviously of primary importance.

Paul VI says basically the same thing when he makes the "meanings" of the conjugal act the focal point and bases its ethical demands on the principle of the inseparability of the two meanings contained structurally in the act, the unitive meaning and the procreative: "This particular doctrine ... is based on the inseparable connection ... between the unitive significance and the procreative significance.... The marriage act, because of its fundamental structure, while it unites husband and wife in the closest intimacy, also brings into operation laws written into the actual nature of man and of woman for the generation of new life. And if each of these essential qualities, the unitive and the procreative, is preserved, the use of marriage fully retains its sense of true mutual love and its ordination to the supreme responsibility of parenthood to which man is called" (*Humanae vitae*, n. 12). The Pope had already stressed the profound link between love and life by including "totality" and "fruitfulness" among the essential, undeniable qualities that love must have if it is to be authentically conjugal. Totality, in fact, does not allow exceptions or reservations of any sort; fruitfulness is directed to transmitting life (cf. *Humanae vitae*, n. 9).

Following this line in *Familiaris consortio*, John Paul II goes on to state: "The total physical self-giving would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving, in which the whole person ... is present if the person were to withhold something..., by this very fact he or she would not be giving totally" (n. 11). Then with compelling logic, when he goes on in the same document to discuss the subject of contraception, the Pope offers in a complex paragraph an illuminating panorama of the values destroyed by contraception.

It bears repeating here in its entirety: "When couples, by means of recourse to contraception, separate these two meanings that God the Creator has inscribed in the being of man and woman and in the dynamism of their sexual communion, they act as 'arbiters' of the divine plan and they 'manipulate' and degrade human sexuality - and with it themselves and their married partner - by altering its value of 'total' self-giving. Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language,

namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality" (n. 32).

For greater clarity it would help to outline the series of values objectively destroyed by contraception:

- 1) the refusal to be recognized as God's "ministers" and "collaborators" in the transmission of life;
- 2) the claim to be the "arbiters" of the divine plan;⁵
- 3) the degradation of human sexuality and, thus, of one's own person and of one's spouse;
- 4) falsification of sexual language to the point of making it objectively contradictory;
- 5) elimination of any reference to the value of life;
- 6) a mortal wound ("falsification of the inner truth") of conjugal love itself.

The "no" to life, which the use of contraceptives cries out by its very name, can thus be seen first and foremost as a "no to God". This had already been forcefully stressed by Paul VI in *Humanae vitae*. This passage also bears repeating in its entirety: "... a reciprocal act of love, which jeopardizes the capacity to transmit life which God the Creator, according to particular laws, inserted therein, is in contradiction with the design constitutive of marriage, and with the will of the Author of Life., To use this divine gift while destroying, even if only partially, its meaning and its purpose is to contradict the nature both of man and of woman and of their most intimate relationship, and therefore it is to contradict also the plan of God and his will" (n. 13).

To return to John Paul II, in the final part of the catechesis mentioned above on Human Love in the Divine Plan, when the Pope "rereads" the doctrine of *Humanae vitae* on contraception, he magisterially develops its individual points. Thus, regarding the offence to the dignity of the person, the Pope does not hesitate to say that this dignity is radically compromised by contraceptive behavior: the model proper to one's relationship with things, i.e., a relationship of dominion, is transferred to the person, who has self-mastery as his "basic constitution", thus depriving man "of his proper subjectivity" and making him "an object of manipulation".⁶

John Paul II then goes on to develop his reflections, focusing his attention on the conjugal act: as "the authentic language of persons" in which "man and woman reciprocally express themselves in the fullest and deepest way" in their "masculinity and femininity",

the conjugal act "is subject to the demands of truth". This occurs at two interconnected levels, the personalistic and the theological.

- At the personalistic level, the connection between the two structural meanings of the conjugal act is such that "the one is achieved together with the other and, in a certain sense, through the other". Therefore, "lacking its inner truth, because artificially deprived of its procreative capacity, it also ceases to be an act of love", and consequently, the "bodily union ... does not correspond to the inner truth and dignity of personal communion". Falsification thus becomes total, because there is no more truth "of self-mastery, ... of reciprocal giving and of reciprocal self-acceptance on the part of the person."

- At the theological level, the demands of truth are trampled upon inasmuch as the conjugal union must give expression both to "the truth of the sacrament" understood as the divine plan of which the spouses are ministers and "which 'from the beginning' has been established in the sign of the 'union of flesh' ", and to the truth of the sacrament in the stricter sense. which "is perfected through the conjugal union", in which therefore "man and woman are called to express that mysterious 'language' of their bodies in all the truth proper to it".

'Persona humana'

As the final element, I think it is wholly correct to apply to the moral disorder in the sexual field represented by contraception a general principle recalled in another document of the Magisterium, the Declaration *Persona humana*: On Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 29 December 1975. An entire paragraph, n. 10, is devoted to how one should evaluate forms of behavior which represent a moral disorder in the field of sexuality. The principle is formulated in this way: "the moral order of sexuality involves such high values of human life that every direct violation of this order is objectively serious".

That contraception is a direct violation of the moral order of sexuality is unequivocally a constant teaching of the Magisterium, given the fact that it is described as "intrinsically immoral". The teaching recalled in the Declaration *Persona humana* fully applies to contraception.

Limits of space do not allow for additional references. But those quoted here are more than sufficient to demonstrate that in the Church's doctrine the conjugal act involves

values of enormous moral importance, some of which are even fundamental, and that contraception compromises them so seriously as to destroy them. It is evident then that in the doctrine taught by the Magisterium the use of contraceptives in performing the conjugal act constitutes gravely sinful matter, in addition to being an "intrinsically immoral" action, and thus is never permissible for any reason or purpose whatever.

Some concluding reflections

Further confirmation of the objective moral gravity of contraception can be seen by looking at some of the aspects that this behavior has taken on in our time - something the Magisterium itself has not failed to do.

Preventing the conjugal act from initiating the generative process has been, until the most recent past, a problem for couples, individual couples, for particular reasons and situations. In the society and culture produced by industrialization, through a complex series of factors which cannot even be noted here, a marked reduction in the birth rate has become the expectation and practice of almost all couples. While still being a marital problem, it has also become a social problem. Lastly, it is a political problem, both of internal politics within individual States and of international politics, especially in relations between developed and developing countries. At this level the real dimensions of the problem then were cleverly extended, by raising the specter of a global catastrophe caused by overpopulation (the so-called "P-bomb", i.e., population bomb) and the death of all from hunger. A drastic reduction in the birth rate has assumed the features of crucial Urgency, beginning with the developed countries and then with the others, which are soon blamed for the "population explosion", another emotionally charged term.

With the complicity of governments, international bodies, beginning with the UN and the WHO, and well-financed private organizations, there grew that "conspiracy against life" denounced by John Paul II.⁷ A conspiracy, the Pope says, "involving even international institutions, engaged in encouraging and carrying out actual campaigns to make contraception, sterilization and abortion widely available. Nor can it be denied that the mass media are often implicated in this conspiracy, by lending credit to that culture which presents recourse to contraception, sterilization, abortion and even euthanasia as a mark of progress and a victory of freedom, while depicting as enemies of freedom and progress those positions which are unreservedly pro-life".⁸

The mass availability of contraception was the first step on a path of death. This quickly

led to a broad "contraceptive mentality", i.e., a widespread attitude of rejecting any unwanted child, thus paving the way to broad social acceptance of sterilization and abortion. The latter, in turn, is becoming the premise for the social acceptance of euthanasia and its legalization.

This immensely tragic destruction of paramount human values in the relations between rich and poor countries does not shrink from cynically abusive policies imposed on poor countries as a condition for receiving financial aid, food and medicine, or from requiring the adoption of measures for quickly achieving zero population growth by every means from contraception to mandatory abortion after the first or second child. A true and very grave crime, all of whose revolting brutality can be seen when one discovers that in many poor countries people have free contraceptives and abortifacients of every sort in abundance, but there are no medicines to save the lives of millions of human beings mowed down, for example, by malaria or other easily curable diseases.

The Magisterium's condemnation has been constant and severe. I merely quote the one stated in *Familiaris consortio*: "Likewise to be denounced as gravely unjust are cases where, in international relations, economic help given for the advancement of peoples is made conditional on programmes of contraception, sterilization and procured abortion."⁹

In our contemporary world, therefore, contraception has played and continues to play a primary role in furthering that rampant "culture of death" whose victims' number in the tens of millions every year. This culture also debases human sexuality and perverts love even in its most sublime form of maternal love, when it grants a mother the absurd right to kill the child she is carrying in her womb. A culture moreover which is devastating and seeking to destroy those same values among economically poor and politically defenseless people, who are nevertheless rich in so many human values that have been widely disregarded for a long time in our wealthy countries.

Couples who choose contraception, whether consciously or not, are helping to consolidate and strengthen the roots of this culture. And this choice can only entail responsibilities whose seriousness and weight are difficult to assess but certainly enormous.

Notes

1. Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Casti connubii* (30 December 1930), in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 22 (1930), pp. 559-561.

2 See especially n. 29, where the Pope quotes in inverted commas Proposition 21,

formulated by the Synod Fathers themselves.

3 Insegnamenti di Paolo VI, vol. 11, 1964, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, p. 420.

4 The text of the address is in Insegnamenti di Paolo VI, vol. VI, 1968, pp. 869-873.

5 On this point, and on several others emphasized here, see the particularly enlightening developments in the Pope's address to priests attending a seminar on "responsible procreation" (17 September 1983), in Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, vol. VI/2, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 1984, pp. 561-564.

6 For this and the subsequent quotations, see John Paul II, Uomo e donna lo creo, pp. 467-469.

7 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter Evangelium vitae, nn. 12, 17, etc.

8 Ibid., n. 17.

9 John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris consortio, n. 30.

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