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Humanae Vitae Confusae

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The "disconnect" between Church teaching on artificial birth control and the practice of Catholic couples is well documented. About 90 per cent of fertile Catholic couples practise contraception. The consequences of this state of affairs are far reaching for the whole People of God.

For Catholics, the Magisterium of the Church (the Pope and bishops) has the special assistance of the Holy Spirit when it teaches a matter of faith or morals for the whole Church. This teaching function can be exercised at various levels, from rather passing references to a solemn declaration which implies infallibility. The teaching on birth control is not infallible teaching (though some theologians have thought so), but it is very weighty teaching, being the teaching of a Pope to the whole world, and teaching with a long history within the Church.

The teaching states that no act of marital intercourse may be cut off from the possibility of transmitting life through human intervention. Artificial contraception is intrinsically evil, so that there is no excusing cause ever for an act of contraception. Artificial contraception is gravely immoral. In older terms, such an act embraced with full knowledge and full consent would be a mortal sin, one which cuts a person off from God and is deserving of eternal damnation.

Yet 90 per cent of fertile Catholic couples act contrary to the teaching. Why might they be doing so? There can be different reasons. It may be that a couple has considered the whole question, has studied prayerfully the teaching of the Church, has read theological opinion on the matter, and has come to the conclusion that the

teaching is either wrong or incomplete. It may be that a couple has tried to live by the teaching, but has found that they do not have the moral strength to continue to do so. It may be that a couple has not thought much about the matter at all. It is taken for granted that couples nowadays practise birth control. It is not a matter of morality.

Where a couple acknowledges the right of the Magisterium to teach in moral matters and the correctness of the teaching, so that their practice is based on subjective weakness, then there is no worrying "disconnect" between the teaching and the practice. This kind of distance between ideal and practice is true of any area of morality. But where the teaching is challenged, ignored or not known, then there is a serious gap between teaching and practice. The implications of this gap are serious.

Church teaching emphasizes the intrinsic connection between the generative and unitive dimensions of each marriage act. Contraception implies the legitimacy of separating these two dimensions, so that there is no intrinsic connection between the two.

If there is no intrinsic connection between the unitive and generative dimensions of the act of intercourse, then the claim that extra-marital intercourse (fornication and adultery) and homosexual genital expression are immoral cannot be easily sustained. A person could argue neither from authority (since authority has already been dismissed) nor from intrinsic reasons (since the cornerstone of such reasoning has been denied).

Furthermore, basing any teaching on authority becomes questionable. If the Church has been wrong on the teaching on birth control, it can be wrong on any other teaching. One is then left with one's own appreciation of a moral matter, no doubt influenced by secular considerations.

In many ways, the Church at local levels has decided that the whole matter is best left as is, unexamined. Most Catholics don't any longer meet Christ Jesus in the sacrament of reconciliation. Those who do, by and large, don't mention birth control as a sin, either because they don't think that the practice is immoral or they don't practise birth control. The vast majority of married Catholics who are fertile and who attend mass receive Holy Communion and practise birth control.

If contraception is gravely immoral, this means that grave harm is being done to individuals and to the community. That is the meaning of immoral. We should be able to point to some of these harms—and we can. Pope Paul VI, through a somewhat deductive method, pointed to harms that would ensue, and these can be examined inductively and verified (i.e., verified through experience). It is interesting that icon feminist Germaine Greer wrote years after the publication of *Humanae Vitae* about how contraception has objectified women; her claims thoroughly support the Pope's predictions.

We can employ Pope Paul's deductive methodology ourselves and point to some other harms connected with contraception. Through contraception, the meaning of marital intercourse is changed. No longer is it defined by its nature as life engendering. It has now solely a unitive purpose, but even in this purpose it is no longer unitive of the spouses as such in their role as spouses. What the impact of the practice of contraception has on the marital relationship, is a matter of speculation. It would be surprising, however, if the relationship did not suffer significantly, in itself directly and in its possibility of service to others.

Children are a wonderful blessing to any couple. They are also a bother, and demand a rather significant commitment on the part of mothers and fathers. People who have become accustomed to being able to control their own lives (to some extent at least) may well be inclined to duck the invitation to generate new lives which will interfere with their enjoyment of private, personal pursuits.

SO, WHAT SHOULD BE DONE? WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Canada's bishops, from their first response to *Humanae Vitae* rightly recognized the primacy of conscience. Some few conservative Catholics continue to see this as a sell-out. These Catholics are quite wrong in their analysis of the situation, but they are boosted in their position by the fact that many Catholics see their choice of contraception as a conscientious decision, though the decision is based on nothing more than convenience or personal wants.

Conscience truly has pride of place when what is at stake is one's relationship with God. But what we are speaking here about true conscience, where the person makes no claim to have equal authority with the teaching Church, where he or she has prayed seriously over the matter, where he or she has studied the teaching at depth and where there is a continual effort to make the teaching one's own.

Conscience, of course, does not make what is immoral morally acceptable. A good conscience can be in error, a good person mistaken. Where erroneous conscience is widespread, harm is widespread.

The final question for this publication is—is the Church correct? Can the dire predictions of Pope Paul which have come to pass, be explained as arising from sources other than contraception? Might it be that the Church is indeed wrong about sexuality generally? Can intra-marital contraception be isolated in ways that do not affect either the quality of marital love or teaching about extra-marital sexual morality? I will continue this reflection on *Humanae Vitae* in a future *Bioethics Matters*. ■

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