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9-1-2009

Contraception & Logical Consistency

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Published version. *New Oxford Review*, Vol. 76, No. 8 (September 2009: 39-40. Publisher Link. © New Oxford Review, Inc. 2009. Used with permission.

GUEST column

Contraception & Logical Consistency

"It is impossible to reconcile the doctrine of the divine institution of marriage with any modernistic plan for the mechanical regulation or suppression of human birth. The church must either reject the plain teachings of the Bible or reject schemes for the 'scientific' production of human souls.... The suggestion that the use of legalized contraceptives would be 'careful and restrained' is preposterous."

—*Washington Post* (editorial, March 22, 1931)

"If contraceptive intercourse is permissible, then what objection could there be after all to mutual masturbation, or copulation *in vase indebito*, sodomy, buggery, when normal copulation is impossible or inadvisable (or in any case, according to taste)?... If such things are all right, it becomes perfectly impossible to see anything wrong with homosexual intercourse, for example. I am not saying: if you think contraception all right you will do these other things; not at all.... But I am saying: you will have no solid reason against these things. You will have no answer to someone who proclaims as many do that they are good too.... Because, if you are defending contraception, you will have rejected Christian tradition.... For in contraceptive intercourse you intend to perform a sexual act which, if it has a chance of being fertile, you render infertile. *Qua* your intentional action, then, what you do *is* something intrinsically unapt for generation."

—G.E.M. Anscombe, *Contraception & Chastity* (1979)

Recent statistics indicate that contraception is widely practiced, even by up to 80 percent of Catholics, in spite of its clear and constant condemnation by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. Does this figure include *practicing* Catholics? Whether they are practicing or not would presumably be the subject of a different poll. Regardless, we are talking about self-identified Catholics who have most likely received the Sacrament of Baptism. Some implications, therefore, suggest themselves.

Many Christian couples, Catholics and non-Catholics, who practice contraception are also against "gay" sex and/or premarital or extramarital sex. Such positions, for such persons, are logically inconsistent. I would even argue that an anti-abortion position is likewise inconsistent.

The essential meaning of a contraceptive act is to engage in the type of intercourse that commonly results

in procreation but to take steps to assure that no procreation takes place. (Sterility or impotency in marriage does not militate against the validity of this definition, as long as the couple in their choice of a marriage partner do not make this choice precisely to avoid procreation.) Contraceptive acts are commonly justified on the grounds that they serve to strengthen the bonds of affection between the spouses, the fostering of which is certainly one of the benefits of marriage. A further justification may point to the overall intention of the couple to give birth later, when the circumstances (economic, social, psychological) are more appropriate.

But homosexual partners who also engage in non-procreative sexual acts may *also* reasonably claim a strengthening of their mutual bonds of affection — bonds so intense that even a non-procreative marriage commitment might be contemplated. They may further point out that they plan to engage in a virtual type of procreation through adoption of children, or that they intend to serve *in loco parentis* in educational and social occupations with responsibilities for children or teens. On what grounds could intentionally non-procreating heterosexual married couples oppose such homosexual unions? That male/female affections exist on a higher or more natural plain than male/male and female/female affections? That theirs enjoys at least the symbolism of procreativeness in male/female sexual congress?

Obviously, the characteristics of intense affection and commitment can also be present in relationships of non-married males and females — or to married persons who commit adultery and who experience an even greater commitment and affection to their adulterous partner than to their chosen spouse. In such cases, it would be equally inconsistent for contracepting married couples to consider the non-procreative union of adulterous couples to be any less moral and meaningful than their own. In fact, if such adulterous unions *were* open to procreation, they could claim, with some justification, to be on a somewhat higher moral level than the non-procreative married union.

The noted British philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe maintains that those who defend contraceptive acts would be inconsistent in condemning in any way masturbation or even bestiality. Presupposing that the bonds of affection for an animal — or even narcissistic absorption in oneself — could be equally strong as affection for other persons, it is hard to deny this argument.

But probably the most important and extensive area of inconsistency regards abortion. Many staunch opponents of abortion have no problem with contraception, at least with a view to family planning and the intention of *eventual* procreation. This view is partly due either to an ignorance of the possibilities of natural family planning (NFP) — the Billings Ovulation Method, the Sympto-Thermal Method, etc. — in which periodic abstinence is practiced and no acts blocking procreation take place, or to seriously mistaken stereotypes and caricatures of NFP as being "ineffective." But such opposition among contracepting couples to abortion is inconsistent. For *if there is* then a universal right to enjoy sex without any obligation of openness to offspring, does this not imply a right to abort an unintended or unwanted pregnancy? All rights and duties are reciprocal. If I enjoy this right at any particular time, why should I have a duty to undertake the formidable task of raising an offspring who resulted at that particular time? The right to avoid such responsibility is more obvious (in the minds of those who support contraception) if and when one has duly contracepted but the contraception unintentionally fails and pregnancy results. Even if there has been no attempt at contraception and a pregnancy results, one could reasonably argue that there is no duty to carry the pregnancy to term — provided that one does, indeed, participate in the "universal right" to enjoy sex without any openness to procreation.

It is a strange effect of the contemporary "culture wars" that someone is tagged as a "conservative" because he opposes abortion and/or gay marriage — even though he may be a prolife Democrat supporting liberal causes such as progressive taxation, universal health care, gun control, welfare expansion, etc. But it seems that many persons who can validly claim to be conservative regarding a broad range of issues are "liberal" concerning contraception. While engaging in non-procreative sex themselves, they find fault with the non-procreative sex of affectionate homosexuals, couples in non-marital but loving "relationships," etc. It should not be surprising that those they censure may find an element of logical inconsistency in their attitudes.

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