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MORAL ASPECTS OF ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION

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THE BACKGROUND

WITHIN the last decade many articles concerning the morality of artificial insemination have been published in Catholic theological journals. The purpose of the present article is to summarize and briefly explain the main conclusions reached in these articles and the opinions expressed in the most recent manuals of moral theology. This topic was treated in the January, 1940, number of THE LINACRE QUARTERLY by Dr. Dayton H. O'Donnell, of Detroit; but, since the subject is still a live one and since much has been written about it in the last few years, a new and practical survey of the question should be helpful to doctors who wish to know and to follow the correct moral doctrine.

We can begin with a consideration of the case which is most frequently proposed by the advocates of artificial insemination: namely, the impregnation of a married woman by sperm obtained from a man who is not her husband. Every Catholic theologian would unhesitatingly brand this operation, in its totality, as immoral; both the impregnation itself and the method of obtaining the sperm are against the law of nature.

It should be rather obvious that we know the plan of nature by analysing the nature of things. God's plan for human propagation must be judged according to human nature and not according to mere animal nature. And whatever may be said of cats and dogs and horses, the well-being of the human child normally demands the care of father and mother over a considerable number of years. Because this fact was always clear to them Catholic philosophers have held unwaveringly to the principle that a re-productive act is permissible only between two persons who are united in the firm bond of marriage. Marriage is the only contract that gives the child the guaranty of father-mother care that his nature demands. The fact that some other man will promise to care for the child is a poor substitute for the plan of nature and is in itself quite contrary to that plan.

Briefly, therefore, we may say that the Catholic philosopher condemns the impregnation of a woman by a man who is not her husband because this act is against nature's plan for the education of the child. This
principle has been taken over unchanged by Catholic theology; and it was stated very clearly and very beautifully by Pius XI in his encyclical on Christian Marriage. After having spoken of the parents' duties to beget and rear children, the Pope solemnly added:

"Nor must we omit to remark, in fine, that since the duty entrusted to parents for the good of their children is of such high dignity and of such great importance, every use of the faculty given by God for the procreation of new life is the right and the privilege of the marriage state alone, by the law of God and of nature, and must be confined absolutely within the sacred limits of that state."

By way of brief comment on this papal declaration, I might mention that when the Pope uses the expression "by the law of God and of nature" he is using technical theological language. The "law of God" refers to the divine law as manifested in revelation, and the "law of nature" refers to the divine law as expressed in the nature of things! In other words, he says that both revelation and reason teach us that reproductive activity must be confined to the marriage state. Since the woman who allows herself to be impregnated by the sperm of a man other than her own lawful husband is really exercising her procreative power with that man, even though this is not being done in the usual manner, she is violating this divine law; and all who assist her share in her guilt according to the measure of their cooperation.

Procedures

I mentioned that, with regard to the case we are considering, Catholic theologians would condemn not only the impregnation itself but also the standard method of obtaining the sperm. With an almost absolute unanimity Catholic moralists have always held that masturbation is against the divine law as manifested both by revelation and by reason, and that this law admits of no exceptions. Their argument from revelation is principally based on St. Paul, who says that "Effeminates . . . shall not inherit the kingdom of heaven" (cf. I Corinthians, Ch. 6). The earliest Christian tradition interpreted this expression "effeminates" (the Latin word is molles) as referring to those practicing self-abuse—an interpretation which squares perfectly with the context, in which various sins of impurity are enumerated.

In proving that masturbation is against the natural law, Catholic moralists have advanced various arguments, the simplest of which, I believe, is based on an analysis of the physical sex mechanism. According to this argument, the very configuration of the male and female bodies, and the biological processes pertaining to reproduction make it quite clear that the psycho-physical processes are directed to and find their natural fulfillment only in coitus. Solitary orgasm makes a mockery of this entire mechanism. Furthermore, if a purely solitary act is not
against nature, then no other act in the sex area is against nature; there are no perversions, and there is no natural basis for sex morality. That, of course, is just the conclusion that modern materialism wishes us to reach; but one can reach such a conclusion only by blinding oneself to nature's obvious plan.

A few centuries ago, a theologian who came to be known as "the prince of laxists" because of the unusual opinions he defended, advanced the view that masturbation is not against the natural law. The Holy See promptly condemned his opinion. It is worthy of note that even this man was not trying to justify masturbation; he admitted that divine revelation forbids it, and he was simply contending that it is not against the law of nature. Another unusual opinion of about the same period seems to have been occasioned by an obvious error in biology to the effect that semen, if retained, might "corrupt" and thus become poisonous and threaten life. It seems that a few theologians held that, if this were the case and if there were no other way of getting rid of the "poisoned semen," a man might masturbate in order to remove the "corrupted semen" and thus "save his life."

With such isolated exceptions as these, Catholic moralists have always held that masturbation is against the law of nature and that this law admits of no exceptions. It may interest our medical men if I point out here that such constant and uniform teaching has a two-fold value, even independently of the arguments used by the moralists. In the first place, it certainly has the same scientific value as would be had, for instance, in legal matters if through generations and even through centuries eminent judges would constantly and day after day hand down the same decision concerning some point of law. A lawyer of today would hardly be considered as unreasonable if he accepted such decisions as expressions of a sound principle of law, even though he had great personal difficulty in appreciating the underlying reasons. And on the other hand, the lawyer would be considered quite rash if he were to reject such a traditional and unanimous judicial opinion without exceptionally solid reasons for doing so.

Theological Opinion

What these judges are to the science of law the moral theologians are to the science of morality. No other society or religious body in the world so emphatically encourages or so carefully trains moral experts as the Catholic Church. For the most part, others merely dabble in moral science; very few genuinely specialize in it. Moreover, anyone who is conversant with moral theology can testify that Catholic moralists do not make a habit of agreeing with one another. There have been and are many controversies among Catholics—for example, on ectopic operations and, as I shall point out presently, on certain aspects of artificial insemination between husband and wife. Hence a view that is held unani-
mously over a long period of time has a strong presumption in its favor, even from the merely scientific point of view.

Such teaching is also of great religious significance to the Catholic. For if theologians unanimously and over a long period of time were to teach erroneously some matter of faith or morals, this teaching would inevitably infect the teaching Church itself—something which is impossible. Hence, the uniform and constant teaching of theologians in such matters is a sure sign of the approval of the Church. That the Church does approve their teaching was indicated by the condemnation previously referred to and also by a reply of the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office given in 1929, which stated that direct masturbation is not permitted even for the detection and cure of a contagious disease.

**Reasons Against Artificial Insemination**

The arguments I have given thus far show why the Catholic moralist cannot in any way approve of the artificial impregnation of a married woman by the sperm of a man who is not her husband; and the same arguments show why no moralist, even a non-Catholic, should approve of the practice. For what is against nature is wrong for everyone, and this can be known by the light of reason. To these arguments, we might add certain considerations which, if they do not of themselves show the immorality of the "proxy" father practice, at least render it suspect.

In the first place, there is the simple fact that a child conceived by means of a "proxy" father is a potential source of strife in any family. Normally a child is a bond of union. He satisfies both the maternal and paternal instincts, gives to father and mother a sense of achievement, and strengthens the bond of love between husband and wife. Such is nature's plan. The child by a "proxy" father is apt to produce effects that are quite the contrary. The enthusiasts for artificial insemination say that this is an ungrounded fear of armchair moralists; and they aver that such children have brought great happiness to couples that would otherwise be childless. They admit, however, that they cannot point to many cases because these matters must of necessity be kept secret. To prove their assertion, they would have to adduce many cases and would have to show that the personalities involved are not "abnormal."

**Materialistic and Liberal Views**

Another reason for suspecting the practice is the fact that it makes a logical piece with the false philosophy that has long been working for the degradation of the family. Two of the ingredients of this false philosophy are a crude liberalism which claims for every man the "right to be happy" (which really means the right to do as one pleases) and sheer materialism, which in denying the spiritual, puts man on the same plane as brute animals. This is not the place to expound the harm
already done by this false philosophy; but those who wish to have a panoramic view of its devastating effects would do well to read Leclerc's *Marriage and the Family*. At present, I merely wish to point out that the same subversive principles seem to underlie the "proxy" father propaganda. The couple want a child, therefore, let them have it in any way they wish. And, since artificial insemination is a good way of breeding animals, it should be satisfactory for men, too!

**Artificial Insemination—Wife and Husband**

I have dwelt at some length on this first case because it is the one most commonly spoken of. The second case concerns the impregnation of a married woman by the sperm of her own husband. The question might be practical when a married couple, otherwise fertile, are prevented from having children because of anatomical or physiological anomalies. My reference to this case will be very brief and is intended merely to inform doctors of the present status of the question in theological literature. In speaking of the various methods of insemination I am not attempting to pronounce on their medical value. I might mention, however, that the impression gained from my study of the problem is that it is very difficult to find a method which is both medically satisfactory and morally permissible.

Theologians often refer to a case in which the husband and wife have natural intercourse, but with little probability of conception because of anatomical or other difficulties. In such a case, practically all Catholic moralists will allow the doctor to lend artificial aid, either by correcting the structural defect or by facilitating the passage of the semen into the uterus. There is some controversy among moralists even on this matter but it is slight and can readily be ignored. Most theologians do not even consider this to be genuine artificial insemination.

Insemination is clearly artificial when the husband's sperm is obtained by some means which is a substitute for intercourse. Many theologians are of the opinion that this is never lawful. They argue that the rights of married people are determined entirely by their marriage contract; and the object of this contract is coitus. Any other means of reproduction is outside the contract and beyond the rights even of married people. These theologians think that when the Holy Office condemned artificial insemination is 1897 it condemned all forms of artificial insemination.

Those holding this first opinion are moralists of the highest reputation, and their arguments are very strong. Nevertheless, an equal number of authoritative moralists are not convinced by these arguments and are of the opinion that artificial impregnation is permissible for married people, provided the husband's sperm is obtained in a manner morally unobjectionable. They think that the decree of the Holy Office refers only to cases in which the sperm is obtained by an unnatural act.
The moralists who sponsor this second opinion do not hold that either husband or wife would be obliged to take part in an artificial impregnation, even though licit means were used; rather, they consider it to be an extraordinary means of propagation which the married couple may resort to by mutual consent. And of course, they would not say that an artificial impregnation consummates a marriage.

The Solution of a Controversy

This controversy may go on for some time, and it may be settled within a short time by the Holy See. In practice, until the dispute is settled, Catholic doctors may follow the opinion that artificial insemination between husband and wife is permissible, if the husband’s sperm can be obtained in a morally unobjectionable manner. I am sure that, if medical men discover or have discovered more such methods, the moral theologian will welcome the opportunity for evaluating their morality.

In conclusion, we may refer in passing to a sentimental problem sometimes proposed: namely, the case of the unmarried woman who wants to have a child of her own by means of artificial insemination. The answer to this case has already been given; no woman has a right to bear a child by any man except by her own lawful husband.