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Quicksands of Compromise

by John J. Brennan, M.D.

In his address to the November, 1971 meeting of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds in New Orleans Dr. Brennan defended the acceptance of the revised code of medical ethics. His address is reprinted here.



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To many doctors technology has now replaced God as the ultimate authority. "What is expedient" has become more important than "what is right." "There are no absolutes" and "If it can be done, it should be done." This is what we hear.

The National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds is probably the strongest and best organized group of scientifically oriented individuals who oppose this philosophy.

Last week by a vote of 232 to 7 the American Bishops accepted a revised code of medical ethics. John Cardinal Cody said, "As teachers of the people and as protectors of life it is high time we make these norms obligatory." I say the same today.

The new code does not use the term "Natural Law." We prefer to call these "Basic Principles." Certainly it is a basic principle that good must be done and evil avoided. And that the good never justifies the means. We can never do evil that good may eventually result. Violence must be rejected as a means of solving social problems. Another basic principle is that innocent human life must never be used to solve social problems. Just as a gun has a good purpose in the hands of a hunter, so too have surgical instruments in the hands of the doctor. The contempt that a hunter feels when he learns that his companion has used his gun to destroy human life in

solving a social problem is shared by us when we learn of a doctor who uses his instruments to destroy a developing human life.

It is for the defense of innocent human life that our group is now unified, organized, and committed as we have never been before in our history.

It was one hundred and fifty years ago that Dr. Christophe Huffland said, "Once doctors take into their consideration who shall live and who shall die, the consequences will be tremendous and doctors will have become the most dangerous men in the state."

That time has now come. In medical morals there are now three big groups. The two extremes are strong. They are represented at one end of the spectrum by our institutional church and at the other end by secular humanism. All those who stand between the two have their feet on the quicksand of compromise.

The promoters of "fornication for fun" or abortion as a method of family planning have shown their strength. They include the Zero Population Growth Group, Planned Parenthood, several large foundations, elected officials, and presidential advisors. The lines are drawn for conflict between the institutional church and secular humanism — between those who think babies are a blessing and those who think babies are a burden.

There are many here today who feel a little lonely because they take a stand different from secular humanism, but still are not in total agreement with our church. Some would not perform abortions, but would not condemn the abortionist. Some would not surgically sterilize those who have permanent reasons to avoid childbirth, but would

medically sterilize women month by month with contraceptive pills. Some would not personally do any of these, but would refer to a doctor who does. Each has his own medical moral code which represents a compromise. Each lives with his own lonely conscience.

We could never destroy a born or an unborn baby — in a mother's room or in her womb. Nor could we accept sterilization. If a woman comes and says, "I cannot control my tongue, doctor. Please cut it out." I would say, "No. A doctor could never so mutilate you. You must learn to control your tongue." Or a man says, "I steal. Please cut off my hands." We would say, "No, even at your own request we cannot cut off your hands. You must use your intellect and free will to learn to control your hands." A doctor is above all a teacher. A barnyard animal has only instinct. Its reproductive organs cannot be controlled. But a human being walks, talks, and reproduces. It is our role to teach him proper control of his faculties — not to destroy them.

It was twenty years ago that the Holy Father said, "it is the role of the doctor and not that of the priest" to teach nature's method. Before we talk of conscience, let each of us here today assess to what extent we as doctors have failed to fulfill our role in informing the conscience of the patients we teach.

Let each man who takes a position of compromise compare himself in the eyes of God with Doctor John Billings of Australia. John Billings went to Central America last fall and lectured every day for a month. He teaches the basic physiology of the menstrual cycle to uneducated, impoverished women. He uses no calendar and no thermometer. He teaches the women to write numbers in a row downward with day one at the top of a wall in her hut. He gives her

red, green, and white stamps. The white stamps have a picture of a baby on them. Day one is the first day of a cycle. A red stamp is placed on the wall. So too on days 2,3,4, and 5. After that days are completely dry. A green stamp is placed on the wall. Green days are completely infertile. As soon as mucus appears, the husband sees the picture of a baby on the wall. The mucus becomes profuse on the third and fourth days. The pictures of the baby are placed next to each number until the fourth day after the most abundant mucus. On the last ten days of each month the stamps are always green.

He estimates that only 45% of women are aware of mucus before he has talked to them — 85% after he has talked to them. Such an inexpensive, safe, and simple, do it yourself, in the home program — that requires these basic elements — love, cooperation, discipline, self-control, and communication between husband and wife. In one TV program he reached an estimated audience of 350,000 women.

I truly think that the only groups of people who have intercourse at the fertile time of the month are those who seek pregnancy, those who are unin-

formed, and those who are uninterested. When we consider all the foam failures, condom failures, and diaphragm failures, we realize that we have the right program, but that we have not succeeded in our teaching program. Rather than teaching the negative approach that contraception is sinful, Dr. John Billings has emphasized the positive program — that contraception is unnecessary. As a doctor and teacher, while I am concerned about the sinfulness of contraception, I am more disturbed that so many people feel that, despite its shortcomings, it is necessary. New and better contraceptives will come and go, but one hundred years from now — one thousand years from now our natural program will still be simple and safe. Our mission is to bring the knowledge that we now have to the millions who need it.

The Human Life Foundation is the first step forward. Our universal church needs a central educational and research program in Rome to fight all that is evil and promote all that is good. Ours is an era when society has made it possible for human life to survive in outer space. Those of us here today must dedicate ourselves to making it safer for human life to survive in inner space.