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[Book Review of] The Agonising Choice, by Norman St. John-Stevas

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Pakistan and India, Israel and Egypt—such power is regarded by many as the sole arbiter of human problems; in a nation in which black, brown, yellow, red and white have yet to achieve a viable relationship based upon mutual respect and non-violence, this short, readable book may make a real contribution to bringing man to his senses.

Whatever good the future may hold for any of us, it will be brought about by those who, unafraid to speak of love, are still more unafraid to love and sacrifice themselves rather than sacrifice others.

They may be few. They have never been many. But in any world in which man lives and thinks and values, there will be those—in medicine, and law, and religion—who have heard the Voice of the Transcendent crying, "Love one another, even as I have loved you," for they are those who know as He that to reduce suffering, man must embrace it.

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BOOK REVIEW . . .

The Agonising Choice

*By Norman St. John-Stevas
Indiana University Press
Bloomington, Indiana
1971 340 pp. \$10.00*

Reviewed by
Joseph T. Mangan, S.J.

The main subject matter of this book is the issue of artificial contraception and the authority of the *magisterium* within the Roman Catholic Church.

The author does not explicitly identify the "agonising choice" which led to the selection of the title. Perhaps it was the choice he made in that "more agonising" situation (pp. 7 & 136) in which he found himself on the very evening on which the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was published (July 29, 1968). On that occasion St. John-Stevas decided and implemented his decision to "strongly condemn the Encyclical in a 'Panorama' television broadcast" . . . within twenty-four hours of its publication.

Or perhaps the title refers to the "agonising choice" mentioned in

the May 7, 1964, statement of the Roman Catholic hierarchy of England and quoted on page 99: "We know that sometimes there can be an *agonising choice* between natural instincts and the law of God. Our hearts are full of sympathy but we cannot change the law of God."

Although there is some lack of clarity about the precise foundation for the selection of the title, there is no lack of clarity about the author's express purpose in writing this book. His explicitly stated purpose is expressed in the "Introduction." This book is an attempt to answer some of the current questions being asked in the area of family planning; it is an attempt to assess what has actually happened in the last "two and a half years (since the publication of *Humanae Vitae*) to set it in historical perspective and to make a contribution to what is a continuing dialogue." (pp. 2,8) "The view on birth control which informs this book, sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly, is that Catholics should be free to decide according to their consciences what methods of birth control to employ." (p. 9) According to the author "This book is intended to heal and not to wound, to reconcile and not to create division . . ." (p. 12)

The book devotes five of seven chapters to an historical overview of contraceptive practices and their side effects over the centuries to the present. There then follows a chapter on "The Law in England and the United States" followed by a dis-

ussion of various religious attitudes toward contraception beginning with the Old and the New Testament and concluding with contemporary Jewish, protestant and Catholic attitudes. His next chapter, on what he calls "The Catholic Revolution" "... triggered off by the invention of the birth control pill . . ." (p. 90), brings the detailed historical discussion up to the eve of the release of *Humanae Vitae*. His final chapter on the historical development is the longest chapter in the book, 94 pages, on "The Encyclical and Its Aftermath."

These five chapters present a rehash of the history of contraception in theory and practice over the centuries with special concentration on the years immediately before and immediately after the publication of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and also with special emphasis on situations in England and the United States. All this the author does from the vantage point of an unconditional dissenter.

Reading these chapters is like re-reading last year's newspaper on an important event of world-wide significance. Few will want to wade through again all the expressions of dissent and approval, accusations of disloyalty and protestations of loyalty in spite of one's dissent, confrontations between local Bishops and their priests, confrontations between differing groups of laity organized and unorganized, contrasts of reactions of some nations' Catholics with reactions of other nations' Catholics, accounts of

priests and laity leaving the Church, questionable evaluations of national hierarchies: one group of hierarchies giving unreserved backing to the Pope, another group "accepting the Encyclical as a fact of major importance" but recognising a right of *objective* dissent from papal teaching, still "other hierarchies (taking) a middle position (finding) a refuge from impossible choices in recognising conscience in the *subjective* sense," etc.

Although the historical study intimates it is giving a balanced world-wide view of reactions to the Encyclical, it concentrates too heavily on England and the United States and on the dissent that arose in those two countries. A more balanced and more objective rendering would have given more attention to all parts of the world and also to those who accept and support the Encyclical.

Further, even though one might reasonably take issue with one or other detail of the dissenter's historical analysis and especially with his evaluation of the national hierarchies' various stances vis-a-vis the Pope and papal doctrinal teaching, it seems to be more or less an accurate summary of the matter he treats.

But so much of it we have already read in Noonan, Himes, the daily papers, and the voluminous publications that rushed into print prior

to and after the Encyclical. The footnotes frequently are references to the daily papers. Depending on the breadth of one's previous reading he might or might not find an added detail that had previously escaped him. He will be able to read again of the "Washington 19" (whose case had not yet been resolved before the book went to print) and "The Catholic University 87," etc.

One thing the historical overview does, however, is all too poignantly to call our attention to the rift that has developed between members of the Roman Catholic Church in recent years.

In the chapter, "Theological Perspectives," the author explains his understanding of the *magisterium* and the strength of the authority of *Humanae Vitae*. "The teaching Church learns from the living (sic) Church and *Humanae Vitae* will only be able to pass from the status of authentic teaching of the Pope to that of authentic teaching of the Church if it commands the assent of the married laity." He then subjects the Encyclical point by point to a thorough negative criticism from the viewpoint of a dissenter.

Now, however, in all fairness to the author we must call attention to his positive consideration of *Humanae Vitae*. After his negative criticisms he devotes almost two whole pages to what he calls "The Case for *Humanae Vitae*." And

towards the end of the chapter he considers some difficulties, gives a few examples of changed teaching from the past, evaluates the dangers in revision of unreasonably modifying moral attitudes toward sexual aberrations, and finally responds to the question whether contraception is a sin.

As in the various chapters on the history so in the one on theological perspectives, the book does not seem to have moved the discussions of issues beyond where they were a year or so after the Encyclical was published.

Since St. John-Stevas is such a well-known opponent of abortion, one might reasonably wonder whether he would apply the same theological analysis and find similar foundations for exceptions to moral objections to abortion. As to the gravity of the matter of contraception according to the Encyclical, it seems specially strange that St. John-Stevas does not see within it a clear evaluation of contraception as objectively grave matter. From be-

ginning to end the Encyclical speaks in such solemn terms of the dignity and sacredness of Christian marriage and of the law of God prohibiting contraception as a violation of the essential meaning of intimate conjugal union, that the moral gravity seems eminently clear.

In the introduction the author states that, "This book is intended to heal and not to wound, to reconcile and not to create division . . ." I am sorry to say that the book does not seem to measure up to the author's expressed intention.

One final observation: one error not subject to controversy crept into the "Introduction" on page 6. The year of publication of the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, is identified as 1969 instead of 1968.

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