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Love and Control—A Further Consideration

JOHN J. LYNCH, S.J.

The practice discussed by Dr. Clarke in the preceding article is commonly referred to by theologians as *amplexus reservatus*, and this term is restricted in meaning to that form of marital intercourse which is designedly terminated while there is yet no serious danger of orgasm for either partner.

There have long existed at least two legitimate schools of theological thought on this matter. The more rigorous opinion maintains that the sexual act so described is intrinsically wrong, although relatively few of the proponents of this doctrine are inclined to consider as objectively grave the alleged unchastity entailed. More common and solidly probable teaching on the matter declares that the act in itself is licit for husband and wife, but in the concrete is fraught with serious moral dangers for many of those couples who might resort to the practice. Only with the proviso that these dangers in single instances can be avoided do proponents of this less severe opinion concede that this form of intercourse can some-

times be acknowledged as morally unobjectionable.

Chief among the moral risks which are taken by those who would practice *amplexus reservatus* is the great difficulty which many would experience in an attempt, after strong sexual stimulation, to refrain from complete venereal satisfaction in an act other than proper marital intercourse. It must be admitted that genuine accidents can and do happen, and that with the very best of intentions one or the other partner in this expression of conjugal love may on relatively rare occasions experience orgasm without any intravaginal ejaculation on the husband's part. This is understandable and, under conditions as stated, moral justification can be found for it. But if "accidents" threaten to become the usual concomitant of these physical manifestations of loving affection, then prudence would more than suggest either that the "victim" is not capable of that sexual restraint required for this kind of love-making or else that the "accident" was at least subconsciously desired and sought from the beginning. In either case, recourse to *amplexus reservatus* is morally contraindicated.

Another danger lies in the predictable fact that in a considerable

number of cases adoption of this practice will eventually lead to its abandonment in favor of sinful contraception. And not least among the perils to be feared is the development of the hedonistic attitude which would make a fetish out of the purely sensual phase of marriage to the detriment or utter exclusion of the spiritual.

This question received considerable theological attention some few years ago when the Congregation of the Holy Office issued a *Monitum*¹ which declared in part that "priests in exercising the care of souls and the direction of consciences should never, either spontaneously or upon being asked, presume to speak as though there were no objection to *amplexus reservatus* from the standpoint of Christian morals." By far the majority of subsequent commentators—including two consultants of the Holy Office itself—were convinced that the document prescinded from and did not profess to resolve the doctrinal dispute summarized above. Rather, in their opinion, it was directed against a small third contingent of writers and priests in the ministry who were at the time recommending *amplexus reservatus* without qualification and with such lack of discretion as to invite reprimand from the Holy See. This interpretation of the document still stands as juridically legitimate, and as a consequence it is even to this day solidly probable and more commonly taught that it is at least theoretically possible for some mar-

ried people to make use of *amplexus reservatus* at times without sin on their part.

THE RELEVANT MORAL PRINCIPLE

In determining the morality of any incomplete sexual act performed by married people—and *amplexus reservatus* most assuredly qualifies as "incomplete" since, by supposition, it is terminated short of serious danger of orgasm on the part of either spouse—the principle to be applied may be stated as follows: incomplete sexual acts are licit in the order of chastity provided that they maintain their proper relation both to the complete act of marital intercourse and to one's partner in marriage.

In this principle licitness is restricted to the order of chastity in order not to deny the possibility of violating some other virtue by an act which is per se conjugally chaste. Certain incomplete acts, for example, even though licit in themselves, might be so distasteful to one partner that for the other to insist on them would be a violation of marital love.

The "proper ordination of incomplete acts to one's partner in marriage" merely emphasizes the monogamous nature of matrimony or the singular personal object of legitimate sexual activity in marriage. Just as the complete sexual act with a partner other than one's spouse is condemned as adultery, so also the incomplete act tending towards any object except one's conjugal partner is forbidden.

Thus, for example, a married man, because of embraces and kisses

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¹Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 44: 546, 1952; cf. Bouscaren, T. L., *Canon Law Digest*, 3, 435.

with his own wife, deliberately experiences incomplete sexual pleasure. At least as far as this first condition is concerned, such an individual cannot be accused of sin against chastity. Whereas the same man, similarly stimulated by embraces with a woman other than his wife, could scarcely maintain that his incomplete sexual act was properly related to the latter. For this reason he would stand accused of doing something morally wrong.

This relationship of incomplete act to one's partner in marriage is normally verified unless it is positively excluded, either explicitly by one's conscious direction of it towards another object, or implicitly by its natural and undiverted tendency toward such another object.

With due regard for the danger of intemperate self-indulgence, the "proper ordination of the incomplete act to the complete" means nothing more than the absence of proximate danger of complete sexual gratification in an act other than that of proper marital intercourse. So again, for example, the married man who in solitude is consciously stimulated sexually by phantasms of his wife can remain within his marital rights.

Similarly, incomplete mutual acts between husband and wife are quali-

fied by this same condition, viz., that those acts maintain the relation to the complete act or, in other words, that there be no unjustifiable danger for either partner of complete sexual satisfaction apart from conjugal intercourse. It is not required that the complete marital act be consummated on that very occasion, provided the deliberate sexual stimulation is terminated short of proximate danger of orgasm.

It is in view of these sound speculative principles determining the morality of incomplete sexual acts as performed by married people that many representative theologians have concluded with such emphatic qualifications as have already been mentioned—to the objective licitness of *actus reservatus*. But despite this theoretical solution, one is constrained to wonder just how many married couples could in practice successfully avoid the several moral dangers confronting those who engage in this kind of sexual activity. Primarily for this reason—but without any least disparagement of the excellent medical reasons adduced by Dr. Clarke—prudent moralists, confessors, and spiritual counsellors would be most cautious and reserved in their approval of this particular expression of sexual love.