

8-1-1954

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### Recommended Citation

Kelly, Gerald (1954) "Catholic Teaching on Contraception and Sterilization," *The Linacre Quarterly*. Vol. 21: No. 3, Article 1.

Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol21/iss3/1>

## Catholic Teaching on Contraception and Sterilization

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THERE is perhaps no aspect of medical ethics in which the line between "Catholic" and "non-Catholic" thought is more clearly drawn than the question of artificial birth-prevention: that is, contraception and direct sterilization. I do not mean, of course, that all Catholics live according to the Church's teaching, for this is obviously not true. Nor do I mean that all Catholics understand what the Church teaches. It is not unheard of that even good Catholic physicians occasionally ask whether certain patients may get "permission" to have direct sterilization or to practice contraception. They would certainly not ask such questions if they really understood the teaching of the Church.

Nor do I mean that all non-Catholics disagree with what the Church teaches. I have seen statements by non-Catholic individuals and groups that agree perfectly with our own teaching. But these are unquestionably in the minority. As for non-Catholic physicians, in particular, I think it is rather typical that even very competent and conscientious doctors, whose general attitude toward the child-bearing function is both wholesome and reverent, think that there are *some* cases in which artificial birth-prevention is the only reasonable solution to an acute problem.

Because of the decided difference between Catholic and non-Catholic views in this matter, and because it is concerned with everyday life and is not of merely rare occurrence, it is important that physicians have a clear understanding of what the Church teaches, of the reasons underlying this teaching, and of its practical implications. The purpose of the present article is to explain these three points; yet before I do so, I should like to deal with what I might term an "approach" problem.

It is sometimes said that there is no such thing as "Catholic ethics"—that the truths of ethics concern the natural law and can be learned by reason alone, without the aid of divine revelation or the teaching of

the Church. All this is true; but it is not the whole truth. And because it is not the whole truth it can be misleading and the cause of unnecessary misunderstandings. The whole truth is to be found in the complete teaching of the Church regarding the power of reason to know the natural law. It is of no little importance, it seems to me, to explain this teaching, even though it may take considerable space, before proceeding to the three points mentioned above. The article, therefore, will have four parts: I. Man's Power to Know the Natural Law. II. Official Catholic Teaching on Artificial Birth Prevention. III. The Reasons Underlying this Teaching. IV. Some Practical Applications in the Sphere of Medicine.

### I. MAN'S POWER TO KNOW THE NATURAL LAW

In the encyclical *Humani generis*, one of the most important theological documents of our time, Pope Pius XII acknowledged the power of human reason when he said that "absolutely speaking, human reason can, by its natural power and light, arrive at a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God Whose providence watches over and governs the world, and also of the natural law which the Creator has written in our hearts." But the Pope hastened to add that "not a few obstacles prevent reason from using its natural ability effectively and profitably. For the truths that have to do with God and the relations between God and men, transcend completely the sensible order, and where there is question of their practical application and realization, call for self-surrender and self-abnegation. In the acquisition of such truths the human intellect is hampered not only by the impulses of the senses and the imagination, but also by evil passions stemming from original sin. As a result, men readily persuade themselves in such matters that what they do not wish to be true is false or at least doubtful.

"It is for this reason that divine revelation must be called morally necessary, so that those religious and moral truths which are not of their nature beyond the reach of reason may, also in the present condition of the human race, be known by all with ease, with unwavering certitude, and without any admixture of error."

In theological language, *divine revelation* refers to the communication of truth to man by God. In nature itself God makes some communications: the visible things of this world speak to us of the invisible things of God—they tell us of His existence, His power, and so forth. This is called *natural* revelation. Over and above this, God has spoken to us through the Patriarchs and Prophets of the Old Law, and through His Son and the Apostles in the New Law. It was to this latter, which is

called *supernatural* revelation, that Pope Pius XII was referring when he used the expression "divine revelation." And in speaking of this supernatural revelation he implied a distinction that is very familiar to Catholic theologians. Supernatural revelation contains some truths that we call *mysteries*: e.g., The Blessed Trinity, Original Sin, The Incarnation, etc. For us to know these truths supernatural revelation is *absolutely* necessary: the unaided human reason could never discover them. On the other hand, supernatural revelation contains some truths which, though very profound in their implications, are already indicated in natural revelation and are not absolutely beyond the power of reason: e.g., the existence of God; that God is the first cause of all things; that He governs the world by His providence; that we must worship God; that we must be just to our fellow men; etc. Such truths pertain to natural religion; and by careful study man can learn much about them, even without the special aid of supernatural revelation.

Nevertheless, in life as it is actually lived, many obstacles hamper men in attaining an adequate knowledge of the natural truths just by the use of their reason. For one thing, the truths themselves, as the Pope observed, are suprasensible: long study and close reasoning are often required for gaining a clear knowledge of them. Moreover, as regards the natural law, the principles and conclusions are often "hard to take" because they impose obligations that "call for self-surrender and self-abnegation." Then, too, passions and prejudices make it difficult to see, and particularly to accept, these conclusions. To these difficulties, the Pope might have added others explained by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa contra gentiles*: e.g. that many men lack the leisure for a serious study of these fundamental natural truths; that others lack interest; and that still others lack the necessary mental equipment.

Some or all of the difficulties just mentioned are more or less the common lot of mankind and have been such since the fall of Adam. It is for this reason that the Vatican Council taught that, although supernatural revelation is not an absolute requisite for knowing the natural truths of religion, yet it is a *moral*, or *practical*, necessity for knowing such truths with ease, with certitude, and without any admixture of error. The Vatican Council did not expressly mention the natural law as a part of the truths of natural religion; but theologians have always understood that it was in some way included. The *Humani generis* expressly included it.

The official custodian of divine revelation is the Church. This has been the constant teaching of Catholic theology; it was so understood by the Vatican Council; and it was clearly indicated by Pius XII at the

beginning of the *Humani generis*. Two years later, in a radio message on "The Christian Conscience as an object of Education," the Pope made this point even clearer as regards moral precepts:

"But where," he asked, "can both the educator and one to be educated find the Christian moral law with ease and certitude? In the law of the Creator, engraved in the heart of every man (cf. Rom. 2: 14-16), and in revelation, that is, in all the truths and precepts that the divine Master taught. Both of these—the natural law written in the heart, and the truths and precepts of supernatural revelation—Jesus, our Redeemer gave to His Church as the moral treasure of humanity in order that she might preach them to all creatures, explain them and hand them on intact and safeguarded from all contamination and error from one generation to another."

In the preceding paragraphs we have clear official statements of the Catholic teaching that (1) supernatural revelation is a practical necessity for an adequate knowledge of the natural law; and (2) that this revelation has been entrusted to the Church to be preserved and explained. It follows therefore that the teaching of the Church is a practical necessity for an adequate knowledge of the natural law, and we should not be surprised or shocked when those who lack the benefit of this teaching are in error as to the existence or extent of some obligations. It follows also that the complete truth is not expressed by the statement that there is no such thing as "Catholic ethics." This is certainly true in the sense that the duties studied in ethics are duties of *human beings*, regardless of the religion they profess; and for this reason we cannot admit two objective standards in matters of medical ethics: one for Catholics, the other for non-Catholics. The statement is true also in the sense that men can learn much about the natural law without the guidance of the Church. But it is definitely not true in the sense that the generality of men can get a clear and adequate knowledge of the natural law, especially as regards its finer points, without the guidance of the Church. In our age this guidance seems to be particularly necessary in the matter of artificial birth prevention; and it has been given repeatedly and solemnly by the two recent Popes, Pius XI and Pius XII.

## II. OFFICIAL CATHOLIC TEACHING

The official Latin text of the encyclical on Christian Marriage, issued by Pope Pius XI on December 31, 1930, is divided into three parts. The first part is positive, explaining Christian marriage in terms of its beauty and blessings. The second part is negative, and is con-

cerned with false theories and abuses. The third part is constructive, outlining the steps to be taken to preserve the beauty of Christian wedlock and to eradicate or forestall the abuses.

First among the abuses of marriage discussed by the Pope is contraception—that is, the frustrating of the marriage act. Several times in the course of this section he refers to this practice as something intrinsically against nature; and he makes it clear that no reason, however grave, even the direst financial condition or the illness of the mother—conditions to which he refers with the most profound sympathy—can justify such an act. Moreover, in this same section is found the following paragraph, which is perhaps the most solemnly-worded statement in the entire encyclical:

"Since, therefore, openly departing from the uninterrupted Christian tradition some recently have judged it possible solemnly to declare another doctrine regarding this question, the Catholic Church, to whom God has entrusted the defense of the integrity and purity of morals, standing erect in the midst of the moral ruin which surrounds her, in order that she may preserve the chastity of the nuptial union from being defiled by this foul stain, raises her voice in token of her divine ambassadorship and through Our mouth proclaims anew: any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin."

These solemn words, as well as the context of the encyclical, leave no room for doubt about the absolute position of the Catholic Church as regards the moral status of contraception. It is not in the class of acts (e.g., certain mutilations) which are occasionally justified for good reasons; rather, it is *absolutely* and *always* wrong. There can be no question of a justifying reason, nor of a "permission," for even one act of contraception. The only possible excuse is a subjective one, such as, for example, ignorance of this divine prohibition.

The encyclical did not deal directly with the broad problem of medical sterilization, but it explicitly condemned eugenic sterilization, whether involuntary or voluntary. The Pope insisted on the principle that the state has no power to mutilate an innocent man against his will; and he added, in another rather solemn passage which applies to all mutilations, that the individual himself does not possess the right of self-mutilation, except in so far as this is required for the good of the whole body.

Shortly after the publication of the encyclical on Christian Marriage, the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office was asked: "What is to be thought of the so-called 'Eugenic' theory, whether 'positive' or 'negative,' and of the means which it proposes for the improvement of human progeny, in disregard of the laws, natural, divine, or ecclesiastical, pertaining to marriage and the rights of individuals?" The reply given by the Holy Office, with the approval of Pope Pius XI, was: "That theory is to be absolutely disapproved, held as false, and condemned, as is declared in the Encyclical on Christian Marriage, *Casti connubii*, of 31 Dec., 1930." This reply was given on March 21, 1931. Almost ten years later the same Sacred Congregation was asked: "Whether the direct sterilization of man or woman, whether perpetual or temporary, is licit." The reply, dated February 24 and officially approved by Pope Pius XII, stated: "In the negative; it is forbidden by the law of nature, and, as regards eugenic sterilization, it has already been condemned by the Decree of this Sacred Congregation of 21 Mar., 1931."

Several points are worth noting about this last-mentioned decree (1940). First, it is explicitly limited to *direct* sterilization: that is, to any procedure by which sterility is *purposely* induced. (When sterility is merely the unintentional by-product of some therapeutic procedure—e.g., removal of cancerous ovaries or tubes—the sterilization is *indirect*.) Secondly, it clearly includes all kinds of direct sterilization, and is not limited to eugenic.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, it includes procedures which are designed to effect a merely temporary sterilization. (A recently-discussed example of this would be the use of phosphorylated hesperidin—as was clearly and completely explained by Father John J. Lynch, S.J., in his articles in LINACRE QUARTERLY for August and November, 1953.) Lastly, the decree states without qualification that all these forms of direct sterilization are against the natural law.

My final citation of the teaching of the Church will be taken from the address given by Pope Pius XII on the moral problems of married life, October 29, 1951. The following paragraphs, taken from the third part of that address, contain a splendid summary of all the documents previously cited:

"Our predecessor, Pius XI, of happy memory, in his encyclical *Casti*

<sup>1</sup>Some theologians hold that the decree concerned only the sterilization of the innocent and that the question of punitive sterilization (that is, sterilization as a punishment for crime) was not included. The statement of Pope Pius XII on the moral problems of married life (which is included in this article), as well as his address to geneticists on September 7, 1953, may be cited in favor of this view. For our purposes here it suffices to limit the question to sterilization of the innocent; and certainly all forms of direct sterilization of the innocent, whether voluntary or involuntary, are included in the Holy Office decree of 1940.



*connubii*, December 31, 1930, solemnly proclaimed anew the fundamental law governing the marital act and conjugal relations: that any attempt on the part of the husband and wife to deprive this act of its inherent force and to impede the procreation of a new life, either in the performance of the act itself or in the course of the development of its natural consequences, is immoral; and that no alleged 'indication' or need can convert an intrinsically immoral act into a moral and lawful one.

"This precept is as valid today as it was yesterday, and it will be the same tomorrow and always, because it does not imply a precept of human law but is the expression of a law which is natural and divine. Let Our words be your unfailing guide in all cases where your profession and your apostolate demand of you a clear and unequivocal decision.

"It would be more than a mere want of readiness in the service of life if the attempt made by man were to concern not only an individual act but should affect the entire organism itself, with the intention of depriving it, by means of sterilization, of the faculty of procreating a new life. Here, too, you have a clearly-established ruling in the Church's teaching which governs your behavior both internally and externally. Direct sterilization—that is, the sterilization which aims, either as a means or as an end in itself, to render child-bearing impossible—is a grave violation of the moral law, and therefore unlawful. Even public authority has no right, whatever 'indication' it may use as an excuse to permit it, and much less to prescribe it or to use it to the detriment of innocent human beings. This principle had already been enunciated in the above-mentioned encyclical of Pius XI on marriage. Therefore, ten years ago, when sterilization came to be more widely used, the Holy See found it necessary to make an explicit and solemn declaration that direct sterilization, whether permanent or temporary, of the man or of the woman, is unlawful, and this by virtue of the natural law from which the Church herself, as you well know, has no power to dispense."

\* \* \* \* \*

#### CONCERNING REFERENCE MATERIAL

A valuable booklet is *The Encyclical "Humani Generis,"* by A. C. Cotter, S.J. It contains the original Latin text, with a readable English translation on opposite pages, also an excellent commentary. In my quotations from this encyclical I used Father Cotter's translation, with only a few changes of punctuation. The booklet is published by the Weston College Press, Weston 93, Mass.

In his *Summa theologia* (I, q.1, a. 1) St. Thomas Aquinas says that supernatural revelation is necessary even as regards the truths about

God that can be known by reason because without this revelation only a small number of men would gain this knowledge, and even they would take a long time and would not avoid many errors. In Book I, Chapter IV, of his *Summa contra gentiles* he explains these points in a profound, yet simple and common-sense manner. Anyone who reads this short chapter thoughtfully should realize that Catholics are very reasonable in looking for the guidance of the Church even in matters that concern the natural law.

My quotations from the encyclical on Christian Marriage are taken from the translation published by the Paulist Press. For the addresses of Pope Pius XII on the moral problems of married life and on the education of the Christian conscience, I have used the translations given in *Catholic Documents* (VI and VIII), but I have not followed these literally. The translations of the decrees of the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office on the eugenic theory and on direct sterilization are taken from *The Canon Law Digest*, by T. L. Bouscaren, S.J.

(The third and fourth parts of this article will appear in a subsequent issue of *LINACRE QUARTERLY*.)

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