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John J. Lynch

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Another Moral Aspect of Fertility Control

JOHN J. LYNCH, S.J.

Professor of Moral Theology

Weston College

Weston, Mass.

A PREVIOUS ARTICLE on fertility control* concluded with this summation of the intrinsic immorality of that practice: "Fertility control . . . derives its initial and essential malice from its opposition to the fifth commandment in its precept against that form of self-mutilation known as direct sterilization." That statement, by deliberate intent, referred only to the isolated act of inducing temporary sterility by artificial means, and consciously prescinded from the further question of the additional sin committed by those who would make use of marriage while thus of their own volition deprived of procreative ability. But this latter problem also deserves consideration. Can it be said that, for husband and wife who are practicing fertility control, conjugal relations constitute a sin of unchastity against the sixth commandment, just as does contraceptive intercourse in its more common forms? The answer to that question may be of some practical importance, especially for Catholic physicians whose patients may inquire as to the lawfulness of an anti-fertility diet as a means of avoiding conception. For it is extremely doubtful that ordinary individuals, unversed in philosophical and theological abstractions, will readily recognize the grave immorality of such bodily mutilation as consists "merely" in the temporary suppression of even a major bodily function. Whereas if they can be informed that this practice is one of illicit birth control, a sin of contraception, and therefore a grave violation of conjugal chastity, they may more easily be persuaded that fertility control is not for them.

OBLIGATION OF CONJUGAL CHASTITY

Chastity in general may be accurately defined as the habit of regulating the use of the generative faculty according to the principles of reason and of Faith. For the unmarried, according to the dictates of reason and the perennial teaching of the Church, "regulation" means nothing less than total

abstention, and all willful exercise of the generative function is denied the unmarried under pain of mortal sin. As Pope Pius XI states in his Encyclical on Christian Marriage: ". . . every use of the faculty given by God for the procreation of new life is the right and privilege of the married state alone, by the law of God and of nature, and must be confined absolutely within the limits of that state."

But for married people, as the preceding citation implies, regulation or control of the generative faculty assumes a broader meaning. Marriage is primarily intended by God for the propagation of children; and man was endowed with procreative ability principally in order that he might, in union with his partner in the married state, achieve that purpose by the temperate exercise of his reproductive power. (As the ultimate physical expression of love between husband and wife, this use of marriage also serves an eminently important psychological purpose, one which is subordinate, however, to the primary end of marriage in the sense at least that it is never to be deliberately sought in a manner positively contrary to that primary end.) For husband and wife, therefore, the duty of regulating the use of the generative faculty (and hence of practicing the virtue of chastity) by no means obliges to total abstention. It does, however, preclude the use of that faculty in any such way as positively and deliberately to prevent conception and thus to defeat the chief purpose for which that function was designed. Again in the words of the same Pontiff: ". . . the Catholic Church . . . 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 grave sin." And the present Pope, in his 1951 address to the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives, saw fit to reiterate the warning of his predecessor in words no less emphatic: ". . . any attempt made by the parties in the performance of the conjugal act, or in the development of its natural consequences, designed to prevent the procreation of a new life, is immoral; and no 'indication' or necessity can change an intrinsically immoral act into one that is moral and permissible."

Such are some of the limits within which the exercise of conjugal rights must be "regulated according to the principles of reason and of Faith." For husband and wife to transgress those limits is to misuse the generative faculty and thus to violate seriously the virtue of conjugal chastity by the grave sin of contraception.

THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF ONANISM

Theologians commonly employ the term "onanism" to designate the various modes of contraceptive intercourse to be included under the condemnation which Pius XI made of "any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life." (Physicians will realize immediately that our use of the term "onanism" differs somewhat from theirs. We do not ordinarily speak, for example, of masturbation as onanistic, and we do include within the meaning of the word some forms of contraceptive relations which the term in medical usage may not embrace.) Now there are two generic ways in which the sexual act can be deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life, and therein lies the basis for a moral distinction between two methods of onanism. The first method implies some aberration *in the performance of the sexual act itself*: the generative faculty is exercised in such a manner as to preclude the *immediate* purpose to which it is ordained by nature, viz., the transfer of the husband's semen to the wife's vagina. Whether this interference with the act is effected by withdrawal and extra-vaginal semination (natural onanism) or by impeding the passage of semen into the vagina by means, for instance, of a condom (artificial onanism), it is clear that by positive human intervention the natural purpose of intercourse is effectively thwarted *by vitiating the act in its very operation*. For that reason moralists agree that the very act or operation of the faculty (extra-vaginal semination or condomistic intercourse) is intrinsically wrong and of itself a violation of chastity.

The second type of onanism, clearly distinguished by Pius XII in the excerpt quoted above, frustrates the conjugal act *by impeding its more remote natural effects*. It permits vaginal reception of semen, and to that extent the sexual faculty is exercised in a manner consonant with its natural purpose. But it provides for interference with the subsequent natural processes leading to fertilization by such means, for example, as the use of spermicides or expellants, or perhaps by impeding the passage of sperm into the uterus. Pius XII condemns this practice explicitly when he speaks of "any attempt made in the performance of the conjugal act *or in the development of its natural consequences* (italics added), designed to deprive it of its inherent power and to prevent the procreation of a new life." Theologians also, of course, universally censure this form of contraception as seriously sinful; but because in this case the generative faculty itself is exercised correctly, and because it is the post-coital effect of the act which is prevented, they are obliged to say that the act of intercourse itself is sinful and contrary to chastity *by virtue of the prior intention to interfere in the devel-*

opment of the act's natural consequences. Subjective guilt in either case is specifically the same. But whereas in the first case the sexual act itself is intrinsically wrong, in the second instance it is the ulterior contraceptive intention of the agent which vitiates a manner of intercourse which would otherwise be licit.

APPLICATION TO THE PRESENT PROBLEM

It is this latter situation, viz., frustration of the natural post-coital consequences of conjugal relations (and conjugal relations undertaken with the intention of post-coital frustration), that we encounter in the present instance. The anti-fertility diet described by the late Dr. Sieve (and again let it be said that artificial fertility control in any comparable form would be subject to the same moral analysis) is designed so to affect the generative cells in both male and female that impregnation of the ova by spermatozoa is made impossible. Grant the accomplishment of that feat, and suppose that husband and wife thereupon engage in natural conjugal relations. Semen is properly deposited in the vagina, and the sexual faculty is thereby exercised in a manner entirely compatible with its *proximate* purpose. But husband and wife not only intend to thwart the *ultimate* effect of their act, viz., possible conception, but they have already tampered with the reproductive system in such a way as actually to obviate the possibility of impregnation. The natural processes consequent upon the conjugal act have been deprived of their inherent power to produce new life. By intent and in effect their act of intercourse is contraceptive, no less onanistic than if spermicide or expellant had been employed; and that use of marriage, by virtue of such intention, thereupon assumes the malice entailed in any abuse of the generative faculty, namely that of unchastity.

There seems to be no possibility of doubt, therefore, that for spouses who are purposely observing a regimen of fertility control, conjugal intercourse is a grave sin against marriage. Furthermore, such use of marriage should deservedly be specified as a form of illicit birth prevention, for it constitutes a deliberate frustration of the natural potency of the marital act to generate life, and is consequently a use of the procreative function contrary to the principles of reason and of Faith. It is still true that the original act of direct sterilization implies a grave violation of the fifth commandment. But it may well be that, for the practical purpose of instructing an inquiring patient as to the malice of fertility control, the physician would be better advised simply to inform his client that such a practice is itself contraceptive

by intent and the prelude to further sins of contraception.

To summarize finally this and the preceding article:

1. Human fertility control involves direct sterilization, and as such constitutes serious violation of the fifth commandment.
2. Those who undertake a program of fertility control with contraceptive intent, or who actually engage in intercourse while practicing fertility control, incur the added grave guilt of onanism, a sin against chastity.
3. For the practical purpose of impressing upon patients the sinfulness of fertility control, doctors may find it more effective to answer inquiries by simply stating that the practice is a forbidden form of birth prevention.

* "Fertility Control and the Moral Law" in *THE LINACRE QUARTERLY*, August 1953, pp. 83-88.