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Letter from England

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Medical-Moral Opinions:

Vasectomy and Sterilization

To The Editor:

I wonder if you could provide an answer to the following question, with the aid of any consultants you might wish to use:

"It is now accepted that surgical sterilization, i.e., ligation of the fallopian tubes in the female, or of the vas deferens in the male, can be reversed restoring fertility to the patients in a varying percentage of cases (10-50%). One can then look upon these operations as temporary surgical sterilization, as compared to permanent chemical sterilization, with the use of contraceptive pills. The Catholic Church, as I understand it, still categorically opposes surgical sterilization. Chemical sterilization, however, is obviously debatable, and in fact appears to be acceptable to the majority of the Church, according to conscience, although, of course, not officially sanctioned.

The question is what the moral and theological objections are to surgical sterilization, and whether they are valid today in the face of increasing concern about population. This has been further aggravated by public concern about the use of the contraceptive pills, which has increased the demand for sterilization considerably. Personally, as one who has spent considerable time and effort defending the Church’s position against abortion, on biological and scientific grounds, I find it difficult to defend the Church’s position on sterilization, particularly when there is such a large segment of the theologians, hierarchy and laypeople in the Church who accept chemical sterilization."

Yours sincerely,

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The University of Western Ontario.

This letter was submitted to our panel of medico-moral consultants. Their replies to the questions raised by Dr. L. L. de Veber are as follows:

To The Editor:

Dr. de Veber’s question is a mosaic of subtle errors:

1. Accepting his statistic that anastrozosis after surgical sterilization is functionally successful in from 10 to 50 percent of cases, one could only compare these procedures to pharmacological sterilization if the latter resulted in permanent sterilization in over 50 percent of the cases in which it is used. It does not.

2. Whatever the rate of moral lapse and disobedience may or may not be in the Church at this time, one cannot say that “chemical sterilization is obviously debatable” when it has been implicitly condemned by the Second Vatican Council (in their directive to follow the Roman Pontiff in this regard) and explicitly condemned in a current Encyclical.

3. To say that “there is such a large segment of the theologians, hierarchy and laypeople in the Church who

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A stranger crossing the title “The Horse Shoe Club” might be forgiven for asking it was a striptease. Actually it was formed about twenty years ago by several doctors of the profession to welcome American and Canadian doctors on a visit to London. Cocktail parties are held twice a year or so when doctors of the two countries can meet. The chief object of the club was at the start to facilitate exchanges for post graduate students and the like. Much good work has been achieved in this respect. Young English doctors going to work in the United States have been helped to overcome the red tape that exists in the National Health Service here and American doctors wishing to find places here for study or post graduate work have been helped to find suitable posts. The good work continues and it is perhaps the only club which does not enact a subscription from its members. Most of its success is due to the work put in by Dr. Nicol of St. Bartholomew’s Hospital and its committee which meets regularly in the office of "The Practitioner," 5 Bentinck Street, London 101. In passing it is worthy of note that “Barts,” as the hospital is generally known, is over 700 years old and was founded by a monk, Rahere!

Contrary to what one might be led to believe by the writings and utterances of some left intellectuals, students, and politicians, English people have a genuine concern for the welfare of America, our ally of two World Wars, this has been particularly noticeable during the past year when both financially and politically the USA was encountering heavy weather. Of course England has experienced all these troubles in the great Empire days, now these are a thing past. The most pressing problem is to accommodate in a small country the humans of its far flung dominions. An area the size of Warwickshire changes from a green and pleasant land to cement each year. London is gradually becoming semi-Asian in its population. Small wonder that many of our young Catholic doctors are in revolt against “Humanism.” The population problem is acute enough, not counting immigration.

"March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb" so runs the old saying. Or the National Health Service on the contrary came in like a lamb but is now going on like a lion. Every phase of medicine from education to retirement comes more and more under the aegis of the National Health Service, so much so that a doctor is dictated to as to where he will practice. Politicians are not slow to make profit from it when occasion arises, taking off the charges one day, passing a bill to legalize abortion another. Little did Beveridge, whose brain child it was, think that the cost to the nation would top 2000 million sterling and still growing. Yet Lady Stock’s, among others, reckons it is the best health service in the world. From personal experience we would agree with this but then a doctor has the great advantage of being able to choose the specialist who will look after him. On the last occasion we were in hospital, one of the nurses, a French Canadian and a nun, one of the best nurses we have met by the way, said “You are very lucky to have such a health service, when I was a child my mother had to have an operation. We had to sell all the stock on our farm to meet the costs.” So there are advantages and disadvantages. S. S. Cosmas and Damian would no doubt approve of patients not having to pay when they are ill, but would take a poor view of the doctors joining the general hue and cry for more money that is increasing inflation and making life very hard for pensioners and others on fixed incomes.

As a previous editor we regret the non appearance of the Catholic Medical Quarterly. It is now nine months since the last issue. The Guild is seeking means to remedy this and hope an issue will soon be in the hands of subscribers.

W. B. J. Pemberton

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