

Contraception and Holiness

by Herbert McCabe, O.P.

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This¹ is a symposium in which Archbishop Roberts and ten American Catholics argue that the usual teaching in the Church about contraceptives is in need of revision. They seek to show that their use in some circumstances may be morally justified. A great many Catholics will, like the present reviewer, open it eagerly; the more critical may not find their enthusiasm invariably sustained. Contributions to any symposium vary in value and the first duty of any reviewer is to indicate which, in his opinion, are important and which may safely be left until we have a lot of time to spare.

In this book there are three chapters which an educated Catholic in England *must* read if he is to inform his conscience properly in this matter: these are by Rosemary Ruether, Elizabeth A. Daugherty and Leslie Dewart. If these alone had been published, I believe the effect on English-speaking Catholicism would have been electrifying; as it is their voice may be muffled by the wool in which they are wrapped. Next I would place articles by Gregory Baum and (with serious reservations), Justus George Lawler, the contents of which are good but not unfamiliar. After this we descend rapidly through the ponderous and the incoherent to two almost compulsively skippable essays by professors respectively of dogmatic and moral theology.

In his introduction, Archbishop Roberts says that the natural law arguments against contraception are inconclusive. He gives reasons for this which I do not find cogent. In the first place he holds that since precepts of the natural law do not depend for their validity upon revelation they must easily be known without revelation. This is to ignore the Christian teaching that without grace the mind of man is darkened and liable to error even about things he could in theory discover without revelation. We are not surprised to find that a saint has a deeper understanding than other men of ordinary human love, nor is it surprising that the Church as a whole should have a clearer insight than others into human ethics. I cannot share the Archbishop's surprise at the idea that the government of India might have to be 'told by the Church that it is engaged in fostering unnatural and immoral practices amongst its people'. Does he think that the Church could never tell governments this kind

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of thing? He himself refers later to the Indian 'orthodox tradition of Suttee' which required a widow to burn herself alive on her husband's funeral pyre. (Incredibly, he regards this, 'however barbaric it may seem to western eyes' as evidence that husband and wife were thought of as two in one flesh. It does not seem that husbands were ever required to burn themselves on their wives' pyres.)

Secondly the Archbishop argues that since we have abandoned the view that lying, being contrary to natural law, is always wrong, we may similarly change our views about contraception. His thinking in this matter does not seem very precise: thus he can slip from 'the tongue (is) an organ clearly designed to convey truth' to 'the gift of speech has been given to man for the social purpose of communicating his thoughts' without apparently noticing the difference between them – a difference highly relevant to the modern discussion of contraception. He also casually identifies equivocating and lying, thereby making history amongst his brethren. Those of us who still think that lying is always wrong will find no counter-argument in the Archbishop's article and will consequently remain unconvinced by his analogy.

He is on much surer ground when he points to the change in the mind of the Church about the interpretation of 'Outside the Church no salvation', though no theologian would accept his view that 'today the word "Church" is understood . . . to include in effect all theists of good will'.

Finally he asks why something which could be imposed as a punishment (sterilization) may not be granted for the good of a family? One might ask in turn whether, supposing capital punishment to be justified, it *follows* that a chronic invalid may commit suicide to relieve his family of a burden?

The next two contributors illustrate an unfortunate tendency of a number of Catholic authors. Instead of dealing with the detailed question 'Is the use of contraceptives always wrong?', they go off into a general discussion of whether *anything* is always wrong. The impression is left that we cannot justify contraception except by reorganizing the whole of Christian morality. No one can feel happy about the present state of moral theology but we should not seem to be reforming it merely to accommodate a change in particular teaching. Nor do I think these two authors ideally equipped for the task of radically re-thinking our theology. Professor Kutz thinks that a man has an inner direction, a 'project of existence' and that 'his individual actions are more or less adequate manifestations of this' and that 'moral quality attaches only derivatively to these individual choices whereas it attaches primarily to the fundamental option'. This means, I think, that we call Rachmanism bad not because a whole lot of people were bullied and made to pay extortionate rents, but because it is a manifestation of Mr Rachman's

bad project of existence. This doesn't seem true: we call people bad because they do bad things and not the other way round. Professor Kutz probably has it in mind that we are especially inclined to call a man bad if he has a *disposition* to do bad things, a vice; moreover if he has a general disposition to do good things a single lapse does not necessarily change our opinion of him. He does not, however, criticize or even seem to be aware of the usual view that charity, being rooted in our divine life and not, like the moral virtues, in our humanity, can be lost by a single choice that severs our personal communion with God (see eg. Aquinas, S.T. 2a 2ae 24.12). Gradually it dawns upon the reader that the underlying argument is that a particular use of contraceptives need not be wrong because no particular act need be wrong. There seems no basic reason why this chapter should not have appeared in a book called 'Murder and Holiness'.

Professor Kutz also thinks we have duties because we are human but rights because we are persons (p. 35); he thinks we are called responsible because we 'respond in gratitude and joy to the mystery of existence' (p. 36) and not because we are *answerable* for our actions, and he thinks that parents 'have no right to think of bringing children into the world' unless they joyously courageously and daily rededicate their love for each other (p. 50).

He is followed by Kieran Conley, OSB, a professor, this time, of moral theology. Like Kutz he contrasts options and individual choices (also like him he is wrong about the etymology of 'responsible'), like him he lays down no criteria by which we are to recognize an option in the right direction. Moreover he offers the following as an English sentence: 'Baptized into Christ, the sacrament of God's love, must purpose all my actions to be identified with the redeeming purpose of the incarnation' (p. 63).

And then suddenly everything is redeemed for we have Rosemary Ruether writing cool lucid prose about 'Birth Control and the Ideals of Marital Sexuality'. (It goes to support my theory that almost all sensible things about sex are written by women – and women called Rosemary at that.) The myth of the 'sexual appetite' which has for so long dominated the thinking of moral theologians, amongst others, should not survive a reading of this chapter. Mrs Ruether puts sexuality back in its human context from which we have torn it. It becomes part of a complex human relationship, sharing in its glory and its defects. I am not going to summarize this splendid contribution, instead I shall quote one sample:

'Suppose one were not allowed to smile when one felt happy. The smile was not allowed to function as a spontaneous expression of *joie de vivre*. Rather the smile was treated as if it were some kind of appetite which had to be kept in check, although being a forceful appetite one must condescend and satisfy it periodically. The satisfaction of this

animal smiling-drive was linked by some Grand Inquisitor with a lunar stopwatch which flashed red and green at intervals. When it flashed green the person could smile, when red he must stop. In addition to this the stopwatch had a few kinks in its mechanism so that it functioned very irregularly and inefficiently. The person therefore . . . lived in constant dread of smiling at the wrong time, in which case he would be hit on the head. . . . Let the clerical moralist contemplate this analogy with care. Let him consider honestly what effect such a regime would have on his own psychic life, and perhaps he will have an inkling of why many Catholic married people object to the rhythm method.'

Julian Pleasants next contributes an interesting chapter in which he seeks to show that the notion of a biological process having one single function is mistaken. Characteristically biological processes have several possible effects and the net effect is always brought about by inhibiting those that happen to be irrelevant. The argument, in my view, suffers from a failure to distinguish between speaking of the effect of an action and of its function. Also he makes uncritical use of a parallel between the function of an organ within a body and the function of an act within its human context. Some time is wasted, too, with a sermon against Aristotle.

In a masterly essay, Elizabeth A. Daugherty demonstrates that in man, in contrast to the lower mammals, sexuality is not tied to procreation. She is admirably tough-minded and keeps extremely close to the zoological evidence.

'Only the higher primates and man have the use of sex in excess of reproductive needs. Only with human beings are both sexes relatively free from physiologically dominated sexual desires, so that we possess a more or less permanent sexuality from adolescence until old age' (p. 113).

'The permanent use of sex in marriage represents a major evolutionary development and may indeed be compared in magnitude to the development from asexual to sexual reproduction' (p. 127).

The function of this permanent use of sex is, in her view, the maintenance of the monogamous family life characteristic of the human species and necessary for human development.

Although this is not the author's language, we may say that what she succeeds in showing is that by natural law human sexual activity is meant to be permanent and does not have reproduction as its unique 'natural end'. She asks in conclusion. 'If it is not actually more proper to control or suppress the function of conception after this function has been fulfilled in the bringing forth of children, than it is to control or suppress the function of the sexual act which is meant to be permanent?'

The next article, by a sociologist, William V. D'Antonio who thinks that *Casti Connubii* is 'part of the deposit of faith' (p. 132), need only

be read by those who do not yet know that when you love someone 'as the noted psychiatrist, Harry Stack Sullivan, has observed, it is quite possible to talk to this person as you have never talked to anyone before' (p. 137).

Next comes an attack on scholasticism by a professor of philosophy called E. R. Baltazar written in a scholastic style one would not have thought possible, let alone publishable, in this day and age. ('Morality has three sources or fonts.') The scholastics, it seems, were right to say that as between procreation and preservation of the family, procreation is primary; but they did not realize that this means simply that it comes first in *time* ('Thomists do not see the significance of this temporal connection'). I think this means that mothers never have to cope *simultaneously* with pregnancy and potting. Scholastic incompetence ('unfamiliarity with the epistemology and logic of process') led them to think that what was primary in time was also primary in importance. In their simple minded way they ought to have thought that 'the human adult is nothing but an oversized child', and this, says Professor Baltazar, 'is patently nonsense'. The scholastics used to keep saying 'What is primarily intended is the last thing you do' (*prius in ordine intentionis, posterius in ordine executionis*) but the author does not tell us this; perhaps he does not know.

Justus George Lawler follows with an acute and interesting essay on 'Discovering Natural Law' strangely marred towards the end by an attack of Teilhardism, e.g. 'We are entitled by every law of history to forecast a future stage in which sexual love may not be rooted primarily in genital union, but will be incarnated and expressed in other forms . . . for this reason one can accept the conclusion of Paul Chauchard – the great interpreter of Teilhard from the perspective of neurophysiology – that "the brain is the principal sexual organ"' (p. 192).

From such disastrous conclusions we are speedily rescued in a really magisterial paper by Leslie Dewart called '*Casti Connubii* and the Development of Dogma'. In Mr Dewart's opinion the inadequate understanding of sexuality that has been characteristic of Catholic culture in the past has its roots not in St Paul or in St Augustine but in Catharism. The Cathars advocated a 'spiritual' love between man and woman which (after the manner of Paul Chauchard) 'was made possible by degenitalizing the sexual attraction of the sexes'. In consequence 'a social premium was put upon the repression of genital activity at the same time that sexual desire was exalted by almost every means available to the culture' (p. 124). Like de Rougement, Mr Dewart holds that this ideal of romantic love has infected Christian thinking since that time; he believes that it has only been finally destroyed by the work of Freud. 'Since Freud we have been able to understand human sexuality as a phenomenon sufficiently complex and organismic to involve the

deepest levels of the human personality and the highest aspirations of the human spirit' (p. 219).

Casti Connubii, says Mr Dewart, is culturally a pre-Freudian document and we need to develop its teaching in the light of our new understanding. The article is too precise and scholarly to bear summarizing; it is the longest in the book but the reader is left wishing for more of this kind of thing. In my view he makes his case that '*Casti Connubii* condemned contraception on the ground that contraception violated the nature of the conjugal act *as such*, that is, insofar as the nature of the act is determined by the nature of marriage' (p. 299). The encyclical is essentially about marriage and Mr Dewart sees (and makes his reader see) in a further development of this teaching – particularly by taking account of St Thomas' view of the importance of *sacramentum* as a good of marriage and developing it yet further – the possibility of a recognition of the place of contraception in marriage. I think he convincingly shows that this need not involve an outright rejection of the main teaching of the encyclical.

Gregory Baum's article that follows, 'Can the Church Change her Position?', though good in itself, adds nothing to Mr Dewart's analysis. It forms, however, a suitable conclusion to the work, including as it does an appeal to reviewers not to accuse the symposiasts of 'destroying the basis of morality by undermining the law'.

It is reminiscent of Cardinal Suenens' plea to the Council when dealing with the same topic: 'I hope it will not be said that we are in this way opening the way to moral laxity. We are faced with the problem not because the Christian faithful are attempting to satisfy their passions and their egoism, but because the best among them are attempting with anguish to live a double loyalty, to the Church's doctrine and to the needs of conjugal and parental love' (reported in *The Tablet*, Nov. 7, 1964).

'If the position taken by the writers of this book is to be refuted,' says Father Baum, 'the arguments must be taken from the objective order'. The central contention of the book, that the present absolute condemnation of contraception is based on inadequate theological and scientific understanding and is in need of revision, seems to this reviewer to be both true and well established in this symposium, but many of the supporting arguments are unconvincing or irrelevant. I hope the book will be widely read by patient and tolerant people for while about half of it is rather bad and some of it very bad, I for one, would read it all again several times – yes, I would even fight my way again through the syntax of Professor Conley – if that were the only possible way to reach the wisdom to be found in the 150 pages written by Ruether, Daugherty and Dewart. Fortunately there is no such necessity and I pass on this tip to my readers.
