

Sterilisation and Human Reason

153

by Quentin de la Bedoyere

In view of the Church's divine mission it is not surprising that some of her moral teachings are not self-evident to secular man. However she has usually offered supporting reasons for her position and no disloyalty is involved in questioning whether these are really valid. In the case of direct sterilisation Pius XI, in *Casti Connubii*, presents the classical argument for prohibition (frequently to be repeated by Pius XII) and specifically states that his conclusion is one that 'the light of human reason makes most clear'.¹ In this article I want to suggest that there are many good men, even within the Christian tradition, to whose reason the prohibition of sterilisation is far from clear and, furthermore, that even the classical arguments may need to be reviewed in the light of new developments. I am not going to discuss the various medical, psychological and economic factors involved, since their bearing on the central moral problem is indirect.

The argument that secular man might put forward to support direct sterilisation could take the following form: There are many instances in which a married couple would have reasons of conscience to refrain from further conceptions; such possible reasons are in fact suggested by Pius XI in his encyclical. They could be of such gravity that the only way in which the risk could be responsibly avoided would be by permanent abstention from sexual intercourse or by sterilisation. The first solution, it would be readily admitted, carries certain dangers such as the straining or even breakdown of the marital home with consequent damage both to the existing family and to society at large. The second solution involves the destruction of fertility – which in normal circumstances would be a substantial loss, but in these specific circumstances is no loss at all since there is an obligation in conscience not to employ it. To suggest that the whole marriage should be endangered in order to preserve a faculty that can never be exercised is an Alice-through-the-looking-glass morality that puts man at the service of morals rather than the other way about.

This is an exceedingly powerful line of argument and any moral theologian who went into battle on this ground would have a hard fight on his hands. The most that he could suggest would be that the damage to the marriage or to society as a result of sterilisation

¹C. T. S. edition, para. 70.

might be considerably greater than present human judgement reveals. Since the obvious reply would be that the argument must stand until such dangers are demonstrated, he would be obliged to present the classical argument and to show thereby that direct sterilisation is always immoral and that therefore no end, however good, can justify its employment.

He would probably commence by pointing out a factor that the first argument does not consider: that man is steward of his body, under God, and not complete master of it. His stewardship implies a duty always to preserve the organs and the functions of the body and only to use them for their proper ends. There are exceptions to this general rule (he would explain) which can be discovered under the Principle of Totality. The body is a totality comprised of various organs and functions which are subordinate to the whole. Since they are subordinate it is sometimes permissible to sacrifice them, but only when the good of the totality requires it. It would be moral, for instance, to amputate a gangrenous leg, since the body, considered as a whole, would benefit thereby. Equally it would be moral to amputate a healthy leg, if it was trapped in a railway line, since the operation would, in the circumstance, be a means of saving the body as a whole. This principle applies logically to sterilisation. A cancerous womb may be removed – even though sterility is an inevitable side effect – since there will be an overall gain to the totality of the body. But the removal of such an organ where the only intention is to sterilise would not be justified since the body would suffer the loss of an important faculty without compensating gain. Fertility is never in itself a source of danger to the body; it only becomes indirectly so as a result of the voluntary act of sexual intercourse. Therefore its neutralisation is a diminishing of the totality of the body and thus a betrayal of stewardship.

Stated in this bare form the argument is not immediately attractive, it carries something of the musty odour of the theologian's study. But that is scarcely the point. The idea of stewardship is not one that a christian would lightly abandon, the Principle of Totality is grounded in reason, the conclusion that sterility is a serious diminution of the body's powers seems inevitable, If it is to be faulted it cannot be within its own terms; somehow there must be a dimension lacking.

The classical argument assumes that the primary totality to be considered is that of the body, but are there other, greater, totalities to which the body itself may be seen as subordinate? The first possibility that springs to mind is society as a whole. An investigation along this line might prove to be fruitful, but there are major difficulties to overcome. First of all the links that bind man to man within society are of a moral order while those considered in the Principle of Totality are of a physical order. Secondly, although man undoubtedly makes up and is completed by society, he is not

subordinated to it as a limb or a function is subordinated to the body; he has an end that is independent of society, while the limb has no end outside its contribution to the whole.

There is, however, another totality which may provide the answer: that of marriage. Of course the links that bind man to wife are of a moral order similar to that of society, albeit more intense and exclusive. But are they also of another order? Scripture seems quite clear that they are. 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and they shall be in one flesh. Therefore they are not two, but one flesh'.² Since St. Paul assures us that mystery is involved it is not surprising that the complete meaning of this is hidden, but that is no bar to drawing certain truths from it. It is clear that in marriage the individual, as such, is subordinate to the relationship. Individuality is not lost but is transcended and can only be seen against the background of the whole. The relationship forms a true totality, that of two in one. The link that binds is of a corporal nature; it occurs at the level of the 'flesh'. In fact this link is more radical than the moral link; it persists even when love is dead, even when the marriage has been repudiated. A closer investigation of this corporal link involves impenetrable difficulties. It is one that is not superficially visible – as if the married couple grew into each other like siamese twins. It persists even if the couple are physically separated from the moment of their marriage vows until their death. Without scriptural authority we should have no means of knowing of its existence at this static permanent level. But it also exists at a dynamic level in the actual 'living-out' of the marriage union. Here an important distinction must be made. The ordinary acts within marriage (which might be defined as any act which is aimed at promoting the purposes of the union) can only be regarded as expressing the underlying union and fostering the love that accompanies it. They may be more, but we have no authority for saying so. On the other hand, the act of sexual intercourse falls into a different category. St. Paul is dramatically explicit about this. He says that an act of sexual intercourse with a prostitute makes one flesh out of the two participants.³ Since in his example there is no love, no intention to generate and a single occasion is visualised, it must be that the act, of its very nature, effects the mysterious union that is at the root of marriage. Therefore it cannot be a mere optional act which happens to be permissible within marriage, it actually brings about the union, completing and existentialising it at its dynamic level. A marriage within which sexual intercourse does not feature as a recurrent expression is deficient in this important dynamic element; the unity of the two in one flesh suffers thereby.

²Matthew 19, v. 5 ff.

³1 Cor. 6, v. 15 ff.

Is this conclusion 'offensive to pious ears'? It seems to throw doubt on the perfection of Our Lady's marriage, or on any marriage in which a mutual vow of chastity is taken. I think it should be accepted that such marriages *are* defective when they are considered precisely as marriages. Abstention from sexual intercourse may, as a result of a special call and graces from God, lead to a unity at the level of the spirit which cannot be achieved otherwise (as might also be the case where prolonged illness required a similar abstinence), but marriage is not just a spiritual union; of its radical nature it is a union which occurs at the level of the flesh, which can only be brought about in its dynamic aspect by sexual intercourse.

If this line of argument can be sustained (I put it forward tentatively and for discussion) then it would suggest that the classical reasons for the prohibition of sterilisation are not compelling. While the Principle of Totality is still applied it is widened to recognise the special status of marriage as revealed by scripture. The primary totality to which the married must have regard is no longer that of the individual body but that of the union of two in one flesh. Normally fertility makes a substantial contribution to this totality since, through it, the couple are able to incarnate their love in procreation. Abnormally this faculty actually damages this totality since it precludes the dynamic element which is actualised in sexual intercourse. In such circumstances the loss to the union occasioned by sterilisation is balanced by a compensating gain to the totality and would therefore be justified. The loss suffered to the personal totality of the sterilised individual is not a bar since the part may be legitimately sacrificed for the whole and now therefore 'they are not two but one flesh'.

The purpose of this article has been a limited one: to suggest that the Church's prohibition of direct sterilisation is not one that 'the light of human reason makes most clear'. If this suggestion has any merit, it does not follow that the prohibition is wrong. But, unless the present position is to be regarded as infallible, it does indicate that this is a field that might well be reviewed in the light of our clearer understanding of the nature of marriage.

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