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By
IGNATIUS W. COX, S.J.
*Professor of Ethics
Fordham University*

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Birth Control Is Wrong!

(Talk by the Rev. Ignatius W. Cox, S.J., professor of ethics at Fordham University, over Station WLWL, Wednesday evening, May 21, 1930.)

THERE are two kinds of birth control. Birth control through self-control, the virtue of continence, and birth control through the use of positive means calculated to prevent conception. This latter is called contraceptive birth control. It is with regard to the use of physical, chemical or mechanical means for family limitation, or birth control through contraceptives, that an editorial appeared in the New York *Herald Tribune* for April 9, 1930. The editorial was entitled "Churches for Birth Control." From it I wish to quote the following:

The world does move and one of the subjects on which it moves is birth control. The action of the New York East Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church taken on Monday, declaring birth control "in the interest of morality and sound scientific knowledge" and calling upon legislatures of New York and Connecticut to remove the existing restrictions upon the knowledge of birth control, is a straw in the wind. The action of the Methodists of New York follows significantly enough upon similar action taken last year by the Commission on Social Justice of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Conference of Congregational Churches of Connecticut and the Universal General Convention. As little as five years ago such action by any one of these bodies would have seemed impossible. Today it is certainly the forerunner of like action by many other religious bodies. . . . In time, perhaps, even religious groups which have hitherto, perhaps on sentimental rather than on canonical grounds, opposed legislative action which would bring the law into harmony with common sense and common practice, may yield to the irresistible current of the age.

Thus far the editorial from the New York *Herald Tribune*.

CATHOLIC OPPOSITION

Now the Catholic Church is the largest religious group which has been and is opposed to contraceptive birth control. The reasons for the Catholic opposition I will explain this evening and thus show how foredoomed to disappointment is

the expectation of those who believe that some day the Catholic Church will cease to oppose contraceptive birth control and thus yield to what the *Tribune* writer calls the "irresistible current of the age."

First of all the opposition of the Catholic Church is most emphatically not founded on sentimental grounds. More than that, the opposition is founded on grounds altogether independent of the Church, on grounds with regard to which the Church has never claimed any jurisdiction, and, in the very nature of the case, can claim no jurisdiction.

There are certain actions which are morally evil and wrong independently of the individual conscience and of the Church of God. Conscience does not make these actions evil and wrong; it only discovers their malice. The Church does not make these actions evil and wrong; it only declares their malice. No individual, no group of individuals, not even the Church of God can make such actions good and right. Let me illustrate this by an example. It is an evil and wrong thing to blaspheme God, the author of man and of all good. Blasphemy by its very nature, hence intrinsically, is altogether contrary to human nature which is and should be entirely dependent upon God. Hence, blasphemy is forbidden by the natural law. For the natural law is the command of God, the author of nature, written in man's nature and recognized by the light of reason. In virtue of this law man understands the will of the Author of nature commanding him the performance of actions that are in accordance with and suitable to the ends of nature, and forbidding actions which are out of keeping with that nature. This natural law is written in the being of every rational creature and embraces the prohibitions and the implicit commands of the Ten Commandments.

CONTRARY TO LAW OF NATURE

Of this natural law the great Blackstone wrote:

As man depends absolutely on his Maker in all things, it is necessary that he should in all things conform to his Maker's will. . . . This will of the Maker is called the law of nature. . . . When He created man and endowed him with free will to conduct himself in all

parts of life, He laid down immutable laws of human nature. . . . These are the eternal immutable laws of good and evil . . . which He has enabled reason to discover for the conduct of human actions. This law of nature is binding all over the globe, in all countries, at all times; no human laws are of any validity if contrary to this.

Now the position of the Catholic Church is that birth control through the use of contraceptives belongs to that class of actions which are so out of harmony with human nature that they are intrinsically wrong. As such they are forbidden by the natural law, God's will written in nature. The intrinsic moral evil of contraceptive birth control is written in human nature, and the Church has no more power to declare good, right or lawful what the natural law brands as evil, wrong and unlawful than the Church has the power to change human nature itself.

HUMAN NATURE THE NORM

The Catholic Church does not make human nature, neither does she by arbitrary action make certain actions to be in harmony with human nature and hence good, and others to be out of harmony with human nature, and hence bad. What the Church does is to examine human nature so as to find out the will of God therein written, and this will she declare to her children and all the world. Just as medical men do not make the laws of healthful living, but study human life, analyze and dissect, and then tell us the laws of health written in human nature, so the Church does not make the fundamental laws of good and right but declares and interprets them as she finds them written by the Author of life in human nature itself.

THE PURPOSE OF MATRIMONY

Now there is no doubt that the natural law and the Author of nature forbid and condemn the practise of contraceptive birth control. The Author of nature has gifted His rational creatures with the sexual faculty, the end and purpose of which is clearly and manifestly indicated, the production of human offspring, children, without which the human race would perish. It is for this purpose that matrimony exists, a permanent institution by the law of nature,

without which the race would be neither propagated nor educated in accordance with the God-given dignity of rational creatures and the absolute needs of the child. The sexual faculties are only to be exercised within the state of matrimony, without which the purposes of nature for the consistent care and development of the child would be most assuredly defeated.

SOCIAL FACULTIES

The sexual faculties are social faculties. They are given not primarily for the good of the individual but for the good of the race. Though there is an individual urge to exercise these faculties, and a fitting reward for the exercise of the same, their outcome, the child, shows nature's intention only too clearly, that the faculty, the urge, the exercise and its reward are all social, for the good and the conservation of the race. This is the end and purpose which nature and nature's God have given primarily and above all to the sexual faculty.

It is for this purpose that nature gives the strongest urge and for this purpose that nature offers her rewards. Now to use nature's faculty, to give way to nature's urge, to seek nature's reward and at the same time to take means by contraceptives to frustrate the primary purpose of nature in granting all these things is without all doubt to pervert nature and to defeat God's will and design. That all this is to violate the natural law written in nature itself is so evident that it is marvelous how unprejudiced men can escape its obvious significance. I say, therefore, that birth control through contraceptives is so clearly intrinsically wrong, so clearly out of harmony with man's nature, so manifestly prohibited by the author of nature through the natural law that no conscience, no combination of consciences, no difficulties, no sentimental reasons can make it right and good.

MUTUAL SELF-SACRIFICING LOVE

It is by nature that God gives the capacity and the impulse in virtue of which His designs are fulfilled. To live according to the natural law is to attain the perfection of

the individual and the fulfilment of the Divine purpose. The sex impulse which God gives man is only the first step of nature towards a mutual love befitting rational creatures, a love characterized by the mutual self-sacrifice of husband and wife. This mutual self-sacrificing love expresses itself in parenthood. Husband and wife are God's chosen instruments to whom He communicates His own fruitfulness. Indeed, the Author of nature cooperates in a wondrous way with His creatures by the creation of the human soul, so that the child is the living output of the creative love of God and the procreative love of His human instruments. By the presence of children the mutual love of husband and wife is urged to still higher degrees of self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness. Their interests, their hopes, their joys are centered on the output of their love. Sex is elevated, ennobled, sanctified by the higher, self-forgetting love to which it leads and by which in God's designs man is brought to a perfection worthy of his dignity in the scale of creation. Children thus check and control sex. Motherhood and fatherhood are unspeakably more than self-gratification. The virtues that are developed by the honest fulfilment of nature's intentions are amongst the finest flowers born of earthly existence and a promise of a reward to come beyond this earthly world.

FINER PURPOSES DESTROYED

Contraceptive birth control is pernicious precisely because it runs counter to all the finer purposes of nature. Nature and nature's God assign a fitting reward or punishment even in this life to those who observe or violate her laws. The reward of those blessed married couples who observe nature's laws is seen in the nobility of character, the mastery over self with the consequent joy and peace which comes from unselfish right living.

The punishments assigned to violations of nature are equally obvious. First of all the use of contraceptives isolates pleasure and gratification from the purposes assigned to them by nature itself. Pleasure is separated from the higher love towards which it should tend, and the link of this higher love with parenthood is brutally sundered. George

Bernard Shaw, I believe, somewhere speaks of contraceptive birth control as reciprocal vice. That is an exact designation of it. The reason why the universal conscience condemns solitary as well as other unnatural vice is precisely because, in isolating pleasure from nature's purposes, it frustrates the very end and intent of nature. Contraceptives put all the emphasis on mere pleasure.

PRELUDE TO DIVORCE COURT

Hence, instead of sex being ruled and regulated and dominated by a higher God-given purpose, it is made an end in itself contrary to the manifest design and intent of nature. Man is thus degraded and brutalized by the successive satisfactions of a lower faculty uncontrolled and unsanctified by any higher purpose. Self-domination is lost as hopelessly, as ultimately, as rational love itself is lost. Woman is degraded from being the co-instrument with man in the duty of sharing the fruitfulness of God, and, by the unnatural divorce of sex from motherhood, becomes a mere tool of passion whilst she loses all the womanly heroic virtues of self-denial and self-sacrifice. Human love which is founded on lust does not endure. Hence contraceptive practises are a fitting prelude to the divorce court. Let me quote here the words of the Rev. John A. Ryan, D.D.:

It is doubtful whether any normal man or woman ever began such practises without suffering a severe moral shock, or continued without serious moral degeneration. It is not surprising that men and women who thus pervert one of the highest functions of life, and the most intimate relation of marriage, should grow obtuse in their perceptions of the sacredness and exclusiveness of wedlock, and of the binding character of the conjugal obligation. It is not a mere coincidence that childless marriages should form such a large proportion of the cases in which divorce is sought on "statutory grounds."

I might mention here in passing that contraceptive birth control is a practical atheism which stultifies when it does not annihilate conscience. The use of contraceptives is the denial in practise of the purposefulness of life and life's faculties. It is a rebellion against the Author of nature and a practical refusal to admit that life and its faculties are not our own to be disposed of as if we were masters, but

that they are to be used by us only as responsible stewards of whom a strict account will be exacted.

NATURE SHOWS ABHORRENCE

There are other sanctions by which nature shows in no uncertain way her abhorrence of methods taken to defeat her purposes and by which she registers her disapproval on the physical and nervous constitutions of those who offend against her. Far-seeing doctors have not been slow to call attentions to those effects in details which cannot be mentioned here. To pass over medical testimony that might be cited, Dr. Arthur Vernon Davies recently declared in the English House of Commons that "competent medical opinion in this country is overwhelmingly against birth control." He said: "Let honorable members talk to any obstetric surgeon or a medical man or woman accustomed to a large gynecological practise, and almost without exception these people will say that birth control is detrimental to the woman and detrimental to the child." But the final sanction of nature, as far as this world is concerned, is unmistakable. Nature punishes with annihilation the groups that frustrate her purposes. The conflict between groups that practically advocate contraceptive birth control and those that practically oppose them will be shortlived. The birth controllers will in a short time breed themselves out of existence, which is another way of saying that nature will annihilate them.

OVERPOPULATION FALSE

I am conscious that all the arguments in proof of the sin of contraceptive birth control will be swept aside by the protagonists of this movement in favor of the short-sighted, irrelevant and sentimental reasons that are dinned into our ears in season and out of season. There is first that oft-told tale of overpopulation. It would argue astonishing simplicity on the part of any one to believe that those who indulge in contraceptive practises are in the slightest degree influenced by the fear that population will in a brief time exceed the food supply. First of all, the fear of overpopula-

tion is at present unfounded, and, even if it were not, contraceptive birth control would be no legitimate way to meet the difficulty. That would be to do wrong that good might come of it. Economic and social conditions are not the determinants of morality.

"THESE ARE MY JEWELS"

It is urged that contraceptive birth control is lawful because of the poverty of so many married couples. Let us honestly distinguish between real poverty and an assumed poverty due to unnecessarily high standards of living. Poverty of the latter class is but too thinly disguised selfishness. People of even the lower middle classes today think necessary things which were luxuries only of the rich a few years ago. Let me remind my listeners of that Roman matron who, when asked by her friends to let them see her jewels, called her children and exclaimed: "These are my jewels; here are all my treasures!" She knew far better than many moderns where wealth and happiness were truly to be found. The answer to this class appealing to economic conditions in favor of immoral birth control is too obvious to need formulation. If immoral birth control is legitimate for the relief of economic conditions so are theft and murder. Amusements, pleasures, mechanical comforts formerly classed as luxuries are now considered necessities even by the so-called poor and are offered as a vindication of contraceptive birth control. It is but another form of the temptation, "All these things will I give you, if falling down you will adore me."

THE REALLY POOR

But there is a large class of really poor about whom Leo XIII wrote so sympathetically in his letter, "On the Condition of the Working Classes." These people have a right to a living wage from that very natural law to which we appealed in the beginning. There is something sardonic in the propaganda of the birth controllers. These poor people have the same right to life, love and children as the rich. They have the right to all that which makes this pos-

sible. Instead of a fiery agitation for a social justice which would alleviate the conditions of the really poor these latter are told: "You do not earn enough to rear children; therefore, you must practise contraceptive birth control." Would that the birth controllers would expend their magnificent energies in advocating social justice instead of leading the multitudes into a betrayal of nature and disobedience to the will of God.

But real poverty, even though the result of social injustice, neither legitimately defends nor makes right and good contraceptive devices. The Church is filled with tender sympathy for the poor and for suffering humanity. She can never in the interest of that sympathy declare as good, right and lawful practises which betray and defy nature and which in the long run will without a doubt work greater havoc than all the ills of poverty and physical suffering. The Church knows that in all this birth-control propaganda the multitudes are being deceived by a lie that comes straight from the father of lies. Hence, she does not hesitate to brand contraceptive practises by their true name, not kindnesses, not mercies to overburdened mothers or pocketbooks, but deadly immoral wrongs to God and human nature, serious sins punishable in this life and in the next.

ONLY ONE LAWFUL METHOD

There is one and only one method of birth control which is permitted and licit and that is birth control through self control. It is the practise of that marital continence mentioned by St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. "Such continence is not easy. It *is* possible. And it is actually practised far more than is often imagined. To look upon sex hunger as an overmastering impulse which will brook no control within the marital bond is to justify prostitution and infidelity." ("Birth Control," John M. Cooper, Ph.D.) There is too much insistence on the utter incapacity of man to resist the sexual impulse. "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me," says St. Paul. God who has written His will in man's nature will give him the strength to fulfil that will in whatsoever conditions he may be placed.

THE "IRRESISTIBLE CURRENT" RESISTED

I started out in the beginning to make answer to the question why the Catholic Church has set her face in stern and unalterable opposition to contraceptive birth control, why she can never yield to what the *Herald Tribune* writer calls "the irresistible current of the age." The Church will not yield to that current and sanction contraceptive birth control because she has no competency in the matter; because the law of God written in man's nature declares that such practise is evil and wrong, because it is a positive frustration of a faculty designed and given primarily not for self-gratification but for race preservation; because only by the proper use of this faculty will be preserved "the inner sanctities of home life and the maintenance of those higher and loftier and nobler sentiments and affections which distinguish the home from the barnyard or the house of prostitution" (John M. Cooper, op. cit.); because she knows that nature takes terrible toll in this life and the next on those who violate her laws.

The Catholic Church is opposed to contraceptive birth control because she recognizes the flimsy logic and the illogical sentimentality which sugar-coats the insidious poison in all contraceptive propaganda. She is opposed because she has tender sympathy for the overburdened mother and the afflicted poor which she has learned from the tenderest of all human hearts, the Heart of Jesus Christ, a sympathy which is founded on the knowledge that contraceptive birth control far from relieving the ills of mankind will increase them a thousand-fold. She is opposed because she is sure of herself and of her stand as the God-appointed custodian of human morals. She is opposed because she recognizes the true but hidden source of all contraceptive propaganda, the serpent who in the beginning tempted Eve by a fruit which was passing fair but which brought a curse upon her womb. The Catholic Church is opposed, as she has been in the past and will be in the future, unalterably opposed to the so-called "irresistible current of the age." To this opposition she commands her children and invites all other right-thinking men and women.

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