

Catholic Family Planning Norms

Is the Church against any form of Family Planning?

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At present there is much confusion about family planning in the Church. Some think that the Church is against any form of family planning. Others are afraid of speaking about the problem at all, while some have impression that the Church is divided on very fundamental issues. Many people see a contradiction between what they think to be Church principles and their own daily practice; others also do not quite know the factors involved in the discussion.

It is my intention, therefore, first to explain the reasons of the present day confusion, then the clear principles of Catholic family planning, and finally questions that are under discussion today by theologians and experts.

Reasons for the present day confusion are many. Family planning is related to over-population. Real over-population, in the sense that there are too many people to share the necessities of life, only became a problem during the past two centuries and has become acute only in the last decades. Formerly populations were kept to size by wars or famine, by natural catastrophes or epidemics. Modern medicine and the development of science and technology have caused an unprecedented increase of life on earth. This necessarily focussed attention as never before on the morality of limiting human life. The problem was a new one, and like any new problem that comes up in the course of the Church's experience, it always takes a long time to see clearly the principles that are involved.

A COMPLICATING FACTOR

A complicating factor has

been during the past century, an almost universal negative attitude towards sex. In spite of the Christian doctrine that everything God creates is good and that marriage is a sacrament, many persons came to look on anything connected with marriage or sex as something inferior and not open to reflection or discussion. This general attitude has impeded a quick solution towards the Catholic practice of a responsible family planning.

Added to this, there has been the sad fact that family planning and birth control were first promoted by people who were not inspired by the best of motives. Outright materialism and the refusal of taking on true responsibilities regarding one's children were often the reasons why people practised different forms of family limitation.

In actual fact the Church has given quite clear guidance on the Catholic principles of family planning. But the majority of Catholics have not been able to absorb it. For many there still exists an agonising ignorance; and uncertainty. There is no reason for the state of affairs to continue.

Regarding principles of "Catholic Family Planning," it is apparent that whoever enters into marriage concludes a contract with another person. His action of marrying is necessarily a public act. This means that it is something that affects not only his personal likings and welfare, but something that by its very nature affects the life and welfare of other persons. Therefore, of necessity, marriage will have many conditions following on it by the very fact that the rights of other persons have to be protected. Or, to put it differently, by entering a

marriage a person implicitly agrees to abide by the necessary implications of this public act.

Marriage was instituted by God Himself. He raised it to a new status and it cannot be seen separated from the divine gift of life and the Christian sacrament of love. This means in concrete terms that the norms ruling marriage should not be purely materialistic or selfish motives. The good of marriage and everything that belongs to it should be judged by the norms of respect for life and of true supernatural love, that are the reasons and grounds for the marriage.

RESPECT FOR LIFE

If respect for life and true supernatural love are the norms of marriage, this means that these norms themselves will also dictate a Christian family planning. It never was God's intention that man and wife should live together and produce children without the use of reason. Precisely for the sake of respecting life and for the safeguarding of the true impulse of supernatural love, man and wife have to use their gifts of intelligence and understanding in planning the number of children which they can and should have within the total context of their lives.

It is true that in their opposition to materialism, some preachers may give a wrong impression on this point. Sometimes they refer to the words used in the creation account, "Go and multiply and fill the earth." These words spoken by God at creation are understood by some people as a command to multiply at all costs. However, this clearly is not the meaning of the Bible. The multiplication of man is not a command, but rather a blessing.

However, it would be altogether wrong to assume, as some have done in the past, that total abstinence is the only, or only correct means of birth control for a Christian. The reason for this lies in the function of the marriage act itself. The purpose of the act of marriage is not only to produce new life, but also to be the expression of the love the one partner feels for the other.

Regarding questions under discussion by the theologians and experts, it is known that secular organisations that promote family planning have introduced a variety of means that directly interfere with conception or fertility. Such contraceptive means are external. To the use of such external means there has always been a strong Christian opposition. The reason is that these measures seem to interfere with life itself. It was generally acknowledged by moral theology of the past that these external interferences could, however, become legitimate if they were unavoidable and a necessary

consequence of another good action.

RENEWED DISCUSSION

Since the last 15 years renewed discussion on this point has been opened. The commission to study Catholic family planning called for by Pope Paul VI after the Vatican Council and consisting of experts from all over the world, was seriously divided over the question whether external means of contraception are always forbidden to the Christian. In fact the majority of theologians and experts of the commission brought out a report in which they urged a reconsideration of the present practice.

There are a variety of reasons for this new opinion. First, however good periodic abstinence may be, it does not seem to solve everyone's problem. Secondly, it is not so clear what constitutes an interference with nature and what does not. Some theologians will argue that God has given man the right to rule his own body according to his own reason. That is why, for instance, we can have ourselves operated on, shave or cut our hair or our feet to remain small as was the custom for Chinese women. We are constantly interfering with our body by taking medicines and pills to regulate our chemical make-up. Why then, they argue, is man not allowed to regulate his fertility by taking a pill?

From a theological point of view the question is indeed very difficult to answer. In his encyclical "Humana Vitae" Pope Paul expressed his view against these new theological opinions. Stating explicitly that he did not want to decide the matter as an infallible teaching, but that he was merely giving his own personal guidance, the Pope left open the possibility of a different point of view.

DEADLOCK?

This has indeed taken place. Quite a few bishops and hierarchies all over the world have explicitly stated that in this matter they are not altogether excluding another theological point of view than the one defended by Pope Paul. It is clear that on both sides, both with the more conservative and the progressive theologians, the same values of marriage are at stake. But in their application of these values to contraceptive means there is a kind of deadlock which can only be resolved by future discussion and reflection.

As in all moral problems, we have to distinguish here the objective external standard and the individual decision of the person. While theologians and shepherds in the Church are studying the objective external standard by which external contraceptives have to be judged, the individual parents of today will have to make their own decision. They should be guided by principles of Catholic marriage, of respect for life and supernatural love, that are accepted by all.