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Letters to the Editor ...

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Letters to the Editor . . .

(The following letter was addressed to Monsignor Paul V. Harrington and refers to his article, "The Catholic Doctor, the Catholic Hospital and Contraception," in the February issue of the Linacre.)

The *Linacre Quarterly* article is thought-provoking. I am grateful for such a careful presentation of papal thought on contraception.

It is surprising to me that on such a key issue scripture seems so silent, and the theological fonts other than papal teachings (the consensus of the faithful, ordinary episcopal teachings, and the learned theologians) seem so ambivalent.

It is inspiring to sense your zeal and sincerity. But I wonder if enthusiasm may have led you to some imprecise statements. For instance, would you, among a peer-group of theological scholars, defend the statement:

"Every Catholic has a special responsibility and a grave obligation to listen intently to the authoritative teachings of the Vicar of Christ, to accept them readily and without question and to give both internal and external assent. There can be no exceptions to this rule" (p. 25, col. 1).

Would you fault a physician anxious to form his conscience if he uses a criterion or criteria what a large number of people are doing, what large numbers think is right (pp. 25-26)? Apparently Pope Paul VI and his predecessors have consulted such criteria in discerning the

spirits which move them to solve problems of conscience. Christ and the saints (including Thomas More) seem to be models for emulation by the perplexed. St. Thomas Aquinas' concept of *epikeia*, K. Rahner's *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, and St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* present views which seem to contrast with your thesis: "Catholic hospitals and Catholic doctors can only rely on one norm of moral evaluation—the authentic and authoritative teaching of the Catholic Church . . ." (p. 26).

Sometimes I fear zeal. I shudder to see the six uses of *can* (rather than *may*) on pp. 25-26, 28; they suggest coercion to conformity. The ten uses of *must* on pp. 26-27, and four uses on pp. 29-30, seem to confuse counsel with command. A scrupulous physician might be profoundly troubled by the absolute burdens to defend, to take leadership to be leaven, to be beacon lights, to stand erect, etc. I fear overstatements may alienate physicians of goodwill, whereas an invitation to go beyond the negative minima might stimulate a holy dedication.

It seems an overwhelming onus to impose on an individual that he investigate and judge every employee's uncompromising commitment to the execution of the moral law as taught by the Vicar of Christ. The AFL-CIO, AMA, and the Office of Equal Opportunity would soon take such a person to court. "The just man falls seven times a day"; the

Catholic tradition holds that saints are persons who worked out flaws and succeeded nobly but not totally. Uncompromising commitment to executing Church law is a stern requisite for operating an elevator in a hospital.

Since none of us is perfect, I wonder if an imperfect hospital operated by imperfect humans might imperfectly fulfill the purpose for which it was established, contrary to the statement on p. 29.

It may be that the three uses of "God and the Catholic Church" on p. 28 will perplex some people. It is so difficult to recognize true prophets empowered to speak for God.

I wonder if "scrupulously" is the apt word on p. 29; the Code of Canon Law taught that "custom is the best interpreter of law." Likewise I question the extension of papal teachings to sub-human life, as the words "binding on all creatures of God" (p. 30) suggests.

I fear the NFPCG may shrink to a little huddle of closed-minded physicians, while the sincere, groping, inquiring Catholic physician may despair of finding Christ and Christian peace in an anxiety-laden, defensive institution. If I may venture one comment on the theme of the article, I would look upon *Humanae Vitae* as a significant development of papal teachings on contraception. For in this, the longest document in the series and the latest, the terms *grave*, *serious*, *mortal sin* are not used to describe the malice of contraception.

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In his response, Monsignor Harrington writes:

First of all, may I say that I welcome your critique and evaluation of the article and shall endeavor to reply in the same generous spirit in which the observations were originally made.

Even though ordinary theological fonts were silent on the matter of contraception, it suffices that recent Popes in encyclical letters, and more frequently and more constantly in serious addresses to specialized groups and to general audiences, have insisted on the moral evil of artificial contraception. Even though all other sources are silent, constant and continuing Papal teaching suffices as a guide, because authentic and authoritative Papal teaching, even when not *ex cathedra* and infallible, is the most certain source for the Doctrine of Christ and His Church.

I would certainly defend before a "peer-group of theological scholars" the statement which you extracted from the article, and I would defend it on the basis of the statement of Pope Pius XI (Encyclical *Castii Connubii*, p. 277) as given on page 11, column 1; on the basis of the statement of Pope Pius XII (*Magnificate Dominum*, A.A.S. 46, 1954, 671-672) as set forth on page 11, column 2, and page 12, column 1; and in the statements of the Second Vatican Council—(*Declaration on Religious Liberty*, n. 14, and *Lumen Gentium*, n. 25) as set forth on page 12, column 2, and page 13, column 1.

These statements officially teach that the Supreme Pontiff, in matters of faith and morals, is the official guide, the teacher of the truth, and that the faithful are to accept the teaching of bishops and the Supreme Pontiff with a "religious assent of soul" and with "a religious submission of will and of mind."

These official statements of two recent Pontiffs and a recent Ecumenical Council leave no room for the rejection by anyone, theologians included, of official teaching and the substitution of a doctrine which differs from the authoritative and authentic teaching of the Supreme Pontiffs.

I would certainly take issue with anyone, physicians included, who would attempt to form his conscience in accordance with any criterion other than the official, authentic and authoritative teaching of the Supreme Pontiff. What you suggest as an alternate criterion—what a large number of people are doing and what large numbers think is right—seems to be the worst possible alternate criterion.

We live at a time when law — both the law of God and the law of man — is violated, it seems, more frequently than it is respected. Consider, if you will, the numbers of murders, personal and bodily assaults, grand larceny, thievery, breaking and entering, rape, etc., that are reported each day in each locale throughout the United States. Recall, if you will, the monthly reports of the incidence of crime in the United States by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Then, ask yourself, if this criminal behavior on the part of thousands of our citizens can be a reliable guide for the formation of anyone's conscience as to what is right or wrong, good or evil.

You make reference to the uses of *can* rather than *may*, and the frequent use of *must* in the text of the article, and indicate that these suggest "coercion to conformity." These words were used deliberately and not accidentally, and were used to indicate that we can only be Christians and true followers of Christ *only* if we accept Christ and His Teaching *on His terms* — not on the basis of our own subjective and personal thinking of what Christ should have said or might have said, and we can become His followers only if we take up His Cross and follow Him. As indicated in the article, neither Christ nor anyone else has ever indicated that being a Christian is easy or comfortable or self-serving. The article also indicates that Christ vehemently and tenaciously insisted on His Doctrine in the face of disagreement, dissent and threat to turn away from Him.

In your reference to the "scrupulous physician" and to the fact that "none of us is perfect," I find the oft-repeated error of confusing authentic doctrine with personal guilt or innocence. What I have strived to present is the authentic, authoritative and official teaching of the Church of Jesus Christ with reference to contraception and

I have endeavored to demonstrate the serious responsibility of Catholic hospitals and Catholic physicians to accept this doctrine and to abide by it. I have totally and completely abstained from making any reference to the subjective guilt or innocence of any physician or of any hospital if either violates this official, authentic and authoritative teaching. Each physician must stand before God and God will make the final judgment as to guilt or innocence.

I fail to appreciate your conclusion that the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds may become a group of "closed-minded physicians" and your effort to separate this Federation from "the sincere, groping, inquiring Catholic physician." Is not a member of the National Federation, who accepts the authentic and authoritative teaching of the Supreme Pontiff, a sincere, Catholic physician? Why must the physician who forms his conscience by personal, subjective, situational and existential criteria be the only physician who is considered to be sincere and Catholic? Is there not here an effort, however unintentional, to separate Christ from His Doctrine and Christ from His Church?

It appears to me that one, be he bishop, priest, religious, physician or non-professional layman, can only be a real Christian and a true and faithful follower of Jesus Christ if he accepts Jesus Christ and His Doctrine as authentically and authoritatively taught by the visible Vicar of Jesus Christ, the gloriously reigning Supreme Pontiff. Unfortunately, there are in our midst persons who wish to be known as Christian and to be considered as followers of Jesus Christ but wish both of these to be on their own terms. This is impossible. Those who are not with Jesus Christ are against Him and this by His Own Words.

Rt. Rev. Paul V. Harrington, F.A.