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John C. Ford

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Morality and the Pill

JOHN C. FORD, S.J.*

IN THE DISCUSSION of the contraceptive pill one cardinal factor is often omitted. It is a surprising omission: The Holy See has already authoritatively condemned the use of the pill as a contraceptive.

On September 12, 1958 Pope Pius XII clearly and explicitly rejected as immoral the contraceptive use of drugs, or pills, or medicines, which "by preventing ovulation make fecundation impossible." There can be no doubt that he intended this teaching to be binding in conscience.

For he appeals to previous authoritative documents in confirmation of his position on direct sterilization, whether permanent or temporary. He appeals, for instance, to the Encyclical *Casti Connubii* (1930), to a decree of the Holy Office published with Papal approval (1940), and to several of his own allocutions notably the Address to the Midwives (October 29, 1951). Of this latter address he said the following year:

"Mindful, however, of the right and duty of the Apostolic See to intervene authoritatively, when need arises, in moral questions, in the address of 29th October last we set out to enlighten men's consciences on the problems of married life."

Furthermore, in his address of September 12, 1958, in the section devoted to sterilization and the sterilizing drugs, he rebukes moral theologians who defend the use of sterilizing drugs for the purpose of prevent-

ing conception; says they are in error; and threatens their opinions with ecclesiastical condemnation. "The Holy See finds itself then," he says, "in a situation like that of Blessed Innocent XI, who saw himself more than once obliged to condemn moral theses put forward by theologians animated by indiscreet zeal, and a rashness showing little discernment."

It is obvious therefore that the Holy See, through Pius XII, was acting authoritatively when it condemned the contraceptive use of new pills. It is true that theologians do not consider that such moral pronouncements are proposed to the faithful like an article of faith, taught with infallible authority. But it is part of Catholic teaching that even when the Pope does not use his supreme infallible power, his authoritative pronouncements call for acceptance, and, where moral matters are concerned, are binding in practice on the consciences of Catholics.

The contraceptive pill as we know it today does not differ in any significant way from the pill condemned by the Holy See. No new medical factors have been made known which make its contraceptive use today different from the contraceptive use which Pius XII declared immoral five and one half years ago.

Consequently, unless and until the Holy See gives its approval to some other teaching (a highly unlikely eventuality), no lesser authority in the Church, and least of all a private theologian, is at liberty to teach a different doctrine, or to free Catholics

in practice from their obligation to accept Papal teaching.

This does not mean that there is nothing left for Catholic theologians to say about the pill. Theologians are still discussing certain of its uses to determine whether they are really contraceptive. In Chapter 16 of our recent book, *Marriage Questions* (Volume II of *Contemporary Moral Theology*, Newman Press), Father Gerald Kelly and I try to contribute to this discussion by explaining some of these possibilities. Furthermore, there is well founded hope that medical science will discover soon a pill which will regulate ovulation with enough precision to make the use of rhythm secure and effective. This is just what Pius XII hoped would take place.

Theological journals will continue to publish the speculations of moral theologians on these problems. Some

of these speculations are merely tentative, and among the most recent ones some are proposed for consideration of and correction by fellow theologians. Such publications cannot be considered definitive of practical, moral obligations on which the Holy See has already given its decision.

Catholics should realize, too, that not only those theologians who tend to enlarge the legitimate scope of the pill, but those who tend to restrict it, are equally concerned over the trying problems married people face today. The moral dilemmas occasioned by generous married love, generous in its self-donation, generous in its fruitfulness, are the preoccupation of all the theologians concerned. Neither they nor the married Catholics can hope to solve these dilemmas by ignoring the teaching of the Holy See.

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*Father Ford is Professor of Moral Theology, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. Permission was granted to reprint the above discussion which he prepared for The Family Life Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference.