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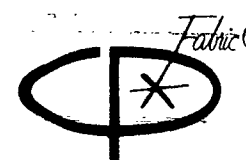
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## Birth Control: An Issue for the Whole Church

By Father Arthur McNally, C.P.  
 (Reprinted from "The Hour of the Crucified")

"Most Non-Catholics do not see anything morally wrong about birth control. A growing number of Catholics today seem to have their doubts. Therefore, since so many people seem to be in favor of a change, why doesn't the Pope act?"

There is probably no issue today that creates more tension between the Church and secular society than the issue of birth control.

Many non-Catholics are obviously puzzled by Pope Paul's failure to abandon the Church's tradition teaching on this subject.

Some would go so far as to say that Paul might as well do something now because he will have to do it eventually when opposition to the traditional teaching reaches high tide.

The difficulty with this way of looking at the problem is that it presumes that Christian morality can be determined by majority.

Of course, it can't. The Holy Father, as a guardian of the deposit of faith, can apply the teachings of Christ to modern society, but he has no mandate from the Lord to change this teaching when it becomes unpopular.

There are two extremes: Those who expect the rank and file members of the Church to decide this question and

then pressure the Pope to implement their decision; and others who expect Pope Paul to make the decision all by himself and then spread the word to the rest of the Church.

Actually, many theologians in the Church today believe that when the Church's present quandary on birth control is resolved, it will be resolved in a way that lies somewhere between the two solutions we have just mentioned.

The Church's final decision on birth control will come neither from the Pope alone nor from the people alone. It will come from the whole Church.

To really understand this we have to understand the role of both Scripture and Tradition in the formulation of Church doctrine.

Much of the Church's teaching, of course, comes to her directly from God's Divine Revelation. For instance, the Church teaches that adultery is clearly condemned in Sacred Scripture.

But there are many things the Church teaches today which are not explicitly contained in the Old Testament or the Gospels.

By her reliance on God's Divine revelation in Sacred Scripture, the Church also draws her doctrinal and moral teaching from Tradition.

This Tradition embraces the insights into revelation contributed to the Church by her great Saints and schol-

ars — insights gradually incorporated into the Church's official teaching.

Because of Tradition, the Church's teaching is not static, but dynamic. It changes. More precisely it develops.

Thus, to have an adequate grasp of the Church's teaching we must view this teaching in a historical perspective.

First, there is God's Divine Revelation transmitted to us in Sacred Scripture and officially interpreted for us by the Church.

Second, there is the Church's tradition, the wisdom and experience of the Church's Saints and scholars and ordinary people who over the centuries have pondered the implications of Scripture and have passed on to us the fruits of this collective experience.

How can we relate this to the question of birth control?

First, we must ask, "What does Sacred Scripture have to say on this burning issue?"

Unfortunately, not very much. Catholic theologians in the past have tried to find passages in the Bible that would serve as arguments against the use of contraceptives but have now given it up as an impossible task.

When we turn to the Church's tradition for guidelines on the question of birth control, we run into a similar difficulty. For until recent times, the Church's theologians developed their

positions on birth control without the benefit of insights we now have into the importance of the inter-personal relationship between husband and wife, and the marriage act as a means of fostering this relationship.

Our traditional teaching developed at a time when we did not have the detailed scientific knowledge that we now have about conception, at a time when oral contraceptives were unknown, at a time when the Church did not have to cope with the pressures of an urban society in which a small family is often an economic necessity.

All these factors have caused the Church to take another long look at its teaching on birth control to see whether a development is called for this area.

Today, in order to come to a decision on birth control that is an authentic reflection of what the Spirit is saying to the Church of Christ, Pope Paul must put this question to the Church:

Does the Church's teaching on birth control need to be changed in the light of modern developments?

Because the matter at issue so profoundly affects the whole Church, from top to bottom, it is not enough for Pope Paul to take a survey of the Bishops. He must call on the experience of married people as well, especially since they can provide insights on this question that no celibate cleric would have.

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