



IS THE MORALITY OF THE CHURCH IN DANGER?

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On July 1, 2022, the book *Etica teologica della vita* [*Theological Ethics of Life*] was published by Archbishop Paglia, current President of the Pontifical Academy for Life. This book gathers the proceedings of a seminar held from October 30 to November 1, 2021, in Rome, and promoted by the same Academy. This study seminar reflected on a basic text elaborated by a group of theologians, most of whom were recently appointed by Pope Francis as members of the Pontifical Academy for Life: Carlo Casalone, Maurizio Chiodi, Roberto Dell' Oro, Pier Davide Guenzi, Anne-Marie Pelletier, Pierangelo Sequeri, Marie-Jo Thiel and Alain Thomasset. Archbishop Bordeyne, President of the Pontifical Theological Institute John Paul II for the Sciences of Marriage and the Family since September 1, 2021, makes some final observations.

Yet, prior to the development of this basic text, these theologians were known to support the moral licitness of contraceptive sexual acts, homologous medically assisted procreation (MAP) and stable homosexual unions. It is not surprising, therefore, although very serious, that this basic text justifies contraceptive sexual acts by equating the use of natural methods with contraceptive means: "There are situations in which two spouses, who have decided or will decide to have children, can make a wise discernment in specific situations which, without contradicting their openness to life, at that moment, does not provide for it. The wise choice will be made by appropriately evaluating all the possible techniques according to their specific situation and obviously excluding those that are abortive."

The reflection of these theologians starts from a true premise—responsible fatherhood—which is taken into account by the authentic Magisterium, and ends up with a false conclusion rejected by the same Magisterium: that the use of contraceptive techniques can be a "wise choice in a specific situation." Indeed, when spouses have "serious motives" (*Humanae vitae* 16) for deciding "to avoid a new birth temporarily or even for an indefinite time" (HV 10), their intention not to procreate is morally right. However, spouses may not use contraceptive means because "man cannot break on his own initiative the indissoluble bond that God has willed between the two meanings of the conjugal act: union and procreation" (HV 12). This is the key precept of sexual morality, a precept that comes from the intention of the Creator. Consequently, if this precept is called into question, the Church's morality on marriage and carnal union collapses and the consequences are numerous.

Forgetting the Object

But these theologians take into account only the intention of the subject and the appreciation of the

circumstances, and fail to consider the malice of the object of the contraceptive sexual act, in this case the voluntary setting aside of the procreative dimension inscribed by God in the nature of the conjugal act. Thus the "wise discernment" of spacing births becomes the "wise choice" of eventually using contraception; whereas Paul VI had pointed out that "honest and serious" reasons could never make licit "the use of means directly contrary to fertilization" (HV 16). In order to regulate births, carnal union only during the infertile periods of the woman, and therefore renouncing union, through self-control, during the fertile periods, is the only honest means. Shamelessly, these theologians thus oppose the Catechism of the Catholic Church, according to which "every action is intrinsically evil which, either in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its course, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes as its aim or means to render procreation impossible" (CCC 2370), and the constant teaching of the Church concerning the evil of the contraceptive sexual act.

However, since these theologians present non-abortive contraceptive techniques as "a wise choice for a specific situation," it is necessary to consider, without angelism, what they really consist of. The two most widely used methods in the world are the pill and the condom. To suggest that the pill is morally permissible is an aberration from a health perspective alone. Nine international experts (doctors and natural practitioners) warned in an open letter to the Pontifical Academy for Life that "to question today the pastoral application of *Humanae vitae*... could lead to one of the greatest public health scandals of all time, because it would affect the health of millions of women. On the other hand, it would be an unprecedented victory for the pharmaceutical industry." It is now well known that "oral contraceptives increase the risk of myocardial infarction and stroke by 60%, and the risk of breast cancer on a pandemic scale." In addition, these synthetic hormones increase the risk of depression and suicide attempts and reduce female sexual desire. Today, the Church is very concerned about the environment. *A fortiori* women expect their bodily integrity to be defended by the Church.

An Abortive Contraception

More seriously, although it is already an objective evil to harm the health of others, all the ordinary pills (estrogen-progestin and microprogestin) have, among their mechanisms of being effective, the early elimination of embryos by preventing their implantation. These experts note that "many women would not want to use the pill if they knew that the destruction of an embryo was possible." Thus the "wise choice" to use non-abortive contraceptive techniques excludes the pill from the outset, a method that these theologians must have been thinking about since it is widely used and Father Thomasset has already spoken out in favor of chemical contraception. As for the Jesuit Roberto Dell'Oro, professor of

bioethics in Los Angeles, newly appointed to the Pontifical Academy for Life (October 2022), openly pro-abortion and recently standing up against the Dobbs decision that overturned Roe v. Wade allowing abortion on the grounds that "Dobbs does not respect democracy, which maximizes rather than restricts a space for personal freedom," one assumes that IUDs, whose mode of action is essentially the elimination of early embryos, pose no moral problem for him.

Strictly speaking, only the condom (and withdrawal) are exclusively contraceptive means. But who in the Church could recognize as a "wise choice" those means that cause a truncated sexual act, rejected by Holy Scripture (cf. Gen. 38:8-10)?

Not surprisingly, the voluntary dissociation of the union-creation link naturally inscribed in the conjugal act makes it possible, for these theologians, to have recourse to MAP, but only "homologous," they specify, "obviously avoiding obtaining supernumerary embryos," which should automatically rule out in vitro fertilization (IVF). But on the website of the magazine *Choisir*, the Jesuit Carlo Casalone specifies that their reflection includes IVF—so who are we kidding when we know that IVF requires the conception of multiple human embryos for a limited number of children to be born? (Only 5% of embryos fertilized in vitro and transferred immediately survive.)

Pressure on the Magisterium

Of concern is that these theologians define their work as a "service to the magisterium." In more pragmatic terms, they seek to influence the pope to admit the moral licitness of contraception and homologous MAP. Archbishop Paglia clarifies in presenting his book, "Pope Francis has been informed of every step and has encouraged this project." For this reason, it is not impossible that the pope will officially pronounce on these innovations, either within the year or in an exhortation after the synod on synodality.

But the intentions of these theologians existed well in advance, from before the bishops' synod on marriage and the family, during the study day, at the invitation of the presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of France (Archbishop Pontier), Germany (Archbishop Marx), and Switzerland, which took place behind closed doors on May 25, 2015 at the Gregorian University. Father Alain Thomasset, who was present, stated it straightforwardly: "The interpretation of the doctrine of the so-called 'intrinsically evil' acts seems to me to be one of the fundamental sources of the current difficulties in the pastoral care of families, because it determines to a great extent the condemnation of artificial contraception,

that of the sexual acts of remarried divorcees and that of even stable homosexual couples." Or Father Maurizio Chiodi, current professor of bioethics at the new John Paul II Institute, stated on December 14, 2017, during a conference also at the Gregorian: "There are circumstances—I refer to *Amoris laetitia*, chapter VIII—which, precisely in the name of responsibility, require contraception. In these cases, technological intervention does not negate the responsibility of the generative relationship. The insistence of the Church's Magisterium on natural methods cannot be interpreted, in my opinion, as a norm that would be an end in itself."

Furthermore, the removal of the intrinsic link between union and procreation in the conjugal act facilitates the justification of homosexual acts since they are by nature nonfertile. These theologians hope that the Church will legitimize stable homosexual unions. Mgr Bordeyne proposes a prayer of blessing for homosexuals in civil unions who may have welcomed a child: "Insofar as the Catholic Church... is in the process of moral and pastoral discernment with regard to homosexual unions, it is to be hoped that it will dare to root this work in liturgical prayer." Marie-Jo Thiel hopes for a recasting of sexual and family ethics: "For the moment, the norm requiring respect for the intrinsic link between the sexual act and procreation has been killed but not abrogated. The same goes for the prohibition of sexual relations for a homosexual or LGBT couple. Or the access to medically assisted procreation, in its homologous version.... It is clear that Pope Francis alone cannot renew the structures and doctrines of the Church. Is this a sign inviting theologians to get to work? It is necessary... to let them work without making trouble for them every time they put forward proposals that are potentially fruitful for sexual and family ethics. Today this remains to be worked out."

Suppression of Intrinsically Evil Acts

More fundamentally, the reflection of these theologians destroys the doctrine of intrinsically evil acts which is a central tenet of Catholic morality, thus opposing John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (VS). Indeed, this encyclical vigorously teaches that there are acts that are always evil because of their purpose, regardless of the circumstances and even if the intention is right. Therefore, these acts can never be chosen "because the choice of such behavior is in no way compatible with the goodness of the will of the person who acts, with his or her vocation to life with God and to communion with the neighbor.... The Church has always taught that one should never choose behaviors prohibited by the moral commandments, expressed in negative form by the Old and New Testaments. As we have seen, Jesus himself reiterates that these prohibitions cannot be departed from: "But if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments... Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not

steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness" (Mt 19:17-18)" (VS 52). Now, the contraceptive sexual act is one of those intrinsically disordered acts which "are in radical contradiction with the good of the person, created in the image of God" (VS, 80).

However, these moralists object, based on St. Thomas (*Summa Theologica* Ia-IIae, q. 94, a. 4), that general norms cannot encompass all particular situations in an absolute sense, which is true, so that in a "specific situation" resorting to contraception would be a "wise choice," which is false. For these moralists always deliberately fail to make clear the distinction that St. Thomas made between positive and negative norms (ST IIa-IIae, q. 33, a. 2). Indeed, positive precepts (e.g., "Honor your father and mother") do not always, and in all circumstances, oblige; whereas negative precepts (e.g., "Man cannot deliberately deprive the conjugal act of its natural power to procreate life") always and in all circumstances oblige. This doctrine is clearly taken up by the Magisterium: "If we consider positive moral precepts, prudence must always verify their relevance in a given situation, taking into account, for example, other duties that may be more important or more urgent. But negative moral precepts, that is, those which prohibit certain concrete acts or behaviors as intrinsically evil, admit of no legitimate exceptions; they leave no morally acceptable space for 'creating' any contrary determination" (VS 67).

An Evil can Never be A Good

This limit imposed by God through negative moral precepts may seem unbearable, but in reality it protects man and makes him happy because God alone knows perfectly what is good for man. So how do these theologians manage to remove the unexceptional obligation imposed by negative moral precepts? They rely on "the concretely possible forms" which refer to the notion of "possible good" set out in *Amoris laetitia* 308 and *Evangelii gaudium* 44-45: "In the perspective we have outlined, we go beyond the alternative between natural and artificial methods: the radical question is played out in the concretely possible forms of a generous and no less demanding responsibility for the gift of generation." Thus, this notion of "possible good" becomes the decisive notion for their argumentation. It is in the name of this "possible good" that they justify the "wise choice" to use contraception in different situations. According to them, an intrinsic evil would become a good in certain circumstances, because people could do no more. But an intrinsic evil is not a possible good, even in specific situations, for the reason that it is not a good and never will be. These theologians seem to despair of the action of grace and to make themselves masters of the divine law: "It is not [the Church] who created this law, and therefore she cannot be its arbiter; she is only its custodian and interpreter, without ever being able to declare licit something that is not licit because of its intimate and immutable opposition to the true

good of man" (HV 18).

As John Paul II strongly stated: "It would be a very grave error to conclude that the rule taught by the Church is in itself only an ideal which must then be adapted, proportioned, graduated, according to the concrete possibilities of man, according to a balancing of the various goods in question. But what are man's concrete possibilities? And which man are we talking about? Of the man dominated by concupiscence or of the man redeemed by Christ? For this is what we are talking about: the reality of the Redemption through Christ. Christ has redeemed us! This means: He has given us the possibility of realizing the entire truth of our being; He has freed our freedom from the domination of concupiscence" (VS 103).

Subjective Factors

However, reflection on moral action also takes into account subjective factors, so that an objective disorder does not necessarily lead to subjective guilt, especially in this day and age when conditioning in favor of contraception is prevalent. People may be in great ignorance about the intrinsic evil of contraception. But the reduced or even almost non-existent guilt of the subjects does not make the contraceptive sexual act a good act and therefore defensible as a choice: "There are concrete behaviors that it is always wrong to choose because their choice involves a disorder of the will, that is, a moral evil" (CCC 1761). Pastoral work must therefore take up the considerable challenge of announcing the truth about carnal union and the formation of moral subjects in such a way that in their concrete situation they recognize the intrinsic evil of contraception and are motivated to reject it.

But these theologians go overboard to achieve the "radical paradigm shift" desired by Francis. "This is an attempt...to embrace the invitation of *Veritatis gaudium* (n. 3) to a radical paradigm shift in theological reflection," says Archbishop Paglia. But if this radical change means being able to choose what can never be chosen, it is not a development, but a radical break with the Church's perennial morality. The hour is therefore grave for Catholic morality and the good of the faithful. Since the responsibility for the teaching of the Church belongs primarily to the pope, let us hope, with the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, that Francis will resist the pressures of these theologians. Let us also hope that the bishops, doctors of faith and morals, will courageously oppose such a collapse of Catholic morality. Finally, during spiritual battles, the Christian people are called to pray and fast to ask the Lord for victory, which does not prevent them from using concrete means to make their wish to be faithful to the divine will heard.

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