

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## Marriage in the Christian Perspective

Gerald W. Healy

*Philippine Studies* vol. 12, no. 3 (1964): 520–528

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

## Review Article

### *Marriage in the Christian Perspective*

**I**N THIS BOOK,<sup>1</sup> their second on contemporary moral problems, two outstanding moral theologians have collaborated to give us what well may be considered a classic on one of the most important and most agitated areas of discussion on the modern scene—Christian marriage. We are all indebted to them for the wealth of knowledge and understanding that they have put at our disposal.

It might be well to note immediately that these authors write neither as “liberals” nor “conservatives” in the narrow sense of those labels but as theologians objectively examining the doctrine of the Catholic Church. They are calm and dispassionate, searching for truth, weighing evidence, admitting their limitations, leaving questions open for further discussions when necessary, suggesting questions that need much more research. They are not iconoclasts but neither are they blindly wed to the tradition of the past. They admit the defect, for example, in the traditional emphasis on “*remedium concupiscentiae*” in the Augustinian teaching on the need to justify sexual pleasure in marriage. “Formerly the attitude towards sex was negative and disparaging.... Today Catholic theologians attribute positive values to sex which would have surprised St. Augustine, if not St. Thomas.” They are not afraid of change but do not admit change for its own sake.

<sup>1</sup> CONTEMPORARY MORAL THEOLOGY; VOL. II: MARRIAGE QUESTIONS. By John C. Ford, S.J. and Gerald Kelly, S.J. Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1963. 474 pp.

Thus they still feel, for good reasons, that the expression *remedium concupiscentiae* should be retained, when all is said and done.

The authors examine the various modern theories on conjugal love, companionship, development of the personality in and through marriage, and their relationship to procreation. I think that those who advocate these modern doctrines will admit that they have been given a fair hearing even though they may not accept the final verdict of the authors. But this is inevitable since it is a matter not of an isolated problem but of a fundamental approach to morality. Through most (not all) of modern non-Catholic writings on sex and marriage runs a relativism, a situational approach that is incompatible with Catholic morality. The Church has certain absolutes which guide us in judging the morality of human acts, all human acts without exception, in or out of marriage. If these absolutes are not accepted then there is no hope of agreement on the conclusions that the Church derives from those absolutes on matters concerning marriage.

Once an individual or any group or sect embraces this situation or circumstance ethics they will be forced with inexorable logic to admit as licit certain actions that have always been condemned by and abhorrent to the Christian conscience. Already its advocates have been led to at least condone certain abortions, sterilization, divorce, free-love, euthanasia. The authors show that it has no built-in defense to prevent the final absurdity of approving of homosexuality. If the individual is his own lawmaker and judge of his unique situation which falls under no absolute universal prohibition, then he must be left free to decide what will develop his personality and contribute to his "happiness" in the matter of sexual pleasure.

The authors enter deeply into the current controversy on the ends of marriage. They take a middle position between the extreme personalism of some moderns and the extreme juridical impersonalism of earlier writers. From this study emerges a doctrine that is true to tradition while being enriched by its liberation from the narrowness that sometimes

marred its presentation. The authors refuse to go to the extreme of rejecting canonical conclusions as if they did not matter; "...in the Church a divorce between canonical and theological principles would be intolerable, especially in the case of marriage, which is a society, and therefore essentially an entity of the juridical order."

The contemporary concern with contraception will make the authors' treatment of that problem of special interest to all. The doctrine of the various Christian churches is outlined, the Greek Orthodox, the Protestant with special attention to the Anglican doctrine. From Anglican sources it is shown that the contemporary majority opinion is a complete about-face, abandoning their former position that contraception was a sin and embracing the other extreme that it is a duty, at least under certain circumstances.

The challenging title of Chapter 13 "Can the Catholic Teaching [on contraception] Change?" will surely catch the modern eye. Since we read in many newspapers and journals that the Catholic Church might change or is being asked (?) to change its doctrine during the Oecumenical Council soon to reassemble for its third Session, it is well to weigh the mature judgment of these two leading moralists: "The Church is so completely committed to the doctrine that contraception is intrinsically and gravely immoral that no substantial change in this teaching is possible. It is *irrevocable*." The relativists will certainly find that hard to swallow and impossible to understand. But if anyone will have the patience to read Chapter 14 ("Why the Church Rejects Contraception"), he will see that the argument of the authors is solidly founded on Papal documents and intimately connected with a whole theology of the individual and the family.

We should make it very clear that the present controversy on the use of "the pill" does not touch this basic question of the immutability of the doctrine of the Church on contraception. The pill is unique among all the means thus far invented for regulating births. There can be absolutely no question of the Church giving a blanket approval to all and any means of practicing contraception, of leaving it up to the individual

to choose the means, which supposes that they are indifferent in themselves. Instruments, chemicals which attack the semen or the embryo, interruption of the act with subsequent semination—these are clearly immoral and condemned in Catholic writings, both official and unofficial, down through the years. The “pill” causes problems and disputes because it has some legitimate therapeutic uses, and, in arresting ovulation, it imitates nature so closely.

Having shown the immutability of the Church’s doctrine on contraception in se, the authors discuss the new anovulants, the “pill”, and show how much room there is for discussion, how much more thought must be given to the questions raised by the anovulants. They then conclude that in spite of the confusion one thing remains clear and certain: “to use the pills as a means of contraception is gravely sinful, and Catholics who intend to use them must be refused absolution and are ineligible to receive the Holy Eucharist.”

If one might be tempted to think that these two authors represent a narrow, Jansenistic, puritanical tradition that is strictly Anglo-Saxon, (he or she) could profitably check with some of the outstanding European Catholic writers on modern marriage problems. Cardinal Suenens (*Love and Control*: 1960), one of the more articulate European Church prelates, has put us all in his debt by his analysis of the beauty of love in marriage but he clearly teaches the evil of contraception: “No one should entertain any confused doubt or false hopes on the point; the Church has not decided these practices are immoral, she has merely confirmed what the natural law already said about them. The use of contraceptives artificially perverts an act which, by itself, would be able to tend to its reproductive end.” The Cardinal holds that contraception is an “essential denial of conjugal communion which it secretly disintegrates and turns into deceit and self-seeking whereas it should be an act of reciprocal giving.”

A French writer, in *Family Planning and Modern Problems* (Herder and Herder: 1961), S. De Lestapis, S.J. takes the same unequivocal position with regard to contraception. With regard to the use of the “pill” for contraceptive purposes he

would agree with Frs. Ford and Kelly; "...if ovulation is deliberately stopped 'so as to preserve the uterus and the female organs from a pregnancy which they are unable to tolerate', it is unlawful and, as the Pope [Pius XII] makes clear, 'Certain moralists claim that it is lawful to take drugs with this end in view (to prevent conception by preventing ovulation) but they are wrong.'" Total or periodic continence is the only means that he will allow, and he shows that it is the only one consistent with the true charity demanded in marriage. His work, emphasizing as it does the population problem and various solutions offered to it could well be considered a companion volume to the book we are reviewing. Fr. de Lestapis' factual and historical study of the emerging "contraceptive civilization" should dampen the ardor of any but the most hardened advocate of contraception. The way whole nations have embraced contraception and then turned against life itself to approve abortion, sterilization, and finally euthanasia makes chilling if not fascinating reading. Father de Lestapis' book provides strong empirical support for the doctrine so well defended in *Marriage Questions*. Clearly, leading continental theologians espouse the same doctrine as the two American moralists whose book we are reviewing here. It is not a question of a view attributable to any narrow school of thought but rather a question of the doctrine of the Catholic Church. Whoever advocates contraception will have to meet these writers on their own grounds where reason and logic and law and tradition must be respected; emotional appeals "to do something" will not suffice.

Some were no doubt impressed by the publicity given in certain sections of the local press to the fact that "the prestigious Fr. John A. O'Brien, President of the Catholic Notre Dame University, has recently expressed alarm over the recently disclosed facts that 30 to 40 per cent of U.S. Catholics use birth control methods not necessarily that which is sanctioned by the Church." The writer went on to say that Fr. O'Brien urged that a meeting be held to see what should be done. The inference is that he wants to change the doctrine of the Church on contraception because in the next sentence

we read "Further proof that the Catholic population is agitating for a revision of their Church's stand on birth control is indicated by last February's poll...."

Father O'Brien is prestigious enough without being made "President of Notre Dame University" which he definitely is not. But those who read this article about Fr. O'Brien will no doubt be surprised to know that he also reviewed *Marriage Questions* in *The Priest* for March, 1964 and with no reservations ended his laudatory review with the words, "Fathers Ford and Kelly have placed the priests of America and of the entire English-speaking world in their debt with this superb work. It is a *must* [underscoring in original] for confessors, pastors, teachers, seminarians and all serious teachers of this subject. It merits top rank in all lists of scholarly works on marriage". And this about a book which teaches explicitly and firmly that the doctrine of the Church on contraception is immutable!

We might also recall that you can prove just about anything with statistics. In fact there is a book written on that very subject, telling you exactly how to do it, if I remember rightly. In this case you could poll those Catholics who are practicing birth-control and, almost for sure, they would say that they are dissatisfied with the teaching of the Church on the matter. And you could poll those who don't go to Mass on Sunday and they would probably express dissatisfaction with the law obliging them to attend Sunday Mass. And, no doubt, those who have abandoned their first spouse and obtained a divorce and remarried would tell a pollster that they believe that something should be done about the Church's laws forbidding divorce and remarriage. And so on down the line. But the Church is not running a popularity contest nor does she make her laws or adapt them to suit the latest Gallup poll. The commission given by Christ was not to teach all nations whatsoever they vote for and approve, but rather "whatsoever I have commanded you". And to make sure that the teaching was correct Christ added: "And behold I am with you all days even to the end of time".

And if a Catholic mother chooses to tell the world "Why I Believe in Birth Control" in a popular weekly, we must consider not her emotional arguments but her moral or theological positions since this is a question of basic Christian morality. At one point she openly states that the end is the main criterion of morality ("Surely the intent and purpose of an act are the main criteria of its morality") and then ends with a flourish on a rhetorical question asking the reader whether or not it wouldn't "be more honest to accept an open attitude which lets Roman Catholics examine the various positions and possibilities on this issue, an attitude which considers the decision as to what method is satisfactory in any particular case to be essentially a matter of private conscience?" In these two statements she shows that she has, knowingly or unknowingly, embraced the Protestant position of private judgment and situation ethics which has been condemned by the Church. The Protestants, specifically we should say the Anglicans, leave to the private conscience the judgment on the means of limiting the family. They also allow, albeit reluctantly, abortion, sterilization, and divorce. Perhaps the next article we will read of this genre will plead for divorce. In fact it would be interesting to see just how this article would read if the word divorce were substituted for birth control!

Those who read the chapters on periodic continence (rhythm) may be concerned more with the practical problem of its reliability. A recent article in *Jubilee* (March, 1964), "Help For Big Families" shows how "a special project at St. Vincent's Hospital shows that under proper conditions the rhythm method is highly reliable". This is very encouraging in the light of all the negative opinions that we run into from time to time. There were 300 women volunteers in the project. Only ten became pregnant and "the doctors—and the women—attribute the pregnancies not to any deficiency in the system, but to what the doctors call 'patient failure'. The women did not follow the doctors' instructions and observe the specified period of abstinence." There must be precision in determining the cycle and with proper training it can be done. The project was so successful that some believe that "eventually every Catholic hospital in the country [U.S.] will



offer rhythm clinic services." One woman volunteer made a remark that exploded nearly all the emotional arguments offered by the moderns who love to attack rhythm. She said: "there is a wonderful peace of mind in knowing you are trying to live according to God's laws."

Also in line with the empirical side of rhythm we might cite a Mill Hill priest, author and lecturer, Fr. Arthur McCormack of England, an expert on the world population problem. In a recent interview he predicted that the present controversy on birth control will soon be ended since new methods of perfecting the rhythm method "are in the laboratories and have gone even further". He predicts that "in the next few years contraceptives will become as out-of-date as the Model T Ford". Experiments being made include simple tests, one of them a saliva test, and an electronic minute transistor capsule that could reveal and even foretell ovulation accurately. He affirms that the present stage of experiment augurs well for the perfecting of these techniques and when perfected they will so facilitate the use of rhythm that all other methods will be obsolete. Fr. McCormack believes that the "pill" will be perfected as an aid to the licit use of rhythm. He rejects its use as a contraceptive.

These recent findings will make more meaningful the chapters on periodic continence by Frs. Ford and Kelly and their insistence on the new pastoral approach according to the teaching of Pius XII. Responsibility for the size and proper care of the family rests with the parents. The priest does not give permission to practice rhythm; it is the decision of the parents to be made, if they wish, with the help of the priest. And the priest should be understanding and sympathetic, knowing that the pastoral approach of "cautious insinuation" of the practice of rhythm has been made obsolete by Pius XII. Responsible parenthood can be a truly Christian approach to marriage provided that it puts "the things of God's supernatural order in the first place". Since science has made available a legitimate method of regulating births, the area of human freedom has been enlarged and consequently the area of personal decision-making. "Christian prudence requires that this

method must be taken into consideration along with other factors when these personal decisions are to be made."

We would not do full justice to Frs. Ford and Kelly if we did not mention the inspirational value of their treatise. Their chapters on conjugal love and on Christian Marriage as a Vocation open up rich veins of thought for the pastoral guidance of Catholics who wish to rise to the full challenge of their marriage in Christ. The authors remind us, in case we have forgotten, that "the most important Catholic statement on marriage of our century, [is] the encyclical *Casti Connubii*". As we know, it begins with the words: "How great is the dignity of chaste wedlock", and spells out in detail the meaning of their supernatural vocation in Christian marriage, the "great sacrament" of St. Paul.

Written at a time when there is so much discussion and so much confusion about marriage and its very purpose and nature, the authors have indeed placed a milestone along the path to understanding and appreciation of this great sacrament which is a symbol of the indissoluble union of Christ with the Church. Every priest and the laity who are married or contemplating marriage will be richer for reading this book.

GERALD W. HEALY