

philippine studies

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

The Birth Control Controversy: The Birth Control Debate

Review Author: Vitaliano R. Gorospe, S.J.

Philippine Studies vol. 17, no. 4 (1969): 833–836

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.

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

battle but lose the war", that is, divest themselves of the recognition and respect attributed to professionals?

With its bold print, effective subheadings, carefully designed charts, tables, graphs, recent statistics and suitable references, the book affords new insight into educational problems on a national scale. Much of the content is provocative to the extent that it may stimulate professional trends in other countries.

MAUREEN MCCARTHY

THE BIRTH CONTROL CONTROVERSY

CONTROVERSY: THE BIRTH CONTROL DEBATE 1958-1968.

By Ambrogio Valsecchi. Translated by Dorothy White. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968.

Ambrogio Valsecchi is a moral theology professor of the Claretianum in Rome. His book is a survey of the teaching of Catholic moral theologians both in Europe and America in the last ten years on the birth control issue. As such Valsecchi's review is already a distinct contribution. Valsecchi gives a fine summary of the theological discussion on the pill and other contraceptive methods, on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, and on the various positions assumed since the Council. He brings up to date J. T. Noonan's now well-known historical survey of the treatment of contraception by Catholic theologians and canonists.

Far from putting an end to the birth control debate, Pope Paul VI's Encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, has only added fire to the current controversy. The significance of Valsecchi's documented study, notwithstanding the fact that it had gone to press before the Encyclical, is brought out by Gregory Baum, O.S.A. in his introduction to the book. The special nature of the dissent expressed by a large number of theologians all over the world against *Humanae Vitae's* absolute ban on artificial contraception brings to the fore the central issue at stake raised by the Encyclical, namely, the new understanding of the Magisterium or teaching authority of the Church. *Humanae Vitae* is a test case of non-collegial teaching which is a departure from the teaching and spirit of Vatican II. In the case of non-infallible and therefore reformable doctrine of the magisterium, religious assent is conditional, i.e., there are conditions under which it is licit for a Catholic to dissent from an official position. Dissent is not identical with conflict against the teaching authority of the Church; it cannot be assumed that a Catholic who conscientiously disagrees

with the non-infallible teaching of *Humanae Vitae* is necessarily disloyal. As Gregory Baum puts it, "The present crisis over the papal encyclical brings to light the need for greater pluriformity in unity of the Catholic Church." (p. xx)

Valsecchi's survey in itself offers solid and convincing theological grounds for dissent from the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. Since the direction and weight of theological reflection in the last ten years tended to favor change in the Church's traditional position, one can hardly expect the majority of Catholics to find the reasoning of *Humanae Vitae* sufficient to settle the birth control question. One source for the development of the Church's moral teaching is the reflection of moral theologians. Now the wide spectrum of conflicting theological opinion up to the eve of the Papal Encyclical is already a strong and converging indication that the birth control question is far from settled. It remains an open question and hence the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* against contraception could be changed. Herein lies the significance of Valsecchi's study.

Whether or not Prof. Valsecchi succeeds in summarizing accurately the positions of the various theologians is not for this reviewer to say. Suffice it to present the general orientation of the birth control debate as reviewed by Valsecchi. The birth control debate began with the discussion of the therapeutic and non-therapeutic uses of the pill. This discussion broadened into the extended use of the pill to regularize the female cycle, or during lactation, or when the threat of violent assault was imminent. It became theologically evident that the cure of a pathological condition is not the only justification for the use of progestational drugs. Furthermore, present day medical knowledge shows that clinical treatment hardly ever raises the moral problem of ovulatory inhibition. In the sphere of moral teaching, two main arguments have been advanced for the licit use of the pill. First, the principle of totality applied to the problem of sterilization was extended so as to include the spiritual good of the person. A new ethical concept of sterilization emerged, namely, the pill may be used in case of self-defense or as an aid to nature for the sake of personal spiritual values. Second, with regard to the essential problem of the extent of man's dominion over his procreative faculty, the emphasis on personal rather than biological criteria for sexual morality became more and more the theological trend. The opinion which maintained the legitimacy of the contraceptive use of the pill under certain conditions, can be said to be the opinion of most moral theologians today.

With regard to other contraceptive methods, the first critical attack on the traditional doctrine of the Church against contraception focused on the distinction between the fertility of an individual act and the fertility of marriage as a whole. All Catholic theologians accepted

the fundamental principle of *Humanae Vitae*, namely the inseparable unity between love and fertility in marital sexuality, but they denied the application of the principle to every single act of sexual intercourse in marriage. Hence a large majority of theologians concluded that if a marriage was oriented towards love and children in general, there may well be situations where contraceptive sexual intercourse is permissible and good. According to Valsecchi's survey, an investigation of Catholic tradition reveals that the Church did not formulate an irrevocable doctrine against contraception. The teaching of Pius XI and Pius XII was shown by the weight of theological opinion to have been based on an outdated concept of human sexuality.

Valsecchi gives a helpful summary of the history of the conciliar debates that preceded the final draft of the Second Vatican Council's doctrine on marriage and the family. Vatican II made it clear that the essential meaning of marriage is conjugal love and responsible parenthood and that the morality of the conjugal act is to be judged not on the principle of biological integrity but on the nature of the human person and his acts. Besides the personalistic emphasis then, the Council adopted the principle of totality within the context of marriage. The principle of totality which focuses on marriage as a whole instead of individual marital acts had become the theological trend among moral theologians prior to Vatican II. It is in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that the contribution of moral theologians towards the development of the Church's moral teaching is most manifest. An examination of the two main positions assumed since Vatican II — those against and those in favor of change in the Church's doctrine against artificial birth control — still left open the problem of the legitimacy of various methods of birth control. In his conclusion to the book, Prof. Valsecchi states that "we must assign to man a more active and extended control over his natural functions in order that he may promote his personal development in a more ordered evolution of society." And in answer to the question of what is meant by 'nature' and 'natural', Valsecchi replies that "it is more 'unnatural' to submit to the determinism of biological processes than to control them and direct them in a responsible manner to that end." (p. 211).

In the Philippine Church where the climate of opinion is still one of caution and fear of change, Prof. Valsecchi's concluding practical advice is worth quoting in full:

First of all, no one must harbour the illusion, or the fear, that Christian morality for married people is becoming lax; every time the discussion turned on the values to be safeguarded, as theologians have pointed out in recent years whenever the sexual conduct of married couples has been under review, the relevant principles have appeared more and more

authoritative, and the moral law more binding. Moreover, no one must doubt the good faith of the more 'progressive' moralists: they have had more to lose by the new trend of thought than any other Christians, especially as in the past they were all, except the youngest group, pledged to defend in all honesty and loyalty the position then generally held (p. 212).

This reviewer believes that Valsecchi's advice is a healthy antidote to *Humanae Vitae's* stricture against the sexual abuses that will result if artificial birth control were allowed by the Pope. Valsecchi's book is highly recommended reading for bishops, priests, teachers, and the better educated and more conscience-directed Catholic couples. It is an invaluable reference and sourcebook for the moral theologian.

VITALIANO R. GOROSPE, S.J.