

A Failure of Vision

CONTRACEPTION AND THE NATURAL LAW, by Germain G. Grisez. Bruce, 1964. 245 pp., \$4.50.

There are times when a work has such a limited conceptual framework, when its basic propositions are given such narrow interpretations and with such a stunning absolute-ness, when an author uses such charged terms as "honest minds" for those agreeing with him or "pseudo-religious personalism" for a philosophy that escapes him, that it becomes difficult to remain composed enough to review the work with objectivity. Such is the case with Grisez's text, published presumably to advance and deepen the present birth control discussion.

On page ninety-eight, for example, Grisez summarizes his position. He states: "Major: For one who has sexual intercourse to act in a way which presupposes an intention opposed to the procreative good is intrinsically immoral. Minor: Contraception is an act—the prevention or lessening of the likelihood of conception by any positive deed directly willed for this purpose—of one who has sexual intercourse which presupposes an intention opposed to the procreative good. Conclusion: Contraception is intrinsically immoral." All that many would say at this point is *nego majorem*, admittedly a strong assertion, particularly for a premise that is claimed to be an evident deduction from an insight based on man's practical reason. However, as the major is understood throughout the text, it becomes clear that what separates those who agree with the author's understanding of it from those who disagree is simply one's vision of reality—not one's ability to reason subtly and with clarity, as the author implies.

What the author is defending here is not the procreative good of marriage as such, but rather a structuring of the role of sex in marriage which subordinates *each* act, *always* and *everywhere* to the procreative

good or, if this is not done, sees these acts as simply reprehensible ventures into sexual release. Although the author occasionally and with reluctance admits that there are psychological and other *secondary* factors which may be operative in sexual intercourse (as when rhythm is employed), he maintains, nevertheless, that in any case the procreative good must never be directly violated. This is simply asserted in the name of practical reason and based on the staggering evidence that children result from intercourse and have for a long time now—all of which gives the reader the impression that he is confronting some type of mystique rather than a reasoned conclusion.

Grisez claims that he is defending a human material good against a false dichotomy, introduced by the situationists, of material goods vs. personal values. ("Situationists" are any of those confused people who use such words as "dialogue," "authenticity," or "personal fulfillment." They are accused of influencing much contemporary philosophy and theology, yet Grisez finds it almost impossible to name them, not to mention giving an exact statement of their tenets.) What is objectionable here is not Grisez's unfamiliarity with many sound theological contributions stressing a personalist framework, but his approach, which is one that refuses to recognize the hierarchy, not dichotomy, of values that constitute man.

What Grisez seems to be unaware of as he castigates as almost "idolatrous" those values that override his absolute procreative value, is that the Christian God is not encountered or contained in some type of supernatural box above us. Rather it is He in whom we live and move and have our being; it is He whom we love when we love our wife, our children, and our neighbor; it is He who reveals Himself to us in and through our love for our neighbor and in our own striving for authentic personal fulfillment. Sex in a love-marriage—an ideal all married

people should strive for—is always procreative, but it is procreative of mutual growth and gift to each other of husband and wife. And it is from such a growing love-union that a child comes forth as a sign and further cause of love. The integrating and sanctifying role of sex must continue if that child is to grow to physical and psychological maturity.

To speak of sex in marriage in other terms, to analyze the stimulus and onset of orgasm in statistical and physical terms, as the present work does, is to verge on irreverence. To speak of the ban on contraception as compelling the mutual growth of love in marriage, just as civil rights legislation compels equal external behavior, is to evidence an existential understanding of love which astounds the reader because of its psychological naïveté. What is "supernaturalized" in a sacramental marriage, in a most profound way, is the sex-love of both partners. Chastity in marriage is the growth in the use of sex in its relational capacity, not the use or non-use of sex as found in the unmarried. Sexual joy in marriage includes but certainly transcends genital stimulation—yet the author persistently thinks of it in terms of this limited area of physical contact.

Admittedly Grisez has effectively done away with the simplistic understanding of the outmoded faculty-theory and has also shown that a significant moral judgment cannot be based on the various properties of physics and/or chemistry. Yet one should note that many other authors have made these points since this question has been openly discussed.

As with the sea around us—so vital to our life yet so little understood—there is much to learn about the reality of sexuality and marriage love. In order to do this we need men of wide vision and profound human sentiment; we need philosophers who can still wonder before reality. There is little of these qualities in the present text.

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