

PERSPECTIVES

A Magazine Relating Religion to Our Times

Volume X

May-June

Number 3

Witness to Love

GERALD J. GARGIULO

IN THEOLOGY, as in man's other intellectual disciplines, ours is a tentative age. It is an age searching for depth, seeking fuller meaning, yet cautious of any definitive formulation of that meaning. It is an age when the Church, critically examining her history and institutions, is looking hopefully to the future of man. It is an age that has rediscovered the person, and within the Church this discovery has become meaningful in the theology of marriage. One of the focal points for concretizing this "personal" insight is the question of birth control.

In the relatively short time that this question has been openly discussed, a number of books, articles, and talks have dealt extensively with it. The following will be an attempt to summarize the pertinent insights of this discussion as a context for understanding and re-evaluating what has been called the traditional teaching on the subject. We can study the present discussion by analyzing three recurring themes: the concept of natural law; the full significance of human sexuality in marriage; and the function of personal conscience. Yet even these divisions approach the question in too general a manner. Perhaps the following questions can serve to synthesize the developments in these three areas. In reference to natural law, we may ask: How are we to understand the terms natural and unnatural? Seeking to better understand human sexuality, we may inquire: What is the role of sex as a sign and cause of love in a Christian marriage? And in searching for an authentic norm for personal conscience, we may ask: What is the full significance and meaning of Christian maturity?

Natural-unnatural

The terms natural and unnatural can have several meanings. One might equate man's given physical situation with natural and, by way of result, consider anything to be unnatural which man's industry produced.

Gerald J. Gargiulo

This view, although perhaps satisfying within a mechanistic framework, is too primitive to be meaningful. On a deeper level one might consider natural all those psychological factors which impel one to meaningful action and unnatural all those sociological, cultural, or even religious mores which inhibit such action. Obviously in such a framework the emphasis would be on *meaningful action*, for example, the growth and expression of mutual love and personal integrity, as in the case of married couples. Even with this qualification, however, this distinction would appear rather arbitrary. Finally, one might state that the distinction between natural and unnatural, insofar as it has moral significance, can only be grasped after a total study of the circumstances, intention, and the human values involved in an action. In this view anything is "morally natural" which fosters man's intelligent confrontation with the world around him and which serves as a means toward positive, personal, and in the present case, marital fulfillment; and the norm for unnatural would be anything which offends personal dignity, personal integrity, or personal creativeness. Although this view has underlined many of the more recent approaches to the birth-control question, and is shared by this writer, there is a danger of building upon the conclusions of a metaphysical insight without giving some of the considerations which lead toward that insight.

One of these considerations is that in a world which has such clear knowledge of the historical, developmental aspects of man and of the growth of human consciousness it is incomprehensible to speak of an absolute norm for human nature in such terms as to deny all the dynamic existential situations in which man finds himself. Correlative to this evolutionary perspective is the insight that it is man's task and goal to penetrate matter with intelligence and to bring order and direction to the physical, psychological, cultural, and economic worlds he lives in. Biology and related sciences indicate that man's superiority lies in his unique capacity to adapt to his surroundings — climatic, social, psychological, to name but a few; and this adaptation implies a

meaningful, conscious control over all the factors involved. Man is a composite of material and spiritual elements, and in case of conflict the spiritual-personal is always of ultimate significance. Consequently it is most *unnatural* for man not to confront his life situation in anything less than a dynamic and personal manner.

It is within such a framework that we must develop a more realistic theology of marriage. The fact that some, in discussing birth control, talk about the end of the act (*finis operis*) in terms exclusively connotative of a static biological functionalism betrays that they are speaking a language incomprehensible and meaningless to contemporary man. (It is interesting to note that these terms are never employed, for example, when discussing the use of the cortisone drug or of plastic surgery to correct a "natural" fault — all the more reason for questioning their significance in relation to human sexuality.) Many of the men of vision of this century have reiterated that man is part of this totality we call nature and his role is to direct it, to humanize it, to bring consciousness to the fore and to do this in the service of personal dignity. This more dynamic approach used as a framework for moral questions in no way asserts a "situational ethic," for the norm, the objective norm for a thing's "naturalness" is its relation to the reality of personal dignity, personal integrity.

Within this framework contraception can be seen as a moral evil, as morally unnatural, only through the use of any means which serve the selfish, arbitrary goals of the persons involved. Contraception taken in any other sense, contraception analyzed solely in terms of a static biological functionalism negates man's dynamic and meaningful role in the world. Again, contraception, if it is to be submitted to a relevant moral judgment, must always have the note of arbitrariness or selfishness about it to be sinful. For example, to deny the procreative aspect of the total marriage project with the excuse that one didn't want to be bothered with children, would be an arbitrary decision.

To categorize, as some recent discussion has done, Aristotelian-Thomistic categories as static and impersonal and contemporary insights as dynamic and personalistic can be misleading. Rather these are traits of particular psychological makeups. For there are theologians who will stay within the traditional philosophical framework and, using its terms, give a dynamic-personal dimension to all of them. What we are suggesting here is that any approach that has a simplistic notion of natural and unnatural is unintelligible for modern man.

Marriage-love

Sex in a love-marriage should be the means of a deeply personal knowledge of God. It is not enough to say that sex in marriage is a sign of love; rather it plays an essential causative role in man's learning to love, that is, learning to relate to others. For sex in a love-marriage is always relational; it is always produc-

tive of personal growth and, within the totality of marriage, it also stands as a call for children as the realization of all its goals. It brings the husband and wife to a recognition of each other, since each spouse's love is a call to the other to respond and to respond by total gift. Man, being the time-space incarnate creature that he is, signifies his personal stance, responds to the other in marriage, only over a period of time. At no moment are all these love goals achieved; however, they are the only context in which we can appreciate the full reality of human sex as seen in the marriage vocation.

Within such a framework it is rather irreverent and existentially meaningless to construct the dichotomy of sex for procreation or for "physical pleasure." "Physical pleasure," in the sense that that term would have any meaning for an unmarried person, is simply not had in a love-marriage. Sex in marriage is always meaningful because of its personal relational significance. In point of fact the physical pleasure is more intense and authentically human when the intention of each spouse is to satisfy and to strengthen the other. Chastity is a meaningful value in marriage, but it is not the chastity of the unmarried, the latter being a virtue conceived basically in terms of celibacy. Chastity in marriage means the use of sex within the context of mutual personal gift. And frequently the full meaning of this insight becomes personally significant only when a person is living the reality of marriage. Outside of that experience, independent of all the empathy that one may possess, there is the distinct danger of overintellectualizing the depth of the creative force of sex in human existence.

Here we should note that one's cultural-sociological view of woman and consequently of sex in marriage is formative of one's approach to this question. What the more recent opinion reflects is that many voices, particularly the voice of the married layman, are trying to convey a more realistic framework for theologians discussing marriage. The layman is witnessing to his understanding of, and the obvious social significance of, the personal dignity and creative capacities of woman, inclusive of but beyond the basic capacity of child-bearing. Woman need no longer redeem herself in the home and society by simply producing members for that society. Moreover, many would say that in a world already burdened by overpopulation, by sickness, by poverty, by ignorance, by superstition, by fear — that in such a world God's will is that woman aid man in his task of *qualitative* improvement in human life.

To do otherwise, to concentrate primarily on a further *quantitative* growth, would suggest an unnatural stance and possibly an offense against God's providence, a providence that can never be interpreted as dispensing man from rational insight and intelligent prognosticative planning. This is a providence that is frequently made evident in the historical development of man, rather than by some type of *deus ex machina* intervention. Man's rational control of the world and

growth in consciousness are signs of God's providence, not the antithesis of it.

Even with this cursory presentation of some of the more recent themes of sex and marriage, it is evident that what is involved are two different theological perspectives. (And frequently the perspective chosen by an individual will reflect his training, his life-situation, and his psychological preoccupations.) It seems to many that a theology that speaks of contraception in simply physical terms, that considers sex-love as really, in case of conflict, quite secondary, that speaks of woman in terms which extol biological fecundity — such a theology is simply too limited in scope to be meaningful or effective in conveying God's will to contemporary man.

Personal conscience

The present renewal in the Church has focused light on the problem of authority and individual conscience, particularly in terms of an authority which has many marks of an oppressive legalism rather than of a witness of service within the Church. Likewise, many contemporary thinkers are re-emphasizing the radically personal decision involved in the act of faith and all the consequences that follow from this. And within this renewal no serious theologian is suggesting a type of arbitrary autonomous subjectivism when contrasting personal integrity and ecclesiastical authority. Yet what many are suggesting, and this is seen particularly in the birth-control issue, is that we must guarantee the freedom of faith; we must witness to the fact that God is a most personal God; we must lead people toward Christian maturity when discussing personal conscience. To speak of personal conscience as the ultimate norm of morality is certainly not new; to realize all the existential implications of this statement is new within the Catholic fold today.

The Church stands as an efficacious witness to God's salvific love for man in Jesus Christ; and part of this witness is her sharing in Christ's prophetic teaching mission. This teaching role, however, cannot be conceived of as dispensing the individual from striving after personal maturity and personal insight. Even the Church's most solemn manner of teaching, through the power of infallibility, can never be interpreted as if dispensing the individual from seeking after truth. The Church is a witness to God's truth and this truth includes all the factors of personal, intellectual, and moral integrity as part of its most fundamental reality. Thus what is basic to the Church's teaching is that the person should love God freely, seek personal integrity, and realize that in many areas of decision, because of the uniqueness of the situation, all that the Church wishes to say is that one must make a mature Christian decision; it does not, and in fact cannot, tell exactly what maturity in this situation means for the person. What we are describing here is not merely a person's subjective right of invincible error, with the implication that actually the Church does have all the existential answers and anyone not agreeing with them is at best

immature. In the present question of birth control, to speak as if the Church has given the absolute definitive answer, to absolutize authority — and here obviously not authority within the context of infallibility — as if to imply that the Church dispenses from or precludes personal decision is to speak in meaningless language and is against the most authentic lived insights of contemporary man.

Christian maturity

To speak of Christian maturity in marriage is to indicate that a person must see his acts as signs of love and not merely as acts conforming with some type of legal correctness. To speak of maturity is to state that one must carefully weigh the insights of reason and the norms given by the Church, and then concretize these factors by a personal decision made before the living God. To speak of maturity in Christian marriage is to be aware that man must always analyze his motives, always strive for marital chastity, always respect the dignity of religious authority, but pervading all of these considerations is the truth that in the twilight of life we will be judged on love. To speak of maturity in the light of the present question is clearly to realize that no physical act is intrinsically evil independent of intentional and volitional orientation — if we are speaking of meaningful human moral acts. And finally to speak of maturity in the present question is to underline the fact that a man must make a judgment as to the hierarchy of human and Christian values involved in an action and respond to the demands of those values. (Such values as the harmony and happiness of the marriage or the education and total life preparation of the children are greatly jeopardized for many couples by the traditional teaching on complete sexual abstinence and/or rhythm.)

Crucial to these recent considerations is that in the question of birth regulation we are in an area where the individual couple, and only the individual couple, can make the final decision. This is not by way of exception but by way of personal right. For only the couple involved know the intimate and delicate role of sex in symbolizing and causing mutual growth in the Christian perfection of themselves, of their marriage, and of their obligations to their children.

Life is light and shadows. Each man must strive for the light; and this is not a private privilege but a personal obligation. Perhaps what the question on birth control most poignantly exposes is the need to foster, to educate toward maturity. In a world that is still racked with such individual selfishness, with such a false notion of sex and love, with such immaturity, it is imperative that all who seek the light speak in meaningful terms so that the witness of Christian marriage be a proclamation of God's care and personal love.