

## TENSION, MORALITY, AND BIRTH CONTROL

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THE CHURCH today apparently faces a dilemma in the birth-control issue. Each of the possibilities open to her appears to be dogmatically embarrassing. On the one hand, the Church may reaffirm her traditional teaching banning contraception and thus seem to ignore the findings of modern studies and the experiences of sincere Catholic couples. Such a reaffirmation might provoke a crisis of faith on the part of intelligent and faithful modern Catholics. On the other hand, the Church may reverse her stand and admit that modern discoveries have rendered her position obsolete. Such a reversal would undermine her whole authoritative structure by admitting that the continuous teaching of the magisterium has been wrong in the past and hence can always be mistrusted in the present. Nor would it help to claim that there has been a development in human conditions and human nature that has rendered a formerly valid teaching obsolete; for the developments in question were already realities when the popes were universally declaring that contraception was immoral.

There are other possibilities. The Church may concede that she does not know the answer to the problem. In this case Catholics would be free to follow their own personal views, and ultimately they will come to distrust a magisterium that long affirmed as certain what it did not really know. Or the Church may subscribe to a number of faulty casuistic solutions that begin by asserting the ban on contraception but end by allowing exceptions that effectively negate that ban. These cases open the Church to the charge of face-saving, dishonesty, and the refusal to admit its past doctrinal failings.

Admittedly the Church is in an embarrassing position. For years she has failed to create a climate in which experts and those personally involved could openly discuss problems. Such discussion was and is necessary in this case—and even in the case of defined doctrine—not because what has been taught is wrong, but because what has been taught is inevitably incomplete and subject to further clarification.

Since this embarrassing position exists, it should be atoned for by action and not by blaming men of the past. It would be a mistake,

however, to think that the alternative courses of action listed above are the only courses open to the Church. All these alternatives assume that there is a contradiction between the traditional position of the Church and modern insights. If one is right, then the other must be wrong. The assumed dilemma ignores the possibility of a higher viewpoint that would encompass the real values inherent in both positions.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to propose such a higher viewpoint. This viewpoint, forged of elements in dogma that have been stressed in recent years, will attempt to show that what has seemed to be irreconcilable is in fact reconcilable. It will do this not by setting forth an *ad hoc* solution to the vexing birth-control problem, but by suggesting general principles that will apply equally to this issue and to a number of analogous issues whose frequency will probably increase in the future. It is due to the general nature of the proposed solution that we begin with some general notions of morality.

#### PERTINENT ASPECTS OF MORALITY IN GENERAL

##### *The Nature of Man*

To lay a foundation for the meaning of morality and moral laws, we must indicate some aspects of man as he exists in the modern world of sin and redemption. Three points should be emphasized concerning the following analysis. First, it is not intended to be exhaustive but only sufficient for our specific purposes. Second, the concepts used represent realities in man and in his situation which are inextricably united in the concrete, though they are separated in our treatment for the purposes of discussion. Third, we are presuming and summarizing a good deal of recent dogmatic progress in understanding and insight.

*Man is "naturally" Christian.* By this we mean that every man from the first moment of his existence partially images Jesus Christ. When the Son of God entered creation, He exhausted in His humanity that

<sup>1</sup>This ignoring of the possibility of a superior reconciling viewpoint is a common phenomenon in the history of the Church. The doctrine of biblical inerrancy is a typical instance. For centuries the Church believed the Scriptures were without error. When the critics began to find a whole series of chronological, geographical, and historical errors, there were those whose first impulse was to assume that if the critics were right (as seemed evident), then the Church's old position was necessarily wrong. Actually, of course, the old teaching of the Church and the findings of the critics can be reconciled in a higher viewpoint that takes into account the significance of literary forms and findings of linguistic studies.

which was possible to human nature. He became the fulness of man, the Son of Man, *the* Man. All other men who have ever lived are but partial reflections of the created divine Image that is He who is the "image of the invisible God, the first-born of every creature" (Col 1:15).<sup>2</sup>

*Man is free.* He is capable of affirming or denying his presently possessed image of Christ and his present relationship to other beings. In that affirmation or denial he becomes other than what he now is. Man can shape his future existence, at least to some extent, because he is free.

*Man is an intrinsically dynamic personal being.* This follows from the fact that man is free. It means that man, as image, is so constituted that he is obligated to become more than he is. Man must grow in wisdom and age and grace and become more truly and more distinctly the unique image of Christ that he is.

*Man shares a common nature with other men, but has his own unique modifications.* Each man shares with other men some aspects of the model upon whom all men are patterned, Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that all men can be said to have the same nature. At the same time, each man possesses these common aspects in a unique though complementary way.

*Man is a creature of relationships.* He cannot exist, much less arrive at his full potential, without the material universe which provides his food, clothing, shelter, etc. Nor can he fully exist as man without other human persons who impart to him complementary aspects of *the* Man, Jesus Christ, who stimulate his own personal growth, who make possible a development of the social virtues. Nor can he arrive at his goal without a personal relationship to Christ Himself, and through Christ and in union with Christ to God the Father. Thus man is a creature who by nature is personally orientated toward the whole

<sup>2</sup> This assertion of man being "naturally" Christian cannot be proved here. It is rooted in the biblical doctrine of Christ as the image of God, the Son of Man, the last Adam, the new creation—all designations that are related in a lesser sense to every man. Some of it appears in Tertullian's famous phrase about the soul being naturally Christian (*Apologeticum* 17, 6). In recent theological writing it can be seen reflected in the theory of the supernatural existential (Karl Rahner, S.J., *Theological Investigations* 1 [Baltimore, 1961] 297-317), combined with the growing emphasis upon the Christological nature of grace. Cf. Emile Mersch, *The Theology of the Mystical Body* (St. Louis, 1952) pp. 455-78.

universe and ultimately to its Creator. Any man who would not be so orientated would cease to be man.<sup>3</sup>

*Man is concupiscent.* In his current condition he is incapable of freely affirming or denying in a complete way the reality of his own Christ-image, the reality of his relationship to his fellow men, and the reality of his relationship to God in Christ. A total affirmation or denial is possible only at death. Until then, each man in varying degrees is only partially capable of affirming and implementing, or denying, what his concrete nature demands in itself and in its relationship to God and to other creatures.<sup>4</sup>

*Man's moral stature is shaped by the age and culture in which he lives.* The qualities of man that we have affirmed above never exist in a vacuum. They only exist in a given age and a given culture. That age and culture affect, shape, and modify—though they never destroy—the above-mentioned qualities. Just as each act of a man helps form his character by modifying these qualities as they exist in him, so too the characteristics of an age or culture leave their effects on him. Thus, in a sophisticated age the average man will face more complex relationships, encounter more complex moral questions, and develop a more complex moral attitude (for better or for worse) toward the world about him. He will be quite different than he would have been had he lived in a primitive society.

#### *The General Nature of Morality in a Fallen and Redeemed World*

The moral law is basically the common law of growth obligating existing man, the man whose nature we have sketched above. Grounded in man's nature there is an impetus or imperative to grow; so-called moral laws merely explicit or express this prior existing imperative.

Regarding morality in general, we can make the following statements. First, man's freedom and his dynamic nature are its foundation. For it is man's freedom that makes it possible for him to grow by affirming

<sup>3</sup> For a brief biblical view of the social nature of man, see J. W. Flight, "Man and Society," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 3 (Nashville, 1962) pp. 250–52. For a recent modern view, see John Walgrave, *Person and Society: A Christian View* (Pittsburgh, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Space limitations prevent our giving an extended explanation of the notion of concupiscence. For a profound treatment, see Karl Rahner, *op. cit.*, pp. 347–82. Cf. Ladislaus Boros, S.J., *The Mystery of Death* (New York, 1965).

values presented to him. (He may also personally deteriorate by denying these values.) But the dynamic nature of man, his inner call to growth, places upon him a moral obligation. He must grow. He must affirm and not deny the values inherent in himself and in the relationships that confront him. It is the free and dynamic nature of man, then, that binds him to morality and moral imperatives.

Second, the morality to which each man is bound is Christian morality in that the common human nature which men share and which founds morality is a nature cast in the image of *the Man*, Jesus Christ. Because men are united in the possession of this Christ-image and because they share one another's lives in a common world, they are bound by a common Christian moral law, the law of growth inherent in a free creature made in the likeness of Christ. Of course, the vast majority of men will not expressly denominate the morality binding them as Christian morality, because they do not explicitly recognize their own personal relationship to Christ. But when they recognize in themselves values that they share with other men and when they further recognize the need to affirm and develop these values, they are effectively, if only implicitly, accepting a morality which is in reality Christian.<sup>5</sup>

Third, the first concrete rule of this Christian morality is to truly love oneself; for by embracing all that he is and by acting in accord with the Christ-image that he is, a man grows; he homogeneously develops his own being; he thereby truly loves himself. On the contrary, he sins when he deliberately denies the Christ-image that he is in his activity. He hates himself in that he destroys himself or at least destroys possible and demanded growth in himself. And to the extent that any activity or class of activities by their nature contradict the fulfilment of the common Christ-image in men, to that extent these activities are always wrong.

<sup>5</sup> The fact that all true common morality is Christian is the basis for the Church's claim to teach morality in the name of Christ. It would seem to be a mistake to think that the Church teaches a natural moral law alongside its teaching of divine law; for the law of existing nature is Christian law. Failure to recognize this, coupled with a propositional notion of revelation that expects all revealed moral teaching to be spelled out in Scripture statements, has led a number of writers to conclude that the Church can never exercise her supreme teaching authority in vast areas of morality. See, e.g., the view of J. David, "Kirche und Naturrecht," *Orientierung*, June 15, 1966, as summarized in *Herder Correspondence* 3 (1966) 305.

Fourth, the second concrete rule of this Christian morality is truly to love other persons; for since man is by nature interpersonal, his own growth is intrinsically connected with his respect and love of other persons who complement his own Christ-image. To love another person is truly to become more oneself. On the other hand, to refuse to love one's neighbor is to begin to destroy oneself. Hence, any kind of activity which by its very nature is opposed to the personal welfare of one's neighbor is, to that extent, always wrong.

In short, these two concrete rules of general morality indicate that moral living, if it is to be divinely orientated, must involve the welfare of human persons—oneself and others. On the other hand, sinful conduct is that conduct that leads to the moral destruction of these same human persons.

Fifth, that which Christ calls the first and greatest commandment—"Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, with your whole mind, and with your whole strength"—is really the restatement in ultimate terms of the significance of the two concrete rules of love of self and love of neighbor; for the God whom we love and are called to love completely is the living God who has created a people for Himself. Our love cannot touch Him as He is in Himself, just as our sins cannot harm Him in Himself. But our love of Him is expressed in our love of His creation in Christ, that is, in our love for ourselves and our neighbors. We reach Christ, and the Father through Him, in the full acceptance of the Christ-image that we and our neighbors are.

In other words, to love and perfect God's creatures is to love Him insofar as He turns towards us. It is to love His total activity in us. It is to begin the ascent toward homage to the mystery that He eternally is. Moreover, the unlimited nature of the first commandment—to love God with one's whole heart, soul, mind, and strength—is but another and deeper way of saying that man must always strive toward the most perfect realization of his own person and the persons of those to whom he is related.

Conversely, there is no sin that is only a sin against God. For no sin can directly affect Him. Sin can only be an opposition to God in His creation, and especially in that creature who sums up in himself all of creation, man. To commit a sin against the ultimate demands of the

first commandment is invariably to act against love of oneself and love of one's neighbor.

Sixth, although there may be standard moral imperatives binding on all men that further specify the rules of love of self and love of neighbor, such universally-binding specific moral imperatives can never completely express the law of growth of an individual man; for each man has his own unique characteristics in addition to the common reflection of Christ that he shares with all men, and he is held to develop all that he is, including that uniqueness. Hence, for each man there are additional moral imperatives that supplement the generally-binding moral rules. However, such additional imperatives do not cancel the general moral law binding on all; for they are based not on changes in man's general nature but on the unique qualities of a given representation of that nature.<sup>6</sup>

¶ Finally, the fulfilment of the law of total love of God as concretized in love of self and love of neighbor is an ultimate goal and not an immediately realizable achievement. While every man is held by his free dynamic nature to totally affirm all that he is and to grow by that total affirmation to the full Christ-image to which he is called, he can never fully make that affirmation because of the factor of concupiscence. This divisive factor is present in every man. Augmented by conscious sin and diminished by virtuous striving, it limits in varying degrees each man's capacity to affirm the Christ-image he represents. The more a man has diminished the effects of concupiscence, the holier he is. And the holier he is, the more he affirms what he is. On the other hand, the more a man has augmented the effects of concupiscence in himself, the more sinful he is. And the more sinful he is, the less he is capable of affirming his own Christ-image.<sup>7</sup>

Since no man is held to the impossible, no man can be considered morally responsible for not totally affirming all that he is here and now. Rather, he is responsible for doing all that he can to grow toward the condition of being able to make that affirmation, the condition that is possible only at death (at least in ordinary cases). Thus, the

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations 2* (Baltimore, 1963) 217-34.

<sup>7</sup> See Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (New York, 1965) pp. 81-109; John Knox, *The Ethic of Jesus in the Teaching of the Church* (London, 1961).

saint must use his enormous capacity for further self-affirmation; the great sinner must begin to move toward his truer self. All must move toward the goal, each according to his own capacity.<sup>8</sup>

NATURE OF SPECIFIC MORAL IMPERATIVES AND THE  
PROBLEM THEY PRESENT

Individual moral imperatives or commandments are really only subdivisions or specifications of the two concrete general rules of common Christian morality, respecting a man's own Christ-image and that of his neighbor. They are the specific visible counterparts to the ultimate command to love God in Christ. Even though such imperatives are often stated negatively—you shall not lie, steal, kill—they really mean to affirm positive aspects of reality toward which man must move. Thus, the prohibition against lying is only the negative way of saying that a man must always move toward the adequate expression of what he is and what he knows. The prohibition against stealing is only the negative way of affirming that a man must respect his neighbor in those possessions that enable him to maintain himself. The prohibition against killing is only the negative way of saying that one must respect the very life of other men. The negative way of speaking has the advantage of making obligations more concrete, but it has an inevitable drawback. Morality seems to be an avoidance of evils instead of a positive search for growth.

All specific imperatives present a problem. What is the extent of their validity? Have these specific imperatives absolute validity? Can they ever be contravened? Do they in every case partake of the absolute value of the general commandments to love oneself and one's neighbor? Are they *in concreto* always the manifestation and specific application of these commandments? Or have they only a relative moral validity? Are they rules of thumb that usually implement the two absolute commandments but in a few instances do not concretize these commandments? In other words, can there not be exceptions to these specific imperatives—exceptions based upon the same founda-

<sup>8</sup> We might add that man's impossibility of realizing fully the moral demands directed to him springs not only from his concupiscent concrete nature but also from the fact that he lives in society with other imperfect men. Their influence upon him accentuates his own individual incapacity.



tions that give them validity, i.e., the general obligation to love oneself and one's neighbor as children of God?<sup>9</sup>

In order to reach some conclusion, a basic distinction seems in order: the distinction between the morality of basic human intentionality and the morality of external acts.

We can view individual moral imperatives as applying to basic human intentionality, man's inner desire and will toward certain values. In this case they are always binding and a person must always affirm them, insofar as he can, within the limitations which concupiscence imposes. Thus, a man is always held to love the truth and to desire to be more truthful. To desire to be a liar is to deny his very being. Also, a man is always held to desire to grow in love for the woman to whom he has pledged his whole life. To desire otherwise would be to contradict what he has become as a result of his marital vows. Likewise, a priest is always held to desire whatever is necessary for him to fulfil his vocation as a minister of Christ. To reject or neglect what is necessary is always wrong. Such acts can be said to be intrinsically evil in that they deny in a specific way the law of growth for the individual in question.

However, although we affirm that a man must always strive toward the total inner acceptance of these values, we must admit that concupiscence makes this total acceptance impossible; for just as he is incapable of completely fulfilling the command to love self and neighbor here and now, so too he is incapable of completely fulfilling the various aspects of these general commandments that are expressed in specific moral imperatives. Man cannot be *totally* attached to the truth; he cannot *totally* desire to grow in love of his wife; he cannot *totally* affirm any single value of the moral law. But if man is not held to realize all these values in a perfect manner here and now, he must grow toward the total acceptance of them.

A different situation confronts us when we move from the area of intention to that of external action; for if we can speak with relative ease of certain values that a man may never interiorly reject, it is more difficult to assert that certain specific external acts must always

<sup>9</sup> As an example of the growing interest among Catholics in these questions, see the debate on the new morality between Joseph Fletcher and Herbert McCabe in *Commonweal* 83 (Jan. 14, 1966) 427-40.

be avoided because they invariably represent the rejection of one of the imperatives of the moral law. A number of factors make impossible, at least in some cases, the simple identification of a given external act and a rejection of an absolute imperative of the moral law.

One such factor is the social condition of the time. One basic and unchanging principle of morality is the need to love one's neighbor. This demand and the consequent imperative to avoid whatever might harm the neighbor's person are fulfilled largely by external activity that we can denominate as moral; for in affirming my love for my neighbor by my external activity, I in turn grow in stature as a person, as a moral being.

It is not a simple matter, however, to say that specific external activity is always an expression of love or opposition to the neighbor; for the personal value of external physical activity can vary as social conditions vary. What may have damaged the neighbor or the whole social body in one age may no longer do so. Thus, interest-taking worked harm to the neighbor in a primitive and agricultural society and under those conditions manifested a lack of love for him. But changes in society make the very same activity of interest-taking no longer harmful to society and the individuals who compose it. Hence, what was once immoral is now moral.

The basic point is that specific external acts may concretize a lack of love for neighbor in one age or one set of circumstances but not in another. When the circumstances are purely local or temporary, it is ordinarily quite easy to see that they are only modifying circumstances. Thus, we would not say that pulling the trigger of a gun is always wrong merely because in a few cases an innocent man was found at the other end. But when the circumstances that make an act wrong are such that they really are characteristic of a whole age or a whole civilization, it normally is far more difficult to recognize that not the basic act but the attending circumstances are what make the act evil. And it is also difficult to mark the disappearance of those circumstances, for such a disappearance does not take place immediately. The history of the usury question<sup>10</sup> is quite instructive on this point.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See John T. Noonan, *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).

<sup>11</sup> The Church's power to define is limited to the common morality of all the ages that springs from the Christ-image in man as that image has been made known through

There is a second factor that makes it quite difficult to denominate a given concrete external act as always morally good or evil. As a result of concupiscence, a man's external actions only partially manifest and symbolize the inner human intentionality that is the standard for judging the moral quality of the act.

To exemplify this, let us take a number of acts that are morally wrong not just because they may harm other men or society but because they are such that they directly contradict the nature of man or the specific kind of man who performs them. Thus, an uttered lie is always morally wrong (even apart from harm that may be done to other persons), because it contradicts the very dynamic nature of man, who grows by the authentic manifestation of what he is and what he understands. Adultery is always wrong, because it contradicts the specific lifelong orientation and commitment to one woman that a man has previously given to his life.

Though such universal moral judgments are true, they are true in the abstract. They would always be true in the concrete only on condition that they were always external manifestations of the interior dispositions which they symbolized. In other words, if every external expression of untruth represented a "pure" intention to deceive, then in every case it would be morally reprehensible. If every act of unfaithfulness represented an interior denial of a married man's fundamental lifelong pledge to his spouse, then every act of unfaithfulness would be a grave moral evil.

In the real world, however, a man's external actions do not completely represent the interior dispositions that they symbolize. Because of concupiscence each man's exterior activity more or less imperfectly manifests what he is and what he intends. "God is true and every man is a liar." Hence, an external act such as telling an untruth or taking an innocent man's life may not manifest in an actual case the degree of malice that it would seem to represent. On the other hand, it is also possible for an external act that appears to be fairly harmless to represent in reality a gravely serious internal wrong.

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the apostles. It is precisely because some questions involve factors apart from this image that the Church can make no definitive pronouncements regarding them. The problem of war, a problem whose factors are consistently shifting, is an obvious case; usury was another.

Ordinarily, of course, this subjective factor is recognized in our moral teaching when we say that there must be sufficient reflection and full consent of the will for an objectively serious act to be subjectively a mortal sin. Yet these subjective qualifications and even the further refinements made more recently by moral theologians are hardly more than rules of thumb that enable us to evaluate only approximately the moral value of a given concrete act; for these qualifications and refinements are rarely capable of measuring the one factor that in the concrete leads to the greatest discrepancy between the apparent value of an external act and its true internal meaning—the individual's capacity to exercise his freedom. It can happen that, as a result of past circumstances and a man's own misuse of his freedom, his present capacity to act freely is so diminished that some acts that seem to be knowing and wilful violations of serious moral imperatives actually do not represent that basic inner betrayal of self that can be rightly styled mortal sin.

The point is that the moral value of a concrete act never exactly coincides with the apparent moral value of its external manifestation. The subjective factor is necessarily always present in the real world, where all men have concupiscence. In a real sense, this subjective factor is an ever-present part of the "objective" data. Hence, no concrete moral act can be judged purely on external appearances.<sup>12</sup>

There is a third factor that complicates the moral evaluation of external acts. In the concrete it often happens that the very same physical act contains a moral response to two or more values and it is morally impossible for the individual involved to perform the external act in such a way that it substantially corresponds to all the values involved.

Perhaps an example will make this clear. Every man should affirm what he knows to be the truth. Consciously to affirm what is not in accord with his inner knowledge is to contradict the basic nature of

<sup>12</sup>Although we are saying with recent moral theologians that judgments must be of concrete acts, we do not mean to say there is no value to so-called objective or abstract morality. Actually, such a morality is the concrete realizable morality of man without concupiscence, man for whom every good act would be an expression of his total love of God and every lie a "pure" lie. As such, this morality is the kind that corresponds most closely to the realizable morality of the ideal Christian, the saint who is gradually minimizing the effects of concupiscence in himself. Hence, it is the ideal morality toward which every man must move as a consequence of the unlimited imperative of the first commandment.

his power of expression; but at the same time every man is obliged to respect his neighbor's right to a good reputation. Now it may happen in the concrete that I am asked an unreasonable question, the honest answer to which will unjustly destroy another's reputation. And it also may be that I lack the capacity or diplomacy to escape this difficult situation without telling a simple untruth. In this case I am faced with the performance of a single physical act which will safeguard my inner need to express myself truthfully and at the same time manifest my concern for my neighbor's reputation. But since I am morally incapable of manifesting these two values in the same response, I tell a simple untruth; for of the two values, the neighbor's reputation outweighs the moral imperative to be truthful.

Moralists are accustomed to say that this is not a lie but some sort of mental reservation. Actually, what they mean is that the activity in question is not a sinful expression of an untruth. Yet it is an untruth. It is a perversion of the expressive faculty. Certainly its malice would be evident if I were confronted with a series of such cases and fell into the habit of telling these untruths without adverting to my contradiction of a basic human value. Under such conditions I would gradually lose some of my honest expressiveness. And the only way I could avoid this evil would be to realize that telling untruths, even in the circumstances involved, is an immoral aspect of a concrete act that must always be internally detested and externally avoided to the extent that this is possible. In fact, the admonition to use ambiguous language, to "lie as little as possible," etc., is only a way of saying that lying is wrong and even in these cases must be avoided insofar as this is possible.

Let us take a different kind of example that involves the problem of overlapping moral demands. It often happens that a man's capacities and talents are so limited by circumstances that he is incapable of living up to two or more demands of his state in life. The accomplishment of one so occupies his time and effort that he cannot accomplish the other.

This is the case of many priests today. They have the vocation of being Christ's witnesses in the community. They are to make understandable to their people the meaning of the action of God in the world today. They are really prophets who speak for God. Consequently, they

have a grave moral obligation to be up-to-date in theology, really to know the mind of the Church and of Christ. To oppose or to ignore this obligation would, therefore, be gravely sinful. Yet how many priests confess that they are out-of-date and are doing very little to catch up?

Of course, these priests are right in not seeing serious sin in this failure to live up to a grave imperative. They have too many immediate obligations that tax their capacities. If they are to celebrate the sacraments, visit the sick, teach in the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, organize the parish lay apostolate, they obviously lack the solid blocks of time (and perhaps the intellectual talent) for such a prodigious task. In other words, they are confronted by a series of grave obligations that they cannot totally meet because they lack the physical, intellectual, and moral resources to do so.

Yet they may not spurn any of these obligations. They must desire to fulfil them all, to do what they can to meet these obligations. To scorn or ignore any one of them would be seriously sinful. And yet in practice they may be able to perform only those external acts that meet the more pressing values. This is all they can do at the moment; but as long as they respect the values that they cannot implement, as long as they recognize that they are real values, as long as they take every occasion to concretize their respect for these values, they are not committing sin.

Our discussion about the morality of external acts is intended to indicate that it is practically impossible to classify a given kind of external activity as always and everywhere wrong; for although it is possible to place a given concrete act within a theological moral category that we rightly denominate as sinful, the actual concrete act usually surpasses the limits of any single moral classification. In fact, the classification of a concrete act in a single moral category often represents only the abstraction and classification of but one aspect of very complex concrete data whose various elements have varying moral implications. And it is often impossible to pronounce on the morality of a given external act unless one envisions it as it concretely occurred with all the interwoven factors.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> It is precisely because of the complexity of every concrete moral act that the Church has not judged and cannot judge the moral value of a given act *in concreto*. All its moral

## CONSEQUENT "TENSION" NATURE OF CHRISTIAN MORALITY

The preceding analysis suggests that by the very nature of things Christian morality is a morality of tension. Tension morality recognizes that man is continuously facing obligations that he cannot immediately fulfil but toward which he must ever move. It recognizes, first, that there are individual moral imperatives that man cannot perfectly fulfil as the first commandment demands. It recognizes, further, that man is often faced with a combination of imperatives of such nature that the accomplishment of one makes morally impossible the accomplishment of one or more of the others. In short, tension morality recognizes that there is always—whether consciously realized or not by the person involved—a tension between what one is called ultimately to do and what he actually can do here and now.

It seems probable that in the future this tension nature of Christian morality will become more evident; for society is becoming more complex, and we can expect an increasing number of situations which demand the externalization of a combination of interior values. When this occurs, man will more frequently see externalized that hitherto often-unrecognized inner tension between the total imperative of the first commandment and the limited response possible to concupiscent man. In attempting to affirm in the external world all the personal moral values necessary to his growth, man will more and more encounter circumstances in which he may find it impossible to live up to the total range of demands of the moral law.<sup>14</sup>

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teaching is necessarily concerned with judgments of abstract morality. Thus, the declaration that a given activity is always wrong can only mean that this aspect of human activity is always morally harmful; it cannot mean that every concrete act embodying this aspect is necessarily sinful.

<sup>14</sup> This assertion does not contradict the established thesis that each just man is given sufficient grace (this wording leaves much to be desired) for the fulfilment of all the precepts of the moral law. This thesis refers to the fact that the just man always receives from God the power to avoid every true personal mortal sin. The thesis does not say that the just man is always able to live up to the objective imperatives of the law of God. On this see Maurizio Flick and Zoltan Alszeghy, *Il vangelo della grazia* (Rome, 1964) pp. 736-37. Grace is not fundamentally something superadded to nature to make what is morally impossible possible. Rather, it is the enduring climate of love by God which makes possible those good acts of man—even acts in which moral impossibility prevents fulfilment of the objective moral law—that lead toward personal union with the Creator.

CHRISTIAN'S PRACTICAL ATTITUDE TOWARD TENSION NATURE  
OF MORALITY

The Christian's attitude may be summed up under the following points that are applicable whenever a tension situation occurs. First, the Christian must recognize the elements of the problem.<sup>1</sup> He must have the capacity to identify the basic moral values and to recognize the present conflict of these values in his concrete external situation.

Second, the Christian must affirm all the values in the concrete situation. He may not pick and choose. Internally he must truly desire to implement them all. Thus, in a conflict of the value of truthful expression and that of preserving another's good reputation, he has to wish sincerely for the preservation of both. He may not, on the ground that he is morally incapable of externally affirming both values, escape the conflict by declaring one of the values nonexistent. To eliminate one of the values in this wise is to violate fundamental honesty and partially to destroy his moral self.

Even in the external order the Christian must make the effort to implement all the values involved despite his moral incapacity fully to do so. To accept placidly the disappearance of one of the values is never permitted. In practice, this may mean that he continually realizes the more basic and pressing values while exerting every effort to achieve the other values as circumstances allow. For example, the out-of-date priest attends to his duties of administering the sacraments, visiting the sick, etc., while taking every opportunity to advance his personal *aggiornamento*. He may never internally or externally be content with the *status quo*, with being an eighteenth-century man.

Third, the Christian must recognize the real significance of the tension situation. He must see it as revealing his own constitutive weakness and imperfection, his falling short of the fulness of humanity as it exists in Jesus Christ. Because of concupiscence, he can never fully affirm the great Christian values, though unfortunately he is seldom personally aware of this internal fact of his being. These tension situations manifest clearly to him the weak and imperfect man he really is.

Further, the Christian must realize that in being brought face to face with his own weakness in these situations, he has no reason for despair; when he honestly does what he can in such morally impossible



situations, there is no sin, for there is no wilful turning away from God and creation. Although now limited in affirming each moral value, he has the assurance of faith that he will one day be able to affirm them all fully.

Ultimately such a tension situation must be seen as a challenge to grow. It demands blood and tears, the effort to transcend current weakness, a forced march toward the implementing of the first commandment. Tension situations actualize God's demand that the Christian do the impossible, that he love His Creator with his whole being.

If the Christian has this challenge nature of his situation in mind, he will avoid two dangerous extremes. The one extreme is to despair of salvation because he cannot here and now fulfil the whole law; the other is to fall into dishonesty by declaring the law to be nonexistent. Only by recognizing the tension situation as a challenge can he live in both honesty and hope.

#### APPLICATION TO CURRENT PROBLEM OF BIRTH CONTROL

In great numbers of families, whether Christian or non-Christian, there appears a tension or crisis in marital morality. The basic elements of the problem have always existed, but in our time the tension among the elements is more marked. This tension is heightened by many circumstances: modern medicine lowers the infant-mortality rate and enables women who in the past would have become sterile to bear children despite their weak constitutions; modern living makes it psychologically more difficult to raise a large family; women face the sociological phenomena of desiring to have an active part in the life of the community, with the corresponding pressure to lessen the ties placed upon them by a number of children; husband and wife are more aware of the dignity of their personal relationship in marriage and of the need to foster that relationship; the current generation stresses sex; some areas face the pressures of overpopulation or at least of economic limitations; etc. The list of such factors is unending and we cannot treat them exhaustively. Our brief enumeration has been given only to indicate some of the causes that have heightened the tension among values that have always existed in the nature of man.

But we must consider these factors in discussing modern marital

morality. Our remarks attempt to situate these aspects of the birth-control problem in the framework set out in the first part—a dogmatic framework. Although some details may be incorrect, we think the general approach is valid. We are, then, open to criticism and refinements by experts in this particular field, but we ask them to attempt to see these refinements in the dynamic context presented in this paper.

How, then, do the factors in marital morality create tension? Let us consider three of the basic factors: the personal relationship of husband and wife and its demands upon them, the procreation of children, and the upbringing of children.

When two people marry, they pledge to one another a whole community of life. They pledge not only the present union but the moral effort to grow more and more one in mind and heart and body as the years go on. The fulfilling of this initial pledge demands constant effort, even to the extreme of sacrifices. It also demands constant expression, for if love is not expressed it soon dies. Man is by nature an expressive being and he grows in a given trait largely by exercising that trait, by expressing it. He grows in honesty by acting honestly, even under duress; he grows in the ability to understand by repeated acts of understanding and he grows in love of another by true expressions of love.

In the common order of things, husband and wife give supreme expression to their total union of love in the marital act. This act is meant to foster their care and affection for one another precisely by expressing the mutual love that already exists to some degree. As the supreme expression that summarizes all partial expressions of love, it is ordinarily a necessary means for the accomplishment of that growth in personal union that is one of the very ends of marriage itself. Hence, the performance of the marital act is not simply a privilege that the state of matrimony confers. It is ordinarily also an obligation insofar as it is an expression that is necessitated by the mutual union to which the parties have pledged themselves.

However, this assertion that the mutual union of the parties necessitates the performance of the marital act needs to be qualified in two ways. First, this necessity is not so absolute that the absence of intercourse makes impossible in every case a true personal union of husband and wife. To say this would be to deny the community of life in the Holy Family. It would deny to couples who have become incapable of

achieving the marital act the possibility of ever arriving at a real community of life. Having said this, however, we must assert that for the vast number of couples it is morally impossible at a given moment to maintain and foster their relationship of mutual love without physical sex expression. Omitting the marriage act requires not just heroism but a total adjustment of life that does not occur in one day.

Second, the act of sexual union that is the normal privilege and obligation of the spouses is not simply a correct physical act of intercourse. It is rather the act of intercourse that truly expresses a love and concern for one another;<sup>15</sup> for just as the spouses are bound to grow in mind and heart as the years go by, they are bound also to make their acts of physical union more and more the kind of expression that promotes such a personal union. Hence, they are obligated to eliminate, insofar as this is possible, the egoism, selfishness, and inconsiderateness that may mark the petitioning of the marital act and its performance; and they are bound to increasingly manifest in their daily life together those marks of frequent thoughtfulness and affection that will make it possible for the act of sexual intercourse to be more a true expression of love and less an expression of egoism. In other words, the spouses must be striving to resolve the inner tensions inherent in their concrete acts of union by placing these acts in a context of growing personal union.

Procreation of children is the second basic factor in the birth-control issue. The Church has always recognized this factor as an inherent part of marriage and the performance of the marital act.<sup>16</sup> For centuries this recognition appeared in the form of a ban on contraceptive acts by the Fathers and the theologians. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this ban has been articulated by the papal magisterium in a series of statements of varying solemnity.<sup>17</sup> In the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II reinforced the view that procreation is an integral part of marriage (no. 50) and indicated that "sons of the

<sup>15</sup> Cf. John Ford and Gerald Kelly, *Contemporary Moral Theology 2* (Westminster, Md., 1963) pp. 116-26, 188-207.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965).

<sup>17</sup> See Denzinger-Schönmetzer 2715, 2758, 2791, 2795, 3638, 3716-18. More recent magisterial statements are discussed by John Lynch, S.J., "The Contraceptive Issue: Moral and Pastoral Reflections," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 27 (1966) 242-49. The latest papal statement on the subject occurred in the discourse of Paul VI to the Italian Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology on Oct. 29, 1966.

Church may not undertake methods of regulating procreation which are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church in its unfolding of the divine law" (no. 51).

The problem in the Church today is not with the long-standing teaching of the inherent connection between matrimony and procreation. Rather, the question is whether the Church's long tradition on the connection of the marital state and procreation demands that nothing ever be done to positively impede procreation. The question is whether contraception is *always* wrong; for no Catholic would deny that it is sometimes wrong.

In the past all contraception was outlawed, but the reasons given<sup>18</sup> are not convincing to a number of modern theologians. More and more they question the validity of the past papal teaching and attempt to explain (or explain away) its real meaning. Various factors have undermined the united front of Catholics opposing all forms of contraception: the permission to use rhythm (an apparent form of contraception), the collapse of so-called "physicist" concepts of natural law (the alleged basis of past reasoning against contraception), and the relatively new factor of overpopulation. A variety of explanations attempt to preserve the substance of past teaching and at the same time, accounting for modern difficulties, allow contraceptive acts in certain conditions.<sup>19</sup>

Personally, we believe the long-standing teaching of the Church to be correct. Every intended contraceptive act is wrong, because it is a conscious attempt to deny life-giving capacity to an act that is directed toward life-giving. A possible and common outcome of a personal act is frustrated.

However, contraception is not wrong because this type of activity prevents a child from being conceived. The unconceived child has no rights and in an overcrowded world it would be difficult to say, as might have been said in the past, that such contraception offends the social good.

Contraception is wrong because it does personal harm to the moral human beings who practice it. Every man is marked by every conscious

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ford and Kelly, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-314.

<sup>19</sup> For a summary of these explanations, see Franz Böckle, "Bibliographical Survey on the Question of Birth Control," in *Concilium* 1 (May, 1965) 53-69. The reference is to the British periodical version of *Concilium*.

act he performs: one who lies—even for a good cause—helps make himself a liar; one who cheats—even for a good cause—helps make himself a cheater; and one who wilfully frustrates the life-giving power of an act helps build up in himself a weakening of the respect for life.

That this analysis is correct we cannot prove. We can only suggest a line of inquiry. Certainly one contraceptive act does not so noticeably reduce a man's respect for life that he becomes a murderer—just as one lie told out of necessity does not make a man a liar. But a long series of contraceptive acts and a climate that accepts contraception as a normal human activity and a normal way to limit population has the effect of decreasing reverence for human life. Thus, we do not think it is a coincidence that in countries where contraception is accepted as normal, abortions have increased.<sup>20</sup> Nor do we think it coincidental that in America the very people who promote contraception tend to promote abortion too. It is not that contraception leads directly to abortion; rather, contraceptive acts produce a mentality that cares less for life and is, therefore, more inclined to accept abortion.<sup>21</sup> For if a person is continually acting in such a way that he intentionally attempts to block the life-giving capacity of his act, he builds up in himself an attitude of opposition to any possible conception; hence, he increases the likelihood of his acceptance of abortion should a child be accidentally conceived. Moreover, even if the problem of abortion is removed by a fool-proof method of contraception, the evil of contraception remains as long as the practitioners become by their activity the kind of persons who would perform abortion should the conception occur.

In short, the real evil of contraception is that in wilfully frustrating the life-giving capacity of the sexual act it lowers the reverence for life

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Noonan, *op. cit.*, pp. 518–20. Stanislas DeLestapis, S.J., in his *Family Planning and Modern Problems* (London, 1961) pp. 50–94, gives a more complete view of the evil effects of birth control. We have centered, for brevity's sake, around abortion.

<sup>21</sup> John G. Milhaven, S.J., in "Towards an Epistemology of Ethics," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 27 (1966) 228–41, argues for the use of empirical evidence in the making of moral judgments. We think the idea has merit, provided that care is taken to detect not only the immediate good or harm done to others by a given act but also the ultimate personal moral consequences of the act upon its performer. It is strange that the vast majority of proponents of contraception interest themselves only in one class of results of contraception. That there may be serious moral "side-effects" does not seem to occur to them at all.

in the parties who engage in it.<sup>22</sup> That there may be compensating factors in some cases that minimize this effect we do not deny. But this minimization, as we shall suggest, occurs precisely when contraception is recognized as evil—just as the evil effects of lying on one's personality are minimized precisely when one recognizes the evil of lying and does so only reluctantly.

The upbringing of children is the third basic factor in marital morality. Procreation partially fulfils the drive to pass on life, but that drive is fully realized only in the upbringing and formation of children. Each parent, by the fact of procreation, assumes a grave responsibility toward the child conceived.

This responsibility demands that parents do all that is necessary to provide for the full human growth of their offspring under the conditions of life in their own age and country. Thus, a parent in the United States today has more of an obligation to educate his child than did a parent of George Washington's time.

Certain means are necessary to fulfil this responsibility. Parents must have some financial capacity. Their talent and industry can limit their income so that another child would make it morally impossible for them to meet the needs of the present family. No man may seek burdens that will make it impossible for him to fulfil his present obligations.

Parents also need to maintain their physical and psychological health. A wife, for example, may be capable of managing only the children she already has. If there is good evidence that another child could cause a nervous breakdown, this woman has a moral obligation to limit the number of children. She must do this for her sake and for the sake of her present family, who need a healthy mother. Similarly, if medical reasons indicate good grounds for believing that another pregnancy will cause death or serious harm to the mother, there is grave sin in risking the conception of another child.

<sup>22</sup> If contraception is wrong precisely because the contraceptive aspect of any act (a concrete act may have other aspects, as we will emphasize), i.e., the deliberate attempt to avoid life, has harmful effects upon the moral character of the performer, then it is easy to see why there is nothing wrong with sexual activity between spouses who are sterile. Such husbands and wives place no deliberate acts that can shape their characters. On the other hand, the rhythm method is seen in this light to have its own dangers. It seems to us that the ultimate justification of rhythm can be found in the fact that the conditions required for its use ultimately coincide with the reasons we give below that make permissible *in concreto* that contraception which is always wrong *in abstracto*.

Finally, the proper upbringing of the children demands a home in which mother and father are growing in harmony and love for one another. Spouses must actively promote this harmony and love both for the sake of their personal relationship to one another and for the sake of their children. For them to do anything that leads to real tension between themselves (such as the tension caused in some couples by the effort to abstain from marital relations) is really to offend against one of their primary obligations.

The three basic factors just considered create tension in marital morality. It should be obvious that in the concrete world there are many cases in which it will be morally impossible for married couples to accomplish externally all the acts necessary to realize all the values inherent in their relationship to one another and to their children. Because of the concupiscent nature of man and the imperfection of the fallen world, acts that promote some values may destroy other values.

A typical couple may have a number of children. Their financial resources may be just adequate for the present family, and a projected increase in the husband's salary will only be sufficient at best to take care of the increased cost of educating the children in the future. Moreover, the strain of raising these children may be such that tensions are beginning to manifest themselves in the family circle.

The spouses recognize their obligations to their present family and reasonably conclude that additional children will make it morally impossible for them to fulfil these obligations adequately. They know that if the husband were more talented, if the wife were a more balanced and saintly individual, then they could accept further additions to their home. But *de facto* each spouse has limitations that make such additions undesirable from a moral standpoint at the present time.

What are they to do? They may consider abstaining from sexual relations, to insure that there will be no further children. But once more they may be confronted with their limitations. They may not be the couple that can maintain and foster their relationship of love without intercourse over long periods. Moreover, they may find that by foregoing sexual relations they create tensions that affect their capacity to give their children a proper home life. Even periodic abstinence (rhythm) may prove of no help because the wife is irregular or because the strain involved in employing it causes tensions and minimizes the

unitive power of intercourse. Hence, for this couple the way of abstinence, periodic or absolute, provides no solution.

They may even turn to some form of contraception. It would be one that least offends their sensibilities, one that allows them to have normal intercourse (without fear of conception) at times when this intercourse would be meaningful to their relationship. But by so using contraceptives they are apparently opposing the long teaching of the Church. They are decreasing in themselves the necessary Christian respect for the life of others by basically intending to thwart the production of life. Thus this alternative is also no solution.

In short, because of the difficulties of the situation and their own present limitations the couple face three choices, all of which have evil moral results. They may continue to have normal intercourse and run the risk of increased tensions in the family and inability to educate all the children properly. They may practice rhythm or attempt to abstain from intercourse and thereby run the risk of creating tensions that will help destroy their relationship and the calm home needed for raising the children. Or they may practice contraception and weaken in themselves the respect for life. They are, then, morally incapable of living up to all the values that their state in life demands.

Of course, there will be many cases in which these tensions do not exist. There will be couples who can raise all the children begotten by normal intercourse and still maintain all the values involved in the marital relationship. For these couples, none of the above difficulties apply. But there are many couples—and their numbers are increasing—who are running into the conflicting obligations we have described. For them there is an obvious conflict of values.

The couple that recognize all the values in their state of life may find tension between some of these values. What are they to do? First, *they must affirm all the values involved*. Internally they must truly desire to attain a growing love for one another. They must seek conditions that permit the best possible development of the already existing children and the intensification of their respect for life.

Moreover, they must make every effort to externalize this deep interior intention insofar as their limited capacities permit. They may never act as if one of these values were meaningless. While they may implement the more important values that have an immediate effect



on the welfare of others, they may never completely forget the other values. Thus, to the extent that their obligations to grow in love for one another and to provide the proper home atmosphere for the children require intercourse without the fear of additional children, to that extent they may regretfully practice some form of birth control. But they may never think that this practice of birth control is ideal.<sup>23</sup> They must recognize their obligation to grow toward the stage where they will be able to fulfil all the values involved. This growth should be nurtured by forgoing intercourse whenever they can do so without endangering their mutual love and family peace.

They must always be conscious of the ideal stage toward which they have to grow, a stage that will enable them to fulfil all the values mentioned. They must move toward this stage in every area of their life. Thus, they must strive to make their acts of intercourse true expressions of love. These acts will then express their desire to grow in consideration for one another and to minimize the selfishness and thoughtlessness that inevitably characterize the intercourse of anyone not fully Christian. They must be striving to make the daily family life deeply Christian, marked by personal consideration and respect for one another and their children. They must take every opportunity to sacrifice themselves for one another and for others. In short, both directly and indirectly, they must take those morally possible steps that will enable them to grow more and more to the stature where they can fulfil all the obligations of marriage, even to the point of complete abstinence if that is necessary.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> It is the constant recognition of the evil of birth control that minimizes in the individual the lessened respect for personal life that can flow from the contraceptive mentality. The situation is analogous to that of a man who, because of circumstances, has little time for prayer. As long as he recognizes the need for prayer by a constant desire and effort to practice it as time permits, he will never develop an indifference to prayer. But the moment he declares himself simply excused and does nothing further to acknowledge the value of prayer in his life, this is the moment in which he begins to lose the values that prayer preserves.

<sup>24</sup> We do not mean to suggest that the ideal marital situation is one in which the spouses forgo the sexual act. Rather, we here reflect the view that this is an imperfect world and that in the circumstances envisioned in the cases at hand the highest possible personal moral development of the spouses that respects all the values inherent in their relationship to one another, to their children, and to respect for life in general demands that they sacrifice what is normally the supreme expression of their union with one another. The situation is analogous to one in which the health of one spouse is so weak that the physical act of intercourse may cause permanent damage to health and the risk of life itself. Under such

The second thing that couples facing moral tension in their marital life must do is *recognize the meaning of the situation for them as Christians*. First, it brings before them with recurring clarity their own inadequacies. If this tension situation did not occur, they might never have realized the stark reality that they as a couple are only *in via*, that they are at present not doing the full Christian job they are called to, that their vocation is ever to grow as husbands and wives and as parents. Inadequacies caused purely by imperfect motivation make it quite easy for a man to deceive himself about his shortcomings. But when his inadequacies are constantly externalized, when he cannot externally live up to his grave obligations, then, if he is honest, he is forced to recognize humbly his own position before God.

Yet there is no cause for despair. If a man does all he can in his situation, he is not turning his back on God, he is not committing personal mortal sin. Just as a man is not morally responsible for perfectly motivating all his internal activities (since this is impossible), so too he is not held to make all his external acts perfect when this is morally impossible. A couple, therefore, need not despair if they cannot live up to the entire objective moral law in their situation, provided that they are doing all they can to grow toward the stage where such will be possible.

In this last sentence we find the final Christian significance of this problem. The couple must see this situation as a real challenge to be more Christian as spouses and parents. It is really the externalization, in a particular way for them, of the eternal Christian challenge to grow. If they accept it as that challenge, as the constant demand to transcend themselves and their present capacities, they will avoid both the dishonesty of those who excuse their shortcomings by saying that they are not shortcomings and the despair of those who say that they cannot live up to their obligations. They must see their shortcomings and present inadequacy as the "sacramentalization," or externalization, of the unending Christian call to grow to the fulfilment of the first commandment in and through Christ.

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limiting conditions the highest moral development of the spouses will demand abstinence, not because abstinence is a universal ideal to be reached by all couples, but because in this case it is a necessity if the couples are to truly respect and love one another as persons. Christian moral existence and personal growth is an end; the simple performance of the sexual act is not.

## CONCLUSION

Morality is the expression of the laws of man's dynamic Christian nature. It demands that a man totally affirm his own being, his relationship to other men, and ultimately his relationship to God. Because of concupiscence, however, man is not capable of making such an affirmation before death; he can only move toward such an affirmation and he must do so. This internal incapacity of man to live up to the first commandment is concretized and externalized from time to time in concrete situations in which the various strands of the moral law are so interwoven that the performance of one imperative of the law renders the performance of another imperative morally impossible. Under such conditions the Christian is bound to recognize all the values involved by attempting to implement them all insofar as this is possible; and he is to see in this situation of tension a continuous challenge to grow up to the unlimited demands of the first commandment.

The advantages of this point of view in the present situation are many. First, it is rooted in Scripture and dogma and not merely in empirical observation, however important that may be. Second, it enables us to meet with general principles and not with casuistic *ad hoc* solutions some of the pressing problems of our time, such as the birth-control issue. Third, it preserves in instances such as contraception the great moral tradition of the Fathers, the theologians, and the magisterium, not by simply repeating it but by clarifying its meaning in concrete situations. Finally, it makes clearer the role of the Church's moral teaching in the spiritual growth of Christians, for it reveals at once the realism and the unlimited call of the gospel.

This solution differs from the solutions proposed by absolutist moralists and by those favoring situation ethics in the tension situation envisaged. An extreme situationist sees no absolutes. For him, moral laws are only guidelines that in certain cases must be contravened because the welfare of persons is at stake. In these cases the act that goes against the moral law is called simply good. The absolutist moralist believes there are absolute standards; therefore, some acts are always wrong, not only *in abstracto*, but also *in concreto* if knowingly and willingly placed. The observing of these absolutes may seem to be harmful to persons in the short run, but in the long run they are necessary for the moral good of the human race.

The solution that we have proposed, it seems to us, takes what is true in both positions. With the absolutist position it holds that there are absolute moral norms and these absolute norms hold both *in abstracto* and *in concreto*. Their infringement is always wrong, because conscious infringement always involves moral harm to persons. But this position agrees with the situationist in that it holds that there are cases in the concrete in which a person may contravene these absolutes. But he may contravene them, not because these imperatives have lost their validity in the specific case, but because the person involved is placed in a moral dilemma in which he is morally incapable of living up to all the imperatives of the moral law. The act done *in concreto* is subjectively without blame, even though there are aspects to it that contravene moral absolutes; but these evil aspects must be recognized as such if the person performing the act is to minimize the evil done.

Briefly, the chief difference between this way of looking at things and the other two viewpoints lies in seeing that concrete acts are not simply right and wrong. They are complex, and their moral nature must be differentiated if one is to properly evaluate them and place them within a context of Christian growth.

Hence, in marriage the couple should ideally perform the sexual act, at least implicitly, in order to express and solidify their relationship to one another, their concern for their already existing children, and their general respect for life. All these are necessary ends that touch on Christian development. But in the tension situations envisioned, the spouses are morally incapable, on the one hand, of realizing their own personal union and home conditions suitable for their children by abstinence or periodic continence; and they are morally incapable, on the other hand, of realizing these two ends by intercourse that is non-contraceptive. In such a dilemma their concrete contraceptive acts of intercourse have positive value in that they truly manifest the concern of the spouses for one another and their mutual love for their children, but at the same time the specifically contraceptive aspect of these acts does them personal harm. The act considered in its totality is not simply good but ambivalent; it is permitted because of the moral incapacity of the parties and only insofar as they recognize the evil aspect of the act and begin taking the steps necessary to minimize and eventually eliminate it.