

Fertility and sterility

19 May 1956

Pope Pius XII

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Address to the participants of the Second World Congress of Fertility and Infertility in Naples

You have expressed to Us, Gentlemen, the desire to come so that you may present your respects to Us on the occasion of the Second World Congress of Fertility and Sterility, which you are now holding in Naples. We have answered your wishes promptly, and we are telling you the very special pleasure we have in receiving an imposing group of scholars and practitioners from so many different countries. You are about to study a difficult and delicate subject, because it concerns one of the principle functions of the human body, and because the results of your work can lead to consequences of great significance for the lives of many persons and for the evolution of societies.

Involuntary conjugal sterility, for which you propose to provide a remedy, presents an obstacle to obtaining of the principle end of marriage and provokes a profound malaise in the couple, often veiled by an instinctive modesty, but dangerous for the stability of marriage itself. That is why, in the face of the powerlessness of modern medicine to successfully treat many cases of this type, you formed in 1951 this International Association of Fertility, whose first Congress, held in New York in 1953, proposed in its agenda three main resolutions: (1) to assist by all possible means the study and research of fertility; (2) to promote and disseminate this specialty among physicians, so that a sufficient number of them may effectively help infertile couples; (3) to insist on the establishment of clinics, services, and fertility centers in hospitals, under the direction of competent personnel.

The present Congress, like the preceding one, is a response to the desire to develop and maximize the knowledge we possess, to spread it among physicians in all parts of the world, and to determine a coordination of work on certain points, where the convergence of efforts will permit more significant results. You will hear a remarkable number of reports and papers that examine endocrinal and metabolic factors of fertility and sterility, their occupational and toxicological factors, new methods of diagnosis and treatment for male and female sterility, the diagnosis of ovulation and spermatogenesis, and the treatment of their disorders, surgery for sterility. A series of dissertations will also consider experimental research carried out in this field and the problems relating to one of the principal functions of the human person. This set of studies brilliantly illustrates the interest which this Congress prompts, and all the ways in which eminent specialists have wanted to contribute to the common effort.

It does not belong to Us to pass judgment on the purely technical aspects of your work. On the other hand, We would like to briefly consider certain moral implications of the questions which you approach from a scientific point of view.

Your previous Congress pointed out, in its final motion, that involuntary conjugal sterility raises an economic and social problem of great importance: that it contributes to the lowering of the fertility index of populations, and, in this way, can influence the lives and destinies of peoples. It sometimes happens that one focuses on this point of view, which is more apparent and more easily controlled, so one may say that the birth rate should be promoted in order to ensure the vitality of a nation and its expansion in all domains. It is true that a high birth rate manifests the creative energies of a people or a family. It illustrates the courage of human persons before life, its risks, its difficulties. It underlines their will to build and to progress. It is right to point out that the physical impossibility of exercising paternity and maternity easily becomes a cause of discouragement, of withdrawal into one's self. Life, which ardently wills to prolong itself, to surpass itself — falls upon itself, so to speak, and many homes, alas, succumb to this ordeal.

It is with pleasure that We would like to mention here a consideration, which you have highlighted yourself. It is entirely true that your zeal to pursue research on marital infertility and the means to overcome it, if it presents a scientific aspect worthy of attention, also engages high spiritual and ethical values, which should be taken into account. We have indicated these above. It is profoundly human that spouses see and find in their child the true and full expression of their reciprocal love and of their mutual gift. It is not difficult to understand why the unsatisfied desire for paternity or maternity is felt as a painful and sorrowful sacrifice by the parents, who are animated by noble and healthy sentiments. Moreover, the involuntary sterility of marriage can become a serious danger to the union and to the very stability of the family.

But this social aspect in fact only conceals a more intimate and more grave reality. Marriage, in fact, unites two

persons in a community of destiny, in their march towards the realization of an ideal that implies, not the fullness of an earthly happiness, but the conquest of spiritual values of a transcendent order, that the Christian Revelation, in particular, proposes in all its grandeur. This ideal, the spouses pursue together, by consecrating themselves to obtaining the primary end of the marriage, the generation and education of children.

Several times already We believed it necessary to recall why the particular intentions of the spouses, their common life, their personal development, could only be conceived as subordinate to the goal which exceeds them, paternity and maternity. 'Not only the common work of exterior life,' We said in an allocution addressed to midwives on October 29, 1951, 'but also all personal enrichment, even intellectual and spiritual enrichment, all that is most spiritual and profound in conjugal love as such, has been placed by the will of the Creator and by nature at the service of the posterity'. (Radio Message Discourse, Vol XIII p. 348-349). Such is the constant teaching of the Church. She has rejected every conception of marriage that would threaten to turn it back on itself, to make it a selfish search for emotional and physical satisfaction, in the interests of the spouses alone.

But the Church has also rejected the opposite attitude which claims to separate, in procreation, the biological activity from the personal relationship of the spouses. The child is the fruit of the conjugal union, when it is expressed in its fullness, by the implementation of the organic functions, the sensitive emotions which are connected to it, with the spiritual and disinterested love which enlivens it. It is within the unity of this human act that the biological conditions of generation must be proposed. It is never permissible to separate these diverse aspects to the point of positively excluding either the procreative intention or the conjugal relationship.

The relationship that unites the father and the mother to their child, has its roots in biological facts but even more so in the deliberate advancement of the spouses, who give themselves to each other and whose will to develop flourishes and finds its true end in the being whom they send into the world. Only this self-consecration, generous in principle and difficult in its realization, by the conscious acceptance of the responsibilities it entails, can guarantee that the work of educating children will be pursued with all the care, courage, and patience it requires. It can now be affirmed that human fecundity, beyond the physical realm, has essential moral aspects, which must necessarily be considered, even when the subject is treated from a medical point of view.

It is quite obvious that the scientist and the doctor, when dealing with a problem of their own specialty, have the right to focus their attention on its strictly scientific elements and to solve it according to these data alone. But when one enters the realm of practical applications to the human person, it is impossible to ignore the repercussions that the proposed methods will have on the person and his destiny. The greatness of the human act consists precisely in going beyond the very moment when it arises, so as to engage the whole orientation of life, to arrive at a position with regard to the absolute. This is already true of daily activity — how much more of an act that engages, with the mutual love of the spouses, their future and that of their posterity!

Therefore, We believe it is important for you, gentlemen, not to neglect this perspective, when you consider the methods of artificial fertilization. The means by which one tends to the production of a new life, takes on an essential human significance, inseparable from the end which one pursues, and susceptible, if it is not in conformity with the reality of things and with the laws inscribed in the nature of beings, to cause serious harm to that very end.

On this point likewise, We were asked to give some directives. On the subject of attempts at human artificial fertilization 'in vitro', it suffices for Us to observe that it must be rejected as immoral and absolutely illicit. On the diverse questions of morality which arise on artificial fertilization, in the ordinary sense of the word, or 'artificial insemination,' We have already expressed Our thoughts in a discourse addressed to physicians on September 29, 1949 (Discourse and Radio Message, vol XI, pp. 221 and following). We reaffirm also the specifics of what We were saying then, and We limit Ourselves here to repeat the judgment given at the conclusion: 'As regards artificial fertilization, not only is there need to be extremely reserved, but it must be absolutely excluded. In speaking thusly, one does not necessarily proscribe the use of certain artificial means ordered solely either to facilitate the natural act, or to accomplish the end of the natural act performed normally.' But since the use of artificial fertilization is spreading more and more, and in order to correct some erroneous opinions that are spreading about what We have taught, We add the following:

Artificial fertilization exceeds the limits of the right that the spouses have acquired by the matrimonial contract, that is, to fully exercise their natural sexual capacity in the natural performance of the matrimonial act. The contract in question does not confer on them the right to artificial fertilization, since such a right is in no way expressed in the right to the natural conjugal act and cannot be inferred from it. Even less so can it be derived from a right to the 'child', as the primary 'end' of marriage. The matrimonial contract does not give this right, because its object is not the 'child' but the 'natural acts' which are capable of generating a new life and which

are ordered toward it. It must also be said that artificial fertilization violates the natural law and is contrary to justice and morality.

[This second section of the Papal Address was given in Latin.]

Now another question occurs, for the treatment of which it is more fitting to employ the Latin language.

Just as our rational mind is opposed to artificial insemination, so the same ethical reasoning, by that norm of behavior which is proposed, altogether prohibits that human semen be procured by means of masturbation, not even so as to be subject to the examination of experts.

This norm of behavior we likewise mentioned in our Address before the Congress of the Association of Urological Physicians, on the 8th day in the month of October in the year 1953, in which we decided these things, saying: 'concerning the rest, the Holy Office has already decided on the 2nd of August, 1929' (Acts of the Apostolic See, vol. 21, year 1929, p. 490, II) that 'masturbation directly procured so as to obtain sperm' is not licit, no matter what the purpose of the exam may be. (Address and Radio message, vol. 15, page 368).'

But when it was reported to us that this depraved mode of behavior had increased greatly in his place, we considered it an opportunity to warn, to recall, and again to instruct, now just as then. If this mode of behavior is being used to satisfy the libido, even the natural sensibility of man, by his own free will, rejects these things, and much more so the judgments of the mind, as often as he considers the matter, maturely and rightly.

Now the same acts ought to be likewise repudiated, even when they are used for grave reasons, which would seem to remove them from culpability: for example, for use as a remedy for those who are troubled by an excess of nervous tension or abnormal outbursts of emotion; for the medical inspection of the sperm, under the power of the microscope, to determine with which venereal or other kinds of bacterial disease it may be infected; for various types of examinations, from which, it is ordinarily agreed, the semen may be diagnosed by the vitality of the sperm, the presence of components, the number, quality, form, strength, and other conditions of that type.

This mode of procuring human seed, by the effect of masturbation, cannot be viewed as anything other than direct, for it is not in accord with nature, in its full exercise of the generative faculty in the human person. Indeed, because this full exercise was done outside of conjugal intercourse, it bears within itself the direct and improper usurpation of the use of this same faculty. In this way, the improper use of this faculty is rightly considered an intrinsic violation of the principles of morality. For by no means does the human person have the right to any exercise of the sexual faculty beyond a certain point, because he received the very same faculty from nature.

Certainly, to the human person (aside from other things which pertain also to irrational animals) the right and power for the use and exercise of the same faculty is bestowed only on those who have entered into a valid marriage, and then it is confined to the matrimonial right, as it has been handed down and received with respect to marriage itself. And this shows the human person that the sole reason for which he has received from nature this responsibility, with respect to the sexual faculty, is nothing other than to have the power and right to enter into matrimony.

Yet this right, which pertains to the object and scope of the natural law, has not been assigned to the will of human persons. By the force of this law of nature, the human person does not possess the right and power to the full exercise of the sexual faculty, directly intended, except when he performs the conjugal act according to the norms defined and imposed by nature itself. Outside of this natural act, it is not even given within the matrimonial right itself to enjoy this sexual faculty fully. These are the limits to the particular right of which we are speaking, and they circumscribe its use according to nature.

Consequently, since the full exercise of the sexual faculty is circumscribed within this absolute limit of conjugal intercourse, the same faculty is intrinsically made fit to achieve the fullness of the natural end of matrimony (which is not only the generation, but also the education of offspring), but its exercise must be joined together with said end.

This being so, masturbation is entirely outside of the aforementioned natural capacity of the full exercise of the sexual faculty, and therefore it is also outside that connection to the end ordained by nature. For that same reason, it is deprived of any designation as a right, and also it is contrary to nature and the moral law, even if it is intended to serve a usefulness which is just and not improper.

What has been said up to this point concerning the intrinsic evil of any full use of the generative power outside the natural conjugal act applies in the same way when the acts are of married persons or of unmarried persons,

whether the full exercise of the genital organs is done by the man or the woman, or by both parties acting together; whether it is done by manual touches or by the interruption of the conjugal act; for this is always an act contrary to nature and intrinsically evil.

[The third and final section of the Papal Address was given in French.]

If fertility meets certain requirements of the organism and satisfies powerful instincts, it immediately engages, as We have said, the psychological and moral realm. The work of education still exceeds, by its scope and consequences, that of generation. Soul-to-soul exchanges, which take place between parents and children, with all the seriousness, the delicacy, the self-forgetfulness which they require, quickly constrain the parents to move beyond the stage of effective possession, to think of the personal destiny of those entrusted to them.

More often than not, when they reach adulthood, children leave their families, go away to respond to the necessities of life or to the calls of a higher vocation. The thought of this normal detachment, which is so expensive for them, should help the parents to rise to a more noble conception of their mission, to a purer vision of the significance of their efforts. Under pain of at least partial failure, the family is called to integrate into society, to widen the circle of affections and interests, to orient its members towards wider horizons, to think not only of themselves, but also of the tasks of social service.

Finally, the Catholic Church, the repository of divine intentions, teaches the superior fecundity of lives wholly consecrated to God and neighbor. Here, the complete renunciation of the family is required, so as to allow spiritual action — entirely disinterested and proceeding not from any fear of life or its commitments, but from the perception of the true destiny of humanity, created in the image of God, and in search of a universal love — such that no carnal attachment may stand in the way. Such is the most sublime and the most enviable fecundity that humanity is able to imagine, one which transcends the biological realm, so to enter, in a sense, into the realm of the spirit.

We did not want, gentlemen, to conclude this speech without opening these perspectives. To some, they may seem quite far away from the objectives that now occupy you. It is not so, however. Indeed, these perspectives alone make it possible to situate your works in their proper place and to perceive their value. What you want is not only to increase the number of human persons, but to raise the moral level of humanity, its beneficent forces, its will to grow physically and spiritually. You want to render a new fervor into the affection of so many husbands who are saddened by a deserted home. Far from obstructing their full bloom, you strive to place at your service all your knowledge so as to awaken in them these admirable resources, which God has hidden in the hearts of fathers and mothers to help them ascend to Him, in themselves and with their entire family.

Struck by such a responsibility, We dare to hope that you will pursue with increasing ardor your scientific labors and the practical achievements, which you propose. By invoking on yourselves, on your families, and on all those who are dear to you, the most abundant divine favors, We bestow upon you, with all our heart, Our Apostolic Blessing.

Pius XII

Translation by Ronald L. Conte Jr.