

THE CATHOLIC FAMILY

NOTES FOR CRITICISM

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The present organization of English society is based on the assumption that families include only two or three children apiece. The details of life fit into a consistent scheme which is compatible with the small family, and with no other.

The scheme quite clearly and obviously does not permit of a large family, save as a very exceptional thing. A family of several young children is rarely met with to-day, particularly in the wide-spread middle-classes, and in those classes a natural family of 8, 10 or 12 children is extremely rare. For the large family is compelled to ostracise itself, and to live so differently from persons of its own social status as to excite their curiosity.

It also excites their pity, contempt or reprobation. To bring a number of children into the world is regarded as foolish, improvident, unkind and unjust. It is retrograde, out of harmony with modern progress, a failure to benefit from scientific knowledge, an intensification of the troubles of an already over-populated world, and an act of cruelty to parents and children alike. That is the common verdict, not only of the worldly man and woman, but also of the majority of the most upright, generous, kind-hearted and religious of our neighbours.

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Hardly anyone now supposes that there is a necessary connection between marital relationship and the conception of children. The use of some form of birth-prevention is considered an obvious duty among married people.

The natural instincts are stimulated in every direction. Journals, books, plays, films, clothing, social customs, conversation and many other things openly conspire to turn the thoughts to sex. The married have no wish to forego the resultant pleasure, and by a curious mental inhibition they refuse to contemplate the effect of such stimulation on the unmarried.

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Now to a Catholic, birth-prevention is forbidden. Under all circumstances it is a grave sin. He lives, nevertheless, among non-Catholics, who outnumber him by twenty times. His mode of living, as a rule, is indistinguishable from that of his neighbours. He lives in the same sort of house, wears the same sort of clothes, and has the same social customs and amusements.

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But he can only live like his neighbours if he has a small family. He has therefore the choice between two heroic alternatives. On the one hand he may live as a celibate in the married state for a long period of years, or on the other hand he may completely withdraw from the manner of life of his kind and have from six to a dozen children. He can only escape choice between these heroic alternatives if from natural causes his marriage is completely or partially infertile.

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The sin of birth-prevention is of an unusual sort in that it is peculiar to certain historical epochs and races in which civilization has begun to decay. Nations have lived for centuries without any common knowledge of it. For men and women who live in a healthy environment it is therefore completely avoidable, unlike such sins as envy, malice, gluttony, avarice, pride, and the like.

Hence we cannot content ourselves by suggesting that it is sufficient to proclaim the truth, and to trust that the majority will refrain from birth-prevention in so far as the common weakness of human nature permits. In this case we can content ourselves with nothing less than complete freedom from sin.

Let us then consider by what means complete freedom from the sin of birth-prevention may be obtained.

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It is admitted that an exceptional man married to an exceptional woman may succeed in limiting his children to two or three by continence in the married state for a long period of years, and thereby maintain the manner of life of his social equals.

The average woman marries in her twenties, and bears two or three children before she is thirty. For a further ten years, and often for a further twenty years, she is capable of bearing children at regular intervals. For that period she and her husband must live a celibate life if further children are to be avoided.

This position is highly unnatural. The constant intimacy, the knowledge of natural rights, and the example of almost every neighbour create a mental atmosphere in which continence is only possible to the exceptionally heroic or austere.

If it is difficult for the normal man and woman to live continently until middle age as bachelor and spinster, it is clearly much more difficult for them to spend the most vigorous two decades of their lives in complete continence in the intimacy of marriage.

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Should the foregoing alternative be chosen, many failures are to be expected. The ideal itself is not convincing. The world is not over-populated; its whole population could stand with comfort on a piece of land no bigger than the Isle of Wight. Everyone knows, too, that there is a plethora of food in civilized lands. The mode of life of to-day is in truth arbitrary and artificial, and little worth so great a sacrifice.

Should Catholics choose this way out of their difficulties, the Church will tend to retain the physically infertile and the insincere, and to lose the fertile and the naturally honest.

Furthermore, if in individual cases the attempt is made without reasons which are ultimately adequate, the abnormal strain will inevitably give rise to personal disharmonies and to abnormal nervous and psychological conditions. There is little hope of obtaining that contentment, peace, courtesy, and honour which were formerly associated with the Christian family if the prime relationship of marriage is subjected to a constant conflict between dread of pregnancy, abnormal continence, unnatural sin, natural rights and natural duties. From this cause the melancholy fact arises that the non-Catholic and the lax Catholic may often achieve a degree of harmony and contentment unknown to the Catholic who is sincere.

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The choice of a large family as an alternative to abnormal continence demands under present circumstances so much independence and strength of character, and so much perseverance in deliberate opposition to the contrary habits and opinions of neighbours, that it, too, is possible only for the exceptional man and woman.

The gregarious and imitative instincts of mankind are so powerful as to make it certain that the bulk of Catholics who intermingle with non-Catholic neighbours will not produce numerous children. The wages of the poorer classes are based on a standard which is not intended to permit of it: in many indirect ways the middle-class income would be jeopardised by numerous children: and for nearly everyone the hardship would be intolerable.

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In this case, however, the ideal conforms with Christian principle and practice. The discipline, stability of character, mutual charity, and freedom from avarice and luxury called forth by the large family are part of the Christian objective.

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The idea of fertility, too, is closely associated with Christianity, and allied to that vigorous and creative force which receives the instinctive admiration of humanity.

For most people the objections to the natural family resolve themselves into four: (a) the difficulty of providing enough food, clothing and other real necessities from present incomes: (b) the general insecurity of means of livelihood, and the scarcity of occupations for children old enough to earn their living: (c) the impossibility of conducting the externals of life in a manner which bears any similarity to that of their neighbours' conduct, together with the social isolation derived from that fact: and (d) the deprivation of comforts, conveniences, amusements and pleasures entailed by the possession of a large family.

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The objection arising from the anticipated deprivation of luxuries and pleasures may be disposed of by renewing the traditional Christian attitude to material things. The Christian ideal does not include more than a frugal sufficiency: additional wealth is a doubtful benefit and a needless danger. And happiness is to be found in simplicity, rather than in the multiple conveniences and distractions of present-day life.

The objection arising from social isolation may be disposed of by the creation of an adequate social life among Catholics themselves, and a withdrawal from social competition with non-Catholics. In this connection it is to be noted that the present system of 'infiltration' does not permeate the non-Catholic world with Catholic principles: it has in fact the reverse effect. The distinctive mark of the Catholic should lie in major issues of social conduct rather than in the technicalities of his religion.

The objections arising from present economic conditions, and comprising, firstly, the difficulty of obtaining sufficient necessities from present incomes, and, secondly, the difficulty of obtaining and retaining a means of livelihood, are less easily disposed of. It is, indeed, asserted that they can be overcome if the nation will adopt Social Credit, Fascism, Neo-Corporatism, or some other political or economic theory; but, even if, for the sake of argument, the efficacy of these theories be granted, it is outside the power of the Catholic body to bring them into force.

It is clearly less than duty to wait impotently for a problematical national remedy, if a practical solution is ready to hand, and able to be applied in independence of others. I submit that such a remedy is now available.

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The remedy available is the reconstitution of economic societies of our own. If the need were sufficiently appreciated, enough money could readily be found in Catholic circles for the purchase of many thousands of acres of fertile land within the confines of this country. In a relatively short space of time numerous villages could be established by those Catholics willing to farm, or to follow the trades and crafts needed by those living simple lives in close contact with the land.

With the details of such an enterprise I am not now concerned. Since elsewhere than in England and the United States most Catholics of to-day live simple lives in rural areas, it is impossible to suggest that such a life is impracticable. I assume with confidence that many English Catholics are capable of adaptation sufficient to procure a frugal livelihood under circumstances so widespread and so normal to the human race.

It is common knowledge that life on the land, of the subsistence type customary among peasants, would permit natural families to be reared in healthy surroundings, and would provide useful work for an almost unlimited number of hands.

In order to practise polygamy the Mormons left their incompatible surroundings for the fields of Utah. If Catholics in this country wish for freedom to practise normal monogamous fertility, it would seem that they must adventure into the fields of England. A virile and courageous body, when bound by intolerable restrictions, has no option but to take the initiative in creating a milieu in which everyone is free to live in harmony with those principles which are deemed to be basic and essential. A milieu so created would naturally begin with an especial simplicity, and its subsequent elaboration would be directed along channels which would not restrict the elementary rights of individuals.

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The foregoing argument may be summarized thus:—

- (1) In this country birth-restriction is substantially universal and the social and economic life of the nation is based on the assumption that all families are small. The large family is now rare, save in certain sections of the working-classes.
- (2) Birth-restriction as currently practised is, however, a grave sin. It is furthermore an exceptional kind of sin into which mankind is only tempted in periods of decadence; and since it can be wholly avoided, it demands especial consideration.

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- (3) If the average Catholic is to mix with his neighbours on terms of equality, he must limit his family by living for some ten or twenty years a celibate life in the married state. This proposal conflicts so radically with the elementary rights and instincts of men and women, and is supported by such inadequate motives, that it is doomed to failure.
- (4) Neither is it to be expected under present circumstances that the average Catholic will have a natural family merely because it seems the only way in which sin can be avoided. The contrary social and economic influences around him are in fact too great. Nevertheless, in this case the proposal is both natural and Christian.
- (5) It is therefore the duty of the Catholic body to take action in furtherance of its principles. It cannot assume control of the State and reform the economic structure of the nation. But, if convinced of the need, it could at once purchase large tracts of land, and create self-supporting Catholic colonies in which natural families could be reared in healthy and simple surroundings.

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In this matter there is need to beware of two common defects: the first comprises the sterile idea that it is impossible to do the right thing until everyone else is ready to do it at the same time; and the second has been described by a well-known Catholic as 'the characteristically English failure to face facts.' As to the first, it has already been suggested that the Catholic body is not justified in waiting for the State to find a national cure for what has become a peculiarly Catholic problem: as to the second, a few observations remain to be added.

It must be repeated that there is no prospect whatever that the ordinary Catholic immersed in the whirlpool of modern life will have a large family, or alternatively that he will spend the best years of his manhood in married celibacy. In both men and women the sexual instinct is profound and urgent, and marriage is its divinely-appointed outlet. It is difficult enough for the unmarried to be continent in the sexual atmosphere of today: no one, save the recluse, seriously believes that ordinary men and women can marry and accomplish the much more difficult task of living for ten or twenty years in married celibacy; nor, for that matter, does anyone expect them to have a natural family.

These, however, are substantially the only alternatives placed before the Catholic body. The radical cure is to escape from the

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milieu in which this entirely unnecessary sin is all but compulsory, and it is to be regretted that we hear so little of any proposal to deal with the matter in a radical way.

But, at the best, many of us could not escape immediately, and perhaps some of us would have to be content to contemplate the escape of our children. The perception that there is no real impasse would, however, help us to accommodate ourselves to our temporary hardship; for there is less heroism in facing temporary difficulty than in trying to practise a way of life which to those unversed in philosophical argument seems completely and permanently irrational.

A half-way house may be envisaged as a probable solution in the days of waiting; namely, considerable periods of married celibacy, and considerably larger families. For this, however, a propitious atmosphere in Catholic circles is essential. Protracted marital celibacy is a new problem, and it has not yet been faced in the frank and practical manner in which the problem of religious celibacy is faced. Since the former is more difficult, there seems to be immediate need for the general adoption by the laity of more stringent personal restrictions regarding those multitudinous things which stimulate the natural instincts. And as to larger families, these will only eventuate if the Catholic body adopts the traditional Christian attitude to material possessions and purchased pleasures, and accepts a simple life and hard work as its normal lot. In neither of these matters is there at present any perceptible difference between the habits and outlook of the Catholic and those of his non-Catholic neighbour.

B. THISTLETHWAITE.