

Since this is probably the last editorial in *New Blackfriars* to be written before the papal declaration on birth-control, it seems proper that we should declare an editorial position on this matter, not, of course with any idea of influencing that decision but in order that we may be judged by it. In a few months' time we may expect that nearly all the roman catholic press will be adopting the papal position as their own and it is possible they may give the impression that it has always been their own. We hope that in our case we shall not merely be wise by hindsight; for this purpose we must risk being publicly wrong.

It is the business of a catholic periodical to keep in touch with the mind of the church; it is only in so far as it succeeds in this that its criticisms of the church have any special value. Attacks on bishops and other representatives of the church by those who do not share her faith and her community life are cheap and readily available; it is the special claim of a journal such as *New Blackfriars* that when it points to defects in the current life of the church it tries to do so in the name of an authentic catholicism. The declaration on birth-control provides a unique occasion for putting this claim to the test; have we discerned the Spirit aright or have we been deluded. Pope Paul's announcement will not presumably be an infallible utterance in the technical sense, it is extremely unlikely that he will seek to define the faith of the whole church in this solemn way, but whatever 'theological note' is to be attributed to it, it will be an extremely important witness to the real mind of the church – certainly a lot more reliable than an editorial.

It hardly needs to be said that editorials in this journal are not the voice of the English Dominican Province nor, indeed, of anybody except the current editor, but the reader may still want to know how far they speak for catholicism and how far they fail to do so.

In our view, then, the papal announcement will not re-affirm the absolute condemnation of contraceptive methods that has been customary in the past; we do not think the rhythm method is the only justifiable means of birth-control. We think there will be a decisive change in the usual teaching in this matter and we do not think that the grounds for such a change should be a re-examination of the physiology of sex in order to determine whether or not a particular method is correctly to be described as spermicidal or

sterilising or inhibiting to ovulation or whatever. Rather we think that the change should come about through adopting different terms of reference for the discussion; it should be the result of a re-examination of the place of sex in marriage.

We do not think that the God-given purpose of sexual communion can be defined at the level of physiology; human sex as it seems to us can only be understood as a part of the business of building a family relationship which includes parents and children. Too many conceptions and too little sex may both be destructive of this relationship.

So long as the sexual relationship is regarded as governed at least minimally by physiology, it is possible to lay down definite prohibitions of certain kinds of physical activity; once we depart from this purely physicalist view, the matter becomes much more complex and it becomes correspondingly harder to make clear rules of behaviour.

This does not mean that it is impossible. Thus, for example, the customary teaching in the past has prohibited contraception and various kinds of perverse behaviour for the same reason – that both violated a physiologically defined role of sex. There is, it seems to us, no reason to suppose that removing the physicalist objection to contraception thereby removes every possible objection to perverse and ‘unnatural’ acts: there are plenty of other reasons for not indulging in such behaviour.

The very complexity and particularity of the matter means that the decision as to whether contraceptive intercourse is justifiable in these particular family circumstances must be a matter for the consciences of the parents themselves – though evidently they have a moral obligation to seek what help they can get from the church, both clerical and lay, before making the choice for which they are then responsible.

This is what we think to be the true mind of the church in this matter. We do not expect all our readers or our contributors to agree with us and it is certainly no part of our intention to persuade others of our view. We put it forward merely for judgement. If Pope Paul proclaims the mind of the church to be quite different from this, we may not feel heretical but we shall at least be thoroughly disconcerted.

H.Mc.C.