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Encyclical letter of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox church in America

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ENCYCLICAL LETTER OF THE HOLY SYNOD OF BISHOPS OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

ON MARRIAGE

H. Birth Control

1. The greatest miracle and blessing of the divinely sanctified love of marriage is the procreation of children, and to avoid this by the practice of birth control (or, more accurately, the prevention of conception) is against God's will for marriage.

The love of God has been manifested in His loving creation of the world, and the divinely sanctified love of marriage - a love filled with the life-creating Spirit - brings forth the fruit of children, to be cared for by parents as the greatest of God's gifts - the gift of life.

The Marriage Service establishes an inseparable link between marriage and the begetting of children. In the litanies, petitions asking for the procreation of fair children immediately follow those invoking a blessing upon the couple being joined in the community of marriage. The same relationship is expressed in all three of the great prayers of the Service. Thus we pray: Give them offspring in number like unto full ears of grain, so that having enough of all things, they may abound in every work that is good and acceptable unto Thee. Let them see their children's children, like olive shoots around their table, so that finding favor in Thy sight, they may shine like stars of heaven, in Thee our God.

Orthodox Christians must not allow themselves to be manipulated by the abstract calculations of statisticians regarding such matters as the population explosion and the need for birth control and family planning. The Church is aware of the complexities which can arise in life due to social, medical and economic problems, but she still affirms that statistics do not reflect God's loving and providential care and inconceivable manner of bringing about the salvation of the world. Preoccupation with statistics can depersonalize us and our co-creativity with God in the begetting of children. The goal of the Christian life is the accomplishment of God's will, which may involve the begetting of children.

2. In all the difficult decisions involving the practice of birth control, Orthodox families must live under the guidance of the pastors of the Church and ask daily for the mercy and forgiveness of God.

Orthodox husbands and wives must discuss the prevention of conception in the light of the circumstances of their own personal lives, having in mind always the normal relationship between the divinely sanctified love of marriage and the begetting of children. Conception control of any sort motivated by selfishness or lack of trust in God's providential care certainly cannot be condoned.

I. Abortion

1. Abortion is condemned as a form of murder.

The teaching of the Orthodox Church is well expressed by canon 91 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council. Those who give drugs for procuring abortion, and those who receive poisons to kill the fetus, are subjected to the penalty for murder. The willful aborting of unborn children, as an act of murder, is contrary to the will of God. The unborn child is human life with potential, and not potential human life. The Church recognizes the existence of certain extreme cases in which difficult moral decisions must be made in view of saving human life, and fully sympathizes with those who must make such decisions. Such an extreme circumstance is the definitely diagnosed danger to the life of the mother at childbirth. The mother must decide whether to lay down her own life for that of her unborn child. Whatever the decisions of human legislatures and courts, the Church cannot accept the willful destruction of an unborn child at any stage of its development as anything other than the destruction of life.

+ IRENEY

Archbishop of New York
Metropolitan of All America and Canada

+ SYLVESTER

Archbishop of Montreal and Canada
Temporary Administrator of the Church

+ JOHN

Archbishop of Chicago and Minneapolis

+ JOHN

Archbishop of San Francisco and Western United States

+ NIKON

Archbishop of Brooklyn

+ KIPRIAN

Archbishop of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania
Secretary of the Holy Synod

+ VALERIAN

Archbishop of Detroit and Michigan

+ THEODOSIUS

Bishop of Pittsburgh and West Virginia

+ DMITRI

Bishop of Hartford and New England

+ GREGORY

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