3 Contraception: From the Protection of Public Morality...

Contraception is, according to the Catholic Church, an immoral practice as it contravenes the natural purpose of the marital act, which is procreation. It is immoral to interfere with the natural cycle of human fertility because it is contrary to God’s plan: a moral principle has thus been extracted from a biological law. Throughout the centuries the Catholic Church has said that contraception is an act against nature, going back to Augustine (†430) or Thomas Aquinas (†1274), to name but two of the most famous opponents of the practice.¹ The contemporary text, *Casti Connubii*, published in 1930, summarised unambiguously the secular position of the Catholic Church and was, according to John T. Noonan, ‘as a distillation of past doctrinal statements, ... a masterpiece’.² The first Pope to speak in ‘positive’ terms of contraception was Pius XII. He conceded in 1951 that the rhythm method for medical or social reasons was a valid option, thus dissociating for the first time the sexual act from procreation. This also implied that the Catholic Church accepted the importance of sexuality as a mode of expression. However, too large a dissociation (by artificial means) between sexuality and reproduction still begets moral disorder.

The Catholic theology and the official position of the Irish state were in accord until such time when contraception came to exemplify the conflict that exists between law and morals, public and private morality. Did contraception contribute to undermining the social fabric? Was birth control the state’s prerogative or that of couples? This chapter will analyse how the teaching of the Catholic Church on contraception was institutionalised in Ireland, and how the state eventually detached itself completely from natural law – a very meaningful process since it was on the question of contraception that the state first confronted ‘the law and morals dispute in its modern form’.³
THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN IRISH, CATHOLIC SEXUAL MORALITY

The ideology adopted by the new Irish state was both nationalist and Catholic: it glorified rural life and had a romantic vision of the family. The latter was going to be institutionalised through the common efforts of the state and the Catholic Church, as anything that threatened the family was seen to threaten the stability of society, and of the nation as a whole. As Michael Nolan wrote, ‘in 1922, the Catholic Church became the most powerful ally of the new state, lending the weight of its immense authority to the cause of law and order and placing at the disposal of the new, mainly Catholic state its biggest ecclesiastical stake, namely its schools and system of clerical management.’ Once the 26 counties of Ireland gained independence, the role of the Church was compromised, which now had to join forces with the people against an enemy other than the British government: ‘A nation that has defined itself in terms of an external enemy no sooner lost that enemy than she created a substitute within herself. In Ireland that internal enemy was immorality.’ Historian and political analyst Margaret O’Callaghan offered her interpretation of the virulent crusade of the Irish Catholic hierarchy to impose its ‘almost hysterical puritanism in relation to questions of sexual morality.’ The bishops had been horrified by the violence unleashed during the Civil War, whose ferocity made them doubt the moral calibre of the Irish, because of ‘their plasticity in the face of false teachings’. Hence their need for moral guidance. The Catholic Church’s concern was clearly stated in a pastoral letter in October 1922:

We deserve to impress upon the people the duty of supporting the national government, whatever it is, to set their faces resolutely against disorder, and to assist the government in every possible way to restore order and establish peace. Unless they learn to do so they can have no government, and if they have no government they have no nation.

The Catholic Church was going to devote itself to purging society of the excesses of the war, by fighting an evil which had come from across the sea to corrupt the Irish, who were obviously weak and malleable. The evil traps were ‘chiefly the dance hall, the bad book, the indecent paper, the motion picture, the immodest fashion of female dress – all of which tend to destroy the virtues characteristic of our race.’