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The Sermon That Cardinal Spellman Never Gave

ON SUNDAY, January 10, 1965, at 2 P.M. Francis Cardinal Spellman was scheduled to preside and give the sermon at Catholic Family Day services in Saint Patrick's Cathedral, New York City. The occasion was the annual celebration of the golden wedding anniversary of married couples in the Archdiocese of New York. There were more than 500 that year, who with their relatives, friends, and interested spectators brought 10,000 people into the cathedral and around the neighboring plazas and streets. Catholic Family Day by 1965 had become an emotionally packed day for hundreds and hundreds of Catholic families. An interesting side-note to the event is the fact that most of the celebrating couples year after year were Italian.

In ecclesiastical terms January 1965 was the fiftieth year of Cardinal Spellman's ordination to the priesthood. He was scheduled to give this sermon after a long and arduous tour of military bases in Vietnam, where he was following his customary practice of celebrating Christmas and New Year's with soldiers under his pastoral care.

January 1965 was also the time of bitter controversy within the Church over contraception. The encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was still three years away. Pope Paul VI on June 23, 1964, had told the Catholic people of the world that traditional norms on contraception were still in force. He had returned to the subject again on October 19, 1964, to reaffirm those norms, to assert that the Church had no doubt about them even though some Catholic theologians were beginning to say the opposite. Some European Catholic bishops during the Second Vatican Council were promoting a change in doctrine. These unorthodox Catholic views received wide coverage in the secular press. Catholics were becoming unsettled. The Holy Father was heard asking privately: Where are our loyal sons? He had also privately cautioned some of the controversial bishops to cease their public remarks on

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the subject.

With a view toward lending support to the Holy Father, Cardinal Spellman in advance of his trip to Vietnam had agreed to address the subject of Catholic family life during the January 10 celebration. His purpose was to present Catholic doctrine on marriage, family life, and the regulation of birth in a pastoral way and authoritatively to state what Catholic doctrine on these subjects was. The theological sections of the sermon stated only the exact teaching of the Church on two important items (contraception and the Pill), leaving the free issues on family limitation free issues. He was also expected to announce his support in New York for counseling services which would give married couples effective Catholic guidance.

Minutes before the service began he announced that he could not give the sermon. Upon his return from Vietnam someone had persuaded him that the Holy Father did not want any bishop to talk on the subject, including bishops who were supporting what the Holy Father himself had said.

The sermon was never given, but within the context of the date January 10, 1965, and subsequent developments in relationship to *Humanae Vitae* the contemplated sermon makes interesting reading.

George A. Kelly

Address to the Golden Jubilarians

By Francis Cardinal Spellman

Your wedding day fifty years ago ushered in a new life of Christian love and responsibility. With your love for each other bonded at the foot of the cross, you were pronounced husband and wife by Holy Mother Church and sent forth, like the apostles of old, to enrich the Kingdom of God.

You were promised then by the Church "a great measure of earthly happiness." This, we can be sure, you have enjoyed, as your presence here this afternoon abundantly indicates. Yet you were not promised—nor did you have—a life free of discomfort, suffering, and self-denial. These crosses, far from destroying your marriage, only made more meaningful your pledge before Christ to love each other until death in sickness as well as in health, in poverty as much as in riches.

Your marriage serves as a sublime example to the world. It is an example of *honor* because of your faithfulness to your sacred vows. It is an example of *generosity* because of your willingness to devote all your talents and energies to making your children good Christians and good Americans. In many cases it is an example of *saintly heroism*, because you endured great hardship not only to give them life in this world but to prepare them for the life eternal. You have made your homes truly sanctuaries of peace and nurseries of virtue

—the hope of our nation and the pride of our people.

Many young couples today, in their early years of marriage, face problems like those you know so well but which, with the grace of the sacrament of matrimony and confidence in God's providence, you have overcome. Like you in your younger days, today's couples also must find the means to support their growing families, to provide them with suitable housing and education adequate for contemporary American society, to see that they have proper health care in the face of ever-rising medical costs. In addition, they face a problem even more current in this day than perhaps in yours—a problem which, in the recent words of His Holiness Pope Paul VI, is on everyone's lips and which goes by the name of birth control.

The Holy Father described this as "the problem of population increase on the one hand, and family morality on the other." It is, he stated, "an extremely grave problem. It touches upon the wellsprings of human life. It touches upon the most intimate sentiments and interests in the experience of man and woman. It is an extremely complex and delicate problem."

The Church is well aware that certain couples, for many reasons, may wish or may find it necessary to limit the size of their families. She recognizes that their need may often spring from such factors as the well-being of families themselves and the social needs of the community. As Pope Pius XII said in 1951, "the Church knows how to consider with sympathy and understanding the real difficulties of the married state in our day" (Address to the Family Front, November 26, 1951).

There are many aspects to the problem of family regulation, and the scientific studies on this subject are quite extensive. While the Church is ever ready to accept the established findings of science, she must always evaluate these data whenever a moral issue is involved. She has the duty, given by the Lord, to teach and propound His law before the people of God. And however much she sympathizes with those who intimately face the problems involved in regulating the size of the family, she must speak when methods offered as a solution violate moral order and God's holy law.

The position of the Catholic Church on contraceptive birth control is unmistakably clear. His Holiness Pope Pius XI solemnly stated that any attempt on the part of the husband and wife to deprive the marital act of its inherent force or to impede the procreation of a new life is immoral and, furthermore, that no matter how great the need may be it cannot change an intrinsically immoral act into a moral and lawful one (encyclical *Casti Connubii*, December 31, 1930).

His successor, Pius XII, reaffirmed this teaching in an address delivered in 1951. There he stated, "This precept [of Pius XI] is as valid today as it was yesterday, and it will be the same tomorrow and always, because it does not imply a precept of human law but is the expression of a law which is Natural

and Divine." The natural law cannot be changed, because, as His Holiness declared later in the same address, it is something "from which the Church herself, as you well know, has no power to dispense" (Address to the Midwives, October 29, 1951).

Perhaps some persons are entertaining false hopes that Catholic doctrine on contraception will change, probably because of certain widely publicized, even imprudent, statements concerning the so-called anti-ovulant pill. Concerning the use of such pills, Pope Pius XII spoke quite plainly in 1958. He taught that while they may be taken for certain medical purposes, it is wrong to use them if the direct intention is to prevent conception (Address to Hematologists, September 12, 1958).

In commenting on this statement, our present Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, declared: "We do not have sufficient reason to regard the norms laid down by Pius XII on this matter as superseded and, therefore, no longer binding." Catholics, therefore, must abide by the teaching of the Holy See in this matter. They are not free to follow contraceptive birth-control practices or to use anti-ovulant pills for a directly contraceptive purpose. Opinions to the contrary may not be followed by Catholics in good conscience.

And without minimizing the human problems that people face—whether they concern poverty, racial injustice, the threat of nuclear war, or the regulation of family size—experience does show and history can demonstrate that men best solve their problems by obeying God's law.

You, our golden jubilarians here today, witness in your own lives the truth that marriage best fulfills itself when it is lived under God and for God. It was by harmonizing your will and God's will that you achieved the contentment and the joy that today are yours.

I know that some people will feel that this is "hard to bear; who can listen to it!" (John 6:60). I can understand their feelings. The Church does too. As long ago as 1951, Pius XII called upon scientists to perfect a morally acceptable method of birth regulation (Address to Family Front, November 26, 1951). The present pope is making a most intensive study of the entire matter. But as Pope Paul clearly indicated last June, "Catholics want to follow a single law such as the Church authoritatively proposes." And I, as your shepherd in Christ here in New York, am obliged to remind you of the law that the Holy See authoritatively teaches.

As evidence of our own deep and continued sympathy, we have established twelve clinics in the Archdiocese of New York to provide guidance for couples who have good reason to limit the size of their families, and to instruct them in the use of natural procedures—the so-called rhythm method—which will help them to achieve their objectives in a way consistent with the teachings of the Church.

I call upon Catholic doctors and their staffs to spread wide the valuable

knowledge about rhythm that we already have, and to intensify research aimed at making this method even more effective. We also urge devoted married couples in the family apostolate to contribute their knowledge and experience to the development of a truly Christian spirituality for living married life under modern conditions. We urge them to take an active part in teaching this spirituality to others. I call upon the nation which has overcome so many other problems to assign part of its resources and talents to developing moral means of fertility control for those citizens who do not choose to make contraception a way of life, and to extend those social services which recognize the blessedness of children, which enable parents to raise in decency those children they chose to have, and which enhance the place of the family in American society.

And I urge those young couples of today who are personally encountering these problems of family life to look to the magnificent example given these past fifty years by you golden jubilarians. You are a living witness to the truth that the trials and difficulties of marriage can be overcome by those who walk in the path of the Lord; that success is assured for those who place their trust in His Providence; and that—again in the words of Pius XI—“there is no possible circumstance in which husband and wife cannot, strengthened by the grace of God, fulfill faithfully their duties” (*Casti Connubii*).