

BOOK REVIEWS

ON MARRIAGE

THE EXPERIENCE OF MARRIAGE

Edited by Michael Novak. (Darton, Longman & Todd, 25s. hardback, 12s. 6d. paperback.)

THE PILL

Edited by Leon Pyle. (Darton, Longman & Todd, 5s.)

The reviewer of these two books about the Catholic contraception debate ought to declare his hand, especially in a journal such as this. The reader can then judge for himself. I write about these books as a married Catholic who has, personally, no *overwhelming* worry about keeping to the Church's present teaching (mainly because my wife's inside works pretty well according to plan), but who on philosophical and theological grounds finds that teaching verging on the nonsensical. This position is certainly getting commoner.

The Experience of Marriage is a report written by thirteen anonymous Catholic American couples on the state of their marital relationships and the effect on them of the ban on contraception. It is an essential document for the understanding of this problem, and of the mentality of those for whom it is a pressing personal issue. While it tells of much anguish, rage and despair, it also spells a kind of hope, because those who have gone through these problems are both articulate and, as Catholics, quite undisturbed in their basic Catholic conviction. One of the things this shows is that the whole contraception issue, however urgent and difficult in itself, is quite peripheral to the religious faith of Catholics. It needs to be got out of the way, because, until it is, Catholics will be unable to concentrate on their proper Christian vocation.

A number of points arise from almost all the contributions. First, the "unnatural" character of the one means of family limitation which the Church expressly allows (rhythm). Most of the couples have tried it, and most of them have found it unsatisfactory. Their dissatisfactions are not, however, all of the same kind or degree. To some, the attempt to regulate so basic a human activity by the temperature chart seems so repellent as to be intolerable. To others it is merely an irritation, to be borne along with the other irritations of life. It would be a grave mistake to think that the attitudes to sex, or rhythm, expressed here are at all uniform. Personal factors make enormous differences. To others, the method is simply useless for physiological reasons.

Second, there is a good deal of dissatisfaction with the fact that those who, in the past, have pronounced on this problem have been celibate. I think this objection can be overdone. Some of the best things written by Catholics on marriage have been by priests, and some of the worst by lay people. Personally, I feel that while it is undeniable that clerical celibacy has much to do with the cold legalism of traditional attitudes, the failings may be equally due to an exclusively *masculine* viewpoint. But this is by no means a failing confined to Catholics.

There is another kind of danger suggested by the book, which is to suppose that outside Catholic circles marital relationships are always far better. Simply as an unprofessional observer, I feel this is probably untrue. This book gives much evidence, from the combination of faith and charity of its contributors, that a Catholic marriage has much to offer, that possibly no other background can give. These essays would be admirable simply as examples of how marital tensions can be tackled and borne, if not overcome, provided the basic relationship is right. They also give much insight into the problems caused by bad sex education.

The fact is that the modern marriage problem is new, not just for Catholics, but for everyone. Knowledge of physiological facts, a new attempt to understand human beings as equally spiritual and bodily organisms (neither angels nor animals), an unprecedented population explosion, all contribute to making this a unique historical

problem for mankind. In this context, the Catholic debate is not just about trifling hairbreadth distinctions (though it is often conducted that way); it is about the fundamental human purpose of marriage. This book will give both Catholics and others a great deal of insight into the nature of this problem, and the kind of thinking needed to solve it. If the "official" Catholic attitude is exasperating (as it is), these essays also help to show that merely to write it off as a fanatical craziness will not help those who are, for whatever reason, oppressed by it. It will also show that this "official" attitude is not shared by many Catholics themselves.

The Pill usefully and comprehensively documents the debate, by reprinting many statements, letters, articles, etc., from recent discussion. The most interesting part is perhaps the reaction to the English hierarchy's worryingly insensitive, not to say crude, reiteration of the traditional line. It shows that Catholics won't take this kind of low-level thinking any longer. The bishops must do better than this in future. The book is a fascinating exercise in moral argument, and shows Catholicism in open debate with itself in a remarkable way.

Brian Wicker

UNMARRIED LOVE

By *Dr. Eustace Chesser. (Hutchinson, 15s.)*

MARRIAGE FOR THE MARRIED

By *Dr. Mary Macaulay. (Delisle, 12s. 6d.)*

Here are two books about love and loving relationships written by two worldly wise and experienced people. While one is about love outside marriage, and the other about it within the marriage-bond, both authors base their books on the belief that each person is seeking in life a satisfying loving relationship with another, and this can only be achieved through honesty and a respect for the individual.

Dr. Chesser's book comes at a time when many people, including a few committed Christians, are doing some straight thinking about our traditional morality. Many traditionalists will disagree with Dr. Chesser's thesis, and will only add one more nail to the coffin they are preparing for those who are thoughtfully and seriously trying to bring a little common sense to bear on the human condition.

From the beginning, where Dr. Chesser says: "There is one indispensable condition; it is always wrong to indulge in pre-marital intercourse without the use of birth control", to the end where he stresses the immorality of having intercourse if there is the slightest suspicion of infection, his theme is the responsibility that one human being has for another.

Pre-marital intercourse is neither moral nor immoral, it is right for some people and wrong for others, and either helps or prevents them growing from adolescence to maturity, according to their particular make-up. What matters is that people should do what is right for them, and that those who wish to have a pre-marital relationship should not be so loaded down with inhibitions and guilt, and not be forced by their parents and society to conduct their private love life in what is, often, considerable discomfort.

Dr. Chesser discusses various degrees of lovemaking, and says again that what is right for some will be wrong for others, always emphasising that mutual consideration will determine how far the couple should go. He glosses over, a little, the situation where what started as a lighthearted affair for both, ends with one person more deeply involved and badly hurt. The chapters about contraception are excellent and very explicit, and for this reason alone, one would like this book to reach a good many young people.

How many young people really get good reliable information about contraceptives? Surely we have got past the stage when we regarded lack of contraceptive knowledge as a deterrent, and this kind of information should be much more widely available.

Dr. Macaulay's book *Marriage for the Married* takes up the tale from Dr. Chesser's. Here is legitimate love, supported by the custom of society, acceptable to all, but despite this approval, fraught with difficulties for the unwary.