

Tacit Consent. Why the Church was unable to stop the spread of contraception in the catholic Veneto (North-East Italy) during the first half of the twentieth century

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Abstract

This article describes the Church's struggle against birth control during the first half of the twentieth century in the diocese of Padua (North East Italy), from pastoral mercy – inspired by the doctrine of St. Alfonso de' Liguori – to strict discipline following the publication of Pio XI's encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, in 1930. We examine documents that have until now been overlooked: the moral cases discussed during the periodic meetings among Padua priests from 1916-58, and the written answers provided by priests in response to a question concerning their efforts to combat the limiting of births, asked in occasion of Bishop Agostini's visit to the parishes in 1938-43. This documentation reveals why – despite the Church's overarching cultural and institutional position – the ethical directives concerning the limiting of births expressed by the Paduan Catholic Church were progressively and systematically ignored by the large majority of worshippers, even the most faithful.

Secularization and reproductive change

Religiosity and secularization throughout the Western world are, today as in the past, intimately intertwined with demographic behavior.¹ The social and individual mechanisms which underlie such behavior are not, however, always so easily understood.² One might imagine a rather simple scenario: the Church elaborates and proclaims moral norms (e.g. sexual relations should occur only within marriage, one should not use contraception, etc.) and the followers of that Church respect these norms, as opposed to others who behave differently. A gradual decrease in parishioners would mean that the moral behaviors advocated by said Church would also become less widespread. In reality, at each step there exists the possibility that things might proceed differently. As we

¹ Ariés 1980; Lesthaeghe 1983; Coale and Watkins 1986; Lesthaeghe and Wilson 1986; Lesthaeghe and Surkin 1988; Lesthaeghe and Neel 2005, Derosas and van Poppel 2006, Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006, 2009.

² McQuillan 2004; Kertzer 2006; Caltabiano et al. 2006.

shall see in this article, moral norms are not always communicated to worshipers in a clear fashion; and not always do those considered to be the most faithful follow Church rules to the letter. Likewise, some moral behaviors concordant with Church mandate may persist even when adherence to the Church diminishes, being driven by other motives. Certainly the influence of the Church on familial and individual behaviors can differ according to the historical and social context. In addition, a Church may have very little influence over the individual, but be relatively strong at the institutional level. The opposite may also be true: the Church may be in direct conflict with the dominant power but able – perhaps precisely because of the latter – to shape the behavior of many individuals. This was the case of the Catholic Church in communist Poland, as well as that in Ireland and in French-speaking Quebec during the time of English dominion.

An understanding of how and if religion influenced marital and reproductive behavior in a particular territorial context during a specific time period thus requires an effort in terms of historical reconstruction. One must endeavor to place oneself in the shoes of the subjects involved: from the diverse members of the clergy to the common worshiper. In this article, we endeavor to do precisely this, in reference to the diffusion of the limiting of births in the diocese of Padua (in northeastern Italy) during the first half of the twentieth century.

The strange case of Veneto

All indicators of religiosity and secularization show that during the first half of the twentieth century (as in the decades which followed), Veneto was one of the areas in Italy and Europe where the influence of Catholicism was most pervasive.³ In addition, in 1921 the birth rate in Veneto was quite high, at 5 children per woman, while marital fertility, according to Coale's I_g indice, stood at 0.712. This number indicates a general absence of the use of parity specific birth control within marriage, in that 71% of a woman's life was “exploited” by the couple for reproductive purposes. More generally, Veneto had one of the

³ Allum (1996), Ginsborg (2003, chapter 5), Ramella (2010).

highest fertility levels in Europe during this time period, compared not only that of other regions in southern and central Italy, but also to levels observed during the nineteenth century.⁴

The Veneto case would thus seem to present an excellent example of a direct link between late secularization and the lingering of reproductive behaviors characteristic of the *ancien régime*. A closer look reveals, however, a more complicated story. First of all, the strong influence of the Church in Veneto did not stop the rapid spread of birth control. In the span of a generation, the fertility rate dropped by 50 percent, from 5 children per woman in 1921 to 2.5 in 1951, without, however, any significant change in marital behavior. In addition, table 1 shows just a few of the associations between the timing of the fertility decline and indicators of secularization.

For example, the percentage of votes given to political parties of Catholic persuasion (before Fascism, to the Popular Party (*Partito Popolare*), and after the second World War, to the Christian Democrats (*Democrazia Cristiana*), is lowest precisely in areas where fertility began to fall the latest. As has been demonstrated by more sophisticated statistical analyses, marital fertility began instead to diminish in areas with greater literacy rates and more precocious industrialization.⁵ Why, one might ask, didn't the decline in fertility in Veneto begin in the more secularized areas? Could it be that the Church – from a certain point on – was unable to stop such a rapid decline in birth rates?

This article focuses on the diocese of Padua (or about 1 million inhabitants in 1951). Its 381 parishes are distributed throughout the provinces of Padua, Vicenza, Venice, Treviso, and Belluno (there are 7 provinces in total in Veneto). The diocese allows for a reconstruction of the great diversity of Veneto from a number of standpoints: geography, urbanization, agricultural structures, and the spread of industry and literacy. Even the diffusion of birth control varied considerably across the diocese. For example, from 1938-43 the birth rate ranged from 10 per 1000 in some urban parishes, areas of precocious industrialization and education, to 35-40 per 1000 in a number of rural areas.⁶

⁴ Coale and Treadway (1986, Appendix A, pp. 80-151); Livi Bacci (1977).

⁵ Dalla Zuanna 1997.

⁶ Dalla Zuanna 2010, Appendix 1.

Table 1. Several indicators for five groups of 71 areas into which the Veneto has been subdivided, clustered according to the timing of the great fertility decline.

<i>All indicators are expressed in percentages</i>	Timing of the fertility decline (Year in which the TFR falls below 20% of the maximum recorded after 1881)					Veneto 1924
	1901	1919	1922	1925	1931	
EDUCATION						
- Illiterate individuals among women born between 1862-66 (over the total number of women)	33	29	42	47	67	45
SECULARIZATION						
- Votes for the Popular Party in 1921 (over total number of valid votes)	39	34	40	40	32	37
- Votes for the DC in 1946 (over total number of valid votes)	53	50	47	55	45	50
INDUSTRIALIZATION AND AGRARIAN TYPOLOGY						
- Active in agriculture in 1936 (over total number of active men)	44	49	64	67	65	58
- Hired farmhands in 1951 (over total number of active men)	5	8	16	13	22	13
- Active in manufacturing in 1936 (over total number of active men)	38	32	21	21	22	27
- Factory workers in 1951 (over total number of active men)	46	40	28	27	28	34

NOTA. The Veneto region is divided into 71 areas: 56 districts and 14 communes. In 1911, the communes were home to more than 15,000 inhabitants; the districts that contain these communes are referred to as the “urban belt” (Dalla Zuanna 1997). The indicator marking the beginning of the fertility transition is the year in which the TFR fell below 20% with respect to the maximum reached after 1881 (Coale and Treadway 1986). The 71 areas are subdivided into 5 groups of equal number, in ascending order by average year of the beginning of the fertility decline. See Dalla Zuanna (1997) for more detailed information concerning the sources used in order to construct these indicators, which, for the most part, were of census and administrative nature.

Sources

The Second Vatican Council (concluded in 1965), the education of the masses, and the spread of mass media all put Catholics in direct contact with the Bible and the moral teachings of the Church. Before the Council – when Catholics who were able to read the bible were looked upon with suspicion, when the majority of the population was able to read little or nothing, and when radios and televisions either did not exist or were very scarce – things were quite different:

(1) Doctrine was, first of all, proclaimed through the pronouncements issued by the ecclesiastic hierarchy and through theological teachings.

(2) These teachings and moral norms were then communicated to parish priests and other confessors.

(3) Finally, parish priests communicated the doctrine to their flock.

In order to understand which teachings reached married couples, one must clearly distinguish these three steps.

The doctrinal position of the Church with regard to the fertility control during the period under consideration – the first half of the twentieth century – has been thoroughly studied. We will briefly review the results of said research.

Less well known are the ways in which the Pope's pronouncements, the documents of the Roman Curia, and the opinions of moral theologians were communicated to priests and confessors. This article uses an ecclesiastic source which until now has never been employed for this purpose. Four times a year (eight in the city) all of the priests in the diocese of Padua congregated (in assembly) by vicarage (*vicariati*), made up of about 5 to 15 parishes each. The objective of these meetings was to assure that the priests presented a uniform position to their flocks. During these gatherings questions of a moral nature were posed – identical for all of the diocese – to which each priest was to write and send a written answer to the Curia. After some months, the official response was written up by one of the Diocese's professors of theology and published in the Diocesan Report (*Bollettino Diocesano*). It appears that the Paduan priests were quite diligent in their

participation in the assemblies and in resolving moral questions. An Episcopal Act published in the *Bollettino* in 1928 (p.643) confirms that:

Many priests are quiet adept at resolving individual cases: they show that they have studied with great diligence; and that even without the possibility of consulting true libraries, one can answer the questions set forth relatively well (...).

Let us now examine the questions posited and the official responses published in the *Bollettino*, from its first publication in 1916 up until the 1950s (1916-58), when this method of training the clergy ended. Twenty-three of the cases deal with “the sin of Onan” (*coitus interruptus*) and – starting in the late 1930s – “periodic continence” (natural family planning). Another 9 cases concern related issues, such as sins which break the 6th commandment (do not ...); the duty of parents to educate their children; and the different rules employed in order to confess men, women, or children.⁷

The study of the influence of the Paduan Church through an examination of moral cases aids in attaining a fuller understanding of the second step of communicating official doctrine – or that of transmitting the latter to pastors and confessors – but it does not provide any information about the third step (or that of the clergy's transmission of moral precepts to their parishioners). With regard to the latter, we have employed an unpublished source: the questionnaire used in occasion of Bishop of Padua Agostini's second pastoral visit which occurred between February of 1938 and December of 1943. During this time, the Bishop systematically visited each and every parish for a period of 3-4 days. Prior to the visit, the priests were required to respond in writing to a long questionnaire on a variety of subjects. The 32nd question asks if *there is a prudent effort, in preachings and confessions, to fight sins related to the limiting of offspring*. This question was not included in questionnaires of previous visits, and was asked again in the early 1950s in the occasion of Bishop Bortignon's first visit (currently unavailable to researchers).

All of the pastors responded positively to the 32nd question. It really couldn't have been otherwise, given the phrasing of the question and the considerably strong hierarchical control of the Church at the time.

⁷ The text, in Latin, of the 32 moral cases are available upon request. For the text in Italian, see Dalla Zuanna 2010, Appendix 2.

One hundred forty parishes provided responses, and a reading of their narratives sheds light both on the clergy's and married couples' positions on the *vile sin of Onan*. The responses must also be considered within the broader context the pastoral visit questionnaire, along with detailed references to the economic, social, and demographic conditions of each parish. Such information also allows for a reconstruction of the birth rate, thanks to population data and information concerning baptisms performed during the two years preceding the Bishop's visit.

Between discipline and mercy. The Catholic doctrine on contraception from the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century.

In what follows, we review just a few aspects of the long history of Catholic doctrine on birth control; that indispensable for understanding the following two phases of communicating the doctrine in the diocese of Padua which took place during the first half of the twentieth century.⁸ The decidedly negative view of birth control on the part of the Catholic Church has its roots in Late Antiquity. St. Augustine (354-430) states – returning to the position of other fathers of the Church and followers of neo-Platonic thought – that sexual desire is the direct consequence of the Original Sin. However, because God commanded all men to grow and multiply and created the institution of marriage, salvation is also possible for married couples, provided that sexual relations take place within marriage with the purpose of procreation. Prohibition of the use of contraceptives derives from this reasoning, in that the latter is not “natural,” or contrary to the aim of sexual activity desired by God. From this point of view, contraception is considered to be a “sin of haughtiness,” in which man acts as if he himself were God. That said, St. Augustine felt that marriage had other positive purposes, if subordinate to its primary aim. More generally, this concept of marriage was gradually consolidated over the centuries that followed, laconically confirmed in canonical law in 1917 (canon 1,013): *the primary aim of marriage is procreation and the education of offspring;*

⁸ Noonan 1965; Flandrin 1970; Chiavacci and Livi Bacci 1995; Pelaja and Scaraffia 2008.

the second aim is that of mutual aid between spouses and amendment for concupiscence. Before the Second Vatican Council, this was the formulation impressed upon moral theologians and Catholic priests.

The Church's negative view of contraception was not, however, always communicated with the same ardency to married Catholics. St. Alfonso de' Liguori (1696-1787) did not, for example, propose any kind of doctrinal change, but did intervene in that what one might call – in today's ecclesiastic language – the pastoral procedure. Objecting to the rigidity of Augustinian thought, at the center of St. Alfonso's reflection was the so-called *theory of good faith*: a person does not subjectively commit sin even if they do something that is objectively bad, if the sinful nature of the latter is ignored. Up until the Second Vatican Council, confession was usually based upon a series of questions which the priest asked the penitent. According to St. Alfonso, confessors – given the supreme good of saving the penitent's soul – could perceive the latter's genuine ignorance and the practical impossibility of correcting the wrongful act, and hence should avoid instilling doubt and should not ask explicit questions. St. Alfonso also suggested that confessors should not delve too deeply into topics of contraception and sexuality, in that a hasty sentence, not attentive enough to the actual situation of the penitent, could cause anguish, and in fact result in a straying from the righteous path, even if subjectively determined. The influence of St. Alfonso on moral Catholic theology from the 1800s to the first half of the twentieth century was enormous; enough so that during the his beatification his works were declared “exempt of any error.”

When the first signs of the diffusion of voluntary marital fertility control began to appear in the nineteenth century, St. Alfonso's school of thought was predominant in Catholic moral theology. In 1842, the Bishop of Le Mans (Belgium) questioned the Sacred Penitentiary of the Roman Curia – which at the time was the highest institution for the examination of moral cases – as to the gravity of *coitus interruptus*. While the Sacred Penitentiary confirmed the traditional position of doctrinal rigor, it also made reference to the *Confessor's Practice* by St. Alfonso (chapter 2, n. 41), where the latter urged priests to be discreet and to avoid speaking about the seriousness of the sin of Onan when they felt it impossible to attain better behavior on the part of their “ignorant” penitents. This position was again confirmed by the Sacred

Penitentiary in 1886.

It was not until 1930 that this practice began to change, not so much in terms of doctrine, but rather with regard to pastoral practice. In a context of increasing alarm over declining birth rates – expressed not only by men of cloth, but also by many intellectuals and politicians in developed countries⁹ – Pio XI solemnly placed the issue of contraception at the center of attention of the Catholic Church by writing *Casti Connubii* (Chaste Unions). In addition to reaffirming the traditional Augustinian doctrine opposing contraception, in this encyclical letter Pio XI strongly questioned the practice of using St. Alfonso's theory of good faith. *Casti Connubii* also returns to the distinction made between the primary and secondary aims of marriage and sexual intercourse. This position was maintained in the decades that followed, notwithstanding the important opening on the part of the Pope and the Church hierarchy towards natural fertility control, and the reinterpretation of traditional Church doctrine based on the discoveries of Ogino and Knaus.

An admonishment which was not always useful. Moral cases on the abuse of marriage addressed by the assemblies of clergy in the diocese of Padua.

In the fifteen years (1916-1930) leading up to the publication of the *Casti Connubii*, only one of the moral cases discussed in the assemblies of the Paduan clergy concerned actions aimed at limiting births. Evidently, among pastors in the diocese of Padua, such an issue was not so salient, even if in several areas fertility control was already evident during the early decades of the twentieth century. The following case does, however, shed light on the position of the Church communicated to Paduan confessors, at least up until 1930:

Case: Marcello, uncouth and penniless, troubled by the numerous offspring he must feed and clothe, abuses marriage with the sin of Onan and sodomy. When sinning, he is convinced that such behavior is not in itself a sin in that, even though other confessors have told him that this behavior is sinful, his is an exceptional case. In fact, another pregnancy would mean another illness for his wife; perhaps a final illness that could lead to her death. The wife, Plinia, does not approve of her husband's behavior

⁹ Teitelbaum and Winter 1985.

and does nothing to encourage it. She fears, however, that she too sins by being mindful of her health, and hence enjoying the impossibility of conceiving (...).¹⁰

Official response:

(...) An invincible erroneous conscience is not admissible with regard to the malice of sodomy and thus those who commit this sin must always be rebuked; if the individual is suitably regretful they should be absolved, but if they are not, they should be sent away without shrift. One can, however, find invincible erroneous conscience with regard to the malice of onanism in the strict sense of the word in certain uncouth individuals due to particular or exceptional circumstances. (...)

(...) One can concede an invincible erroneous conscience to Marcello when he commits the *sin of Onan*, although not, however, when practicing *sodomy*. If her husband commits the *sin of Onan*, Plinia does not sin, either in the case that she allows the behavior or if she requests it. If however, she commits *sodomy*, she is not guilty of bodily cooperation only if violence is used against her or if she is severely threatened (she feels deeply afraid).

“Invincible erroneous conscience,” – a concept dear to St. Alfonso – is granted to Marcello “even if other confessors told him that this behavior is sinful,” in that he is “uncouth and penniless” and has an “exceptional circumstance.” It thus seems that an invincible erroneous conscience did not simply mean ignorance of the evil nature of an action, but also an “invincible” refusal to accept that the action itself was a sin. There could, therefore, be quite a number of cases of “invincible erroneous conscience,” in that the majority of worshipers were “uncouth and penniless” and there was a potentially quite a long list of “exceptional circumstances.” In all of these cases, it was suggested that confessors stay silent rather than contribute to the moral disaster of an individual. With regard to the sin of sodomy, however, there was no escape, and one could not use either the excuse of ignorance, exceptional circumstances, or invincible erroneous conscience. It is precisely the difference in treatment of those whose committed the sin of sodomy compared to those who committed the sin of Onan which emphasizes the favorable practice towards those who practiced onanism – a result of a rigorous application of the St. Alfonso's theory of good faith.

This case also illustrates the differential treatment of men and

¹⁰ *Bollettino Diocesano* 1924, pp. 575-576.

women with regard to the sin of Onan. Plinia “does not approve of her husband's behavior and does nothing to encourage it,” and thus does not sin when she has sex with her husband. In light of the logic outlined above, this presents yet another reason pastors were unlikely question women on this subject. More broadly, on all topics of sexual nature, it was suggested that confessors be very prudent in the formulation of their questions and – when in doubt – stay silent.

Up until 1931, the subject of onanism was not touched upon in the moral cases. Paging through the *Bollettino Diocesano*, the issue comes up here and there, with tones similar to those outlined above: doctrinal rigor tempered by a continual insistence on pastoral prudence. This attitude changes after the publication of Pio XI's *Casti Connubii* on the 31st of December, 1930. Although the encyclical did not introduce any doctrinal changes, it did argue that – due to the diffusion of fertility control – St. Alfonso's doctrine of good faith was hardly applicable to the sin of Onan. An understanding of how the teachings of the *Casti Connubii* were translated into instructions for the clergy of the diocese of Padua is facilitated by an examination of nine moral cases on the topic of onanism presented in the priest assemblies of 1931-33. Here are a paradigmatic passages from a case in 1932:¹¹

Case: Jack spoils the conjugal act in order not to have children due to considerable difficulties of his own, that of his wife and of his family, particularly when taken together (...). His wife, Caia, was given the following recommendation by a doctor of good repute: “If you become pregnant again, you will surely die.” Caia believes what she has been told in that the last time she gave birth she nearly died; her husband is also of the same opinion, and thus he spoils the conjugal act with the consent of his wife. She asks if at least the risk of dying excuses the guilt of abusing marriage. Do there exist motives just enough to excuse the abuse of marriage? How should the confessor act?

Official Response

- (1) (...) Pope Pio XI, in the Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii*, did not forget to consider the motives proposed above, the consequences of poverty, and familial difficulties, all of which he looks upon with understanding and compassion (...). In the end, the Pope recalls the motive concerning the extreme danger faced by the mother. However, the Pope argues in solemn and absolute terms: *No reason, not even the gravest, can make what is*

¹¹ *Bollettino Diocesano* 1932, pp. 39-40.

intrinsically against nature something harmonious with nature and thus honest. (...)

- (2) The confessors should remember that (a) no honest motive, even if manifold, can excuse the grave sin of onanism or any other related act prohibited by natural law; (b) the Roman Pontiff condemns the malicious silence of the confessor towards the penitent who declares his vice and way of behaving even in good faith. Consequently, in order that the confessor not be considered conniving with Jack, and instead desirous of condemning his unacceptable behavior, the confessor must not stay silent once he becomes aware of Jack's sin (...).
- (3) (...) By way of summary, neither the threat of illness nor the risk of dying are admissible as motives which remove the malice of violating the conjugal act.
- (4) The parson may need to judge Caia and her husband under different circumstances: (a) if they express their situation; (b) if they do not confess. In the first case, the confessor (...) must tell them the truth; the same holds even if the penitents appear to be acting in good faith and admonishment is not foreseen to be useful. In the second case (b) the confessor may absolve the penitents (...) even without questioning the latter with regard to the sin in question, and even if he suspects its presence. In other words, the confessor may grant absolution because the issue at stake is not malicious silence on the part of the confessor; and questioning in a similar case, is in all truth, wisely left alone, presuming good faith.

With this response, the strict lessons of the *Casti Connubii* are stressed with “no ifs or buts.” In reality, however, very little seemed to change. The fourth point of the response outlined above does not so much reflect the *Casti Connubii* as it does the pronouncements made by the Sacred Penitentiary during the 19th century and the case on onanism and sodomy presented to the assembly of Paduan pastors in 1924 (described above). Even after the publication of the *Casti Connubii*, the confessor could stay silent and grant absolution if the penitent did not confess to onanism and if “the penitent appears to act in good faith and admonishment is not foreseen to be useful.” St. Alfonso's approach had permeated the world vision of theologians and Paduan pastors too deeply to be erased by a single pronouncement from Rome.

What did change with the *Casti Connubii* was the practical position required of pastors, not so much within the confessional, as in their regular and exceptional preachings on onanism. If before pastors were

advised to stay silent, now it was suggested that they speak up, even if with tact and prudence. In the nine cases published after the *Casti Connubii* that speak to the subject of onanism, priests were urged to educate their worshipers with regard to the Christian doctrine of marriage.

A seemingly indestructible wall. The Paduan parsons responses to the question on the abuse of marriage during the pastoral visit of 1938-43

A reading of the narratives of the 140 Paduan parsons who responded at length to the questionnaire allows for a deeper understanding of five aspects: (1) awareness of the demographics of the parish; (2) actual measures taken against the abuse of marriage; (3) content of the exhortations made to their worshipers; (4) opinions as to the motives which pushed couples to limit births; (5) awareness of the results of their efforts.

(1) *Awareness of the demographics of the parish.* It seems likely that perception of and the actual practice of limiting births were quite comparable. Among parishes where the birth rate (BR) was greater than 35‰, almost all priests shared the same opinion as that expressed by the priest of Conche (BR=39‰), a poor community of farmhands located on the plains outside of Padua: *the sin of limiting one's offspring has not infiltrated the parish.* Where, however, the birth rate fell below 25‰, the parish priests' position reflects most closely that expressed by the parson of Arsié (BR=12), a village located at the foot of the Alps, composed mostly of small-time breeders and poor peasants who in large part earned their living through seasonal emigration. The parson writes: *We currently find ourselves in a period of accentuated limiting of births. This disastrous phenomenon is especially notable in the mountainous villages (more so than in the countryside), where one finds avarice and despicable self-interest and petty comparisons which arise among families who constantly communicate among themselves. In fact, there are now very few large families, that is to say those with 8 or 10 children. The majority have less than 5, as opposed to forty years ago when one would have found mostly large families.*

(2) *Actual measures taken against the abuse of marriage.* An effort to take measures against the abuse of marriage was made during preachings and in confessional. Such preachings rarely took place during the Sunday sermon due to an awareness that speaking in too explicit a fashion to the flock as a whole risked creating temptation among the unaware. The parson of the hillside town of Tramonte (BR=28), composed mostly of farmers who either owned or rented small plots of land, argues that *given the small size of the parish, speaking openly about this matter does not seem a prudent choice, in that they all know one another, hence in some cases the argument is taken up and corrected in confessional.*

Only a few parsons cite preachings relevant to youth of marrying age. Evidently, notwithstanding the change brought about by the *Casti Connubii*, most parish priests did not publicly address topics of sexual nature when it came to young adults. This choice follows the instructions written by Pio XI in the encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* published shortly after the *Casti Connubii* on the topic of educating youth in a Christian fashion. In addition, paging through the *Bollettino Diocesano* one observes how – several years earlier – the Paduan Bishop Dalla Costa conducted an out-and-out “crusade” against the sexual education of youth. In an Episcopal Act he writes quite clearly: *...therefore, given the explicit theories of the Church, which forbids certain questionings and explanations even in the penitentiary court, which is the most certain and effective medicine of the passions, we prohibit all parents, educators, confessors, and ecclesiastic assistants to male and female youth to either follow or practice the theory of sexual education or burden other priests or layman with the latter.*¹² The same argument is again taken up, in an analogous tones, in another Episcopal Act in 1930.¹³

Another issue also rendered credible preachings against limiting fertility quite difficult: priests were sent strong signals from the Catholic hierarchy that they should educate parents on the importance of investing in the well-being and futures of children. Echoing the content of the encyclical mentioned above on the Christian education of youth, we find a moral case from 1931 which strongly admonishes

¹² *Bollettino Diocesano* 1929, p. 244.

¹³ *Bollettino Diocesano* 1930, p. 57.

parents who neglect their children:

Case: Jack, head of the family, could certainly, if he lived with greater parsimony, provide for the needs of his children and the education that is their due; in reality he does not fulfill this duty (...) It is asked how and if do parents sin when they wastefully consume their own goods and do not see to the needs and education of their children.

Official response. (...) Parents who wastefully consume their assets not only sin for their wastefulness, but also err in the love due to their children, and thus it is likely they too will also gravely commit sin. It is serious indeed the sin of Jack, head of the family, of which we speak (...). The priest must take care not to absolve an indisposed individual or to treat with excessive benignity a recidivist; that which must be openly admonished must not be kept silent; the parson must not encourage such scandal in his parish with silence.

It must have been difficult for priests to be intelligible to Christian parents, asking of them – contemporaneously – both “quality” and “quantity” of children.

The common approach used for communicating doctrine on the abuse of marriage to groups of worshipers took the form of meetings with married men and women. Among the 50 parsons who cite such educational moments, 31 met (always separately) with husbands and wives, while none met with only the husbands, and 19 met with only the wives. Generally, many of the priests agree with the parson of Enego (BR=22), another village located at the foot of the Alps with characteristics similar to Arsiè. The priest writes: *in the majority of cases the guilty party is the man, acting against the wishes of the woman*. Why, despite this knowledge, did priests thus turn more often to the women, confirming a gender difference which we also find in the writings (cited above) of St. Alfonso? We do not find explicit justifications for this choice in the answers provided to the questionnaire, almost as if this was considered “natural” behavior. It is probable that men were somewhat less scrupulous in their confessions and were less likely to participate in the formative occasions organized by the parish. If so, the behavior of the priests suggests a greater detachment on the part of the Church towards men, at least with regard to these issues. This conclusion is supported by descriptions of confessional practice. For example, the parson of Mandria (BR=25), a community of peasants and factory workers located just outside of the

city of Padua, writes: *unfortunately evil casts a wide web. Many women admit to the sin of the abuse of marriage.* Perhaps their husbands did not mention this sin in confessional, or perhaps they did not confess in the parish, or maybe they did not confess at all.

The confessional was the preferred place to fight – with prudence – the sin of limiting one's offspring. The necessity of acting prudently is clearly referred to by the parson of San Vito di Vadobbiadene, a community of wine producers and farmers in the hills north of Treviso, who disconsolately writes: *after having received such charitable correction, some are no longer to be seen at either the Sacraments or in Church such that they may deliberately abandon themselves to sin.* Together with many of his colleagues, another parson of a very small and poor community at the foot of the Alps called Incino (BR=13), where the greatest resource was seasonal emigration, notes that *occasionally in preachings, more often in confessional and with greater energy the parson endeavors to eradicate these cases.* Other priests explicitly confirm that they clearly understood the change in attitude toward penitents following the publication of *Casti Connubii*. According to the parson of Crespano (BR=26), a community where men farmed the land and women worked in the large silk factories: *one can no longer suppose good faith among those guilty of limiting their number of children.* That said, this behavior was not entirely homogenous across all parishes, given that the parson of Fara (BR=28), an agricultural community in the hills north of Vicenza, complains that *too often our worshipers hear that other confessors remain silent; and their silence is interpreted – at the very least – as those who do speak about it exaggerate.*

(3) *Content of the exhortations made to worshipers.* The main argument used by priests to convince their followers to change their behavior was that by limiting the number of children one was not trusting in Divine Providence. An exemplary comment comes from the parson of San Nazario (BR=23), a poor community with similar characteristics to those of Enego, Arsiè and Incino, where the majority of men spent at least 6 months a year working in France, Belgium or Switzerland: *one presses on such that certain ideologies of foreign origin and certain difficulties which have since arisen are overcome, inviting trust in the providence of God and acceptance of His divine dispositions,*

reminding that this life is none other than preparation for the next, where God awaits us.

(4) *Opinions as to the motives which pushed couples to limit births.* Several parsons speak of excessive economic concerns, or *avarice and despicable self-interest* which, according to the priest of Arsiè – cited at the beginning of this section – pushed worshipers to lose faith in Divine Providence. For the parson of the extremely poor community of Masi (BR=19), made up of farmhands and located in the far south of the diocese: *limiting the number of children has been introduced solely due to poverty which has persisted for years.* According to other priests, especially in areas where limiting births was more widespread, the underlying reasons were instead linked to lifestyle and imitation, often caused by interactions with foreigners outside of the parish. For example, the parson of Valstagna ((BR=21), located in the hills near San Nazario, comments: *several families returned (from France) at the outbreak of hostilities (written in the year 1940) have only one child, or at most two, and with allusions or words one fears that they spread evil.* For the parson of the urban Paduan community of the Holy Trinity, composed mostly of families of factory workers: *children scare: in some cases not even one, in others – and these make up the majority if not the totality – one-two-three at most. Parents with many children, more than three, are looked upon with wonder and spoken of with admiration by upstanding individuals and by others with contempt, as if they were without common sense.* A lengthier articulation of this aspect is expressed by the parson of Vo' (BR=22), a community of farmers in the Euganean hills, 25 kilometers outside of Padua: *the persistence of this disorder has a number of different competing genre of causes: the inability to restrain oneself; the lack of faith in Divine Providence; the inadequacy of certain dwellings; poverty; the disdain one hears in talk and conversations about parents of many children; the reluctance of certain mothers to show that they are pregnant, especially if they have grown children at home (...). Another motive is the lack of a spirit of sacrifice. We are facing wall that seems indestructible.*

(5) *Awareness of the results of their efforts.* The closing words of this narrative bring us to a final aspect of interest obtainable from the priests' responses. Rarely does one find words of optimism, although

the pastor of the mountain community of Roana (BR=12), made up of lumberjacks and small-time breeders, comments: *starting this year (it was 1938), it seems there are small signs of improvement, in part due to the beneficial influence of laws on the subject.* The majority of the priests, however, shared the discouragement voiced by the pastor of Vo'. The parish priest of St. Carlo (BR=21), a community of factory workers in the city of Padua, writes: *we must say, in all sincerity, that we continue to lose ground.* The most disconsolate response comes from the parson of Saletto di Montagnana (BR=23), a community composed mostly of poor farmhands: *the sin of limiting the number of children is also fought against, if with prudence, with preachings such that those living in sin will understand, and then in the confessional, but it seems quite difficult to persuade them. Even individuals who seem good are not persuadable.*

Summary and discussion

Up until the 1920s, Catholic moralists – even if they considered *coitus interruptus* to be a grave sin, symptom of scarce faith in Divine Providence – advised priests to speak with great prudence and circumspection and only during confession or in other private settings. If they acted imprudently, confessors risked harming the good faith of worshipers unable to change their behavior, or otherwise introducing the sin to the unaware. This position, which reflected St. Alfonso de' Liguori's advice to confessors, was fully shared by bishops and by those responsible for the education of seminarians and the ongoing instruction of parish priests in the diocese of Padua. The official response to the sole moral case discussed in the assembly of priests who, between 1916 and 1930, reflected on these issues, suggests an uncompromising position on a doctrinal level coupled with less than rigorous pastoral practice. Priests were explicitly advised to stay silent, rather than speak out. If they followed the guidelines provided, priests were not supposed to raise the subject of *coitus interruptus*, either from the pulpit or in educational meetings organized for their followers. In confessional they were not to ask questions on the topic, intervening only – and with great prudence – if the worshipers themselves admitted to such behavior.

Many couples could have interpreted such silence as assent, and this may help explain why – in the diocese of Padua and in all of the Veneto region – the practice of limiting births spread in the first decades of the 20th century. This occurred independently of the strength of secularization. Rather, the birth decline began in areas characterized by more precocious diffusion of industry, education of the masses, and where there existed greater migratory flows with areas of low fertility.

When, in 1930, Pio XI requested through the *Casti Connubii* greater discipline in the struggle against the limiting of births and declared the Alfonsian theory of good faith to be little applicable to the abuse of marriage, parish priests were put in a hard position. On the one hand, they were asked to promote the *quality* of children, supporting initiatives for their development and education (nursery and professional schools, theatrical and musical activities...) and exhorting parents to do their best to support the needs of their children. On the other hand, parsons were also supposed to encourage the *quantity* of children, entreating parents to have faith in Divine Providence, and not to put limits on marital fertility. These two requirements found partial reformulation in the practice of natural birth control through periodic abstinence, already considered licit by the Sacred Penitentiary in a pronouncement made in 1853, and strongly encouraged a century later by Pio XII in his speech to midwives in 1951. This practice was also considered in 6 of the cases discussed during the Paduan assembly of 1939-58, with progressive approval in light of scientific discoveries made concerning women's menstrual cycle.

But when priests responded to the pastoral visit questionnaire in 1935-42, discouragement was the prevalent tone. It seemed as if they were up against *an indestructible wall* and *even individuals who seem good are not persuadable*. In their efforts, parish priests were not favored by the Church hierarchy's proud opposition to any form of sexual education of youth. It must have been difficult to instruct young adults in the virtues of Christian marriage if they could not speak of sexuality aside from reiterating ominous prohibitions, falling short of any real educational interaction.

Due to these various factors, even the most devoted of Catholic worshipers became increasingly dubious about the Church hierarchy's position concerning birth control. To this regard, the following passage, taken from a long interview with OBG, a midwife working in the public

sector, is illuminating. The woman, born in 1899, assisted in the delivery of more than 6,000 infants during the 50-year period of 1923-72 in Campo San Martino. This municipality was made up mostly of farmers who either owned small plots of land or rented, and was located in the high Paduan plains (the birth rate was 22‰ from 1937-38).

Even more widespread was ignorance in terms of sexuality. If you only knew how many women asked me what they needed to do in order not to have children! It was something else, holy Mary! They trusted me and so did their husbands. Those who already had many children and didn't want to get pregnant again would ask: "Mother, what do we need to do?" "You must time things right [evidently an allusion to *coitus interruptus*] or don't do anything at all [or don't have intercourse]," I would tell them. There were no other methods, because condoms didn't exist yet. I would teach young brides that if they wanted to have intercourse with their husbands, they should do so for several days right after their period ended, but after that they should stop, as it became risky. And later they would come and thank me: "You know, it's true, it's really true! We followed your method!" Because before they had children one after the other and now, instead, as many as three years might pass without them getting pregnant. They were truly happy. What did the priests have to say? I never spoke with them about this sort of thing. At one time they would have liked for women to have as many children as came along. They feel the same way now.¹⁴

In this fashion, even in Catholic Veneto fertility rapidly declined. The efforts of the Church were not, however, entirely in vain. During the second half of the 20th century, fertility remained higher in less secularized areas, even if birth rates more than halved with respect to the first 30 years of the century. In the last two decades of the 1900s, when fertility levels in Veneto reached their lowest point (1.3 children per woman), territorial differences in birth rates overlapped quite closely with several measures of secularization, confirming a tendency already observed in 1961.¹⁵ However, any association between industrialization and fertility disappeared: on the contrary, fertility was higher in areas where industrialization coexisted with direct management agriculture, often carried out by the same workers. Further research might reveal if and how such change was conditioned by the behavior of the clergy and – more generally – by the speed of processes of secularization.

¹⁴ Ceccato 1993, pp.165-166.

¹⁵ De Sandre 1971; Dalla Zuanna 1997.

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