Tacit Consent: The Church and Birth Control in Northern Italy

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Religiosity and secularization throughout the Western world are, today as in the past, closely intertwined with demographic behavior. The underlying social and individual mechanisms are not, however, always clearly understood. As I demonstrate in this article, the moral norms of the Catholic Church on reproduction are not always communicated to worshipers in a clear fashion, and even faithful Christians do not always follow Church rules to the letter. Moreover, the influence of the Church on familial and individual behaviors can differ according to the historical and social context. An understanding of how and to what extent religion influences marital and reproductive behavior in a particular geographical context during a specific time period thus requires historical reconstruction. In addition to analyzing Church principles and values, one must also examine the behavior of the individuals involved: theologians, the Church hierarchy, parish priests, and the parishioners themselves.

This article employs novel documentation to examine ways in which the Church’s moral rules on contraception were (or were not) communicated to parishioners in a predominantly Catholic context in a period of rapid fertility decline: the diocese of Padua, in the northeastern Italian region of Veneto, during the first half of the twentieth century.

Before examining the diocesan documents, I briefly review the demographic and religious context of Veneto and the diocese of Padua during the period under consideration. All indicators of religiosity and secularization show that during the first half of the twentieth century (as in the decades that followed), Veneto was one of the areas in Italy and Europe where the influence of Catholicism was most pervasive. In 1921 the fertility rate in Veneto was quite high, at 5 children per woman, while Coale’s index of marital fer-
tility ($I_p$) was 0.712, indicating a general absence of the use of parity-specific birth control within marriage. More generally, Veneto had one of the highest fertility levels in Europe during the first quarter of the twentieth century. However, the pervasive influence of the Church did not stop the rapid spread of birth control beginning in the 1920s. In the span of a generation, the fertility rate dropped by 50 percent, from 5.0 children per woman in 1921 to 2.5 in 1951, without any significant change in marriage behavior. Indeed, secularization seems less of a driving force behind rapid fertility decline in Veneto compared to other elements of social change characteristic of the first half of the twentieth century: the spread of industrial labor, demographic development of urban areas, decline in infant mortality, diffusion of mass education, and an increase in individual mobility due to considerable flows of seasonal outmigration, especially to Belgium, France, and Switzerland.

The 381 parishes of the diocese of Padua (about 1 million inhabitants in 1951) were distributed throughout the provinces of Belluno, Padua, Treviso, Venice, and Vicenza. The diocese reflects the diversity of Veneto from a number of standpoints: geography, urbanization, agriculture, and the spread of industry and literacy. Even the diffusion of birth control varied considerably across Padua. For example, in 1938–43 the birth rate ranged from 10 per 1000 in some urban parishes and some areas of early industrialization, widespread seasonal migration, and high levels of education, to 35–40 per 1000 in a number of rural areas.

**The Diocesan Reports**

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 the reading of the Bible was not encouraged by the Catholic hierarchy—indeed the majority of the population in rural Italy was largely illiterate—and access to radio and television was uncommon. Church doctrine was communicated to parish priests and other confessors through pronouncements issued by the ecclesiastic hierarchy and through theological teachings. These teachings and moral norms were in turn conveyed to worshipers.

The doctrinal position of the Church with regard to fertility control during the first half of the twentieth century has been thoroughly studied. 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. Four times a year (eight in the city) all priests in the diocese of Padua congregated in an assembly made up of about five to 15 parishes. The purpose of these meetings was to ensure that priests presented a uniform position to their flocks. During these gatherings questions of a moral nature were posited and all priests were required to send written answers 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), annual compendiums of which are now available in many parishes of the diocese and in the libraries of the Episcopal Seminar and Curia. The priests of Padua were apparently 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 quite adept at resolving individual cases: they show that they have studied with great diligence; demonstrating that even without access to libraries, one can answer the questions set forth relatively well.

I now examine a selection of the questions posed and the official responses published in the Bollettino, from its first publication in 1916 up to 1958, when this method of training the clergy ended. Twenty-three of the cases deal with “the sin of Onan”8 (coitus interruptus, or withdrawal) and—starting in the late 1930s—“periodic continence” (natural family planning). Another nine cases concern related issues, such as sins that break the Commandment forbidding adultery; the duty of parents to educate their children; and the different rules employed in order to hear confession from men, women, or children.9

The study of the influence of the Paduan diocese through examination of moral cases provides a fuller understanding of the communication of official doctrine to pastors and confessors, but it says nothing about the clergy’s transmission of moral precepts to their parishioners. With regard to the latter, I rely on an unpublished source: the questionnaire used on the occasion of the Bishop of Padua’s second pastoral visit, which occurred between February 1938 and December 1943. During this time, Bishop Agostini systematically visited each parish for a period of three to four days. In preparation for the visit, parish priests were required to respond in writing to a long questionnaire on a variety of subjects. One question asked whether “there is a prudent effort, on the occasion of preachings and confessions, to fight sins related to the limiting of offspring.” All 381 parish priests responded affirmatively to this question.10 The outcome could hardly have been otherwise, given the phrasing of the question and the strong hierarchical control of the Church at the time. One hundred and forty parish priests provided extensive responses, and a reading of their narratives sheds light on the views both of the clergy and of married couples on the “vile sin of Onan.”

Between discipline and mercy

The roots of the decidedly negative view of birth control on the part of the Catholic Church can be traced to Late Antiquity.11 St. Augustine (354–430) stated that sexual desire is the direct consequence of Original Sin. However, because God commanded humankind to be fruitful and multiply and accordingly
created the institution of marriage, salvation is possible provided that sexual relations take place within marriage for the purpose of procreation. Prohibition of the use of contraception derives from this reasoning: birth control is contrary to the aim of sexual activity desired by God. This concept of marriage was gradually consolidated over the following centuries, summarized in canon law in 1917: “the primary aim of marriage is procreation and the education of offspring; the second aim is that of mutual aid between spouses and remedy 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. In the eighteenth century St. Alfonso de Liguori (1696–1787) proposed a “theory of good faith”: even if a person does something that is objectively bad, he does not subjectively commit sin if he is unaware of the sinful nature of his act. Until the Second Vatican Council, confession was usually based upon a series of questions that the priest asked the penitent. According to St. Alfonso, confessors could perceive the penitent’s genuine ignorance of a particular sin and the practical impossibility of correcting the wrongful act, hence they should avoid instilling doubt and should not ask explicit questions of the penitent. St. Alfonso also suggested that confessors should not delve too deeply into topics of contraception and sexuality, lest a hasty judgment that ignores 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 Catholic moral theology from the 1800s to the first half of the twentieth century was so pronounced that during 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. For example, in 1842 the Bishop of Le Mans (Belgium) questioned the position of the Sacred Penitentiary of the Roman Curia—at the time the principal institution for the examination of moral cases—on the gravity of the practice of withdrawal. While the Sacred Penitentiary confirmed the traditional position of doctrinal rigor, it also cited St. Alfonso’s admonition that priests use discretion and 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 reaffirmed 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 in Europe, and facing the gradual acceptance of birth control by the Anglican Church in the Lambeth Conference of 1930, Pope Pius XI elevated the issue of contraception within the Catholic Church by writing *Casti Connubii* (Chaste Wedlock). In addition to reaffirming the traditional Augustinian doctrine opposing contraception,
in this encyclical Pius strongly questioned the practice of using St. Alfonso’s theory of good faith. This opposition to birth control was maintained in the decades that followed, notwithstanding the important changes in the position of the Pope and the Church hierarchy on the subject and the reinterpretation of traditional Church doctrine based on the findings of Ogino and Knaus related to ovulation and the calendar method of fertility control.

An admonishment that was not always useful

In the 15 years leading up to the publication of Casti Connubii, only one of the moral cases discussed in the assemblies of the Paduan clergy concerned actions aimed at limiting births. Evidently, this issue was not salient among pastors in the diocese of Padua, even if in several areas of Veneto fertility control was already evident during the early decades of the twentieth century. The following case taken from the Diocesan Report of 1924 sheds light on the position of the Church as communicated to Paduan confessors, at least 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. While sinning, he is convinced that such behavior is not in and of 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 infirmity that could lead to her death. The wife, Plinia, does not approve of her husband’s behavior 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.…13

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 elaborated by 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 signify ignorance of the evil nature of an action, but also an
“invincible” refusal to accept that the action itself was a sin. The number of cases of “invincible erroneous conscience” could conceivably be large, given that the majority of worshipers were “uncouth and penniless” and the list of “exceptional circumstances” was potentially quite long. In all of these cases, confessors were encouraged to remain silent rather than contribute to an individual’s moral ruin. With regard to the sin of sodomy, however, there was no recourse: one could not use the excuse of ignorance, exceptional circumstances, or invincible erroneous conscience. It is precisely the difference in treatment of those who committed the sin of sodomy compared to those who committed the sin of Onan that emphasizes the tolerance toward individuals who practiced withdrawal—a result of a rigorous application of St. Alfonso’s theory of good faith.

This case also illustrates the differential treatment of men and women with regard to withdrawal. Marcello’s wife, 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 to question women on this subject. More broadly, on all topics of a sexual nature, confessors were advised to be prudent in asking questions and—when in doubt—stay silent.

Until 1931, the subject of onanism was not broached in moral cases. Paring through the Bollettino Diocesano, the issue comes up here and there, with doctrinal rigor tempered by an insistence on pastoral prudence. This attitude changes after the publication of Casti Connubii at the end of 1930. Although the encyclical did not introduce doctrinal changes, it did argue that—due to the diffusion of fertility control—St. Alfonso’s doctrine of good faith could hardly be applicable to the sin of Onan. An understanding of how the teachings of Casti Connubii were translated into instructions for the clergy of the diocese of Padua is facilitated by an examination of moral cases on the topic of onanism presented in the priestly assemblies of 1931–33. The following are paradigmatic passages from a case in 1932:14

**Case:** Antonio spoils the conjugal act to avoid having children due to considerable difficulties of his own, that of his wife and of his family, particularly when considered as a whole…. 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:** … Pope Pius XI, in the Encyclical Letter Casti Connubii, did not forget to consider motives such as those proposed above; the consequences of poverty, and familial difficulties, all of which he looks upon with understanding and compassion…. Indeed, the Pope recognizes the extreme danger faced by the mother. However, the Pope also argues in solemn and absolute terms: No
reason, not even the gravest, can turn what is intrinsically against nature into something harmonious with nature and thus honest. …

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 toward the penitent who declares his vice and behavior, even in good faith. Consequently, in order that the confessor does not connive with Antonio, and instead condemns his unacceptable behavior, he must not stay silent once he becomes aware of Antonio’s sin. …

… By way of summary, neither the threat of illness nor the risk of dying is admissible as motives which remove the malice of violating the conjugal act.

There may be different circumstances under which the parish priest may need to judge Caia and her husband: (a) if they recount 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 similar cases is, in all truth, wisely left alone, presuming good faith.

With this response, the strict pronouncements of Casti Connubii are reiterated. In reality, however, even after the publication of Casti Connubii, the confessor could 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 too deeply influenced the views of theologians and Paduan pastors to be erased by a single pronouncement from Rome.

What did change with Casti Connubii was the practical position required of priests, not so much within the confessional as in their preaching on withdrawal. While priests had previously been advised to stay silent, now the Church encouraged them to speak up, though with tact and prudence. The moral cases related to withdrawal published after Casti Connubii urged priests to educate their worshipers with regard to the Christian doctrine of marriage.

“A seemingly indestructible wall”

A reading of the narratives written by the 140 Paduan priests who responded at length to the questionnaire circulated to parishes between 1938 and 1943 allows for a fuller understanding of four factors: (1) measures taken against the “abuse of marriage”; (2) content of priests’ exhortations to worshipers; (3) opinions concerning the factors that motivated couples to limit births; and (4) awareness of the results of priests’ efforts to limit the abuse of marriage.
Measures taken against the abuse of marriage

Priests’ efforts to stop the abuse of marriage were expressed through preaching and in confessional. Such preaching rarely took place during the Sunday sermon since speaking too explicitly to the faithful as a whole risked creating temptation among the unaware. The parish priest of the village of Tramonte, around 15 km from Padua and composed mostly of farmers who either owned or rented small plots of land, argued 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 parish priests cite preaching relevant to youth of marriage age. Evidently, notwithstanding change brought about by Casti Connubii, parish priests did not publicly address topics of sexuality among young adults. This decision follows instructions written by Pius XI in the encyclical Divini Illius Magistri published shortly after Casti Connubii, on the topic of educating youth in a Christian fashion. In addition, the Bollettino Diocesano reveals that—several years earlier—the Paduan Bishop Dalla Costa conducted a veritable “crusade” against the sexual education of youth. In an Episcopal Act he writes clearly: “…therefore, given the explicit theories of the Church, which forbid certain questionings and explanations even in the penitentiary court…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.”15 The same argument is taken up in analogous tones in another Episcopal Act in 1930.16

Socioeconomic circumstances also rendered preaching against fertility limitation quite difficult. The Catholic hierarchy strongly encouraged priests to educate parents on the importance of investing in the well-being and future prospects of children. Echoing the content of the encyclical mentioned above on the Christian education of youth, a moral case from 1931 strongly admonishes parents who neglect their children:

Case: Giuseppe, 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 whether 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 that they too will also gravely commit sin. It is serious indeed the sin of Giuseppe, 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 parish priest must not encourage such scandal in his parish with silence.
It must have been difficult for priests to communicate clearly with Christian parents when asking of them to ensure—simultaneously—both “quality” and “quantity” of children.

The most common forum for communicating doctrine on the abuse of marriage to worshipers was meetings with married men and women. Among the 50 parish priests who cite such educational activities, 31 met separately with husbands and wives, none met only with husbands, and 19 met only with wives. The priests’ opinions were exemplified by the remarks of the parish priest of Enego, a village located at the foot of the Alps: “In the majority of cases the guilty party is the man, acting against the wishes of the woman.” Why, then, did priests more often address women, confirming a gender difference that one also finds in the writings of St. Alfonso? No explicit justification for this choice is provided in the answers to the questionnaire, almost as if such behavior was considered “natural.” Men may have been less forthright in their confessions and 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 toward men, at least with regard to these issues. This conclusion is supported by descriptions of confessional practices. For example, the parish priest of Mandria, a community of peasants and factory workers located just outside 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 go to confession at all.

The confessional was, however, priests’ preferred place for eradicating—with prudence—the sin of limiting one’s offspring. The necessity of acting prudently is clearly referred to by the parish priest of San Vito di Valdobbiadene, 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.” Another priest of the very small and poor community of Incino, near the Alps, where the main income-generating resource was seasonal outmigration, notes: “Occasionally in preaching, more often in confessional, and with greater energy, the parish priest endeavors to eradicate these cases.” Other priests explicitly confirm that they understood the change in attitude toward penitents following the publication of Casti Connubii. For example, according to the parish priest of Crespano, a community where men farmed and women worked in large silk factories: “One can no longer suppose good faith among those guilty of limiting their number of children.”

Content of priests’ exhortations to worshipers

Priests often argued that limiting the number of one’s children indicated a lack of trust in Divine Providence. An illustrative comment comes from the parish
priest of San Nazario, a community where the majority of men spent at least six months a year working in Belgium, France, or Switzerland: “One must not flag in the effort to resist certain ideologies of foreign origin and related difficulties which have since arisen, inviting trust in the providence of God and acceptance of His divine dispositions, reminding worshipers that this life is none other than preparation for the next, where God awaits us.”

Opinions concerning the factors that motivated couples to limit births

Several parish priests spoke of excessive economic concerns, or “avarice and despicable self-interest,” which caused worshipers to lose faith in Divine Providence. For the parish priest of the extremely poor community of Masi, made up of farmhands and located in the far south of the diocese: “Limiting the number of children has begun solely as a consequence of poverty, which has persisted here for years.” According to other priests, especially in areas where limiting births was more widespread, the underlying reasons were instead linked to lifestyle changes, often caused by interactions with foreigners outside of the parish. For example, the parish priest of Valstagna, located in the hills near San Nazario, comments: “Several families who returned [from France] at the outbreak of hostilities [in 1940] have only one child, or at most two, and one fears that they spread evil with allusions or words.” According to the parish priest of the urban Paduan community of the Holy Trinity, with a labor force composed mostly of clerks and factory workers: “Children are scarce: 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 as upstanding individuals and by others with contempt, as if they were without common sense.” Another articulation of this outlook is expressed by the parish priest of Vo’, a community of farmers in the Euganean hills, 25 kilometers outside of Padua: “Persistence of this trouble has a number of different and competing causes: an inability to restrain oneself; the lack of faith in Divine Providence; the inadequacy of certain dwellings; poverty; the disdain one hears in talk and conversation about parents of many children; the reluctance of certain mothers to show that they are pregnant, especially if they already have grown children at home…. Another motive is the lack of a spirit of sacrifice. We are facing a seemingly indestructible wall.”

Awareness of the results of priests’ efforts to limit the abuse of marriage

Rarely does one find in priests’ questionnaire responses words of optimism, although the priest of Roana, a mountain community of lumberjacks and
small-time livestock breeders, comments: “Starting this year [1938], small signs of improvement seem to have appeared, in part due to the beneficial influence of laws on the subject.” The majority of priests, however, shared the discouragement voiced above by the pastor of Vo’. The parish priest of St. Carlo, 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 parish priest of Saletto di Montagnana, a community composed mostly of poor farmhands: “The sin of limiting one’s offspring is fought against, if with prudence, through preaching, 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.”

Discussion

Up until the 1920s, Catholic moralists—even if they considered withdrawal to be a grave sin and a sign of the absence of faith in Divine Providence—advised priests to use prudence and circumspection and to speak about this matter 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 of 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 procedures. In fact, priests were explicitly advised to stay silent. The guidelines provided urged priests not to raise the subject of withdrawal, 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 tacit consent.

When, in 1930, Casti Connubii demanded greater discipline in the effort against limiting births, parish priests found themselves in a difficult position. On the one hand, they were asked to promote the quality of children through initiatives for their development and education and to exhort parents to do their best on behalf of their children. On the other hand, parish priests were also asked to encourage the quantity of children, entreating parents to have faith in Divine Providence and thus not to limit marital fertility. Conflict between these two obligations was partially reduced by the practice of periodic abstinence, a form of natural birth control already considered permissible by the Sacred Penitentiary in a pronouncement made in 1853. Priests considered the use of periodic abstinence in six of the cases discussed in the Paduan assem-
bles between 1939 and 1958, with progressive approval in light of scientific discoveries made concerning women’s menstrual cycle.

When priests responded to questionnaires between 1938 and 1943, they mainly stated their intention to discourage birth limitation among worshipers. Yet it seemed as if the only argument priests could employ was to place one’s trust in God’s providence, reminding the faithful that this life is merely the preparation for eternity. In fact, the priests themselves confirmed that other forms of dissuasion were unpersuasive in a context where couples increasingly found limiting the number of children to be beneficial. As couples confronted powerful social and economic motivations to have small families, priests found the exhortations of the Church to be generally ineffective.

Concluding remarks

Future research could elaborate on the current study in three ways. First, it would be interesting to observe whether and how—following Mussolini’s Ascension Day speech in 1927 calling for Italy to increase its population from 40 to 60 million in 25 years—efforts by the Catholic Church to limit birth control became intertwined with Fascist propaganda and pronatalist policies. Research suggests that the Fascist regime’s attempts to encourage high fertility did not succeed in slowing the decline in birth rates, although more extensive examination on the interconnections between Church and State on this matter would be useful.17

Second, researchers could collect further documentation on the evolving reactions of Catholic couples to the moral instructions communicated by priests and confessors. The Catholic Church’s universal position on birth control as set forth in Casti Connubii was maintained at least until the first half of the 1960s, even if accompanied by more favorable opinions about the acceptability of natural family planning.

Finally, historians might further explore the links between religion and reproductive behavior in Veneto between the early and late twentieth century. Research reveals that during this time period, the Church’s efforts to influence reproductive behavior were not entirely in vain. Even if birth rates more than halved between the first and second half of the century, regional differences in birth rates coincided quite closely with several measures of secularization.18 Further research might reveal whether and how such differences were influenced by the behavior of the clergy or—more generally—by the pace of secularization.
Notes

2 McQuillan 2004; Kertzer 2006; Caltabiano, Dalla-Zuanna, and Rosina 2006.
3 Burch and Shea 1971.
4 Allum 1996; Ginsborg 2003, chapter 5; Ramella 2010.
7 Dalla-Zuanna 2010, Appendix 1.
8 See Genesis 38: 9–10.
9 The text, in Latin, of the 32 moral cases is available upon request. For the text in Italian, see Dalla-Zuanna 2010, Appendix 2.
10 The questionnaires were written in part by typewriter, in part by hand, and their content has yet to be published. They are, however, stored and consultable upon request in the main hall of the Diocese of Padua’s Episcopal Archive.
11 This section draws on the work of Noonan 1965; Flandrin 1970; Chiavacci and Livi-Bacci 1995; and Pelaja and Scaraffia 2008.
15 Bolletino Diocesano 1929, p. 244.
16 Bolletino Diocesano 1930, p. 57.
17 Ipsen 1996; Treves 2001; Caporali and Golini 2010.
18 De Sandre 1971; Dalla-Zuanna 1997.

References


