

## ***ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER PIO XII ON THE NATURAL BIRTH WITHOUT PAIN***\*

*Sunday, January 8, 1956*

We have been informed about a new advance in gynecology and we have been begged to adopt a position in relation to that from the moral and religious point of view. It is natural childbirth, without pain, in which no artificial means are used, but only the natural forces of the mother come into play.

In Our Address to the Members of the IV International Congress of Catholic Doctors , September 29, 1949 [1] We said that the doctor intends at least to mitigate the evils and sufferings that afflict man. We mentioned then the surgeon, who strives to avoid pain as much as possible in the necessary interventions; to the gynecologist, who seeks to diminish the sufferings at birth, without endangering either the mother or the child and without undermining the bonds of maternal affection, which, it is claimed, are ordinarily knotted at that time. This last observation referred to a procedure used at the time in the Maternity House of a large modern city: to avoid the pain the mother had been provoked into a state of profound hypnosis, but it was found that this procedure carried with it an affective indifference towards the child. Some, however, think that this fact can be explained in another way.

Learned by this experience, on successive occasions they were careful to awaken the mother several times, during some moments throughout the development of the birth; this way it was possible to avoid what was feared. An analogous check could be obtained with a prolonged narcosis.

The new method, of which we want to talk now, does not have that danger; leaves the parturient her full consciousness, from the beginning to the end, and the full use of her psychic forces (intelligence, will, affectivity); it does not take away or, according to others, it does not diminish more than pain.

What position must be adopted in relation to this method from the moral and religious point of view?

### **I. SCHEME OF THE NEW METHOD**

#### **1. Its relation to the experience of the past**

In the first place, childbirth without pain, considered as an ordinary fact, is in clear contrast with the common human experience, that of today and also that of the past and the most remote times.

The most recent research indicates that some mothers give birth without feeling any pain, although no analgesic or anesthetic has been used. They also show that the degree of intensity of suffering is less in primitive peoples than in civilized ones; if it is of medium intensity in many cases, it is still high for most mothers, and it is not uncommon that it is unbearable. Such are the current observations.

The same should be said about past times, as historical sources allow us to verify the fact. The pains of women in childbirth were proverbial; reference was made to them to express a very living and anguishing suffering, and literature, both profane and religious, offers us the proofs. This way of speaking is common, indeed, even in the biblical texts of the Old and New Testaments, especially in the writings of the prophets. We will cite some examples here. Isaiah compares his people with the woman who, at the moment of birth, suffers and complains (see *Is* 26,17). Jeremiah, who sees ahead when approaching the judgment of God, says: «I hear screams like of woman in childbirth; screams like those of a woman who gives birth for the first time »( *Jer*4.31). On the evening before his death, the Lord compares the situation of his Apostles to that of the mother waiting for the moment of delivery: "The woman when she stops feels sad, because her time is coming. But when she has given birth to a son, she no longer remembers the tribulation because of the joy of having a man come into the world "( *Jn* 16:21).

All this allows us to affirm, as an accepted fact among the men of yesterday and today, that the mother gives birth in pain. And this is opposed by the new method.

## **2. The new method considered in itself**

### ***a) Preliminary general considerations made by the supporters of the new method***

Two general considerations, made by those in favor of this method, guide and orient the one who wants to delineate its main features: the first one refers to the difference between the painless activity and the painful activity of the organs and the members; the other, the origin of pain and its relationship with organic function.

The functions of the organism, it is said, when they are normal and performed as they should, are not accompanied by painful sensations; these denote the presence of some complication; otherwise, nature would be in contradiction with itself, since it associates pain to a certain process, in order to provoke a reaction of defense and protection against what would be harmful to it. Normal delivery is a natural function and, therefore, should occur without pain. Where does this come from?

The sensation of pain - it responds - comes from the cerebral cortex, and is regulated by it, being where the excitations and signals of the whole organism arrive. On these, the central organ reacts in a very different way; some of these reactions (or reflections), receive from nature a precise character and are associated by it to certain processes (absolute reflections); for others, on the contrary, nature has not fixed its character or its connections, but is determined in a different way (conditioned reflexes).

The sensations of pain are in the number of reflexes (absolute or conditioned), which have their origin in the cerebral cortex. Experience has proven that, thanks to the arbitrarily established associations, it is possible to provoke sensations of pain even when the excitement that causes them is in itself totally incapable of doing so.

In human relationships, these conditioned reflexes have as agents more effective and more frequent language, the spoken or written word or, if you like, the opinion that reigns in an environment and that everyone shares and expresses through language.

## **b) *Elements of the new method***

This is how the origin of the vivid sensations of pain felt in childbirth is understood: these are considered by certain authors as due to conditioned reflexes -opposed- triggered by erroneous ideological and affective complexes.

The disciples of Russian Pavlov (physiologists, psychologists, gynecologists), taking advantage of their teacher's research on conditioned reflexes, present the question in substance as follows:

### *a) foundation*

Childbirth has not always been painful, but it has become such in the course of time because of "conditioned reflexes." These could have originated in a painful first birth; perhaps the inheritance has its part there too, but these are only secondary factors. The main reason for this is the language and the opinion of the environment he states: the birth they say is "the difficult time mother" is torture imposed by nature given to the mother, helpless, suffering unbearable. This association, created by the environment, causes fear of childbirth and fear of the terrible pains that accompany it. Thus, when the muscular contradictions of the uterus make themselves felt, at the beginning of the birth, the pain defense reaction arises; This pain causes a muscular contraction and this, in turn, an accretion of pain. The pains, then, are real, but they are derived from a falsely interpreted cause. In labor, the normal contractions of the uterus and the organic sensations that accompany it are real; but these sensations are not interpreted by the central organs as what they really are: simple natural functions; by virtue of the conditioned reflexes, and in particular the enormous fear, they become painful sensations.

### *b) purpose*

Such would be the genesis of puerperal pain.

From this we can deduce what the end and task of obstetrics should be without pain. Applying the acquired scientific knowledge, you must first dissociate the associations that already exist between the normal sensations of contractions of the uterus and the pain reactions of the cerebral cortex. In this way negative conditioned reflexes are canceled. At the same time we have to create new, positive reflections that will replace the negative reflexes.

### *c) practical application*

The practical application is to give first mothers (long before the time of delivery) a deep education, adapted to their intellectual capacity, on the natural processes that develop in them during pregnancy, and in a particular way during childbirth. They already knew these natural processes in some way, but most of the time without clearly perceiving their connection. Thus, many things were still wrapped in mysterious darkness and lent themselves to false interpretations. The characteristic conditioned reflexes also acquired a considerable force of action, while anguish and fear found in them a constant element. All these negative elements would be eliminated by the aforementioned teaching.

At the same time, an insistent appeal is made to the mother's will and feeling so that she does not allow unfounded feelings of fear to arise or, as such, have been presented to them; we must also reject an impression of pain that may tend to manifest itself, but which in any case is not justified and is not based, as they have been taught, more than in a false interpretation of the natural organic sensations of the contracting uterus. Above all, mothers are sought to estimate the natural grandeur and dignity of what they fulfill at the moment of giving birth. They are also given detailed technical explanations of what needs to be done to ensure the perfect development of the delivery; they are taught, for example, how they have to put the musculature exactly in motion, how they have to breathe well. This teaching is given in the form of practical exercises so that the technique has become familiar at the time of delivery. It is a question, then, of guiding the mothers and putting them in a position to support the birth, not in a purely passive way, as if it were a fatal process, but by adopting an active position, influencing it with intelligence, the will, the affectivity, so that it is realized in the sense wanted by nature and with it.

While the birth lasts, the mother is not abandoned to herself; is assisted and with the permanent control of a staff trained according to the new techniques and that reminds him of what he has learned, indicates at the right time what he has to do, avoid or modify, and if necessary rectifies his mistakes quickly and helps to correct anomalies that may arise.

Such is, in essence, according to Russian researchers, the painless theory and practice of childbirth. On the other hand, the English Grantly Dick Read has presented a theory and an analogous technique in a certain number of points; nevertheless, in its philosophical and metaphysical principles it moves away substantially from the same, since it does not support itself as those in a materialist conception.

#### *d) extension and success*

As regards the extension and success of the new method (called the psycho-prophylactic method), it is claimed that in Russia and China it has already been used in hundreds of thousands of cases. It has also been implemented in various countries of the West; several municipal maternities have put at their disposal particular sections. The Maternity Houses, organized exclusively according to these principles, are not numerous until today in the West; France, among others, has a (communist) in Paris; also in France, two Catholic institutions, in Jallieu and Cambrai, have completely adopted this method in their rooms, without sacrificing what had been good before.

As for success, it is said that it is very important: from the births that occurred in this way, from 85 to 90 per cent they have been really painless.

## **II. VALUATION OF THE NEW METHOD**

### **1. Scientific evaluation**

After having outlined the scheme of this method, we move on to its assessment. In the documentation that has been sent to us is this characteristic note: "For the personnel, the first indispensable requirement is the unconditional faith in the method". Is it possible to demand absolute faith of this kind, based on secure scientific results?

The method contains, without doubt, elements that must be considered as scientifically proven; some have only one great probability; others are no more (at least at this time) than of a problematic nature. It is scientifically proven that there are conditioned reflexes in general; that certain representations or certain affective states can be associated with certain events, and that this case can be verified for pain sensations. But that it is already proven (or at least that it can be proven) that the pains of the birth are due solely to this cause, is not an obvious truth for all at the present time. Also some serious critics make reservations about the axiom that is affirmed almost a priori: "All physiologically normal acts and, therefore, normal birth, nor that nature would be in contradiction with itself, if it had made the birth an intensely painful act. Indeed, they say, it would be perfectly understandable physiologically and psychologically that nature, concerned about the mother that begets and the child begotten, achieve with it that there is an awareness, in an unavoidable way, of the importance of this act and thus want to force to take the necessary measures in relation to the mother and the child.

We leave to the competent specialists the scientific verification of these two axioms, which some hold as certain and others as debatable; nevertheless, it is necessary, in order to decide about the truth or falsity, to adhere to a decisive objective criterion: "The scientific character and the value of a discovery must be appreciated exclusively in relation to its conformity with objective reality". It is important not to neglect here the distinction between "truth" and "affirmation" ("interpretation", "subsumption", "systematization") of truth. If nature has done labor without pain in the reality of the facts, if afterwards it has become painful because of conditioned reflexes, if it can again become painless, if all this is not only affirmed, interpreted, built systematically, but can really be proved, it follows that the scientific results are true. If this is not the case, or it is not, at least for now, possible to obtain complete certainty in this regard, it is necessary to refrain from any absolute affirmation and consider the conclusions obtained as scientific "hypotheses".

Renouncing to give a definitive judgment on the degree of scientific certainty of the psychoprophylactic method, we pass to examine the problem from the moral point of view.

## **2. Ethical evaluation**

Is this method morally irreproachable? The answer, which must take into account the object, the purpose and the reason, is briefly stated: "In itself, there is nothing reprehensible from the moral point of view."

The teaching given on the work of nature in childbirth; the correction of the false interpretation of the organic sensations and the invitation to correct it; the influence exerted to make unfounded anguish and fear disappear; the aid granted so that the parturient collaborates opportunely with the nature, conserves its calm and the dominion of itself; an increased awareness of the greatness of motherhood in general and, in particular, of the time when the mother gives birth to the child; all these are positive values to which there is nothing to reproach; they are benefits for the parturient and are fully in accordance with the will of the Creator. Seen and understood in this way, the method is a natural ascesis that protects the mother against superficiality and lightness, exerts a positive influence on her personality, so that in an hour as important as the birth, manifest the firmness and strength of his character. Still under other aspects, the method can give positive moral results. If the pain and

fear of childbirth is eliminated, the incentive to commit immoral actions in the use of marriage rights is often diminished.

As far as the reasons and the purpose of the aid provided to the parturient are concerned, the material action, as such, does not carry with it any moral justification, neither positive nor negative; it is a matter for the one who lends his help. It can and must be carried out for reasons and irreproachable purposes, such as the interest presented by a purely scientific fact; the natural and noble feeling that makes the human person cherish and love the mother, who wants to do her good and to assist her; a deeply religious and Christian disposition, which is inspired by the ideals of a living Christianity. But it may happen that assistance seeks an end and obeys immoral motives; in this case, it is the personal activity of the one who provides the assistance that suffers the damage; the immoral motive does not transform good attendance into a bad thing, at least as regards its objective structure; and, conversely, a good assistance in itself can not justify a bad motive or give proof of its goodness.

### **3. Theological evaluation**

It remains to say a word about the theological and religious valuation, in so far as it is distinguished from moral value in the strict sense. The new method is often presented as part of a philosophy and a materialist culture and in opposition to Sacred Scripture and Christianity.

The ideology of a researcher and a scholar is not in itself proof of the truth and value of what you have discovered and exposed. The Pythagorean theorem or (to not leave the field of medicine) observations of Hippocrates, who have recognized exact, discoveries of Pasteur, the laws of Mendelian inheritance, should not the truth of its contents to the moral ideas and religious of their authors. They are not "pagan" because Pythagoras and Hippocrates were pagans, or "Christian" because Pasteur and Mendel were Christians. These scientific advances are true because - and insofar as they - respond to objective reality.

In the same way, a materialist researcher can make a real and true scientific discovery; but this contribution in no way constitutes an argument in favor of his materialist ideas.

The same reasoning applies to the culture to which a sage belongs. His discoveries are not true or false because they have come from such and such a culture, from which he has received inspiration and which has imprinted on him a deep seal.

The laws, the theory and the technique of natural childbirth, without pain, are valid, without a doubt, but they have been elaborated by wise men who, in their majority, profess an ideology, belong to a materialistic culture; This ideology and this culture are not true because the scientific results cited above are true. And it is still much less accurate that the scientific results are true and have been demonstrated because their authors and the cultures from which they come have a materialist orientation. The criteria of the truth are different.

The convinced Christian finds nothing in his philosophical ideas and in his culture that prevents him from taking seriously, in theory and in practice, the psycho-prophylactic method; he knows, as a general rule, that reality and truth do not identify with his interpretation, subsumption or systematization, and that, therefore, he can at the same time fully accept the one and reject entirely the other.

#### 4. The new method and the Holy Scripture

A critique of the new method, from the theological point of view, must particularly take into account Sacred Scripture, because materialistic propaganda seeks to find a very clear contradiction between the truths of science and those of Scripture. In Genesis (3,16) it reads: « *In dolore paries filios* » (« You will give birth in pain »). To understand these words well, it is necessary to consider the condemnation imposed by God in the context as a whole. Inflicting this punishment on the first parents and their offspring, God did not want to prevent, nor has it prevented men, to investigate and use all the riches of creation, to make culture progress step by step; make the life of this world more bearable and more beautiful; soften work and fatigue, pain, illness and death; in a word, to subject the earth to himself (cf. *Gen* 1:28).

In the same way, punishing Eve, God did not want to prevent her, and she has not prevented the mothers from using the appropriate means to make the birth easier and less painful. To the words of Scripture it is not necessary to look for an escape; they remain true in the sense understood and expressed by the Creator: motherhood will give much to suffer the mother. In what precise way has God conceived this punishment and how will he execute it? The Scripture does not say it. Some claim that the birth was in its origins completely painless and that it became painful later (perhaps as a result of a misinterpretation of the judgment of God) thanks to the self and hetero-suggestion of arbitrary associations, conditioned reflexes and as a result of the wrong behavior of the parturients; up to here, however, these affirmations, as a whole, they have not been tested. On the other hand, it may be true that an incorrect psychic or physical behavior of parturients is likely to greatly increase the difficulties of childbirth and have actually increased them.

Science and technology can therefore use the conclusions of experimental psychology, physiology and gynecology (as in the psycho-prophylactic method) in order to eliminate the sources of errors and painful conditioned reflexes, and to make the delivery as painless as possible; the Scripture does not forbid it.

#### Final considerations on Christian obstetrics

In conclusion, we add some observations about Christian obstetrics.

Christian charity has always cared for mothers at the moment of birth. He has strived, and even today strives, to provide them with effective psychic and physical assistance, according to the state of progress of science and technology. Perhaps this is the moment of the new advances of the psycho-prophylactic method, insofar as they find the approval of serious scholars. Christian obstetrics can, here, include in its principles and methods all that is right and justified.

However, it is to be hoped that he will not be content with this only for people capable of receiving more, and that he does not leave any of the religious values that he had at stake until now. In our [address to the Congress of the Italian Association of Catholic Midwives](#) , on October 29, 1951 [2] , we spoke in detail about the apostolate that Catholic midwives are capable of lavishing and are called to perform in the exercise of their profession; For example, we remembered the personal apostolate, that is, the one that exercised through their science, their art, the solidity of their Christian faith ( *lc*, p. 837); then, the apostolate of motherhood, trying to remind mothers of their dignity, their seriousness and their greatness. Here we apply what

we have said today, since they assist the mother at the time of delivery. The Christian mother receives from her faith and from her life of grace the light and the strength to place in God a full trust, to feel under the protection of Providence and also to accept with pleasure what God commands her to suffer; It would be a pain, then, for Christian obstetrics to be limited to offering aid of a purely natural, psycho-prophylactic nature.

Two points deserve to be underlined here: Christianity does not interpret suffering or the cross in a purely negative way. If the new technique avoids the sufferings of childbirth or attenuates them, the mother can accept it without any scruples of conscience; but it is not bound to do so. In case of partial success or failure, he knows that suffering can be a source of good if he supports it with God and by obeying his will. The life and suffering of the Lord, the sorrows that so many great men have endured and even sought, thanks to which they have been perfected and have climbed to the heights of Christian heroism; the daily examples of resigned acceptance of the cross, which are offered to Our sight, all this reveals the meaning of suffering, of the patient acceptance of pain in the current economy of salvation,

Second observation: Christian thought and life, and consequently Christian obstetrics, do not attribute an absolute value to the progress of science and to the refinements of technique. On the contrary, a thought and a conception of life, according to materialistic inspiration, find this natural position; it serves them as a religion or as a substitute for religion. The Christian, although applauding the new scientific discoveries and using them, rejects everything that is materialistic apotheosis of science and culture. He knows that they occupy a place in the objective scale of values; but without this place being the last, it is not the first either. Also, as for them, the Christian repeats today as yesterday and as always: "Seek first of all the kingdom of God and his justice" ( *Mt.6.33*). The highest, the last value of man, is found not in his science and in his technical abilities, but in the love of God and in his dedication to his service. For these reasons, the Christian, before the scientific discovery of childbirth without pain, is saved from admiring it without reserve or from using it with an exaggerated enthusiasm; he judges it in a positive way and with reflection, in the light of right natural reason, and of that other, more living light of faith and love that emanates from God and from the cross of Christ.

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\* AAS 48 (1956) 82-93.

[1] AAS 41 (1949) 557-561.

[2] AAS 43 (1951) 835 ss.

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