

The Book Barnacle . . .

Linking Sorcery And Contraception

By PETE VERE

As a young traditional Catholic, I knew theologically that the Church forbade contraception. I didn't quite grasp the why; I simply trusted the Church as best I could. Then in university I studied St. Thomas Aquinas and the natural law, which helped me understand the intellectual basis for rejecting contraception. Yet it was not until I set foot in a Catholic marriage tribunal as a freshly minted canon lawyer that I began to experience, secondhand, the destruction contraception wrought on this blessed institution.

I began to research contraception in my spare time. For years I wondered why the Bible said very little about something so destructive of marriage and the family. Then, just before Thanksgiving last, God provided me with the answer while reading Jesuit Fr. John Hardon's essay "Contraception: Fatal to the Faith and to Eternal Life." Fr. Hardon asserted that the early Christians classified contraception as sorcery, paganism and witchcraft.

Stunned, I mentioned this to my wife. I also shared the need I felt to research this question in more depth, and from secular and pagan sources. Sonya smiled. Under the tree come Christmas morning were six books, from various publishers, linking the topics of sorcery, witchcraft, contraception, paganism, and abortion.

Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West

Probably the most compelling of the six, from a secular perspective, was John M. Riddle's *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West*. Riddle is well known in academic circles as a professor of history at North Carolina State University. *Eve's Herbs* (ISBN 0-674-27026-6) is a 341-

page tome published by Harvard University Press.

Riddle's thesis is simple: Contraception, abortifacients, and abortion-inducing substances are nothing new. The ancient world had knowledge of herbs and other plants that, when administered in a certain way, prevented conception or caused women to abort. This knowledge was passed down orally, usually from mother to daughter. During the Middle Ages much of this knowledge was lost as midwives who practiced contraception and abortion were prosecuted for witchcraft.

"The magic associated with women was often connected to their use of herbs," Riddle writes. He had already explained that because of the Church's opposition to abortion, "much of the practical knowledge of birth control was left in the hands of 'old women,' some of whom became known midwives. Also pushed, shoved really, away from the central culture were women who knew the anti-fertility herbs and were thought to be witches."

Riddle cites a number of modern studies that corroborate the effectiveness of these anti-fertility herbs when it comes to preventing conception or inducing abortion. "In other words, the deeds described in the 15th century as the sevenfold traits of witchcraft are all creditable, according to modern medicine (with the exception of bestiality and homosexuality)," Riddle states. "Midwives and witches, whether one and the same, knew the drugs to take to reduce fertility."

"Each plant has its own 'secrets' concerning when it will have the desired effect and when its effect may be unsuccessful or even fatal," Riddle adds. "The secrets must be learned and transmitted to others in a chain of learning."

The author repeats the following quotation from modern historian

Richard Trexler: "Infanticide was far and away the most common social crime imputed to the aged witches of Europe by the demonologists." While sometimes prone to accepting the claims of anti-Catholic historians, Riddle disputes one of their more common claims, namely, that midwives were often singled out for accusations of witchcraft because they were women of prominence and influence.

"More likely," he writes, "the primary reason witches were persecuted was the same as that for which a woman in Hamburg was burnt to death in 1477: 'because she had instructed young females how to use abortion medicines'." He had already noted that "sexual offenses were, by far, the leading offenses of which witches were accused in three Essex villages between 1560 and 1599."

Eve's Herbs is an excellent exposé of the wide availability of contraception and abortion in ancient and medieval times. It does a fairly good job, from a secular perspective, of showing the link between contraception, abortion, and the medieval understanding of witchcraft. As such, it should be read by any serious Catholic pro-life activist or moral theologian who struggles to understand the link between contraception, abortion, witchcraft, and paganism.

In showing these links, this book also (albeit probably unintentionally) reinforces the biblical basis for the Church's condemnation of contraception.

Nevertheless, it is not a book I would recommend to everyone. The book is written from a secular perspective. The author does not appear to share the Church's aversion to contraception and abortion. He also does not always demonstrate a clear or correct grasp of Catholic teaching. Therefore, the content requires some spiritual and theological maturity to digest.