



Sex and Contraception

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The Gift of Life

God chooses to bring forth new human life through the love of spouses. God created the world as an act of love, and the bringing forth of new human life is, quite appropriately, the product of another kind of loving act. When a man and a woman have a child together, it's an act that changes the cosmos: someone has come into existence that will never

pass out of existence, since each soul is immortal and is destined for immortal life.

Pope John Paul II was energetic in explaining how couples do not achieve true spousal union in sexual intercourse when they use contraception. He reminded us that the sexual act is meant to be an act of total self-giving and

that, in withholding their fertility from one another, spouses are not giving totally of themselves. He spoke of the “language of the body” — that bodily actions have a meaning as much as words do, and that unless we intend those meanings with our actions, we should not perform them any more than we should speak words we don't mean. In both cases, lies are being “spoken.”

Sexual union has a well-recognized meaning; it means:

- ◆ “I love you.”
- ◆ “I find you attractive.”
- ◆ “I care for you.”
- ◆ “I will try to work for your happiness.”
- ◆ “I wish to have a deep bond with you.”
- ◆ “I am willing to have a child with you.”
- ◆ “I want to share my whole life with you.”

Some who engage in sexual intercourse do not mean these things with their actions; they wish simply to use another for their own sexual pleasure. They have lied with their bodies in the same way as someone lies who says “I love you” to another simply for the purpose of obtaining some favor from him or her.



Rediscovering Church Teaching

Catholics who live by the Church's teaching on sexuality have the strongest and happiest marriages.

Generally, their homes are happy places to be: the spouses love each other and delight in the joyful lives of their children.

It's a sad fact that today most Catholics do not live by that teaching. Most have sex before marriage, use contraception before and during marriage, and, thus, somewhat predictably, divorce at the same rate as the rest of the population. Few Catholics engaging in these actions are deliberately rebelling against the Church; they simply believe the Church's teaching on contraception and sex before marriage to be hopelessly outdated. Yet many of them hold this belief without having seriously considered the reasons why the Church teaches that premarital sex and contraception are immoral activities, ones that are an obstacle to a close relationship with Christ. Not surprisingly, the reasons that contraception is wrong are related to the reasons why sex before marriage is wrong.



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Why Is Contraception Wrong?

The Church condemns contraception because it falsifies the meaning of the sexual act. The casual sex

characteristic of our culture prevents many from seeing that sexual intercourse is tremendously meaningful. After all, it is an act that easily creates tremendous emotional bonds between the partners and also may result in the lifetime responsibility of a



baby who needs and deserves the love and presence of both mother and father. Contraception impedes both the emotional bonding and the life-giving power of sexuality. To put it simply, sex is for having babies and for bonding; if people are not ready for babies or bonding, they ought not to be engaging in acts of sexual intercourse.



While people today sometimes long to experience the bonding power of the sexual act, they frequently have little understanding of the goodness of its procreative meaning. Indeed, our culture often treats babies as burdens and not as gifts. Fertility is seen as a hazard, a dreadful “condition” that needs to be “managed” and guarded against. Some even speak about “accidental pregnancies,” as if getting pregnant were like getting hit by a car — a disruption of “normal life” that at best is inconvenient, and in some cases perceived as tragic. The truth is that if an act of sexual intercourse

results in pregnancy, this means something’s gone *right* with the act — not that something’s gone “accidentally” *wrong*!

Today, perhaps precisely because of the widespread availability of contraception, we’ve lost sight of the fundamental truth that those not ready for babies are not ready for sexual intercourse. Few seem to realize that sexual intercourse, making love, and making babies are inherently connected, and for good reason. Too often today, sexual partners make no commitment to each other and are not prepared for any pregnancy that may result. Using contraception sets up the expectation that people can “responsibly” have sexual intercourse outside of marriage, but pregnancies still happen: hence the large numbers of babies killed through abortion and the large number of babies born out of wedlock and often raised by a single parent, living in poverty.

Artificial Contraception and the Church

It comes as a surprise to most people that, as recently as the early decades of the last century, all Christian churches (and some non-Christians) were united in

their opposition to artificial contraception. Luther, Calvin, and Wesley were all opposed to contraception. The great Hindu leader Gandhi was opposed to contraception. It was only in 1930 that the Anglican Church went on record as saying that for grave reasons, within marriage, contraception could be permissible. By contrast, during this same time period, Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical *Casti Connubii* (*On Christian Marriage*), in which the Holy Father reiterated what has been the constant teaching of the Catholic Church: because contraception violates goods intrinsic to marriage, it is intrinsically wrong.

This teaching of the Church went virtually unchallenged until the early 1960s, when the invention of the “Pill,” new fears of a population explosion, and the rise of feminism led many people to be more accepting of contraception. Some Catholics became convinced that the Church was holding on to a hopelessly outdated, unrealistic, and impractical standard. Some even believed that within a short time, this “old-fashioned” restriction would be lifted. In 1968, however, Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* (*On Human Life*), which reiterated true Church teaching:



But the Church, which interprets natural law through its unchanging doctrine, reminds men and women that the teachings based on natural law must be obeyed, and teaches that it is necessary that each and every conjugal act remain ordained to the procreating of human life.

(*Humanae Vitae* 11)

There is an unbreakable connection between the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning of the conjugal act, and both are inherent in the conjugal act. This connection was established by God and cannot be broken by man through his own volition. (*Humanae Vitae* 12)

The Gift of Fertility

The Church has always recognized that the ability to have children is a great blessing; children enrich the lives of their parents and the whole of society.

Furthermore, having children is a way that spouses help God bring forth the new human souls to enjoy the bliss eternally in heaven.

Certainly to be fertile is a state of health for an adult person. It is those who are *not* fertile who need to be helped and who seek treatment for infertility.

Contraception treats fertility as a disease in need of a cure, and in the process, treats the woman's body as though there were something wrong with it. Use of

contraception suggests that God made a mistake in the way that He designed the body and that we must correct His error.

It's ironic that at the very time people are becoming very wary of dumping pollutants into the environment, they seemingly have no

compunctions about dumping pollutants into their bodies. The health risks of chemical contraception to women are considerable; the list of bad side effects is long and includes weight gain, a reduced sex drive, high blood pressure, strokes, and increased incidence of some forms of cancer.

Few people are aware that many forms of contraception are abortifacients; in other words, they sometimes work by causing an early-term abortion. Rather than inhibiting ovulation, they work by preventing the fertilized egg, the tiny new human being, from implanting in the wall of the uterus. The IUD works in this fashion, as do Norplant, DepoProvera, the patch, and some forms of the Pill.

Contraception, then, enters a note of tremendous negation into the act of sexual intercourse. It is not harmonious with lovemaking, which should be a most wonderful act of affirmation, a tremendous "yes" to another person, a way of conveying to another that he or she is wonderful and completely accepted. This acceptance is conveyed by making a total gift of oneself



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to another, something with which contraception interferes. The contracepting lover says, “I want to give myself to you, but not to the extent of sharing my fertility with you; I want you, but not your sperm (or your egg)!”

A Lifetime of Love

We generally are truly in love with those with whom we want to have babies; we *do* want our lives totally tied up with theirs. We want to become one with them in the way in which having a baby makes us one with another — our whole lives are intertwined with theirs; we buy diapers, and give birthday parties, and pay for college, and plan weddings. A non-contracepted act of sexual intercourse says again just what we vowed on our wedding day: “I am yours for better or worse, in sickness and health, till death do us part.” Having babies with another is sharing a lifetime endeavor with that person.

Yet, despite what many people mistakenly believe, the Church does *not* teach that spouses must have as many babies as their bodies can bear. It recognizes the morality of methods of Natural Family Planning that do not attempt to render a potentially fertile act infertile. Those who use Natural Family Planning abstain from sex when fertile; that is in no way a violation of fertility. The kinds of benefits that flow from NFP indicate its goodness: spouses become more self-controlled, better communicators, and more generous; they experience greater love and intimacy and they rarely divorce.

If Catholics educate themselves about the Church’s teaching and attempt to form their consciences in accord with that teaching, they will realize enormous positive benefits in day-to-day life as well as eternity. They will come to a marvelous understanding of the purpose of human sexuality that has shaped the Church’s rejection of contraception.



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For More Information

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Janet E. Smith, "Sexual Common Sense," an audio series available at www.mycatholicfaith.org, especially "Contraception: Why Not" and "Hormones R' Us."

———, *Humanae Vitae: A Challenge to Love* (New Hope, KY: New Hope Publications, 1993).

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Christopher West, *The Good News About Sex and Marriage* (Cincinnati, OH: Servant Publications, Revised Edition, 2004).

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