

So What's Wrong With Contraception?

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When the controversy first erupted over the HHS mandate, I joined my fellow bishops in stating that our fundamental objection to this unjust government mandate is its disregard for the rights of conscience and religious liberty. It remains so.

Much of the press, many politicians and pundits attempted to distort the matter and shift the focus to the Catholic Church's opposition to contraception. It was a shrewd tactic given the Church's counter-cultural but consistent teaching on the illicitness of contraception is an easy target for ridicule in a very secular culture. Even among Catholics our teaching is widely misunderstood, seldom taught clearly and in too many cases widely disregarded.

With so much national attention focused on the mandate's requirement forcing many Catholic institutions and employers to pay for insurance that includes morally objectionable services (such as contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs), this has become a teachable moment. The silver lining may be that the HHS controversy, still unresolved, offers an opportunity to state clearly the Catholic teaching on the sacred transmission of human life. I want to seize this timely opportunity.

The year 1968 was a tumultuous year. It was a time of war, civil unrest and social ferment around the world. On July 25 of that year, Pope Paul VI published his prophetic encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (Of Human Life). Best known for upholding the Church's constant moral teaching on the illicitness of contraception, Pope Paul VI reminded Catholics and all people of good will that something as sacred as the transmission of human life cannot be cut loose from its moorings without grave consequences for individuals, for marriages and families and for society. Human life and married love re sacred and ought to be revered and protected.

The moorings which preserve due respect for the dignity of human sexual love are rooted in God's plan for marriage. The conjugal act (sexual love between spouses) has a meaning which comes from the Creator. It is enshrined in our bodies which God created as male and female. As a sign of the covenant between spouses, every conjugal act ought to be both unitive (a true act of mutual self-giving) and procreative (open to the transmission of life). In other words, every marital act has both a love-giving and life-giving dimension. To separate these two prevents the marital act from realizing its divinely intended purpose. Contraception does precisely that. To engage in sexual activity outside of marriage, or with members of the same sex, or for selfish purposes, or while interfering with the natural fruitfulness of the act by contraception is a rejection of God's intended meaning and purpose. It is sinful.

The widespread dissent and disregard of this teaching following the publication of *Humanae Vitae* were symptomatic. The secular mentality says that human beings, rather than God, are the measure of all things. Right and wrong are determined on the basis of what is practical rather than what is true. This worldview values results over reason. This radical secular humanism has affected even many in the Church. Many Catholics have sought to accommodate Church teaching to the wisdom of the world. This attempted compromise is a capitulation to error. It eliminates the necessary tension that will always exist between the spirit of the Gospel and the spirit of the world. The result is a "contraceptive mentality" which wrests control and dominion from God and places it in the hands of men and

women. This mentality is anti-gospel and anti-faith. With this mentality the salt loses its savor — (Mt.5:13).

Pope Paul VI was prophetic in recognizing the grave consequences that would follow if Catholics and others failed to consider where the acceptance of artificial birth control would lead society. A contraceptive mentality would lead inevitably, he said, “toward conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality.” It would be disastrous for marriage and families and would lead to loss of respect for women, “to the point of considering her as a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment, and no longer as his (man’s) respected and beloved companion.” He saw the danger of contraceptives being employed as a tool of government in imposing its will over its people. Who would say that these prophetic words have not been fully realized even beyond what was imagined in 1968?

Many family problems and social ills can be linked to this widespread contraceptive mentality, which separates sexual love from its proper context in the divine plan for marriage. Skyrocketing divorce, premarital sex, marital infidelity, homosexual activity, abortion and a host of other problems follow in its wake. The loss of respect for God’s plan for marriage, for the dignity of human sexuality and the gift of life has contributed to the explosion of pornography as a multibillion-dollar industry. It prepared the way for society’s slide toward embracing euthanasia, embryonic stem cell experimentation, and finally human cloning. Today the Supreme Court of the United States is preparing to rule on whether marriage will even continue to be recognized and protected as a unique union between one man and one woman.

However unpopular it may be in some quarters, and admittedly difficult, the Church cannot change its teaching on the immorality of artificial contraception. The Church does not create the moral law, but is only its guardian and interpreter. Ultimately, contraception is morally unacceptable because it is contrary to the true good of the human person and marriage as inscribed in our human nature.

Catholics who strive to live according to the Church’s teaching find divine assistance through recourse to the sacraments, especially the Sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist. We draw strength from God’s grace through prayer and the cultivation of virtue, particularly the virtue of chastity.

A priceless gift is also available through the scientifically proven methods of Natural Family Planning. NFP is a benefit to married couples because they can use it to help them either to achieve or to avoid pregnancy. (Even Planned Parenthood acknowledges that when used correctly, NFP is 95 to 99.6 percent effective in avoiding pregnancy.) Natural Family Planning methods are healthy, reliable, teachable and inexpensive means of family planning, which enable couples to cooperate with God and one another in spacing pregnancies in a way which actually strengthens their relationship. It involves shared decision-making and shared responsibility. It fosters communication and self-discipline. Couples who use NFP regularly seldom divorce. It builds rather than undermines marriages! Contrast these fruits to the harm Pope Paul foresaw coming in the wake of widespread acceptance of contraception. So what’s wrong with contraception? *A tree is judged by its fruits.*

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