

Is Sex *per se* Always About Children? The (Im)Morality of Contraception

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I. Introduction

The Catholic Church bases its teachings about human sexuality on Revelation as transmitted and interpreted by the authentic Magisterium. Along with this authoritative guidance, the Church also analyzes human nature and seeks to penetrate the meaning and message of the natural law based on reason and experience. All of this background forms the framework from which flows the doctrine regarding both a positive appreciation for God's gift of human sexuality and its appropriate expression and those attitudes or actions which violate the very significance of this gift. Therefore, human sexual activity enriches persons and society if it respects the God-given proper character of such activity. Conversely, behavior which involves sexual expression outside of its predetermined paradigm is noxious and detrimental to individuals and society. This expansion of the effects of sexual behavior outside of the individual is linked to the principle of solidarity. Whenever a human being progresses toward realization of his or her potential, all others benefit in some way. Whenever an individual moves away from true personal fulfillment, all of humanity in some way suffers. Such is the inherent bond of humanity; such is the Mystical Body of Christ. The common good cannot be divorced from the personal good and vice versa. There is no such thing as a "sin which doesn't hurt anyone."

This study will presume the Catholic teaching on natural law which provides that directly willed genital expression of human sexuality is to occur legitimately only within the context of marriage. Regarding the three traditional “goods” of marriage, the *bonum fidei* (unity) and the *bonum sacramenti* (indissolubility) also will be presumed. The focus will be linked much more specifically and directly (though not exclusively, since the three “goods” are inter-related) to the *bonum prolis* (begetting of children).

Human nature has much to tell us in a simple yet forceful manner about the characteristics of sexual conduct. Logic itself demonstrates the inherent potentially reproductive consequence of intercourse. Experience and reason manifest the nexus between love-making and life-making. Sexual pleasure sought in such a way as to detach itself deliberately from its generative capacity is intrinsically frustrating. “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder” (Mark 10:9).¹ It is said that nature never forgives. Whenever any human function is actualized outside of the parameters established by the Designer of human nature, deleterious effects will follow inexorably.

Albeit briefly, this article will seek to examine not only the theological and philosophical bases of Catholic doctrine regarding the moral evaluation of contraception but also bring to the light some scientific and cultural realities which have marked so deeply our modern times. Rarely if ever in human history have small pills (and the like) made such a deep impression on society, the relationship between the sexes, the attitude towards child-bearing, God’s dominion over human life, the concept of the meaning of the human body and the importance of marriage as a permanent commitment between one man and one woman.

II. Modern Technical Developments

The practice of the immoral regulation of births is not something new in itself. The Biblical story of Onan provided this sin – at least in a generic form – with the name of Onanism.² Surely from

¹ Here, the use of this passage is intended to be understood in the analogical or illative sense.

² Genesis 38:9. It is well known that other considerations also surround this text.

both a medical and moral view contraception can also be linked with sterilization as a form of temporary sterilization. What is novel in the recent half-century or so is that medical compounds (along with certain types of devices or surgical procedures) have been produced and made available on a wide scale at the international level. Some of the background history may be useful as a means of situating in time significant moments in this expansion.

In 1950 Planned Parenthood (founded by Margaret Sanger) invited Dr. Gregory Pincus to develop an ideal contraceptive. Sanger convinced her friend, Katherine Dexter McCormick, – the heiress of the International Harvester fortune – to fund the research and development. This same McCormick funded Carl Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst, who claimed that sexual restraint was a root cause of mental illness.³ Dr. Pincus of Harvard University joined with Dr. John Rock (a Catholic) in efforts to manufacture a birth control pill. Funding also came from Dr. James Gamble who was part of the Birth Control Movement. Pincus had already taken part in the 1951 contraceptive trials in Mexico City and with Rock conducted the first contraceptive experiments on a large scale in Puerto Rico in 1956. The pill was actually sold to Spanish and Italian women (labeled as a menstrual regulator) by 1957. One writer, Carl Djerassi (a biochemist), “had his doubts about the ethical propriety of using poor Mexican and Puerto Rican women for the contraceptive experiments, but then acknowledged it would be difficult to corral upscale suburban women for the tests.”⁴

III. Church Teaching Before 1968

In order not to view the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* in a way that isolates it from the previous Catholic doctrine, we do well to note certain background information. This will aid the reader to recognize the weighty theological heritage which had to be considered by Pope Paul VI. Prior to 1930 no Christian Church had ever officially allowed married couples to practice the artificial regulation of family size. Martin Luther had called Onanism a type of sodomy;

³ Information in this paragraph relies upon a column in *The Wanderer* of January 22, 1998. No further details are available.

⁴ *Ibid.*

John Calvin called it the murder of future persons; John Wesley taught that such measures would destroy the souls of those who used them. Fatefully, on August 14, 1930 the Anglican Church at its Lambeth Conference allowed such practices. On March 21, 1931 the Federal Council of Churches in the United States followed suit and went along with the Church of England in permitting artificial birth control. For the first time, the birth control issue formally divided Protestants and Catholics.⁵

In the midst of this controversy, Pope Pius XI issued his encyclical letter *Casti Connubi* (On Christian Marriage) on December 31, 1930. The force and clarity of the language used by the Holy Father in part IV entitled "Vices Opposed to Christian Marriage" bears citing at length in its most pertinent sections. We must remember that both Pope Paul VI and Catholics in general were highly aware of the longstanding and explicit quality of this doctrine. Fr. Arthur Vermeersch, SJ (then professor of Moral Theology at the Gregorian University in Rome) did not hesitate to denote the teaching contained therein as an infallibly taught doctrine.⁶

... We shall explain in detail the evils opposed to each of the benefits of matrimony. First consideration is due to the offspring, which many have the boldness to call the disagreeable burden of matrimony and which they say is to be carefully avoided by married people not through virtuous continence (which Christian law permits in matrimony when both parties consent) but by frustrating the marriage act. Some justify this criminal abuse on the ground that they are weary of children and wish to gratify their desires without their consequent burden. Others say that they cannot on the one hand remain continent nor on the other can they have children because of the difficulties whether on the part of the mother or on the part of family circumstances.

But no reason, however grave, may be put forward by which anything intrinsically against nature may become conformable to nature and morally good. Since, therefore, the conjugal

⁵ John F. Kippley, from a January 1991 letter of the Couple to Couple League International, Inc.

⁶ Arthur Vermeersch, S.J., translated by T. Lincoln Bouscaren, S.J., *What is Marriage?: A Catechism according to the Encyclical "Casti Connubi" of Pope Pius XI*, New York: The America Press, 1932, pp. 36-38.

act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious.

... Since, therefore, openly departing from the uninterrupted Christian tradition some recently have judged it possible solemnly to declare another doctrine regarding this question, the Catholic Church, to whom God has entrusted the defense of the integrity and purity of morals, standing erect in the midst of the moral ruin which surrounds her, in order that she may preserve the chastity of the nuptial union from being defiled by this foul stain, raises her voice in token of her divine ambassadorship and through our mouth proclaims anew: *any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin.*⁷ (emphasis added)

Pope Pius XII on October 29, 1951 made a statement that “direct sterilization, whether permanent or temporary, of the man or of the woman, is unlawful, and this by virtue of the natural law from which the Church herself, as you well know, has no power to dispense.”⁸ In the same statement, he spoke of the possible existence of reasons which could justify or vitiate the observance of the infertile cycles as a means of regulation of births.⁹ In an allocution given on September 12, 1958, a month before his death, he also expressed disapproval of the new means of extending the period of infertility in a woman’s cycle (the contraceptive pill). Some had proposed its acceptability since it “did not (unlike condoms, “withdrawal” or diaphragms) entail any interference with the *physical*

⁷ Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubi*, December 31, 1930, quoted in Kevin D. O’Rourke, O.P. and Phillip Boyle, editors, *Medical Ethics: Sources of Catholic Teaching*, 3rd edition, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999, p. 104.

⁸ Pope Pius XII, *Fundamental Laws Governing Conjugal Relations*, October 29, 1951, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 397.

⁹ Pope Pius XII, *Fundamental Laws Governing Conjugal Relations*, October 29, 1951, quoted in *Medical Ethics: Sources of Catholic Teaching*, Kevin D. O’Rourke, O.P. and Philip Boyle, O.P., editors, St. Louis, MO: The Catholic Health Association of the United States, 1989, pp. 201-202.

structure of the conjugal act."¹⁰ He said in what may be the only direct reference to the Pill by a Roman Catholic Pontiff:

But a direct, and therefore illicit sterilization results when ovulation is stopped to protect the uterus and the organism from the consequences of a pregnancy which it is not able to sustain. Some moralists contend that it is permissible to take medicines with this latter intention, but they are in error.

*It is likewise necessary to reject the view of a number of doctors and moralists who permit these practices when medical indications make conception undesirable, or in other similar cases, which cannot be discussed here. In these cases, the use of medication has as its end the prevention of conception by preventing ovulation. They are instances, therefore, of direct sterilization.*¹¹

As will be seen later, Pope Paul VI seems to have been referring to this allocation in his address to the College of Cardinals on June 23, 1964.¹²

In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration gave approval to the nation's first contraceptive pill on May 9, 1960.¹³ Use of the pill started to spread rapidly in the early 1960's and this provoked questions about its morality. Some such as the above-mentioned Dr. Rock argued that the pill was morally licit due to its medical (rather than mechanical) mode of performance. This demonstrates the allure of science and the danger of technical advances which do not give due regard to moral norms about human activity.¹⁴ Around that time, population issues also became increas-

¹⁰ Brian W. Harrison, "Humanae Vitae and Infallibility", *Fidelity*, November 1987, p. 47.

¹¹ Pope Pius XII, *Address to the Seventh International Congress of Hematology, September 12, 1958* quoted in John R. Cavanagh, M.D., *The Popes, the Pill, and the People: A Documentary Study*, Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1965, pp. 7-8.

¹² B. Harrison, *Ibid.*

¹³ Rita Rubin, "The Pill Turns 40", *USA Today*, 10 May 2000, p. 11B.

¹⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in Today's World*, in Austin Flannery, O.P., general editor, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Dublin: Pillar Books, 1975, pp. 903-1001, see especially numbers 36, 59.

ingly a matter of worldwide concern. In the encyclical *Mater et Magistra* dated May 15, 1961 Pope John XXIII stated when treating the subject of population increase: "Accordingly, that the question posed may be clearly resolved, a course of action is not indeed to be followed whereby, contrary to the moral law laid down by God, procreative function is also violated." (#189)¹⁵ He then added:

Because the life of man is passed on to other men deliberately and knowingly, it therefore follows that this should be done in accord with the most sacred, permanent, inviolate prescriptions of God. Everyone without exception is bound to recognize and observe these laws. Wherefore, in this matter, no one is permitted to use methods and procedures which may indeed be permissible to check the life of plants and animals.

Indeed, all must regard the life of man as sacred, since from its inception, it requires the action of God the Creator. Those who depart from this plan of God not only offend His divine majesty and dishonor themselves and the human race, but they also weaken the inner fiber of the commonwealth. (#193-4)¹⁶

In 1963, Pope John XXIII established a commission to study and advise him on the family, population and the birth rate.¹⁷

The work of that commission and most particularly of the commissions later established by Pope Paul VI was focused primarily not on the condemnation of contraception in itself but on an analysis of the moral implications of "the Pill". Germain Grisez stated, "Paul VI told John Ford (Jesuit member of the commission – author's note) that he was absolutely convinced from the very beginning that what [Pope] Pius XI taught in *Casti Connubi* [the 1930 encyclical which upheld the Church teaching against contraception] was true and couldn't change, but Paul also thought there might be something about the pill that was different. And, if there

¹⁵ Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, May 15, 1961, quoted in Anthony Zimmerman, S.V.D., coordinator, *Natural Family Planning: Nature's Way – God's Way*, Milwaukee, DeRance, Inc., 1980, p. 232.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹⁷ Ann Carey, "How dissenters tried to sway birth-control teaching: Seldom-told story behind the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* shows Pope Paul VI stood firm despite pressure", *Our Sunday Visitor*, August 3, 2003, at www.osvpublishing.com/periodicals/show-article.asp?pid=830.

was, he wanted to find out about it, because he felt the Church couldn't ask people to do something that God doesn't require of them."¹⁸ Fr. Ermenegildo Lio, OFM mentioned to Fr. Brian Harrison "that the Pope assured him personally, at around the time *Humanae Vitae* was issued, that he had never at any stage been in doubt about the intrinsic evil of contraception. The long time lapse was due only to the need to ponder carefully the precise manner in which this truth – which had already been authoritatively settled by Pius XI in *Casti Connubi* (1930) – could best be reaffirmed."¹⁹

On June 23, 1964 Pope Paul VI addressed the College of Cardinals and after having outlined the seriousness of the matter and the work of the study commissions said:

*Meanwhile let us say in all frankness that so far we do not have sufficient reason to regard the norms laid down by Pius XII on this matter as superseded and therefore no longer binding. So these norms must be considered valid, at least until we feel obliged in conscience to modify them. In a matter of such importance it seems right that Catholics desire to follow one single law propounded authoritatively by the Church. So it seems advisable to recommend that for the present no one should arrogate to himself the right to take a stand differing from the norm now in force.*²⁰

It is worth noting that in 1965 in the case of *Griswold vs. Connecticut* the United State Supreme Court voided a law that forbade counseling the married to use contraceptives since such would be an invasion of the right to privacy protected by the First and Ninth Amendments of the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution.²¹ This was described as a right existing in the "penumbras of the Bill of Rights".²²

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ B. Harrison, *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁰ Pope Paul VI, *Allocution to Cardinals*, June 23, 1964 in Zimmerman, *Ibid.*, p. 234.

²¹ Jack C. Plano and Milton Greenberg, *The American Political Dictionary*, 4th edition, Hinsdale, Illinois: The Dryden Press, 1976, p. 75.

²² United States Supreme Court Decision in *Roe v. Wade*, January 22, 1973, cited in William B. Lockhart, Yale Kamisar and Jesse H. Choper, editors, *Constitutional Law, The American Constitution, Constitutional Rights and Liberties*, 1973 Supplement to the third edition, p. 416.

Another confirmation of the questions raised by the contraceptive pill comes from the Second Vatican Council itself in the document *On the Church in Today's World, Gaudium et Spes* which was promulgated on December 7, 1965. In paragraph 51 it states: "*In questions of birth regulation the sons of the Church, faithful to these principles, are forbidden to use methods disapproved of by the teaching authority of the Church in its interpretation of the divine law.*"²³ However, in footnote 14 which corresponds to this statement, while citing references to the teachings of Pope Pius XI in *Casti Connubi*, of Pope Pius XII in his 1951 address [but, notably, not the 1958 allocution in which the Pill was specifically mentioned [although it was later cited in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*] and Pope Paul VI in his 1964 address, the following is stated:

*By order of the Holy Father, certain questions requiring further and more careful investigation have been given over to a commission for the study of population, the family, and births, in order that the Holy Father may pass judgment when its task is completed. With the teaching of the magisterium standing as it is, the Council has no intention of proposing concrete solutions at this moment.*²⁴

It is outside the scope of this study to examine the work of the commission which was studying this issue. Their final report was delivered to the Pope on June 28, 1966.²⁵ It is well known that much or all of this report was leaked to the public and that a large part of the commission did express openness to a change in the doctrine. For our present purposes suffice it to quote from Pope Paul VI in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*:

However, the conclusions arrived at by the commission could not be considered by us as definitive and absolutely certain, dispensing us from the duty of examining personally this serious question. This was all the more necessary because, within the commission itself, there was not complete agree-

²³ Second Vatican Council, *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Philip S. Kaufman, *Why you can Disagree and Remain a Faithful Catholic*, new expanded and revised edition, New York: Crossroad, 1995, p. 69. As one might suspect from the title, this book contains several rather questionable theological positions.

*ment concerning the moral norms to be proposed, and especially because certain approaches and criteria for a solution to this question had emerged which were at variance with the moral doctrine on marriage constantly taught by the magisterium of the Church.*²⁶

On October 29, 1966 the Holy Father gave an address in which he affirmed that he did not accept the arguments which favored changing Catholic doctrine on this matter.²⁷ Rather, he stated that previously he had wished to proclaim that the norms of the Church had not been changed but were still in force and that the Council did not allow for any substantial change in the teaching. The evidence still points to the fact that only new questions arising from the use of the Pill needed to be clarified in the light of this perennial teaching.²⁸

IV. *Humanae Vitae* (July 25, 1968)

The Church, nevertheless, in urging men to the observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches that each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life. (HV 11) With this expression, the answer was given regarding the morality of contraception. What precedes and follows this phrase in the encyclical seeks to explain and convince further of the goodness, truth and beauty of this teaching. This writer is convinced of all of that and more. One might be tempted to cease any further exposition of this matter and say, "Roma locuta est; causa finita est." (Rome has spoken; the cause is finished). However, since in the thirty-six years following the promulgation of the encyclical such turmoil has arisen in this intimate and delicate area of human

²⁶ Pope Paul, *Humanae Vitae*, July 25, 1968, no. 6. This and all subsequent quotations from this encyclical were taken from the Vatican website at www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html

²⁷ A. Carey, *Ibid.*

²⁸ B. Harrison, *Ibid.*, p. 47.

life²⁹ and because the Roman Pontiffs since then persistently have exhorted the Pastors of the Church to present this teaching in a way which will be suitably comprehended by the faithful, let us proceed. An effort will be made to address some of the more common and pressing questions which often arise from this Providential encyclical in the hope that it may be of some pastoral utility. A question-and-answer format will be adopted since this is a common way in which the issue is confronted in actual conversation.

A. Is Contraception Wrong?

"Similarly excluded is every action which, either in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible." (HV 14) This section obviously excludes any form of contraception, whether mechanical, medical or strictly onanistic. This teaching has been reaffirmed constantly by the Pontiffs in speeches given throughout the world and in numerous official Church documents.

B. Is Contraception Always Wrong?

"Neither is it valid to argue, as a justification for sexual intercourse which is deliberately contraceptive, that a lesser evil is to be preferred to a greater one, or that such intercourse would merge with procreative acts of past and future to form a single entity, and so be qualified by exactly the same moral goodness as these. Though it is true that sometimes it is lawful to tolerate a lesser moral evil in order to avoid a greater evil or in order to promote a greater good, it is never lawful, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil that good may come of it – in other words, to intend directly something which of its very nature contradicts the moral order, and which must therefore be judged unworthy of man, even though the intention is to protect or promote the welfare of an individual, of a family or of society in general. Consequently, it is a serious error to think that a whole married life of

²⁹ At least one author has signaled the dissent over "Humanae Vitae" as the turning point due to which many turned to sources other than their religion for guidance on bioethical issues. See Antonio Puca, O.Cam, *Il contributo della teologia alla bioetica*, Torino: Edizioni Camilliane, 1998, p. 17.

otherwise normal relations can justify sexual intercourse which is deliberately contraceptive and so intrinsically wrong.”
(HV 14)

In this paragraph, the Pope disallows the concept of “choosing the lesser evil”, denies that the end may justify the means and refutes a mistaken notion of totality which does not examine the moral autonomy of individual acts of contraceptive intercourse. Here we have an obvious example of the application of the dictum assumed by Thomistic moral teaching, “Bonum ex integra causa; malum ex quocumque defectu.”³⁰ Therefore, objectively speaking, contraception could not be justified on the grounds that it is a lesser evil than abortion or marital disharmony.

C. Why is Contraception Wrong?

This particular doctrine, often expounded by the magisterium of the Church, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.
(HV 12)

Sexual union is an expression of *total* self-giving in marriage. If the possibility of conception is deliberately excluded in an artificial way, the gift of self is only partial and, therefore, does not express the truth of the symbolism of the sexual act. Philosophically, this involves the separation of the intrinsically unitive and procreative meanings and purposes of the conjugal act in itself. It violates purposely the nature of intercourse and, as a result, is directly deleterious at many levels to the persons who engage in such practices. This dual end or scope of the marital act is inscribed in the very essence of the conjugal joining together. Intimacy becomes depersonalized by the partialization of its meaning. It expresses a message such as, “I give you myself without my God-given fertility” or “I want you without your God-given fertility.” Procreativity is personal, not only biological. Sexual intercourse is a unique and

³⁰ Gerardus M. Paris, O.P., *Synopsis Totius Summae Theologicae S. Thomae*, editio altera, Naples: M. d'Auria Editore Pontificio, 1958, p. 285-290, I-II. Q. 18 especially article 4 ad 3m.

specific kind of touch and carries with it the corresponding symbolic and existential meaning.³¹

The reason is that the fundamental nature of the marriage act, while uniting husband and wife in the closest intimacy, also renders them capable of generating new life – and this as a result of laws written into the actual nature of man and of woman. And if each of these essential qualities, the unitive and the procreative, is preserved, the use of marriage fully retains its sense of true mutual love and its ordination to the supreme responsibility of parenthood to which man is called. We believe that our contemporaries are particularly capable of seeing that this teaching is in harmony with human reason. (HV 12)

D. Why listen to the Church?

This kind of question requires from the teaching authority of the Church a new and deeper reflection on the principles of the moral teaching on marriage – a teaching which is based on the natural law as illuminated and enriched by divine Revelation.

No member of the faithful could possibly deny that the Church is competent in her magisterium to interpret the natural moral law. It is in fact indisputable, as Our predecessors have many times declared, that Jesus Christ, when He communicated His divine power to Peter and the other Apostles and sent them to teach all nations His commandments, constituted them as the authentic guardians and interpreters of the whole moral law, not only, that is, of the law of the Gospel but also of the natural law. For the natural law, too, declares the will of God, and its faithful observance is necessary for men's eternal salvation.

In carrying out this mandate, the Church has always issued appropriate documents on the nature of marriage, the correct use of conjugal rights, and the duties of spouses. These documents have been more copious in recent times. (HV 4)

³¹ William E. May, *Sex and the Sanctity of Human Life*, Front Royal, Virginia: Christendom Press. Further information not available since this was taken from the following websites: www.ewtn.com/library/MARRIAGE/COABPA.TXT; www.ewtn.com/library/MARRIAGE/MANWOM.TXT; www.ewtn.com/library/MARRIAGE/SEXSAN.TXT

Since the same God Who revealed Himself is also the author of creation, human nature is imprinted with certain permanent characteristics by God which determine that which is beneficial and that which is harmful to the achievement of its proper ends and the accomplishment of its unique goals. Since salvation is directed to the whole person, the Church must be able to interpret the meaning of that natural law. How could the Church guide its members if it did not speak out? This natural law is "an original moral sense which enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie."³² It is obvious that we do not always immediately perceive and correctly appreciate the guidance provided to us by the natural law due to the darkening of the intellect and the weakening of the will as the result of sin. Therefore, Revelation expresses more clearly the details of this primordial moral sense and the Church is the divinely-established guide by which we can know with greater clarity and certitude the will of God. "The competence of the ecclesiastical magisterium does not extend only to supernatural revelation, but also to natural truths, because the light of Revelation projects itself also on them, convalidates them and clarifies them. The God of Revelation is also the God of Creation."³³

E. Can I follow my Conscience?

In all matters of morality, the Church gives due respect to the place and role of conscience. This is as true (no more and no less) with regard to contraception as it is with any other moral issue. Perhaps because of such intense media speculation and the dissemination of false theories regarding Church teaching in this matter, one could infer that many persons have been the victims of confusion about this particular area of life.

The conscience does not manufacture nor teach the truth. Rather, its specific function is to apply the truth learned from

³² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Definitive Edition, Manila: Word & Life Publications & CBCP/ECCCE, 1997, p. 528 par. 1954.

³³ Anselm Gunthor, *Chiamata e Risposta: Una nuova teologia morale*, Roma: Edizioni Paoline, 1979, Volume III, p. 699. Here he is quoting from the Austrian Bishops' declaration commenting on *Humanae Vitae*.

authoritative sources as a means of guiding the practical judgement in the process of moral decision-making. In the case of contraception, given the continual repetition of Church teaching by the current Roman Pontiff over the past twenty-six years and its dissemination throughout the world by the media, surely there is less likelihood of one being uninformed about the fundamental truth in this regard. It is true, also, that we have witnessed a surge of dissent from Church teaching by many of those who are responsible for the care of souls.

Given these facts and in view of human weakness, one could suppose that there may be some who err in this matter in so-called 'good faith'. This would occur if one were subjectively convinced (in sincerity and before God) that contraceptive practices were licit. This would not alter the fact that such a choice would be violative of the objective moral order but would only be a recognition that at times an erroneous conscience may be followed (if a sincere search for the truth has been completed). It should be noted, however, (and strongly so) that since such behavior would be in contradiction to the natural law, although the individual(s) concerned might be partially or totally free of moral guilt this would be no guarantee or safeguard against suffering the consequences in the natural order of a wrongly directed decision. "Nature never forgives." Those who exalt the independence of conscience would do well to consider better the ramifications of following an erroneous conscience no matter how sincere it may be.

Responsible men can become more deeply convinced of the truth of the doctrine laid down by the Church on this issue if they reflect on the consequences of methods and plans for artificial birth control. Let them first consider how easily this course of action could open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards. Not much experience is needed to be fully aware of human weakness and to understand that human beings – and especially the young, who are so exposed to temptation – need incentives to keep the moral law, and it is an evil thing to make it easy for them to break that law. Another effect that gives cause for alarm is that a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the

satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection. (HV 17)

F. Isn't There An Overpopulation Problem?

Paul Erlich's well-known book, *The Population Bomb*, came out around 1970. It proposed that, based on Malthusian theories, the demographic contours of the planet would soon outstrip the available resources. This book had a wide impact throughout the world. No one will deny that in some families and in some countries special attention must be paid to a prudent promotion of responsible (and moral) parenthood. However, many scholars also are convinced that if the resources of the earth are managed well, we will be able to sustain development at a pace that will match population increase. Much of the current problem depends not upon the number of people as such but upon the unjust and inequitable distribution of wealth. Other difficulties arise from population implosion, the concentration of large numbers of people in urban areas. Nevertheless, one is not free to adopt a perspective of situation ethics in seeking to justify population levelling through contraceptive means. Likewise, the government should not intervene to take upon itself decisions about family size that belong properly to the spouses in line with the principle of subsidiarity. In our own time, we have heard of courts in the United States seeking to impose on Catholic entities the obligation to cover contraceptives as part of the health insurance of their employees.

Today an important part of policies which favour life is the issue of population growth. Certainly public authorities have a responsibility to "intervene to orient the demography of the population". But such interventions must always take into account and respect the primary and inalienable responsibility of married couples and families, and cannot employ methods which fail to respect the person and fundamental human rights, beginning with the right to life of every innocent human being. It is therefore morally unacceptable to encourage, let alone impose, the use of methods such as contraception, sterilization and abortion in order to regulate births. The ways of solving the population problem are quite different. Governments and the various international agencies must above all strive to create economic, social, public health and cultural

*conditions which will enable married couples to make their choices about procreation in full freedom and with genuine responsibility. They must then make efforts to ensure "greater opportunities and a fairer distribution of wealth so that everyone can share equitably in the goods of creation. Solutions must be sought on the global level by establishing a true economy of communion and sharing of goods, in both the national and international order". This is the only way to respect the dignity of persons and families, as well as the authentic cultural patrimony of peoples.*³⁴ (underlining added)

G. Isn't Periodic Continence or Natural Family Planning Just as Immoral?

"... *quilibet matrimonii usus ad vitam humanam procreandam per se destinatus permaneat.*" (HV 11-emphasis added)³⁵ The study of human biology has brought forth greater scientific awareness of female fertility patterns and the accompanying signs. Although males are generally always fertile, women undergo alternating periods of fertility and infertility. This is the work of nature. God speaks to us and to our intelligence through nature. There could be acceptable reasons stemming from various sources for which a couple might determine to space births and they would be acting within the parameters of the moral law if they restricted the sexual expression of their conjugal love to those times of infertility on the part of the woman. To do so without proper reasons, however, would be an illicit abuse rather than a licit use of a God-given natural rhythm of fertility and infertility. This likely infertile expression of conjugal love shares something of the same connotations as sexual acts between spouses when one (or both) of them is sterile due to illness or age. No positive steps are taken to impede procrea-

³⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, March 25, 1995, paragraph 91. Taken from the website of the Pontifical Academy for Life at www.academiamvita.org/template.jsp?sez=DocumentiMagistero&pag=papi/evangelium_vitae/evangelium_vitae&lang=english

³⁵ Bertrand de Margerie, S.J., "Reflections on some aspects of Encyclical HUMANAE VITAE to which less consideration has been given", *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, May 25, 1978, pp. 6-7. In this article he makes an important observation that the expression *per se* is omitted from many translations.

tion directly. Some even make use of fertility awareness in order to increase the chances of conception. For these reasons, it would seem that one of the most pressing duties of the Church today would be to disseminate more widely knowledge of and training for responsible parenthood based on fertility awareness. "Nature always rewards."

If therefore there are well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile, thus controlling birth in a way which does not in the least offend the moral principles which We have just explained.

Neither the Church nor her doctrine is inconsistent when she considers it lawful for married people to take advantage of the infertile period but condemns as always unlawful the use of means which directly prevent conception, even when the reasons given for the later practice may appear to be upright and serious. In reality, these two cases are completely different. In the former the married couple rightly use a faculty provided them by nature. In the latter they obstruct the natural development of the generative process. It cannot be denied that in each case the married couple, for acceptable reasons, are both perfectly clear in their intention to avoid children and wish to make sure that none will result. But it is equally true that it is exclusively in the former case that husband and wife are ready to abstain from intercourse during the fertile period as often as for reasonable motives the birth of another child is not desirable. And when the infertile period recurs, they use their married intimacy to express their mutual love and safeguard their fidelity toward one another. In doing this they certainly give proof of a true and authentic love. (HV 16)

V. Conclusion

Due to the limited scope of this study, many other related issues will be left for further study. Such considerations for analysis would include: the infallible nature of this teaching, the gravity of

the sin of contraception, the teachings of Pope John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* and his development of the "Theology of the Body" amongst others. A spiritual battle for the culture of life against a culture of death has been engaged. Any objective observer will note the link between the contraceptive mentality and such abominations as abortion, euthanasia, artificial reproduction, homosexual marriages and the like. Without a doubt, this same contraceptive mentality has played its part in weakening that self-discipline which is so necessary for the practice of the virtue of chastity. Said virtue involves not only the body, but the whole person at psychological, social and spiritual levels. The lack of this virtue surely has contributed to the pandemic contamination of our people by affective disorders, not to mention sexually transmitted diseases. In this battle, the meaning of words will be important as will prayer for discernment. May wisdom be ours!

This modest exposition has sought to demonstrate that our well-being in a holistic sense depends upon loving obedience to the law of God and nature. A final quote from a Dutch psychiatrist, Doctor A.A.A. Terruwe, seems appropriate as a confirmation of that affirmation:

At the beginning of my career as a psychiatrist I had a great deal of difficulty understanding how an ecclesiastical prohibition of contraception could be right. Time and again I sought explanations, and over and over again I even thought I had understood them. But as a matter of fact the logic of the thing continually eluded me. Since then experience has taught me a different reason, the one I have set forth here. I was witness to the psychic damage which conscientious people with the best of intentions suffered from the use of contraceptives. They became ill and disturbed with respect to their experience and practice of love... It was then that I understood why I could not grasp the theological arguments; they failed to make it clear that it was the person's own natural good and well-being which they were defending. And this I have now seen for myself.³⁶

³⁶ A.A.A. Terruwe, *The Abode of Love*, translated by Robert C. Ware, St. Meinrad, Indiana: The Abbey Press, 1970 and quoted in Thomas J. O'Donnell, S.J., "Contraception and the Catholic Doctor: The Question of Referrals", *The Medical-Moral Newsletter*, Volume 23, Number 2 (February 1986) p. 6.

Theologians are also persons and, therefore, a personal note (a wish) will be added. After having listened to the presentation of this doctrine in a class of Bioethics for medical students, one student of highly superior intelligence said to me, "My parents belong to Opus Dei and I always go to retreats but you're the first priest who has ever convinced me that contraception is wrong." It is not known to what places this article will travel nor into whose hands it may fall, but it is desired ardently that it may serve as an instrument to lead others to see clearly the difference between right and wrong and to choose life. □