



Contraception in the Works of St. Augustine

Berman D. Ibañez

This paper aims to present the teaching of St. Augustine on contraception as founded on his theology of love proper to marriage. The study begins with a look at the origin of contraceptive practices in ancient times and the development of the teaching on contraception in the Greco-Roman world and in the early Church Fathers. In the second section, the study examines St. Augustine's view of marriage in his work 'De bono coniugali' bringing clarification to the central role of sexual intimacy and love in marriage. The third section then proceeds to discuss St. Augustine's teaching on contraception as treated in some of his other works arguing that contraception is morally wrong because it violates conjugal love.

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Contraception in Pagan Antiquity and in the Early Church

Ancient contraceptive practices

Many are actually surprised to learn that the issue of contraception, thought to be modern as brought about by science and technology, was already present during the ancient times. Already methods similar to modern contraceptives we have today existed as early as in the very beginning of civilization. The papyruses of ancient Egypt reveal that plugs of honey and crocodile feces were used as contraceptive suppositories and record a list of herbs such as acacia and colocynth that served as either abortifacients or as potions to regulate the menses to prevent pregnancy.¹ In Mesopotamia, evidence

¹ J. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, Cambridge 1994, 66-72. Riddle identifies the earliest medical writing from Egypt, the Kahun Papyrus, (c. 1850 B.C.),

in the Babylonian lexical texts shows that plants were used as contraceptives and stones were thought to prevent pregnancy.² Women in Mesopotamia might have used breast-feeding as a form of contraception,³ and an ancient form of the rhythm method was possibly practiced, which would advise a woman at what times in the day she was more likely to get pregnant.⁴ Furthermore, anal intercourse was a contraceptive method used by the *ēntu* priestesses, and may have been a common practice among the population at large.⁵

Unlike the papyri preserved by chance of ancient Egypt and the incidental lexical texts of Mesopotamia, ancient scientific and medical literature is at our disposal as we examine the contraceptive practices in ancient Greece and in ancient Rome. Contraceptives and/or abortifacients are mentioned in more or less detail in the surviving works of Aetius (*Medicine*), Aristotle (*History of Animals*), Caelius Aurelianus, Celsus, Dioscorides (*Materia medica*), Galen, Hippocrates (i.e., the Hippocratic Corpus), Herodotus (*History of the Persian Wars*) Lucretius (*De rerum natura*) Mustio, Oribasius, Paulus Aegineta, Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*), S. Placitus Payriensis, Ps. Apuleius Platonicus, Soranus (*Gynecology*), and Theodorus Priscianus.⁶

It is noteworthy that the Greeks had a word for the contraceptive — *atokion* — whereas in Latin there existed only a vague term — *venenum* — which meant ‘poison.’⁷ It is also to be noted that contraceptives were discriminated from abortifacients in theory, but in practice it was difficult to distinguish between the abortive and contraceptive effects of some potions.⁸ The following are the forms of contraceptives mentioned by any of the classical writers:

- a) Potions are the first form of contraceptive and the type most often mentioned, such as drink of misty plant, the taking of willow seed, the use of wine, wallflower seed and myrtle.

the Ramesseum Papyrus (c. 1784-1662 B.C.), the Ebers Papyrus (c. 1500 B.C.), the Berlin Papyrus (c. 1300 B.C.) which record contraceptive suppositories, abortifacients, and oral contraceptives as well as magic and amulets employed to prevent conception.

² R. Biggs, *Conception, Contraception and Abortion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, in *Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honor of W.G. Lambert*, eds. A.R. George and I.L. Finkel, Winona Lake 2000, 5.

³ M. Gruber, *Breast-Feeding Practices in Biblical Israel and in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia*, in *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 19 (1989), 61-83.

⁴ Biggs, 10.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ P. Prioreschi, *Contraception and Abortion in the Greco-Roman World*, in *Vesalius*, 1, 2 (1995) 77-87; J. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, Cambridge 1986 (republished), 12-29; Riddle, 1-65, 74-86; A. McLaren, *A History of Contraception from Antiquity to the Present Day*, Cambridge 1990, 12-72; K. Hopkins, *Contraception in the Roman Empire, in Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 8 (1965-6), 124-151.

⁷ McLaren, 26-7.

⁸ Noonan, 17; McLaren, 61.

- b) A second kind of contraceptive method familiar to the ancients was a blocking of the entrance of the sperm to the uterus, using such pessaries and sticky mixtures of peppermint, cedar gum, honey.
- c) A third kind of contraceptive is salve or ointment to be applied to the male genitals. Either the ointment is believed to act as a spermicide, or it is intended to function, like the pessaries, to close the uterus on penetration into the vagina.
- d) In addition to these three chemical or mechanical ways of blocking conception, there was a belief in a sterile period for women. The Hippocratic School had decided that the period most likely to be fertile occurred just after menstruation (*The Diseases of Women* 1.38).⁹
- e) Three types of contraceptive physical movement are mentioned by the ancient writers: *coitus interruptus* or anal intercourse, the turning movements by prostitutes to avoid conception, and the woman's holding her breath, then immediately rise, squat, sneeze, and wash.
- f) Finally, if all else failed, recourse could be made to magic in the form of protective amulets and talismans.

Although it is difficult to determine accurately the efficacy of the ancient contraceptive measures,¹⁰ what is clear is that such attempts were made. What was the main motivation that impelled the ancients to deliberately prevent conception and avoid childbearing? The importance in ancient Mesopotamia of a woman bearing children — especially a male heir — to her husband is well-known. But, once having produced a sufficient number of children, measure of control in preventing pregnancy was sought.¹¹ The epic of *Atra-hasīs*, a major piece of national propaganda, seeks to convince the society to use contraceptive measures to limit population.¹²

For the ancient Greek familiar system, the ideal was to have one son to maintain the family name and one daughter to cement a marriage alliance with another family.¹³ Plato in *The Republic* (c. 429-347 B.C.) spoke of the need to regulate fertility so that offspring would not exceed the means of the community. In *The Laws*

⁹ Noonan, 15.

¹⁰ Noonan points out that the prevalence of amulets may suggest that no method could have been very good (p. 17). Riddle shows that modern writers have denied the effectiveness of oral contraceptives among the ancients (p. 16). Hopkins holds out a possibility that contraceptives might have had some limiting effect upon the fertility of the Romans, but he sees limited effectiveness only in the actions of vaginal suppositories (p. 150). Pioreschi concludes that ancient physicians did not have at their disposal effective contraceptives and abortifacients other than those that acted mechanically (pp. 77-84).

¹¹ B. Hodge, *The Christian Case against Contraception*, Oregon 2010, 5-6.

¹² Ibid., 6; see W.G. Lambert and A.R. Millard, *Atra-hasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, Winona Lake 1999, 103.

¹³ McLaren, 17.

he advanced the idea of providing for the stability of the number of plot holders by having one heir per family.¹⁴ Aristotle (c. 384-322 B.C.) suggested that the age of marriage be regulated, and abortion employed to regulate fertility.¹⁵ As to the ancient Romans, if the Roman couple's first concern was to have children, their second was not to have too many. Pliny the Younger noted that he lived in «an age when even one child is thought a burden» (*Letters* 4.15). The custom that required the equal division of the estate among one's children was the main reason usually advanced to explain why Roman families were so small.¹⁶¹⁷

Hence, primarily due to economic and/or social reasons, the ancients consciously tried to control fertility and had at their disposal various population control measures including contraception.¹⁸ Given the case, normally they saw nothing wrong in the employment of contraceptive practices. Most writers do not speak of any moral objection to the dissemination of contraceptive information. From the Greek writers to the Roman doctors and pharmacists, generally there was no rejection of the use of contraception or it was reasonably presumed as acceptable due to economic and/or social and health reasons.¹⁹

Moral evaluation

Towards the second century, an important shift occurred. We have seen that marriage in ancient culture was closely linked to the aim of producing children and procreation was regarded as a civic duty. Recent scholars, however, have noted shifting emphases in the rhetoric of Roman philosophers and moralists on the subject

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic* V, 459d-461c, tr. G.M.A. Grube & C.D.C. Reeve, ed. J.M. Cooper, Indiana 1997, 1008; Plato, *The Laws* V, 740, tr. T.J. Saunders, ed. J.M. Cooper, Indiana 1997, 1421.

¹⁵ «The proper thing to do is to limit the size of each family, and if children are then conceived in excess of the limit so fixed, to have miscarriage induced before sense and life have begun in the embryo». (Arist, *Pol.* II, 1272a, tr. E. Barker, Oxford 1948, 99.)

¹⁶ McLaren, 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁸ Riddle lists the following population control measures in classical antiquity: sexual restraint, delayed marriages, contraception, abortion, infanticide, and homosexuality (2-15). The case of homosexuality is an interesting one that even among the married the public tolerance and, in the Greek case, the lauding of male homosexuality could have played a part in limiting reproduction. In Crete homosexuality was, according to Aristotle, officially supported as a population control tactic (McLaren, 13; see Arist., *Pol.* II, 1272a (99); K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, London 1971; K.J. Dover, *La Morale Popolare Greca all'epoca di Platone e Aristotele*, Brescia 1983).

¹⁹ Noonan, 18-19. In fact, it was not only contraception but also abortion that was accepted or tolerated. It is because the Greek philosophers taught that a male *conceptus* was not a rational or ensouled being until thirty days (Hippocrates) or forty days (Aristotle) after conception; a female not until after eighty or ninety days. In Roman law the fetus was referred to, not as *homo* (human being) or *infans* (child), but as *spes animantis* (that which has hopes of living or being ensouled). Until its birth it was considered part of the mother and warranted no special consideration. The general view of the ancient world was that a fetus was never more than potentially human (McLaren, 31, 82).

of marriage around the time of the rise of Christianity. They began to emphasize marriage as a friendship (*philia*, *amicitia*) between spouses; stress was placed on the importance of harmony (*homonoia*, *concordia*) between husband and wife.²⁰ Both the Latin writer Seneca and the Greek author Plutarch propagated this ideal. Musonius Rufus, a Stoic philosopher who taught at Rome in the first century A.D., and who was read with great appreciation by several early Christian writers, offers a clear illustration of this new discourse on marriage.²¹

In marriage, Musonius writes, husband and wife come together for the purpose of making a life in common and to procreate children: “They should regard all things as common between them, and nothing peculiar or private to one or the other, not even their bodies” (frag. 13A). Children alone, however, do not constitute a marriage: «But in marriage there must be above all perfect companionship (*sympbiōsis*) and mutual affection (*kēdemonia*) of husband and wife, both in health and sickness and under all conditions, since it was with desire for this as well as for having children that both entered upon marriage.»²²

This new morality was also accompanied by a new circumspection regarding the dangers of unrestrained sexuality. Prescriptions for marriage became stricter. Adultery was condemned; homosexual relations were no longer viewed with the same tolerant attitude as in ancient Greece. Philosophers such as Musonius, Athenagoras, Pliny the Elder and Epictetus began to speak of non-procreative sex as bad.²³

The early Church Fathers

The early Fathers, too, in their defense of the value of marriage, vigorously opposed the contraceptive practices. They made use of the prevailing morality of the Greco-Roman philosophers that harmonized with faith and scriptures to explain better their theology of marriage.²⁴ Already in the *Didache*, there is set out a Way of Life and a Way of Death. The Way of Death is filled with sins, of which one is *pharmakeia* (φάρμακία) or “medicine.”²⁵ The evil men who follow the evil way of *pharmakeia* are «killers of offspring, corrupters of the mold (πλάσματος) of

²⁰ D. Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, Minneapolis 1992, 8.

²¹ Ibid.; see C. Lutz, *Musonius Rufus, “The Roman Socrates”*, in *Yale Classical* 10 (1977), 87-101.

²² Hunter, 8.

²³ McLaren, 64.

²⁴ Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria in the late second century borrowed directly from the works of Musonius and Plutarch to forge a Christian theology of marriage that harmonized with the prevailing philosophical ideals. Later, in the fourth and early fifth centuries, teachers such as John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo retrieved some of these ideas to provide a new marital morality for Christians living in a changed social and political context (Hunter, 9).

²⁵ This has reference to the *pharmakoi* or *pharmakeia* in *Gal* 5:20 and *Apoc* 9:21; 21:8; 22:15, which were denounced to be practiced by the followers of Jesus (see Noonan, 44-5).

God».²⁶ It may be argued that “medicine” here means drugs used as abortifacients or contraceptives, and that “destroyers of the work of God” means those committing abortion or contraception.²⁷ The same teaching on *pharmakeia* is repeated in the Two Ways as it appears in the second century *S. Barnabas Apostolus*.²⁸ Also, in the *S. Barnabas Apostolus* there is indicated an opposition to sexual conduct in marriage which would have a contraceptive effect: it uses the weasel as the symbol of men who «work iniquity with their mouth in their uncleanness» and women «who work iniquity with their mouth». Oral intercourse is meant, for the letter says, «this animal conceives by the mouth».²⁹

Marcus Minucius Felix seemed to refer to the denunciation of contraception in the *Octavius*. It contrasted the decent behavior of Christians with the conduct of pagan women who «by drinking drugs extinguish the beginning of a future man, and before they bear, commit parricide».³⁰ The drugs Minucius describes could either be contraceptives or abortifacients. The effect of the act — “extinguishing the beginning” — could indicate an act either of contraception or of abortion.³¹ Similarly, Book IX of *Refutatio omnium Haeresium* attributed to Hippolytus of Rome contains an attack to Pope Callixtus who allegedly permitted to the Christian free women and their slaves the use of drugs of sterility (φάρμακοι ἀτόκιοι) or bind themselves tightly in order to expel a fetus (καταβάλλειν το τέκνον) which has already been engendered.³² This conduct, the critic of Callixtus concludes, is “adultery” and “murder”. Adultery stigmatizes the relationship; “murder,” the acts of contraception and abortion.³³

Two particular kinds of acts with contraceptive effects are noted pejoratively in *Divinae Institutiones* by Lactantius, oral intercourse and self-castration.³⁴ Epiphanius in *Panarion* concludes that the rejection of children in the sexual act is truly the worst practice and crime.³⁵ John Chrysostom, preaching about 390 on the fashion in which Christian marriage festivities should be conducted, denounces the use of contraception as both a form of murder and of idolatry.³⁶ In the second sermon, on avarice, he spoke again on contraception. Men who are avaricious and desirous to avoid children as a burden «mutilate nature, not only killing the newborn, but even

²⁶ *Did.* V. 1-2 (*SCh* 248, 166, 168).

²⁷ Noonan, 92.

²⁸ *Barn.* XX (*PG* 2, 780).

²⁹ *Barn.* X (*PG* 2, 753, 756); Noonan, 92.

³⁰ *Oct.* III, 2 (*CSEL* 2, 43).

³¹ Noonan, 93.

³² *Haer.* IX, 12. 25 (*GCS* 25, 356).

³³ Noonan, 94.

³⁴ *Inst.* V, 9. 17 (*CSEL* 19, 427).

³⁵ *Pan.* XXVI, 16. 2-4 (*GCS* 25, 296).

³⁶ *Hom. in Rom.* 24 (*PG* 60, 626-627).

acting to prevent their beginning to live».³⁷ The expression “mutilate” may suggest castration. The prevention of life could possibly include abortion, but more probably contraception alone is meant.³⁸

In their teaching on contraception, however, it is important to note that the main concern of the early Fathers was on the conflict between procreation and various dualistic heresies such as Gnostics and Encratites that were hostile to marriage and procreation.³⁹ Anti-Gnostic writers such as Iranaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Methodius and Lactantius fought vigorously against these groups and stressed the goodness of procreation in marriage. This preoccupation has cost the early Fathers, however, to have seemingly overlooked the role of love in marriage or, more specifically, the value of sexual intimacy as expression of love between the spouses in their teaching on contraception. As a result, many today are cautious to appeal to the early Fathers in order to give light concerning the modern issue of contraception.

Among the early Fathers, Augustine is considered the most influential when it comes to the teaching on marriage and contraception. However, being occupied himself in a battle against the new dualism of Manichaeism, which in the third and fourth centuries had renewed the attack against marriage and procreation, not to mention that he was an ex-Manichaean himself, Augustine is also the most susceptible to be criticized for a supposed negative view of human sexuality and, consequently, a deficient view of marriage and marital love. Not a few scholars accuse Augustine of being opposed to sexual attraction, sexual intercourse, and sexual pleasure.⁴⁰ Some claim that his view of sexuality may even have been tainted with latent Manichaeism.⁴¹ Others have accused him of maintaining a functionalist view of sexual intercourse according to which the conjugal act is legitimated only by procreation and has no value as an expression of love between the spouses.⁴²

³⁷ *Hom. in Mt. 28* (PG 57, 357).

³⁸ Noonan, 99.

³⁹ As early as Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, it is clear that some groups of Christians favored sexual renunciation and wished to impose this on others. The Pastoral Epistles also warned against “hypocritical liars” who forbade Christians to marry and ordered them to abstain from certain foods (1 Tim 4:1-3).

⁴⁰ For Noonan Augustine's understanding of marriage possesses Manichean and Stoic influences (see pp. 119-139); U. Ranke-Heinemann, in her book *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality and the Catholic Church*, New York 1991, calls Augustine's conversion “a disaster for married people” (p. 78), and says that Augustine was “the man who fused Christianity together with hatred of sex and pleasure into a systematic unity” (p. 75); T. Mackin (*Augustine on the Nature of Marriage*, in *Sexuality, Marriage and the Family: Readings in the Catholic Tradition*, ed. P.I. Odozor, Notre Dame 2001, 173) maintains that despite what Augustine claimed, for him “intercourse itself was sinful”.

⁴¹ For examples of this critique see T. Fox, *Sexuality and Catholicism*, New York 1995, 22; V. Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, Minnesota 1996, 116-18.

⁴² A. Trapè, *La Contraccezione in S. Agostino*, in *Lateranum* 44 (1978), 32; N. Cipriani, *L'influsso di Aristotele sulla Concezione Agostiniana del Matrimonio*, in *SEA* 114 (2009), 618; Noonan maintains that Augustine saw procreation as the purpose of marriage (p. 126), that he saw “selfless love” as having

Criticized for having a negative view of sexuality and conjugal life, it would be futile to discuss Augustine's argument of contraception. Hence, seeing the great need to clarify and correct such criticism, which, though already present in Augustine's time, persistently recurs even today, let us now look again at his view on marriage by examining carefully an important work, the *De bono coniugali*.

Augustine's View of Marriage in *De Bono Coniugali*

De bono coniugali: an apology

First of all, it is important to keep in mind that Augustine developed and systematized his theology of marriage largely in the course of his struggles against active and dangerous adversaries of his time: the Manicheans (who denigrate marriage), the Jovinianists (who put marriage on a par with virginity) and the Pelagians (who exalt concupiscence so much).⁴³ A contextualized reading of *De bono coniugali* (401) would reveal that the primary concern of Augustine was to defend marriage against the denigrating views of the Manicheans and other Christian ascetics against marriage.⁴⁴ This concern of Augustine affects to a large extent how he structured *De bono coniugali*. In Greco-Roman handbooks, rhetorical speeches could be either judicial (prosecutorial or defensive/apologetic), epideictic (praise or censure), or deliberative.⁴⁵ Rhetorically speaking, *De bono coniugali* fits in the category of an apology/defense.

And as an apology, following the rule of rhetoric, the treatise began with an *exordium*. Well-known are the three goods of marriage of *proles* (offspring), a very small part in marriage (p. 125), and that 'there was nothing rational, spiritual, sacramental in the act of intercourse itself' (p. 125); Ranke-Heinemann holds that for Augustine "intercourse is a culpable act and needs justification: a child" (p. 41), and calls Augustine a neurotic who "radically separates love and sexuality" (p. 76); Mckin contends that Augustine left no middle ground between conception and capitulation to sexual lust for couples to engage in sexual intercourse as an expression of intimacy (p. 72).

⁴³ See Trapè, 32.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Retract.* II, 22.1 (CSEL 3, 156-7) – here in the *Retractiones* the followers of Jovinian, according to Augustine, boasted «that Jovinian could not be answered by praising marriage, but only by censuring it». For this reason, Augustine says, he composed *De bono coniugali*. However, several scholars agree that the above comment of Augustine regarding the unsuccessful attempt to refute Jovinian without degrading marriage is a thinly veiled allusion to the notorious treatise of Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, which at that time was widely regarded as an unrestrained and ill-advised attack on marriage. Cf. R.A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, Cambridge and New York 1990, 45; D. Hunter, *Augustinian Pessimism? A New Look at Augustine's Teaching on Sex, Marriage and Celibacy*, in *AugStud* 25 (1994), 158-9; cf. A. Hunter, *Augustine, Sermon 354A: Its Place in His Thought on Marriage and Sexuality*, in *AugStud* 33:1 (2002), 51; E. Clark, "Adam's Only Companion": Augustine and the Early Christian Debate on Marriage, in *RechAug* 2 (1986), 145; C. Harrison, *Marriage and Monasticism in St. Augustine: The bond of friendship*, in *Studia Patristica* 33 (1997), 95.

⁴⁵ See Arist., *Rhet.* I, 3; Cic., *Top.* XXIII, 91; Quint. *Inst. orat.* III, 4, <http://www.humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/Silva.htm>.

fides (fidelity) and *sacramentum* (indissolubility). Less well-known is the good of *coniunctio amicalis* or *societas amicalis* (friendly fellowship/companionship) mentioned in the *exordium*.⁴⁶ Some scholars have rightly pointed out the lack of attention this *exordium* receives from the commentators of *De bono coniugali*.⁴⁷ It is important to pay attention to this part because it is here where Augustine lays out his main argument and provides the context within which everything else he says in this treatise can be understood.⁴⁸

In fact, a closer reading of the *exordium* would reveal that Augustine begins by saying that marriage is first of all good because of the “friendly fellowship” (*societas amicalis*) that is formed between man and wife who form the primary bond of society (*connexio societatis*). With this, he provides the framework within which his further discussion of the various goods of marriage is placed,⁴⁹ i.e., first, marriage as *societas amicalis* should be open to procreation (*proles*), although it remains a good without it and sexual intercourse; secondly, marriage as *societas amicalis* must be faithful (*fides*); and lastly it should be permanent (*sacramentum*).

Marriage as loving friendship

Aware of such context, much attention should be placed now on this important aspect of marriage as *societas amicalis*. N. Cipriani observes that Augustine is basing his assertions on the two principles of anthropological order inherited from Augustine’s culture: on the one hand “man is a being with social nature” and on the other hand “has the innate sense of friendship.”⁵⁰ D. Burt would also remark that

⁴⁶ *De b. coniug.* I, 1 (CSEL 41, 187): «Every individual belongs to the human race and by virtue of his humanity he is a social being. In addition, he possesses the great and natural good of a capacity for friendship. It was with these purposes that God decided to create all humanity from one man, so that all would be kept in community with each other not only by similarity of species but also by the bond of kinship. Hence the first natural link in human society is that between man and wife. Even these God did not create as separate individuals and then unite them as strangers by birth, but he fashioned the wife from the husband, and signaled the strength of their union by the flank from which she was drawn and formed; for those who walk together, and together observe the direction which they are taking, are joined side by side in unity. The result is the bonding of society in its children. And this is the one honorable fruit (i.e., the children), not of the union of husband and wife, but of sexual intercourse; for even without such sexual association there could exist a true union of friendship (*coniunctio amicalis*) between the two sexes, with the one governing and the other obeying». (English texts, with some few modifications occasionally, by P.G. Walsh, ed., *Augustine: De bono coniugali, De sancta virginitate* (The Oxford Early Christian Texts), Oxford 2001, 2- 3).

⁴⁷ See Cipriani, 618; see also Trapè, 36, and A. Solignac, *La femme, la sexualité et le mariage dans le De Genesi*, in BA 49 (1972), 526, as cited in Cipriani, 618.

⁴⁸ Precisely this is what makes the *exordium* so important in a rhetorical apology.

⁴⁹ Cf. Hunter, *Augustinian Pessimism?*, 160-161: «The idea of *societas* – the mutual union, harmony, and companionship of the couple – animates Augustine’s discussion at every point» (160). Cf. Harrison, 95: «In respect of each of these goods in this treatise marriage is above all treated as a relationship which is founded upon, informed by and which finds its ideal realization in the friendship of the partners».

⁵⁰ Cipriani, 619.

at the foundation of Augustine's social philosophy rest two facts: first, that man is a *loving* being, with a capacity for and need to love; second, that man is a *social* being who needs interaction with others of his kind. We are made *perfect* as humans by our love for other humans. We are made happy when that love is returned. The primary expression of such reciprocal love is found in friendship.⁵¹

The motif of friendship (*amicitia*) occupied a privileged position in the philosophical writings of both Greek and Roman culture, a theme which St. Augustine embraced and developed also in his various writings.⁵² As C. Kannengiesser observes, «Augustine's personal ties with the culture to which he belonged should not be underestimated in evaluating his category of love».⁵³ Thus, in developing his theology of marriage, Augustine borrows the notions of classical friendship, taking into account the positive characteristics the philosophers accorded to this virtue, where love is the cause and which is altruistic.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, St. Augustine differs from the classical authors because Augustine's conception of friendship is inspired not just by his profound knowledge of the human heart but also, and especially, by the Scriptures. His point of view surpasses that of his pagan predecessors, for he sees every aspect of friendship in relation to God, who is its source. Thus, he elevates the notion of friendship to a level of eminent distinction: from *amicitia* to Christian *caritas*. Natural friendship with its intrinsic limitations is perfected by Christian charity. While *amicitia* is based on merit or a shared likeness with respect to virtue, *caritas* overrides this shared likeness or merit based friendship and extends even to enemies.⁵⁵ Unlike *amicitia* which tends to be confined to a few, *caritas* reaches out to many.⁵⁶

Simply put, when St. Augustine states that marriage is good because of friendly companionship between the spouses, he means to say that this friendship is founded on love. The essence of marriage is love. There is only one good of marriage, the loving friendship between the spouses, and this love can be expressed in three ways: through the generation of children (although it remains a good without it), through their fidelity to each other, and through the indissolubility of their love to each other. Thus, we have the three aspects, or rather, the threefold good of marital

⁵¹ D. Burt, *Friendship and Subordination in Earthly Societies*, in *AugStud* 22 (1991), 84-85.

⁵² St. Augustine treats the theme of friendship primarily in the *Confessions*, *City of God*, *Sermons*, *Letters* and the *Dialogues* at Cassiciacum, cf. M.A. McNamara, *Friendship in Saint Augustine*, Fribourg, 1958, viii; cf. J.F. Monagle, *Friendship in St. Augustine's Biography: Classical Notion of Friendship*, in *AugStud* 2 (1971), 82.

⁵³ C. Kannengiesser, *Augustine on Love: Response to Fr. Tarcisius van Bavel, the Double face of Love in Augustine*, in *AugStud* 17 (1986), 188.

⁵⁴ It is in Cicero that we find a synthesis of the classical views of his predecessors regarding friendship in his *De amicitia* and on which according to M.A. McNamara Augustine depended much (cf. McNamara, 225); cf. Cic., *De amicit.* V, 18; IX, 30; as cited in Monagle, 81.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Ep.* 130, 13 to Proba in c. 412 (CSEL 44, 55), as cited in M.A. McNamara, 194.

⁵⁶ Cf. *De ciu Dei* XIX, 8 (CSEL 40, 385); cf. *Conf.* VIII, 7, as cited in M.A. McNamara, 197.

love: *proles*, *fides* and *sacramentum*.⁵⁷ This threefold good Augustine seems to treat as something so interconnected and inseparable aspects of loving friendship.

Now, among the three, it is in the *bonum sacramenti* that love is explicitly connected and readily acknowledged. What makes marriage indissoluble is the fact that it is based on love of Christ for the Church. Following St. Paul, Augustine presents marriage as the sign of Christ's love of the spouses for each other.⁵⁸

Unlike the *bonum sacramenti*, the relation of love to the *bonum proles* and *bonum fidei* is not immediately recognized. This is due to the fact that, as we have seen, when Augustine presents these goods, his primary concern is to defend marriage against the Manichaeans and other heretical groups who downgrade the good of procreation.⁵⁹ At the same time, Augustine is also cautious to the excessive confidence of the Pelagians who exalt concupiscence, though he keeps on distinguishing 'good' concupiscence in the original state from that which is 'bad' after the fall.⁶⁰ This defensive stance, unfortunately, would tend to overshadow the more positive feature of Augustine's presentation of marriage, i.e., as loving companionship, which definitely merits greater attention from the part of the hearers/readers. E. Clark speculates on why Augustine did not develop this idea of companionate marriage and writes that «It is embedded in his thought... but is overshadowed by his emphasis upon the reproductive functions of marriage. His ambivalent conception of the essence of marriage can be traced primarily to the necessities of theological controversy, for it was in the midst of controversies that he formulated his marital ethic».⁶¹ But

⁵⁷ J.R. Connery writes that the three goods of marriage, which Augustine delineates, are all related to love (*The Role of Love in Christian Marriage: A Historical Overview*, in *Communio* 11/3 (1984), 247).

⁵⁸ Connery, 244-5.

⁵⁹ One can perceive here how Augustine effectively uses the rule of rhetoric. After laying out concisely his main argument in the *exordium* (chapter I), he proceeds to elaborate and prove it using the *partitio* (division) of *proles* (chapter II), *fides* (chapter IV), and *sacramentum* (chapter XV). Generally, it is *not* advisable to present arguments in *descending* order of strength, as it has a debilitating, anticlimactic effect. Thus, since the main issue is to defend marriage against those who denigrate it, Augustine starts with the strongest argument first, the good of procreation, followed by the good of fidelity and lastly the good of sacrament.

⁶⁰ Augustine admits that in Adam and Eve's first state, sexual desire was not absent, but it coincided perfectly with the conscious will: it would have introduced no disruptive element into the clear serenity of their marriage (P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York 1988, 402-3). In one text that probably dates to c. 420-421, the *Epistula* 6* (*Ep.* 6*, 5 (CSEL 88, 34), Augustine distinguishes between the concupiscence which is an inevitable result of the fall – *concupiscentia carnis* – and the concupiscence of marriage – *concupiscentia nuptiarum* – that would have existed in Paradise and which includes desire for conjugal chastity, the desire to have children, and desire for a common life (*concupiscentiam vinculi socialis*) (see Harrison, 97; V. Grossi, *Il contesto del De bono coniugali di S. Agostino a proposito della sessualità umana in alcuni movimenti cristiani del tardoantico*, in *RdT* 47 (2006), 887-9; P. Cahall, *Saint Augustine on Conjugal Love and Divine Love*, in *The Thomist* 68 (2004), 351-3)). Augustine does concede, in other places, that there may have been *libido* in Paradise, but of a different sort to what we now know (Cf. *Ep. Pel.* I, 34 (i.e., against the Pelagians, here, rather than the Manicheans) as cited in Harrison, 97).

⁶¹ Clark, 139.

this should not hinder us from seeing the real and complete Augustinian notion of marriage.

Aristotle's influence and the role of sexual intimacy in marriage

In a significant study on Augustine's view of marriage, N. Cipriani asserts that the language of Aristotle is scattered throughout the text of *De bono coniugali*. Besides the more evident inspiration of the scriptures and the commonly recognized influences of Manichaeism, Platonism, Neoplatonism and Stoicism, he proposes that Augustine's view of marriage is greatly influenced by Aristotle.⁶²

Through analysis of the texts of some of the works of Augustine (primarily the *De bono coniugali*) and Aristotle,⁶³ Cipriani points out that both our authors agree, first, in their idea concerning the social and friendly character of marriage.⁶⁴ Second, they also agree in their idea that the natural goal of conjugal union is the procreation of children.⁶⁵ Third, Augustine and Aristotle also coincide with their idea that the legitimate procreation of children is guaranteed in the fidelity of the spouses.⁶⁶ Thus, we see that both our authors see the social and procreative aspects of marriage as inclusive of one another, although, as Augustine observes many times, there can be marriages, which although deprived of children, remain perfectly united in love. It remains certain that for him, marriage, even though it may remain infertile due to physical reasons or voluntary or consented renunciation, is the unique natural place in which children can be generated in an orderly, honest, and legitimate manner.

But the harmony between the two authors does not end here. We move now to our final point: Augustine and Aristotle also agree in their moral evaluation of pleasure tied to the exercise of sexuality.⁶⁷ This is something of significance because among the classical authors, it was Aristotle who emphasizes more the particular intimacy or natural unity in friendship, while in the Stoic ethics it seems to be accorded

⁶² See Cipriani, 617-38.

⁶³ Especially Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. D. Ross, London 1963), *Politics* (trans. E. Barker, Oxford 1948), *Oeconomica* (trans. G.C. Armstrong, London-Cambridge 1962), *Magna Moralia* (trans. G.C. Armstrong, London-Cambridge 1962).

⁶⁴ For Aristotle, cf. *Eth. Nic.* IX, 9, 1169b; IX, 4, 1166a; VIII, 1, 1155a; IX, 11, 1171a; VIII, 12, 1162a; cf. *Pol.* I, II, 9, 1253a; *Pol.* I, II, 10, 1253a. For Augustine, cf. *De b. coniug.* I, 1 (CSEL 41, 187), 2-3; IX, 9 (CSEL 41, 200), 20-1; IX, 9 (CSEL 41, 200), 21.

⁶⁵ For Aristotle, cf. *Pol.* I, II, 2, 1252a, 10-33; *Econ.* I, III, 1, 1343b. For Augustine, cf. *De b. coniug.* XVIII, 22 (CSEL 41, 216), 42-3.

⁶⁶ For Aristotle, cf. *Pol.* II, III-IV; *Econ.* I, IV, 1, 1344a; III, II. For Augustine, cf. *De b. coniug.* XVII, 19 (CSEL 41, 212), 36-7; XXIV, 32 (CSEL 41, 226-7), 56-7; *De s. virg.* XII, 12 (CSEL 41, 244-5), 78-9; *C. Iul. O. imp.* V, 23 (PL 45, 1459); VI, 30 (PL 45, 1582); VI, 22 (PL 45, 1552).

⁶⁷ For Aristotle, cf. *Magna Mor.* II, 7, 1205b; *Eth. Nic.* III, 10, 1118a; III, 11, 1118b; III, 11, 1119a; VII, 14, 1154a. For Augustine, cf. *De ord.* II, XI, 32 (NBA 3, 329-331); *C. Iul.* IV, XIV, 67 (NBA 18, 740); *De b. coniug.* IX, 9 (CSEL 41, 200), 20-1; XI, 12 (CSEL 41, 203), 24-5; XVI, 18 (CSEL 41, 210), 34-5; also cf. *Contra Adimantum* XIV, 2 (NBA 13/2, 166) and *Contra Faustum* XXII, 29 (NBA 14/2, 510).

a secondary role.⁶⁸ Unlike Plato and the Stoics who do not see a positive value in bodily pleasure and whose ideal is not the moderation, but rather the suppression of its desire, Aristotle sees a positive value on moderate, bodily pleasure.⁶⁹

This is clear in a passage of *De bono coniugali* where St. Augustine distinguishes the goods in two categories: the goods which are desirable for themselves (*expetenda propter se ipsa*), such as wisdom, physical health and friendship, and those desirable because they are necessary for attaining other goods (*propter aliquid necessaria*), such as doctrine, food, drinks, sleep, marriage, and sexual intercourse. It is opportune to note how both marriage (*nuptiae*) and conjugal act (*concubitus*) are considered necessary goods in view of friendship (*quaedam propter amicitiam, sicut nuptiae vel concubitus*) «for the propagation of the human race depends on this last, and the alliance of friendship within it is a great good.»⁷⁰

Such Aristotelian influence to Augustine is vital for it significantly accentuates in the Augustinian notion of marriage the intimate character of natural, loving friendship. It sheds clear light on the value of sexual intercourse with its attendant pleasure as corresponding not only to the *bonum prolis* but rather as an expression also of conjugal love to be enjoyed by the spouses apart from procreation. By this, sexual intimacy also corresponds to the *bonum fidei* not merely as a remedy to carnal concupiscence (*remedium concupiscentiae*),⁷¹ enabling both spouses to avoid illicit sexual intercourse, but rather as a *positive* duty of one spouse to meet the sexual needs of the other as expression of their love.⁷² True, Augustine says that to have sex for

⁶⁸ The Stoics on the whole seem to be more concerned with the nature of virtue or the nature of society rather than with the relationship between a few individuals – cf. C. White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*, Cambridge 1992, 29; E. Cassidy, “The Recovery of the Classical Ideal of Friendship in Augustine’s Portrayal of Caritas,” in *The Relationship Between Neoplatonism and Christianity*, ed. T. Finan and V. Twomey, Dublin 1992, 135-6.

⁶⁹ Cf. Cipriani, 632.

⁷⁰ *De b. coniug.* IX, 9 (CSEL 41, 200), 20-1.

⁷¹ Carnal concupiscence (concupiscence of the flesh, desire of the flesh, *libido*) is the tendency of all our sensitive appetites, including sexual desire, to escape the control of reason after our fallen state (cf. C. Iul. IV, 14, 74, as cited in Cahall, *Saint Augustine on Conjugal love*, 348). This carnal concupiscence is but one of many *libidines* that scourge the human heart as a result of Adam’s sin: anger, greed, obstinacy, vanity, and many others, above all, the lust for domination (cf. *De ciu. Dei* XIV, 15 (CSEL 40/2, 34), as cited in Hunter, *Augustinian Pessimism?*, 170).

⁷² In his disputes with the Pelagian Julian of Eclanum, Augustine took great pains to distinguish between carnal concupiscence that consists of a disordered desire for any sensual pleasure (including sexual lust) and sexuality as such with its attendant pleasure. Thus, he makes it clear that what he regards as the disorder of concupiscence is not synonymous with sexual *pleasure*. On the other hand, Julian of Eclanum tended to equate carnal concupiscence, sexual lust, and sensual pleasure, and therefore he refused to admit that carnal concupiscence and sexual lust were results of the fall (Cahall, *Saint Augustine on Conjugal Love*, 349). C. Burke notes that «this point needs to be specially stressed since, given the vigor with which St. Augustine criticizes the yielding to concupiscence, a superficial reader might easily be led to conclude that he is criticizing the actual seeking of pleasure itself in marital intercourse» (*St. Augustine and Conjugal Sexuality*, in *Communio* 17 (1994), 330). Augustine’s idea that sexual desire is inevitably caught up in the “concupiscence of the flesh” is precisely the point that

the sake of pleasure without directly intending procreation bears a “forgivable fault” (*venialis culpa*),⁷³ but what Augustine meant by this is more correctly understood today as a “moral imperfection” than as a formal sin,⁷⁴ which is almost reduced to triviality, taking it for granted as a normal feature of post-lapsarian life.⁷⁵

Finally, it should also be kept in mind that in the enjoyment of the sexual loving intimacy, both Augustine and Aristotle point out that spouses must see to it that the *natural use* of intercourse should not be exceeded or thwarted.⁷⁶ This will then be the violation of contraception, which we shall discuss in the next section.

Contraception in St. Augustine

Having clarified and justified Augustine’s view of marriage and his positive appraisal on the role of sexual intimacy as expression of conjugal love, we can now confidently proceed to interpret Augustine’s teaching on contraception. Augustine deals with the issue of contraception first in his clash with the Manicheans, whose hostility to marriage was an important incentive to him to write about marriage himself and induced him to become a passionate defender of the goodness of marriage and of procreation.⁷⁷ But his treatment with contraception is not limited only in the context of the Manichean polemic, for he deals with it also in his other works related to marriage.

In the works directly anti-Manichaeon

The Manichean deprecation of reproduction stemmed from their foundation myth: at the world’s origin, the power of Light had been defeated by Darkness and entrapped in matter. Reproduction served only to dissipate particles of light further among matter and thus impede its collection and restoration to its heavenly home. Contraceptive measures were required among the lower ranks to prevent further entrapment of light in new bodies. Deliberately detaching sex from procreation, the Manichean ethic was thus pro-contraceptive and anti-reproductive.⁷⁸

his critics (ancient and modern) seize upon as evidence of his pessimistic and Manichaeon tendencies (Hunter, *Augustinian Pessimism?*, 161).

⁷³ *De b. coniug.* (VI, 6 (CSEL 41, 195).

⁷⁴ Cf. Trapè, 44-5; D. Covi, *El fin de la actividad sexual según San Agustín*, in *Agustinus* 17 (1972), 60-4; J. Hugo, *St. Augustine on Nature, Sex, and Marriage*, Princeton, NJ (repr.), 127-130; Regan, 363-64, he writes: «At a time when the theology of venial sin and imperfection had not been worked out, St. Augustine did not have the terminological precision to express his thought with all exactness»; Hunter, *Augustine, Sermon 354A*, 45-7.

⁷⁵ Sermon 354A.12: “Sermons inédits III.” 281: *Vingt-six sermons*. 83, as cited in Hunter, *Augustine, Sermon 354A*, 46.

⁷⁶ Cf. *C. Iul.* IV, XIV, 67 (NBA 18, 740); *De b. coniug.* IX, 9 (CSEL 41, 200), 20-1; XI, 12 (CSEL 41, 203), 24-5; XVI, 18 (CSEL 41, 210), 34-5. For Aristotle, cf. *Eth. Nic.* VII, 14, 1154a.

⁷⁷ See J. Rist, *Saint Augustine: Virginity and Marriage* 3, in *Canadian Catholic Review* (February 1987), 60-1.

⁷⁸ Cf. for example, *De haer.* XLVI, 14 (CCL 46, 317.146-150); Clark, 147.

Augustine inverted the Manichaean evaluation to champion a pro-reproductive and anti-contraceptive ethic,⁷⁹ commencing with his earliest anti-Manichaean work, *De moribus Manichaeorum* (387/389). Here we find his first statement against the Manichaean contraceptive mindset. Since this passage comprises his most succinct statement, it deserves to be quoted in full:

After all, you actually forbid not intercourse but marriage in the proper sense, as the apostle foretold long before, though marriage is the one moral defense of the act. Here I have no doubt you will cry out and stir up hatred by saying that you strongly recommend and praise perfect chastity yet do not forbid marriage, since your Hearers, who hold the second level of membership among you, are not forbidden to take and have wives [...]. Are you not the people who think that the begetting of children, which souls are bound in the flesh, is a more serious sin than intercourse? Are you not the people who are accustomed to admonish us to observe, as much as we can, the time at which a woman is ready for conception after her menstrual period and to abstain from intercourse at that time so that a soul does not become entangled in flesh? From this it follows that you think that taking a wife is not for the sake of procreating children but for the sake of satisfying lust. But marriage, as the very laws of marriage cry out, unite [sic] a man and a woman for the sake of procreating children. Whoever, then, says that to beget children is a more serious sin than to have intercourse certainly forbids marriage and makes the woman no longer a wife but a prostitute.⁸⁰

To remark on this passage is to comment on Augustine's complete strategy on this issue, for it assembles all of the essential arguments Augustine will ever use against contraception in his anti-Manichaean writings. They are the following:⁸¹

- 1) The dubious claim of Manichean to praise chastity and tolerate marriage.
- 2) The reality, which is that they oppose marriage rather than sex.
- 3) Manichean opposition to conception, because it entraps the divine substance.
- 4) The consequent encouragement of contraceptive acts (among Hearers).
- 5) The directive of 'the apostle' (that is, the author of *1 Timothy* 4:3, the probable reference here) as foretelling Manichaeism when speaking of those who 'prohibit marriage.'
- 6) Permission for Manichean Hearers to marry while avoiding conception.
- 7) The assertion that in Manichaeism marriage exists to satisfy lust, not to procreate.
- 8) Marriage as the only permissible context for marital intercourse.

⁷⁹ Clark, 147.

⁸⁰ *De mor. Manich.* XVIII, 65 (CSEL 90, 146-7), trans. Teske, *The Manichean Debate, The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century* I/19, Hyde Park, New York 2006, 98.

⁸¹ J.K. Coyle, *Augustine on Manichaeism and Contraception*, in *Manichaeism and Its Legacy*, NHMS 69 (2009), 286.

- 9) The begetting of offspring as the true purpose of marriage,
- 10) as the marriage affidavit itself states.
- 11) The claim that, in the end, Manicheans turn their wives into prostitutes.

These same eleven points appear in various combinations in Augustine's confrontation with the Manichaean contraceptive mentality in his other works: *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* (398/400),⁸² *Contra Secundinum Manichaeum* (404)⁸³ and *De haeresibus* (428/429).⁸⁴

Manichean advice on contraceptive technique was apparently limited to telling Hearers to avoid sex during the woman's fertile period as seen in the text above of *De moribus Manichaeorum*.⁸⁵ But, perhaps *coitus interruptus* was also employed if the phrase "pouring out" in a "shameful slip" in *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*⁸⁶ be taken to mean it. This is most likely because the primitive form of the rhythm method as determined by the Greek medicine is in fact not reliable.⁸⁷ Anyhow, our point here is to clarify that in the said passage, Augustine condemns the Manichaeans for seeking to avoid children by availing themselves of supposedly infertile times, but the point of his disapproval was that they regarded procreation as evil.⁸⁸ Furthermore, it is worth noting that for the Manichaeans abortion was out of question since although the Manichaean hearers take steps to ensure that their women do not conceive,⁸⁹ if despite those efforts conception occurs, the resulting offspring are to be accepted only grudgingly.⁹⁰

Another important point of Augustine is his argument from the "eternal law," perhaps the best known discussion of law,⁹¹ which he advances in *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*: «eternal law is the divine reason and the will of God which commands the maintenance of the natural order of things and which forbids the disturbance of

⁸² All the points raised in *De moribus Manichaeorum* resurface, although in scattered fashion, here: 1) VI, 8 (CSEL 25/1, 299); XXII, 50 (p. 644); XXX, 6 (pp. 754-5); 2) XXX, 6 (p. 754); 3) XXX, 6 (p. 755); 4) XV, 7 (p. 429); 5) XXX, 5 (p. 753) and 6 (p. 755); 6) VI, 8 (p. 298); XV, 7 (429); XXII, 30 (p. 624); XXIII, 10 (p. 716); 7) XV, 7 (pp. 429-430); XXII, 30 (p. 624); 8) XV, 7 (p. 430); XXII, 30 (p. 624) and 61 (p. 656); 9) XV, 7 (p. 429); XX, 6 (p. 755); 10) XV, 7 (p. 429); XXX, 6 (p. 755); 11) XV, 7 (pp. 429-430); XXII, 61 (p. 656).

⁸³ C. Sec. 21-22 (CSEL 25/2, 938-40). Only six points are mentioned here: 2, 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11.

⁸⁴ *De haer.* 46, 13 (CCL 46, 317). Only four of the original points are preserved: 2, 3, 6 and 9.

⁸⁵ Similar advice is recalled — though never so explicit — in *C. Faust.* XV, 7 (CSEL 25/1, 429), XXII, 30 (p. 624), and XXX, 6 (p. 755), and in *De haer.* 46, 13 (CCL 46, 317).

⁸⁶ So Noonan infers from *C. Faust.* XXII, 30 (CSEL 25/1, 624); see Noonan, 121.

⁸⁷ Cf. M.R. Miles, *Not Nameless but Unnamed: The Woman Torn from Augustine's side*, in *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, ed. J.C. Stark, Pennsylvania 2007, 188. Miles writes, «perhaps this ancient teaching that a woman's most likely time to conceive is immediately after her menstrual period is the origin of the old joke "What do they call people who use the rhythm method? Parents!"».

⁸⁸ Cf. Trapè, 45-6; A. Regan, *The Perennial Values of Augustine's Theology of the Goods of Marriage*, in *Studia Moralia* 21 (1983), 365.

⁸⁹ *C. Faust.* XXII, 30 (CSEL 25/1, 624).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, XV, 7 (p. 429-30).

⁹¹ R.J. Dougherty, *Natural Law*, in *Augustine through the Ages, An Encyclopedia*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, Cambridge 1999, 583.

it».⁹² It is God's will to maintain the natural order; here it appears as if eternal law encompasses what comes to be called divine law and natural law, which are one and the same thing,⁹³ and that law decrees that marriage's true purpose is the propagation of the human race.⁹⁴ We shall go back to this later to explain further its full meaning.

In other works

Augustine's discussion on contraception is not limited solely in the context of the Manichaean polemic. In *De coniugiis adulterinis* (419/420) Augustine responds to questions proposed to him concerning remarriage, upholding the position that no remarriage was possible even for the purpose of procreating children, remarking,

Because in this time of refraining from all embrace there is no need to have children and propagate.

Yet he does not wish to be misunderstood: once married, one may not avoid children:

When the conception of offspring is precluded, it is wrong and shameful even to sleep with one's lawful wife. Onan the son of Judah did this, and God killed him for it. Propagation of children, therefore, is in fact the primary, natural and legitimate purpose of marriage. For this reason those who marry because of their inability to be celibate ought not to remedy their own defect in this way while at the same time eliminating the thing that makes marriage good, namely the propagation of children.⁹⁵

This passage is a fundamental text for it is one of two passages in Augustine on contraception where the explicit context does not restrict the denunciation to the Manichaeans. This would clarify the real intention of Augustine: his preoccupation to champion a pro-reproductive and anti-contraceptive ethic was not solely out of his polemic with the Manichaeans. Furthermore, Augustine's reference to the scriptural story here is the first use of the fate of Onan by a prominent theologian as an argument against contraception. It is an exegesis of considerable, although not controlling, authority for later writers.⁹⁶

⁹² *C. Faust.* XXII, 27 (CSEL 25/1, 621); see also 28 (p. 622).

⁹³ Augustine says the natural law is the imprint of the "lex aeterna" on our soul (*De divv.* 83 qq., 53, 2).

⁹⁴ *C. Faust.* XXII, 61 (CSEL 25/1, 656). This should also be read together with the discussion of natural use of sex in *De b. coniug.* IX, 9 (CSEL 41, 200), 20-1; XI, 12 (CSEL 41, 203), 24-5; XVI, 18 (CSEL 41, 210), 34-5.

⁹⁵ *De con. adult.* II, 12. 12 (CSEL 41, 396).

⁹⁶ A.-M. Dubarle ("La bible et les Pères ont-ils parlé de la contraception?," in *Le supplément* 15 (1962): 605, n. 71) suggests that early Christian writers generally recognized the Onan story as primarily an account of the violation of fraternal obligation rather than an object-lesson of deviation of the purpose of sexual intercourse (as cited in Coyle, 290). Trapè disagrees to this and believes that Onan's case is an example of argument against contraception (pp. 40-3).

However, a more important and clearer passage which deals specifically with Augustine's teaching on contraception is from *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* (419/420), written in defense against the Pelagian Julian of Eclanum and his accusation that Augustine condemned marriage as the work of the devil. It reads:

It is, nonetheless, one thing to have intercourse only out of the desire to have children; that involves no sin. It is something else to seek the pleasure of the flesh by having intercourse – though not with someone other than one's spouse; that involves a pardonable sin. For, even though one does not have intercourse for the sake of having children, one does not, nonetheless, prevent the procreation of a child for the sake of this sexual passion, either by an evil intention or by an evil act. Though they are called husband and wife, those who do this are not truly husband and wife, and they do not preserve any of the reality of marriage. Rather, they merely use the good name of marriage to cover over their shamefulfulness. They are, however, revealed for what they are when they go to the point of exposing the unwanted children who are born to them. They were not, after all, willing to rear and to have with them the children they did not want to bear. And so, when their dark savagery is turned against their own unwanted children to which they gave birth, it is brought to light in its obvious wickedness, and their hidden shamefulfulness is revealed by its manifest cruelty. At times this lust-filled cruelty or cruel lust goes so far that it even procures drugs to cause sterility, and if they are not effective, it somehow extinguishes and destroys within the womb the fetus already conceived, desiring that its own offspring perish before it begins to live. Or, if it was living in the womb, it desires that it be killed before it is born. Certainly, if both of them are such people, they are not husband and wife, and if they were such from the beginning, they did not come together in marriage, but rather in debauchery. But if both of them are not such people, I venture to say: either she is in some sense the prostitute of her husband, or he is an adulterer toward his wife.⁹⁷

Just like the passage in *De coniugiis adulterinis*, this discussion on contraception is outside the context of Manichaeic polemic. Of course, one may assume that the people in Augustine's mind here were the Manicheans.⁹⁸ His effort in *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* to disassociate his doctrine from Manichaeism would make this reading plausible.⁹⁹ Only that nowhere else were the Manichaeans charged with using sterility causing drugs! As mentioned, the only contraceptive drugs ascribed to the Manichaeans were the rhythm method and the *coitus interruptus*. Furthermore, we have seen that for the Manicheans abortion is out of question.

Hence, it would be fair enough to infer that St. Augustine is meant to condemn here not only the Manichaeans and their contraceptive practice but also each and every act of marital contraception in general. Discussing contraception

⁹⁷ *De nupt. et conc.* I, 15. 17 (CSEL 42, 229-30).

⁹⁸ So as Noonan hypothesizes (p. 137).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

in a broader context not limited to the Manichaean polemic, Augustine here is able to elaborate further and, hence, clarify his teaching on contraception. Formally, unequivocally, passionately, Augustine here condemned contraception practiced by the married: the deliberate preventing of offspring by means of evil intention (*voto malo*) or evil act (*opere malo*), i.e., drugs of sterility (*sterilitatis venena*)¹⁰⁰ (in addition to *coitus interruptus* and other *usus contra naturam* mentioned in *De bono coniugali*¹⁰¹ and *Contra Faustum*¹⁰², e.g., anal and perhaps oral sex¹⁰³). As to preventing offspring *voto malo*, it means the will of not having offspring despite having intercourse. This is not equivalent to or cannot mean:¹⁰⁴

- a) Having intercourse when one knows that offspring cannot be had, as in the case of sterile or old spouses. Augustine's respect to the role of sexual intimacy in the loving friendship between spouses and the good of fidelity assures on this.
- b) Having conjugal intercourse *satiandae libidinis causa*, i.e., without directly intending to conceive a child, which bears a *venialis culpa*. We have argued that this is more correctly understood today as a "moral imperfection" than as a formal sin, which is almost reduced to triviality, taking it for granted as a normal feature of post-lapsarian life.
- c) Then, with these two, we can go further to reasonably infer that the *votum malum* or the will of not having offspring cannot be confused with having conjugal intercourse during infertile times, when this is done to assure, in the scope of conjugal fidelity, responsible parenthood.

Contraception: a violation against conjugal love!

Yet an important question remains: aside from the repugnance to the good of procreation, which was clearly seen among the Manicheans but which cannot be said among the married in general who might practice contraception not out of repugnance to procreation but just for the purpose of limiting children, what *else* pushed Augustine to defend passionately the reproductive aspect of marriage in every intercourse? Our passage just cited above has also a revealing answer to this.

A closer look on this passage shows that Augustine here is alluding to the important principle of the distinction of the goods *expetenda propter se ipsa* and

¹⁰⁰ In fact, this provided later canon law with its term for contraceptives, "poisons of sterility." Under the heading *Aliquando*, it was to become the medieval *locus classicus* on contraception (Noonan, 136).

¹⁰¹ *De. b. coniug.* XI (CSEL 41, 203).

¹⁰² *C. Faust.* (CSEL 25/1, 624).

¹⁰³ Cf. B. Brooten, *Nature, Law, and Custom in Augustine's On the Good of Marriage*, in *Walks in the Ways of Wisdom. Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. S. Matthews, C. Briggs Kittredge and M. Johnson-Debaufre, Harrisburg, PA 2003, 187; see also Rist, 63.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Trapè, 45-6.

propter aliquid necessaria in *De bono coniugali* that we have discussed above. We have seen how the conjugal act is considered necessary good in view of marital loving friendship even apart from procreation *provided* the natural use of intercourse is not exceeded or thwarted. What is remarkable in this passage is that we see Augustine specifically applying the moral application of this principle to his teaching on contraception. Contraception as the deliberate elimination of procreation from the conjugal act by means of evil intention or evil act is a disruption of the natural use of conjugal act. And for Augustine, this is tantamount to letting lust dominate. This is not love anymore.

Here we see that Augustine's treatment of eternal or natural law on contraception should be read in the context of this conjugal love. There is the tendency to interpret this argument in a rather superficial way, i.e., that the sexual act is naturally designed for procreation, and it is wrong to frustrate this design because it is wrong to interfere with man's natural functions. As a result, many are not altogether convinced by this argument since after all we do interfere with other natural functions, for instance when we use earplugs or hold our nose, etc., and no one has ever argued that to do so is morally wrong. Why then should it be wrong to interfere for good reasons with the procreational aspect of marital intercourse?¹⁰⁵

But in arguing that contraception goes against nature, what Augustine intends is more than this superficial interpretation. He means something deeper that touches our being, namely, to go against nature is to damage oneself, for nature is one's very being.¹⁰⁶ To disrupt the "eternal reason" that guides the natural cosmic order is to bring damage to our beings. To upset the "personal creator's will and wisdom" as the source of the "eternal cosmic law" is to rupture our relationship with the personal God. In contraception, the natural intent of sexual intercourse is disrupted by the predominance of lust. This is not love anymore; this is disordered love, where immoderate and intemperate excess dominates.¹⁰⁷

Therefore, the reason for St. Augustine's committed defense for a pro-reproductive and anti-contraceptive marital ethic: contraception is an exclusion of conjugal love;¹⁰⁸ it not only separates sex from procreation, it also separates sex from

¹⁰⁵ The defenders of contraception in any case, dismiss this traditional argument as mere "biologism"; as an understanding of the marital act that fails to go beyond its biological function or possible biological consequences, and ignores its spiritual function, i.e., its function in signifying and effecting the union of the spouses (cf. C. Burke, *Married Love and Contraception*, in *Osservatore Romano* (English Ed.), Oct. 10, 1988. No pages. Online: <http://www.cormacburke.or.ke>).

¹⁰⁶ Cf. A. de Mello, *The Way to Love: The Last Meditations of Anthony de Mello*, ed. F. Stroud, New York 1992, 76.

¹⁰⁷ See Cahall, *Saint Augustine on Conjugal love*, 354; Burke, *St. Augustine*, 561.

¹⁰⁸ See Hugo, 136.

love.¹⁰⁹ Contraceptive marital intercourse contradicts the *truth* of conjugal love,¹¹⁰ and is therefore a sign of domination of carnal concupiscence.¹¹¹ It is no longer a total giving of spouses to each other;¹¹² in contraception spouses are in danger of taking rather than of giving, and of so losing the sense of mutual donation.¹¹³ In contraception one destroys its essential power to signify union.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

To conclude, it is important to bear in mind that Augustine, in enumerating his goods of marriage (*bona nuptialia*), has a tendency to unify them as three inseparable aspects of marriage whose essence is the good of loving friendship. These threefold good, although distinct from one another, are inseparable and inclusive of one another, that if one of these elements is deliberately removed, then love in marriage no longer exists. That happens in the problem of contraception, in which the procreative aspect is separated from the unitive aspect of marital act. The primary concern of St. Augustine, the Doctor of Charity, is to protect and maintain the love in marriage. As bishop and pastor, Augustine is concerned that the dignity of married life be understood, so that his flock might live accordingly. Everything is to be brought back to his beloved *ordo amoris*.¹¹⁵ ■

Abbreviations

<i>AugStud</i>	Augustinian Studies (Villanova, PA)
<i>Barn.</i>	_____, <i>S. Barnabas Apostolus</i>
<i>C. Faust.</i>	Augustine, <i>Contra Faustum Manichaeum</i>
<i>C. Iul. o. imp.</i>	Augustine, <i>Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum</i>
<i>C. Iul.</i>	Augustine, <i>Contra Iulianum</i>
<i>C. Sec.</i>	Augustine, <i>Contra Secundinum Manichaeum</i>
<i>CCL</i>	Corpus Christianorum seu nova Patrum collectio Series Latina (Tournhout-Paris)
<i>CSEL</i>	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna)
<i>De b. coniug.</i>	Augustine, <i>De bono coniugali</i>
<i>De civ. Dei</i>	Augustine, <i>De civitate Dei</i>
<i>De con. adult.</i>	Augustine, <i>De coniugiis adulterinis</i>

¹⁰⁹ Pope John Paul II, Address, September 17, 1983: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2 (1983), 563.

¹¹⁰ Burke, *Married Love and Contraception*, <http://www.cormacburke.or.ke>.

¹¹¹ Burke, *St. Augustine*, 561.

¹¹² Burke, *Married Love and Contraception*, <http://www.cormacburke.or.ke>.

¹¹³ Burke, *St. Augustine*, 564.

¹¹⁴ Burke, *Married Love and Contraception*, <http://www.cormacburke.or.ke>.

¹¹⁵ Regan, 365.

<i>Did.</i>	<i>Didache</i>
<i>haer.</i>	Augustine, <i>De haeresibus ad Quodvultdeum</i>
<i>De mor Manich.</i>	Augustine, <i>De moribus Manichaeorum</i>
<i>De mor. Eccl. cath.</i>	Augustine, <i>De moribus Ecclesiae catholicae</i>
<i>De nupt. et conc.</i>	Augustine, <i>De nuptiis et concupiscentia</i>
<i>De ord.</i>	Augustine, <i>De ordine</i>
<i>De s. virg.</i>	Augustine, <i>De sancta virginitate</i>
<i>Econ.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Economics</i>
<i>Ep. 130</i>	Augustine, <i>Epistula 130</i>
<i>Ep. 6*</i>	Augustine, <i>Epistula 6*</i>
<i>Eth. Nic.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
<i>GCS</i>	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte (Leipzig)
<i>Haer.</i>	Hippolytus of Rome, <i>Refutatio omnium Haeresium</i>
<i>Inst. orat.</i>	Quintilian, <i>Institutio oratoria</i>
<i>Inst.</i>	Lactantius, <i>Divinae Institutiones</i>
<i>Magna Mor.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Magna Moralia</i>
<i>NBA</i>	Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana (Roma 1965ss)
<i>NHMS</i>	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies (Leiden – New York – Köln)
<i>Oct.</i>	Minucius Felix, <i>Octavius</i>
<i>Pan.</i>	Epiphanius, <i>Panarion</i>
<i>PG</i>	Patrologia Graeca, J.-P. Migne (Paris)
<i>PL</i>	Patrologia Latina, J.-P. Migne (Paris)
<i>Pol.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Politics</i>
<i>RdT</i>	Rassegna di Teologia (Napoli)
<i>RechAug</i>	Recherches Augustiniennes (Paris)
<i>Retract.</i>	Augustine, <i>Retractationes</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Rhetorica</i>
<i>SCh</i>	Sources Chrétiennes (Paris)
<i>SEA</i>	Studia Ephemeridis “Augustinianum” (Roma)
<i>Top.</i>	Cicero, <i>Topica</i>



Fr. Berman D. Ibañez is a priest of the Archdiocese of Capiz. He holds two Licentiate Degrees, one in Theology (S.Th.L.) from the University of Santo Tomas and another in Theology and Patristic Sciences (L.Th.Sc.Pat.) from the Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum in Rome. He can be contacted at bherms08@yahoo.com.