

Contraception: The Bitter Pill

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Each month, to test our courage, my wife Lisa and I stand before an auditorium full of couples about to marry in the Catholic Church and explain to them the Church's teachings about sexuality. The crowd is generally not happy to be there. Many are not Catholic and few, needless to say, want to hear what the Church has to say about sex and contraception. They've heard it already on the afternoon talk shows from renegade nuns. This is, moreover, the upper east side of Manhattan, a tough market for *Humanae Vitae*.

We tell our restive audience that what they are about to hear is counter-cultural. We try to pique their curiosity: What arguments can there possibly be against using the pill? Proof texts are lacking in Scripture and we wouldn't use them anyway. The last thing you do with a crowd of post-baby boom Catholics is argue from the top down. What we have to do is persuade them that getting rid of their pills and diaphragms will actually make them happier. Then, gently, we can slip in a few natural law arguments about sex and babies.

The challenge is to put the cultural coordinates back to where they were seventy years ago. Until 1930, not only did every Christian denomination teach that contraception is wrong, but even the mainstream of media and politics did not approve of it. The ubiquitous state laws against selling birth control devices were the work of Protestant, not Catholic, legislatures. When, at the Lambeth Conference in 1930, the Anglican Church became the first Christian body to change its mind about contraception, the *Washington Post* was as indignant as Pope Pius XI. It seemed self-evident to at least a plurality of Christians that the deliberate obstruction of the life-making potential of sex is a gravely disordered act.

Disrupting Marriage

The use of contraceptives did not really take off until the advent of the pill in the early '60s. At the time, the pill was heralded as a great boon to married couples because it would remove from sex the fear of pregnancy. The divorce rate in America was 25 percent. It proceeded to double quite rapidly. While there were a number of reasons for this general breakdown of marriage, the pill certainly contributed. One obvious reason is that it makes infidelity easier by taking babies out of the picture. It also turns premarital sex into a recreation like tennis or bungee jumping, so that many enter marriage with a consumerist attitude toward sex that is easily bored and dissatisfied.

But there are more profound reasons why the pill is so disruptive to marital happiness. It has to do with the nature of sexuality itself. Sex, we tell our audience, is a mystery that can never be reduced to mere biology. It has a meaning far beyond the physical act of love. In *The Graduate* when Mr. Robinson confronts young Benjamin Braddock about his adultery with Mrs. Robinson, Benjamin defends himself by saying that it was no big deal: "Mrs. Robinson and I might just as well have been shaking hands." Mr. Robinson gets even more upset, and rightly so; because behind Benjamin's statement is a gnostic separation of spirit and flesh, of heart and body, which even the dimmest of cuckolds can sense is utterly wrong.

Our culture has been able to turn sex into a casual activity because it has separated personhood from the human body. Most people have the idea that their real self is somewhere inside the proverbial ghost in the machine and that what they do with their bodies doesn't make much difference. But this has never been the view of the Church, which teaches that the body is not a mere appendage, but is as much a part of us as our soul. After all, we don't say in the Nicene Creed that we believe in the immortality of the soul, but in the resurrection of the body. In a very significant way, we are what we do with our bodies.

The Old Testament uses a very interesting verb for sex: to "know." One of the things we surrender in the act of love is knowledge about ourselves that only our spouse should have. Nobody has written about these aspects of

sex more profoundly than John Paul II in *Love and Responsibility* (1959). In that book, the future philosopher-pope argues further that each person is an irreducible subject "a person, not a thing," who ought never to be used as an object. As we know, sex is an appetite which has a tendency to do just that: to treat persons as objects. A couple can easily slip into treating one another as objects, as things to be used in bed, rather than as persons giving and receiving the spousal gift of love. And this may be why so many couples are bored by modern sex: You can tire of an object, while you can never tire of a person.

There is also the matter of babies. God's first command to humanity was to be fruitful and multiply. For those made uncomfortable by divine injunctions, the most elementary biology textbook will explain that sex is for making babies. And since sex is such a deep part our identity, it may be that when you sterilize the baby-making potential of sex, you are doing damage to yourself.

Artificial contraception is wrong because it violates the gift of self that ought to be at the center of every act of physical love. When you take the pill or use a foam, diaphragm, condom, or whatever, you are, in effect, saying to your spouse, "In this, the most intimate act of our marriage, I am going to give myself to you, but only up to a point." Or, conversely, you are saying, "I want you in this act to make a total gift to me of yourself, except that part of you which so deeply defines you as a sexual being, your fertility."

The body has its own deep language, and when we add chemicals or latex to the act of love, when we deliberately destroy its potential for making new life, we falsify the nuptial meaning of its actions. We hold back the full gift of self which during the wife's fertile period must include an openness to new life.

A couple who use artificial birth control are not only falsifying the meaning of sex, they are also behaving immaturely: trying to extract gratification from an act while getting rid of its natural consequences. It is not unlike certain eating disorders.

Chesterton put it well when he said that birth control "is a name given to a succession of different expedients by which it is possible to filch the pleasure belonging to a natural process while violently and unnaturally thwarting the process itself."

Child Spacing and NFP

At this point, an obvious objection appears on the faces in our audience. Is the Church telling us that we have to have one baby after another? What about my career? And my health? But the Church recognizes that there are legitimate reasons for spacing children. All that is asked is that a couple be generous and not put selfish motives first. And besides, the best thing you can do for a child is to provide siblings. It is, paradoxically, more difficult to do a good job bringing up one or two children than three or four.

If the arrival of children needs to be spaced (a job once done quite effectively by full-time breast-feeding), there is a morally acceptable way of doing it: Natural Family Planning. NFP is one of the best-kept secrets in the Catholic Church (and the medical profession), and most of our pre-cana audience is no doubt hearing about it for the first time.

The general ignorance surrounding NFP is a real tragedy, because couples who use it almost universally report what a boon it is to their marriage. NFP is not "Catholic birth control." Nor is it the calendar rhythm method, which has a 15 percent failure rate and went out the window decades ago. It is a method whereby both partners exercise restraint during the wife's fertile period, which is determined by a few simple symptoms. Used correctly, it is more effective than the pill. And it ought to be noted that the more effective an artificial contraceptive is, the more potentially harmful side-effects there are for the wife.

An obvious question occurs to our audience, one that is a stumbling block for any number of otherwise clever theologians: Since artificial contraception and Natural Family Planning have the same goal -- to postpone the

arrival of a child -- what is the moral difference between them? Why should a little piece of plastic or a small dose of hormones be such a big deal?

But NFP and artificial contraception do not, strictly speaking, have the same goal, since NFP is used by couples to help conceive as well as to space children, while artificial contraception is used only to block conception. (A dividend of the sexual revolution is that one in six couples now have trouble conceiving, which gives NFP additional marketing appeal.) And even when the goal is the same -- the postponement of a child -- everyone would agree that the means used to achieve a goal can be either good or bad. For example, if you need a hundred dollars, you can either rob a bank or earn the money.

When it comes to spacing children, there is all the difference in the world between sex that is nonprocreative, because it takes place during the infertile part of the wife's cycle, and sex that is antiprocreative. The couple using NFP is accepting their fertility as it is: a great good, but a good which they are not going to use at this time. The husband respects his wife's cycle and does not try to manipulate it.

But a couple on artificial birth control is treating their fertility as though there were something wrong with it, something that has to be gotten rid of by medication or barrier. (The latter is a revealing term: "I want to make love to you, I want to give myself to you, but first let me put in my barrier.") A pill is what you take when you have an illness: couples who use contraceptives are treating their fertility, whose depth and mystery they ought to revere, as a defect in need of a technological fix.

The Fork in the Road

The Church does not teach that an act is evil because it makes people unhappy, but it does affirm that evil acts will inevitably have that result. Women who use contraceptives often complain that they feel like they are being used as objects and that their sex life is flat. Couples who use NFP never seem to have this problem. In the latter case, the wife, whose sensitivity in this area is usually keener, has the assurance that her husband loves her enough to practice self-control. And besides, abstinence is the best of aphrodisiacs. There is nothing like periodic continence to keep one's sex life interesting. It's like going on a honeymoon twice a month. A Jewish rabbi once told *New York* magazine that orthodox Jewish women, who have to abstain from sex for a period after menstruation, universally report that periodic continence keeps their sex fresh and entertaining.

In the end, couples who use NFP and those who use contraceptives are living two radically different versions of physical love. One accepts the gift of sexuality exactly as it is stamped in the human person by God; the other rejects it. And this severing of life and love is not healthy for a marriage. In fact, a void can open up in the love life of a contracepting couple, a void that is usually first noticed by the wife. Two statistics tell the whole story: The divorce rate among couples who use NFP is somewhere between 1 and 3 percent, while the divorce rate among couples who use contraceptives is well over the 50 percent national rate.

This is the message of *Humanae Vitae* that nobody gets: When you try to short-circuit the procreative end of sexuality, you also hurt the unitive. There is simply no way of separating them.

There is another unseemly aspect of the pill that is only now getting attention: its strong causal link to abortion. In one respect, "contraceptive" is a misnomer for the pill, because it sometimes does its work after conception by preventing the fertilized egg from implanting in the mother's womb. In other words, it is an abortifacient. But the link to abortion goes further. The essence of the contraceptive mentality is to drive a wedge between sex and babies. Once a society does this and goes on a spree of sterilized sex, it has to have abortion as a backup in case a contraceptive fails or (as happens with teenagers) isn't pulled out of the pocket at the critical moment.

The Church's insistence on the link between contraception and abortion occasionally gets support in surprising quarters. In *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* the U.S. Supreme Court, on its perennial search for the most plausible-sounding sophistries to uphold legalized abortion, stated:

[F]or two decades of economic and social developments, people have organized intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society, in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail.

In other words, we need abortion so that people can continue their contraceptive lifestyles.

Not Animals

The clash over contraception in the final analysis involves two irreconcilable views of the human person and sexuality. Humans are not brute animals; we are created in the image of God. We do not reproduce, we procreate; and the place to look for an ethics of sexuality is not in the rest of the animal kingdom, but in the other direction, at the three persons of the Holy Trinity in the act of eternal, mutual self-giving. The entire Christian world once understood this, and Protestants who think that this is no longer an issue ought to examine their own heritage. Luther and Calvin both taught that artificial birth control is intrinsically evil. So did Karl Barth, who wrote Paul VI a warm letter of praise after the publication of *Humanae Vitae*. The modern world has evacuated the marital act of its mystery and sanctity and it is sad that most denominations have gone along, hesitantly at first, only to proceed enthusiastically.

Much of the official Catholic apparatus also goes flopping along with the contraceptive culture. Many pre-cana programs actually promote artificial birth control, which means that they indirectly promote abortion. The pope, as usual, has a deeper insight than his middle management into the centrality of contraception in the array of life issues. In *Evangelium Vitae*, the first institutional step he proposes in the battle against the culture of death is the establishment of teaching centers for natural methods of regulating fertility. Unfortunately, the laity get little encouragement in this area. This is partly because the progressive wing of the Church, which controls most of the chanceries and seminaries, has never focused on Natural Family Planning. They consider it part of the baggage of *Humanae Vitae*, a document they shun like a vampire avoids sunlight.

Still, there are reasons to be optimistic that contraceptives will someday go away. At the end of each of our marriage preparation sessions, couples who seem to have little use for most Church teachings come up and say that NFP actually sounds like a good idea. Women, in particular, may decide on purely feminist grounds that artificially thwarting their fertility is demeaning. And, so far as the intellectual debate goes, Chesterton, our guide and mentor, made the amusing observation that "the more my opponents practice Birth Control, the fewer there will be of them to fight us."

Or, as a friend of mine once put it: "Be optimistic, the readership of the *New York Times* is not replacing itself."

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