

Marriage, Sexuality, and Contraception

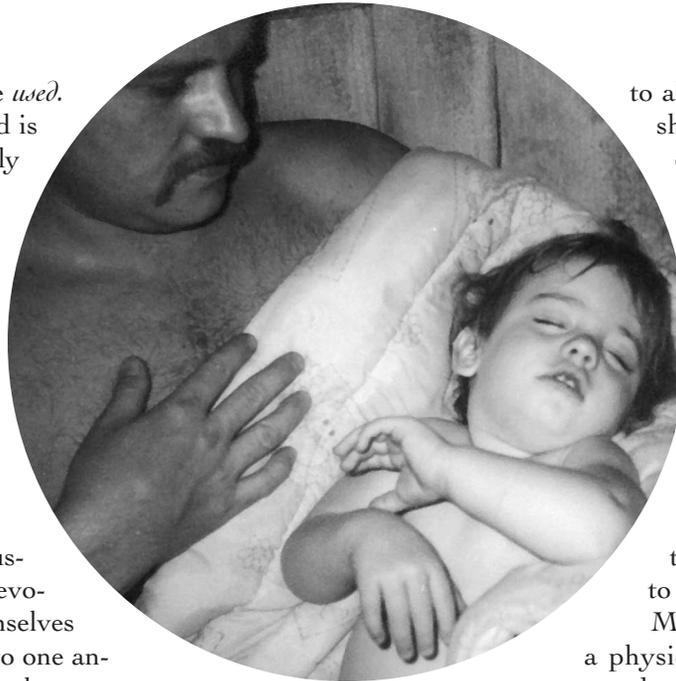
Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother’s [widow], and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; and raise up offspring for your brother.” But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother’s [widow] he spilled the semen on the ground, lest he should give offspring to his brother. And what he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he slew him. ~ Genesis 38:8-10

IT IS an astounding truth that God has made each person in his own image (see Gn 1:27). Each human being is made by God to be *loved*, but never to be *used*. One way we image God is that each person, and only that person, can *give himself/herself totally* in the way that the three Persons of the Trinity each give themselves to the others. It is only with a complete gift of self that a person can find authentic joy and prepare for communion with God.

In marriage, the spouses, by their free and irrevocable consent, give themselves definitively and totally to one another so that they are no longer two, but *“one flesh”* (see Gn 2:24 and handouts on Matrimony and What is a Sacramental Marriage?). Marriage is the means of total self-giving by which most people are called to image God’s intimate family life within the Trinity.

The Catholic Church has always taught that sexuality is good — that it is one of the greatest gifts from our Creator. The marriage act was designed by God for human joy, pleasure, giving, and gratitude. Yet it is more than merely biological; it involves the innermost being of each human person. Human love, rightly expressed within marriage, is an image of di-

“Properly expressed, human sexuality is sacramental — a source of life, love, and grace.”



vine love: God is present in human passion, as he is present in all of creation. Human sexuality is created by God, designed by him to express mutual love and destined to allow men and women to share in his creative power to bring forth new life. Conceiving a child is procreation (co-creating with God), not just reproduction as it is with other living creatures. Human procreation is God’s way of creating new human beings who have an eternal destiny. It is within marriage that God intends children to be born and educated.

Marriage, therefore, is a physical and spiritual fulfillment and a source of perfection for the spouses, whose generous and unselfish love is poured out to each other in its totality, and whose generosity, when God so desires, results in children as the living expressions and fruit of their love. Properly expressed, human sexuality is sacramental — a source of life, love, and grace.

In today’s world, however, sex is seen as intended *solely* for pleasure and sexual partners are seen as personal playthings, having no divine meaning. Therefore, our culture sees marriage as only one of many acceptable arrangements for sexual activity. Most people — sadly even many Catholics — think that



A child is always a blessing

artificial interference with conception is acceptable because, so it is supposed, human beings are mere biological beings. Yet Sacred Scripture teaches us that our bodies, like our souls, are holy to God: *“Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body”* (1 Cor 6:18-20).

Even people who accept that marriage necessarily involves having children (and fewer and fewer people think this way) do not view preventing conception at any given time by any available means as morally wrong. But *the prevention of conception by certain means outside of abstinence and natural methods — physical sterilization, using physical or chemical barriers to conception, avoiding completing the sexual act — is*

morally wrong and a grave evil. This has been the constant teaching of the Church from its beginnings, continuing an unbroken Tradition from Old Testament times. The Church has opposed contraception directly, deliberately, and vehemently in every age, even when the dominant secular culture condemned it as well, as it did, for example, in the United States in the nineteenth century.

Contraception separates sexual intimacy from its natural result, the possible creation of new life. Contraception is a form of lying — “I give you everything of myself, except my fertility.” By separating the good and happiness of the spouses from the procreative purpose of marriage, contraception violates the inner truth of married love, which is the total gift of each one to the other, and therefore violates the marriage covenant. By encouraging the spouses to *use each other sexually* rather than *give themselves to one another*, contraception also violates their human dignity.

Pope John Paul II taught that “there exists in contemporary culture [an] ... attitude which leads people to think that they can control life and death by taking the decisions about them into their own hands” (*The Gospel of Life* 15). When, through contraception, a married couple removes from their act of making love its potential procreative capacity, they usurp the power to decide when a new human person will come into existence, a power that is God’s alone. They exclude God from the very act that symbolizes and transmits his creative love. They deliberately reject cooperation in God’s creative power and take upon themselves the ultimate and awesome rights reserved to God alone, who is the very source of human life.

Even when the spouses do not believe they are doing wrong, the objective evil of contraception silently corrodes marriages, and it is a significant factor in the high divorce rate we see in today’s society. Moreover, the contraceptive mentality leads to other grave social ills:

premarital sex, promiscuity, increased homosexual activity,

pornography, and abortion. In these ways, contraception is not only destructive of human dignity but contributes as well to the destruction of the fabric of society.

In modern culture, the Church’s teaching on contraception is more often misunderstood than understood. *To act with an informed conscience, a couple considering or entering into marriage is responsible to ensure that they fully understand the Church’s teaching.*

“Contraception is a form of lying.”

“The objective evil of contraception silently corrodes marriages.”



JUPITERIMAGES

While the Church teaches that married couples are to be generous in creating new life, it also realizes that there may be times when, *for serious and just reasons only*, childbearing must be postponed. For these situations, the morally acceptable form of family planning is **natural family planning**, which uses God’s gift of periodic female infertility to avoid (not prevent) conception. Because a couple can determine the few days each month when a woman is fertile, they can abstain from sexual intimacy on these days. At other times of the month, even though sexual intimacy is unlikely to result in conception, sexual relations are permissible for the good and happiness of the spouses, who do nothing to frustrate the nature of the sexual act and remain “open to life,” willing to joyfully welcome a child that God might nevertheless send to them.

Unlike contraception, natural family planning does not put the health of either spouse at risk. Furthermore, there is no risk of abortion, unlike intrauterine devices (IUDs) and, sometimes, “the pill.”

And, used properly, natural family planning has a success rate at least as high as the most commonly used contraceptives.

Natural family planning must be learned (from teachers, not books), and it takes both spouses to make it work. Yet couples who periodically abstain from sexual intimacy find ways beyond this intimacy to express their love for one another. Natural family planning also teaches self-mastery, strengthens marital chastity, improves communication between the spouses, and increases responsibility and thoughtfulness toward each other. Couples who use natural family planning rarely divorce, and in today’s society that alone is powerful evidence for the fact that *natural family planning, when used rightly to fulfill and not thwart the purposes of marriage, strengthens and safeguards marriages*. Natural family planning is not as easy as “popping a pill,” but rightly used and used with right intent, it is completely healthy, completely safe, as effective as “the pill,” and *holy*.

(CCC 1604, 2361-2363, 2366-2371)