

# *WHY IS CONTRACEPTION IMMORAL?*

from *Called to Give Life*

by Jason T. Adams





## Why is contraception immoral?

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Too often the discussion of the morality of contraception fragments into a specific treatment of individual devices and methods wherein the overarching theological and philosophical essence of contraception is obfuscated. We lose sight of the forest for the trees. Behind every device and method of contraception is a fundamental breach of God's design for marital sexuality. Without this perspective, the Church's condemnation of contraception might appear to be a knee-jerk reaction to modernity or a rejection of science and man's dominion over the material universe. The more we can recover the root of the Church's prohibition of contraception, the more consistent and comprehensive will be our objections.

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### What is contraception?

In order to discuss the morality of a thing, we must first define it. *Contraception*, from the Latin *contra* (against) and *conceptio* (to conceive), literally means "against conception." It may be defined as "every action which, whether in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible" (HV 14). Simply put, contraception is any intentional attempt to render the conjugal act infertile. Father Ronald Lawler and Dr. William May elaborate:

Contraception, as the word itself suggests, is actively aimed at preventing conception. But it is necessary to begin with a clear definition of 'contraception' to make unmistakable the precise nature of the acts to which moral judgments about contraception are intended to apply.

In his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI gave an exact account of the nature of contraceptive actions. A contraceptive act is had in any act of coition which is intended precisely to act against the procreative good, to prevent it from being realized... Thus, there are various ways in which intercourse can be contraceptive: through the use of mechanical devices (such as condoms or diaphragms), by the use of withdrawal or spermicides, by the use of anovulant pills, by surgical sterilization, and the like. Contraception is always part of a dual act, 'contraceptive

intercourse.’ In this dual act of contraceptive intercourse, one chooses to engage in sexual intercourse. While choosing to have intercourse, which is known to be essentially related to the procreation of new human life, and precisely because one does not want the act of intercourse to flower the fruitfulness which it can have, one performs the contraceptive act. This act is aimed precisely against the procreative good. The coming-to-be of a new human life (which is in itself a great good, though one may perhaps very reasonably desire not to realize it here and now) is treated as an evil, something to be acted against. The precise purpose of the contraceptive act, as we shall more fully show below, is to act directly against the great human good of procreation – to treat it as if here and now it was an evil, not a good.

Contraception or contraceptive intercourse therefore is not identical in meaning with birth control or family planning. Plainly there are other ways to control births and to plan one’s family than by engaging in contraceptive intercourse. One can control or prevent births by means far worse than contraception – by abortion, for instance. And one can plan one’s family by means that are in themselves thoroughly good – that is, by Natural Family Planning.<sup>1</sup>

Note that in this definition contraception is not regarded as a classification of *things* alone that act against conception, but that it extends to the broader consideration of action, that is, a choice or act of the will against the natural fertility of sex. Hence it is not the material artificiality of contraception, the interference of *man-made* devices with a God-given faculty, alone that makes it unnatural. The artificiality of contraception extends to the willful frustration of one’s true end. In other words, it violates the natural law, the purpose for which man and marriage were designed:

Contrary to popular belief, the Church does not oppose artificial birth control *because* it’s artificial. She opposes it because it’s *contraceptive*. Contraception is the choice by any means to *impede the procreative potential of a given act of intercourse*. In other words, the contracepting couple chooses to engage in intercourse, and, foreseeing that their act may result in a new life, they *intentionally* and *willfully* suppress their fertility.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lawler, Ronald, O.F.M., Cap., et al. *Catholic Sexual Ethics*. Our Sunday Visitor, Huntington, Indiana: 1996, pp.153-154.

<sup>2</sup> West, Christopher. *Good News About Sex & Marriage: Answers to Your Honest Questions about Catholic Teaching*. Charis/Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, Michigan: 2000, p.112.

A further point to be made is that, even if couples do not impede the procreative potential of a given act of intercourse, (i.e., even if they do not contracept), they may well be engaging in their acts of intercourse with a mentality opposed to the good of children. Such a mentality (some call it a “contraceptive mentality”) is utterly contrary to the meaning of marital love. It can develop even in a couple that practices natural means of birth regulation if the couple begins to see fertility as a disease to be avoided at all costs. While engaging in an act of intercourse with an anti-child mentality is not the moral equivalent of engaging in contracepted intercourse, it springs from the same disordered view of fertility and may result in a sort of rebellion against the goods of marriage.

In order to determine, therefore, what constitutes a violation of the procreative meaning of intercourse, we must not only ask what method is being used to regulate birth (means) but what is our intention, our motivation, our attitude toward the goods of marriage? In *Humanae Vitae* Pope Paul VI refers to the inseparability of the unitive and procreative meanings of intercourse. Since these two meanings of the act are truly inseparable, contraception wars against both. Contraception is a wholesale violation of the meaning of marital love. We have arrived, therefore, at an even broader understanding of the “contraceptive act”: any act of intercourse that separates or opposes the procreative and unitive goods of marital sex.<sup>3</sup>

## Why is contraception wrong?

### ❶ Contraception willfully divides the unitive and procreative aspects of sex.

That contraception deliberately separates the unitive and procreative aspects of sex is affirmed by John Paul II in his 1994 *Letter to Families*:

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<sup>3</sup> Note that this discussion encompasses premarital sex. Fornication is a violation of the procreative aspect of marriage in that it denies the right of children to be conceived, born, and reared within a permanent union of mother and father (i.e., a family). It furthermore violates the unitive end of marriage insofar as “unitive” is understood to mean the permanent and unbreakable communion of persons that constitutes marriage.

In particular, responsible fatherhood and motherhood directly concern the moment in which a man and a woman, uniting themselves in one flesh, can become parents. This is a moment of special value both for their interpersonal relationship and for their service to life: They can become parents—father and mother—by communicating life to a new human being. The two dimensions of conjugal union, the unitive and the procreative, cannot be artificially separated without damaging the deepest truth of the conjugal act itself (12).

### **(a) Why are the unitive and procreative aspects of marital sex so important?**

Marriage, because it is part of God’s plan to redeem and sanctify the world, has specific divinely instituted ends or goods. While secular culture may view marriage as a civil institution that is reducible to a contract, the concept of Christian marriage is founded on the mystery that marriage is a sacramental covenant communion in which two become one for the sake of their own salvation and the salvation of the world.

The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament (CCC 1601).

A definition of the unitive and procreative elements of marriage will help demonstrate the salvific power of marriage and the indissoluble relationship between the unitive and procreative aspects of the marital act. The unitive aspect of marriage can be understood as the mutual and total self-giving of spouses to each other’s salvation. The procreative aspect is the participation of the spouses in the creation of new life. The mutual commitment to salvation that characterizes the unitive aspect overflows to another person: the child. Love, by its nature grows; it never suppresses a good. Love is complete giving. Because it delights in the good of another, it is generous and unreserved.

The marital act is the visible sign of this overflowing of love. It visibly encapsulates the union between spouses and its life-giving power. Just as marriage integrates unitive and procreative,

so must the physical expression of spousal communion. To separate the unitive from the procreative in the marital act is to disintegrate it and to frustrate God's plan for marriage.

Marriage is designed to give life, not to turn inward on itself. The grace of God that exists in the love of spouses is meant to overflow to the world. God gives life and love abundantly and expects us to do the same. This is why Christ established marriage as a sacrament that signifies His own fecund relationship with the Church:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the Church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. So also husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body.

'For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.'

This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the Church. In any case, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and the wife should respect her husband (Eph 5:25-33).

Christ espouses His Church, our mother, and in this covenant there is a mutual outpouring of self in which nothing is held back, even to the point of giving one's own life. The communion that exists between Christ and His Bride brings forth new life—spiritual children who deepen the life of the Church. In the same way, marriage must be life-giving. Spouses must exhibit the same total self-gift that Christ offered, holding nothing back—including their fertility. Christ's love for His Church is never contraceptive, never self-gratifying, but exists for the very purpose of creating new life.

Consider an entity in which two people love each other so much that they exist as one, and in which the love of this union is so real and so intense that another person proceeds from it, a person who is sent out into the world to sanctify it. Sound familiar? The life-giving love of family is analogous to the inner life of God

himself. Pope John Paul II writes: “God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude, but a family, since He has in Himself fatherhood, sonship, and the essence of the family which is love.”<sup>4</sup> When we live according to this mystery we conform to the image of God; when we live counter to it we deviate from the image of God.

As a communion of persons, the marriage that is open to children witnesses to the world the very life of God:

The Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the procreation and education of children it reflects the Father’s work of creation. It is called to partake of the prayer and sacrifice of Christ... The Christian family has an evangelizing and missionary task (CCC 2205).

This is the exalted dignity of marriage, expressed by the cooperation of unitive and procreative elements. To deny either is to deny the divine calling that makes marriage part of God’s plan.

**(b) Isn’t this philosophical hair-splitting? Does God really delineate marital sex into its unitive and procreative aspects?**

If it seems unlikely that God would engage in categorizing and defining the aspects of marital sex, it is only because we know that God sees things in wholes, not in parts. God gets to the essence of things and so should we. This is why the Church exhorts her children to observe sex in its wholeness, not separating unitive and procreative. Parsing sex into categories comes about as a response to our abuse of its integrity.

## Catechism Connection

### The Unitive and Procreative Ends of the Marital Embrace

The spouses’ union achieves the twofold end of marriage: the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life. These two meanings or values of marriage cannot be separated without altering the couple’s spiritual life and compromising the goods of marriage and the future of the family. The conjugal love of man and woman thus stands under the twofold obligation of fidelity and fecundity (CCC 2363).

<sup>4</sup> in Hahn, Scott, *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*, Charis (Servant), Ann Arbor, MI, 1998, p. 36.



Fecundity is a gift, and *end of marriage*, for conjugal love naturally tends to be fruitful. A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving as its fruit and fulfillment. So the Church, which ‘is on the side of life’ teaches that ‘each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life.’ ‘This particular doctrine, expounded on numerous occasions by the Magisterium, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act (CCC 2366).

② **The practice of contraception holds that man, apart from God, is the overseer of when life shall begin.**

Pope John Paul II explains:

At the origin of every human person there is a creative act of God... [I]t follows that the procreative capacity, inscribed in human sexuality, is—in its deepest truth—a cooperation with God’s creative power. It also follows that men and women are not the arbiters, are not the masters of this same capacity, called as they are, in it and through it, to be participants in God’s creative decision. When, therefore, through contraception, married couples remove from the exercise of their conjugal sexuality its potential procreative capacity, they claim a power which belongs solely to God: the power to decide, in a *final analysis*, the coming into existence of a human person. They assume the qualification not of being cooperators in God’s creative power, but the ultimate depositories of the source of human life...[C]ontraception is...so profoundly unlawful as never to be, for any reason, justified. To think or to say the contrary is equal to maintaining that in human life situations may arise in which it is lawful not to recognize God as God.<sup>5</sup>

This, according to Dietrich Von Hildebrand, is the sin of irreverence:

The sinfulness of birth control is rooted in the arrogation of the right to separate the actualized love union in marriage from a

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<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, Discourse, Sept. 17, 1983; 28 *The Pope Speaks* 356, 356-57 (1983); as quoted in *The Winning Side*, Dr. Charles Rice, p.109.

possible conception, to sever the wonderful, deeply mysterious connection instituted by God. This mystery is approached in an irreverent attitude. We are here confronted with the fundamental sin of irreverence toward God, the denial of our creaturehood, the acting as if we were our own lords. This is a basic denial of our being bound to God: it is a disrespect for the mysteries of God's creation, and its sinfulness increases with the rank of the mystery in question. It is the same sinfulness that lies in suicide or in euthanasia, in both of which we act as if we were masters of life.

Every *active* intervention of the spouses that eliminates the possibility of conception through the conjugal act is incompatible with the holy mystery of the superabundant relation in this incredible gift of God. And this irreverence also affects the purity of the conjugal act, because the union can be the real fulfillment of love only when it is approached with reverence and when it is embedded in the consciousness of our basic bond to God...

We thus see that artificial birth control is sinful not only because it severs the mysterious link between the most intimate love union and the coming into existence of a new human being, but also because in a certain way it artificially cuts off the creative intervention of God, or better still, it artificially separates an act which is ordained toward cooperation with the creative act of God from this, its destiny. For, as Paul VI says, this is to consider oneself not a servant of God, but "Lord over the origin of human life."<sup>6</sup>

### ③ Contraception impairs the full reciprocal self-offering that constitutes the marital embrace.

In his 1981 Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II describes this reservation of self in the marital embrace as an "objectively contradictory language":

When couples, by means of recourse to contraception, separate these two meanings that God the Creator has inscribed in the being of man and woman and in the dynamism of their sexual communion, they act as "arbiters" of the divine plan and they "manipulate" and degrade human sexuality and with it themselves and their married partner by altering its value of "total" self-giving. Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving

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<sup>6</sup> Von Hildebrand, Dietrich. *Love, Marriage, and the Catholic Conscience: Understanding the Church's Teachings on Birth Control*. Sophia Institute Press, Manchester, New Hampshire: 1998, pp.45-46.

oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality (32).

The Most Reverend John J. Meyers, Archbishop of Newark, explains the Holy Father's formulation:<sup>7</sup>

John Paul II roots the entire Christian sexual ethic not only in the *structure of the act* (though he acknowledges its importance), but rather in the meaning of the love reflected in sexual intercourse. Couples readily assent to the teaching that the *normal* meaning of intercourse is mutual love. They can also readily assent to the teaching that the *ultimate* meaning of sexual intercourse is when their love for each other can produce new life, if it be God's will.

What they are *gradually* beginning to see is that within this context, it is morally dishonest to withhold part of that love through contraceptive intercourse.

Long before he became Pope, John Paul taught at length on sexual morality. He maintained that the only proper response to a person is *love*. For him, a person could never be reduced to the level of an *object*, a means to an end. Contraceptive intercourse, he posited, is one way in which married couples sin against one another, their own love, and the Creator, by reducing the other to a means of pleasure.

Moreover, as Pope, John Paul II has explored the marriage relationship more deeply. He has repeatedly explored the "language of the body." The human body, with its sexual dimension seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and procreation, as in the whole natural order, but includes right from the beginning the "nuptial" attribute, that is, the capacity for expressing love—that love precisely in which the man-person becomes a gift, and by means of that gift, fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence.<sup>8</sup>

The conjugal act is 'true' only when the conjugal love which it expresses is true. As the Holy Father states: "In the act which expresses their conjugal love, the spouses are called to make *of themselves* a gift, one to the other: nothing of what constitutes their *being* a person may be excluded from this self donation."<sup>9</sup>

Contraception introduces a limitation on the self-giving of the other, and therefore a falsification which contradicts true married love.

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<sup>7</sup> The following is excerpted from Bishop John J. Meyers, "The Rejection and Rediscovery by Christians of the Truths of Humanae Vitae," *Trust the Truth*, The Pope John Center, Braintree, Massachusetts: 1991.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, General Audience, 16 January, 1980.

Married couples are *gradually* beginning to see the core *practical* teaching of the Holy Father: that married couples may engage in conjugal relations whenever they wish, but they must *mean what they are saying with their bodies*.

Pope John Paul II has, in other words, fueled a reexamination of the Church's teaching on fertility and contraception by expanding the Church's definition of contraception from the unlawful and unnatural sterilization of the sexual act, to the deeper and more comprehensive sterilization of *human love* and mutual self-gift:

Man and woman carry on in the language of the body that dialogue which, according to Genesis 2:24, 25, had its beginning on the day of creation. This language of the body is something more than mere sexual reaction. As authentic language of the persons, it is subject to the demands of truth, that is, to objective moral norms. Precisely on the level of this language, man and woman reciprocally express themselves in the fullest and most profound way possible to them by the corporeal dimension of masculinity and femininity. Man and woman express themselves in the measure of the whole truth of the human person.

Man is precisely a person because he is master of himself and has self-control. Indeed, insofar as he is master of himself he can give himself to the other. This dimension—the dimension of the liberty of the gift—becomes essential and decisive for that language of the body, in which man and woman reciprocally express themselves in the conjugal union. Granted that this is communion of persons, the language of the body should be judged according to this criterion of truth...

According to the criterion of this truth, which should be expressed in the language of the body, the conjugal act signifies not only love, but also potential fecundity. Therefore it cannot be deprived of its full and adequate significance by artificial means. In the conjugal act it is not licit to separate the unitive aspect from the procreative aspect, because both the one and the other pertain to the intimate truth of the conjugal act. The one is activated together with the other and in a certain sense the one by means of the other... Therefore, in such a case the conjugal act, deprived of its interior truth because it is artificially deprived of its procreative capacity, ceases also to be an act of love.

It can be said that in the case of an artificial separation of these two aspects, a real bodily union is carried out in the conjugal

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<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, *Discourse on Responsible Parenthood*, 17 September, 1983.

act, but it does not correspond to the interior truth and to the dignity of personal communion—communion of persons. This communion demands that the language of the body be expressed reciprocally in the integral truth of its meaning. If this truth be lacking, one cannot speak either of the truth of self-mastery, or of the truth of the reciprocal gift and of the reciprocal acceptance of self on the part of the person. Such a violation of the interior constitutes the essential evil of the contraceptive act.<sup>10</sup>

In their expression of marital sexuality, the couple signifies bodily such mutual, self-emptying love as Christ Himself poured forth on the Cross. For this reason, some in the Church have referred to the Crucifixion as the consummation of the union between Christ, the Bridegroom, and his bride, the Church. To deprive the marital act of its mutually self-emptying capacity by withholding one's generative power, is, simply put, a lie. One "speaks" with one's body what one does not mean interiorly. A communion of persons, which is the rightful end of the sexual act, cannot be achieved with such a reservation. Contraception is a violation of the communion for which sexuality is directed in the first place.

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<sup>10</sup> General Audience, August 22, 1984.

## Bishops Speak

### **Most Reverend Charles J. Chaput, OFM Cap, Archbishop of Denver**

The covenant which husband and wife enter at marriage requires that *all* intercourse remain open to the transmission of new life. This is what becoming “one flesh” implies: complete self-giving, without reservation or exception, just as Christ withheld nothing of Himself from His bride, the Church, by dying for her on the cross. *Any* intentional interference with the procreative nature of intercourse necessarily involves spouses’ withholding themselves from each other and from God, who is their partner in sacramental love. In effect, they steal something infinitely precious – themselves – from each other and from their Creator.

*Of Human Life: A Pastoral Letter to the People of God of Northern Colorado on the Truth and Meaning of Married Love: July 22, 1998.*

### **Most Reverend Glennon P. Flavin, DD, Former Bishop of Lincoln, Nebraska**

Therefore, we who have been blessed by God with the gift of the Catholic Faith can have no doubt about the immorality of artificial contraception. The Catholic Church clearly teaches that the use of artificial contraception in all its forms, including direct sterilization, is gravely immoral, is intrinsically evil, is contrary to the law of nature and nature’s God. This is and always has been the uninterrupted teaching of the Catholic Church from the beginning.

The ban on contraception is not a disciplinary law of the Church, like abstinence on Friday, which the Church can enact and which the Church can change and from which the Church can dispense for good reasons. Rather, it is a Divine Law which the Church cannot change any more than it can change the Law of God forbidding murder. Artificial contraception is wrong, not because the Church says it is wrong (it was wrong before Christ established the Church); it is wrong

because God Himself, through the revelation of His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, has declared it to be wrong. Because artificial contraception is intrinsically evil, it may never be practiced for any reason, no matter how good and urgent. A good end never justifies the use of an evil means.

*A Pastoral Letter to Catholic Couples and Physicians on the issue of Artificial Contraception: October 11, 1991.*

## Did you know ...

### Catholics out-contracept the general population

According to the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, the percentage of Catholic women (ages 15-44) who were using some form of contraception was 70% versus a 64% rate for women in the general population.

In 1988, the most common form of contraception among Catholic women was oral contraception (the Pill), whereas in the 1995 study, the most frequent form of contraception was sterilization. 40% of Catholic respondents reported the use of sterilization—that represents 4.8 million Catholic women ages 15-44. The rate of sterilization among Catholics doubled from 1988 to 1995.

Only about 3% of Catholic women using a method of birth regulation use Natural Family Planning: about 300-400 thousand women.

*Richard J. Fehring, DNSc, RN, and Andrea Matovina Schlidt, BSN, RN. "Trends in Contraceptive Use Among Catholics in the United States." Linacre Quarterly, 68 (2): 170-185.*



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Jason and Linda have used Natural Family Planning to successfully postpone and achieve pregnancy throughout their marriage, and have shared their testimony to its benefits in Pre-Cana, RCIA, young adult/youth groups, and other venues.



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by Jason Adams, MA

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