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# THE PILL: NO SMALL MATTER

A discussion about contraception by  
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Our culture and even most Catholics find the Church's teaching that contraception is never in accord with God's plan for sexuality hard to understand and perhaps even ridiculous. Isn't contraception a terrific modern invention that frees human beings from enslavement to bodily constraints? Doesn't it allow the unmarried to live out their sexuality without having their plans, their studies, or their careers, derailed by an unwanted pregnancy? Doesn't it enable people to ensure sexual compatibility -- and other kinds of compatibility -- before marriage? Doesn't it enable married people to pursue the spiritual ends of sexuality without fear of pregnancy and to have a reliable way of controlling their family size?

Our culture seems to have decided that sexuality free from the responsibilities of children is so essential to human happiness that some in our government have proposed free contraception for all women.

Yet, as common as these beliefs are to our culture, they are at odds with God's plan for the great gift of sexuality and how it must be lived in order to contribute to our happiness.

Why is there this disparity between the culture in which we live and the Church Jesus established?

## **God's plan: human beings are made for love**

God's plan for sexuality is made very clear through revelation. The story of the moral use of sexuality begins (EVERYTHING begins) in

Genesis. God has plans for sexuality from the start. What could be clearer than “Two shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24) and “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28)?

Even before we received those commands, we were told that God made human beings in his image: male and female He made them. Saint John Paul II in his masterful study known as the Theology of the Body explains that because God is a lover, and human persons are made in the image and likeness of God, we are made to be lovers. In fact, he tells us we can learn this by considering the shape of our bodies or what he calls the “meaning” of our bodies. He speaks of the “meaning” of our bodies because he does not think our bodies are merely physical things but are designed to “express” something true about our inner reality. Our inner reality is that we are persons meant to be lovers – we are naturally drawn to love what is good, and especially to love what is good about being in relationship, and what is good about being in relationship is love. So, we love love, as does God. After all, God is a Trinity of persons, and what the persons of the Trinity do, is to love.

### **The Spousal Meaning of the Body**

So how do our bodies “mean” or “express” or “signify” that we are meant to be lovers? Male and female bodies are clearly meant to be joined together. As the cliché so precisely states: “the parts fit.” “Two” clearly are “meant” to be “one”. The “one being” that the two become, is the whole of two complementary parts. One of the words for love in Greek is “eros”: it means the passionate desire to unite with the other. This desire to unite with another is profoundly affirmative and reflects that truth that we cannot be whole, cannot be complete, cannot be satisfied, and cannot be happy without a union with the other.

The male brings his masculinity to the union and the female her femininity. Saint John Paul II calls this the “spousal” meaning of the body. By this he means that our bodies show that we are meant to be married, we are meant to be in a spousal relationship. Our very natures are essentially spousal. (The Catholic Church teaches that the spousal meaning can also be fulfilled by those who consecrate themselves to Christ, who is the Bridegroom and a Father although he never entered in to a physical marriage.)

The physical union of spouses enables human beings to escape our fundamental loneliness and to unite with another in a fuller way. Adam’s pure joy at the creation of Eve expresses the foundational need that human persons have to be in relationship with another human person. Adam and Eve were clearly meant to use their sexuality to build a life together – the union they seek is not just one of a momentary physical pleasure, but of a kind to build a family and a tribe and a nation, and ultimately, to build a communion of saints. But I am getting ahead of the story.

### **The harmony we desire**

If we use our imaginations a bit, we realize it would have been a life for Adam and Eve before the fall would have been one of blissful harmony. We know something of it through our largely unsatisfied yearnings: we long for a complete union with another who completely affirms us and whom we completely affirm and with whom we can live in blissful harmony. It ain’t gonna happen in this world of extremely imperfect human beings. But we do long for it, and God makes it clear that we should act on that longing and do what we can to work to achieve that harmony that came spontaneously to Adam and Eve. Moreover, he promises to give us the graces needed through the sacraments.

## **Self-giving love**

What makes it so difficult for us to achieve happiness through our sexual relationships is that, after the fall, we are all tremendously selfish. We tend to seek our personal satisfaction over the well-being of others. We tend to use others to satisfy our desires. “Use” of another and loving another are essentially incompatible.

In recognition of this reality Saint John Paul II (as philosopher Karol Wojtyła) wrote the book *Love and Responsibility*. There he tries to instruct us on how we can turn our sexual urge that seeks personal satisfaction into something that is directed towards the good of the other – into what is known as *agapic* love– one that is directed towards affirming and loving another rather than using the other. One that is self-giving and not one that is “taking” or “using”

## **Becoming a parent with another**

Saint John Paul II taught that being open to the good of children goes a long way to making the sexual act unselfish; conceiving and raising children is a good shared by the spouses and not possible without loving cooperation with another. Moreover, it is undeniably true that babies need parents committed to them and committed to each other. That is, parents who are in a faithful, exclusive marriage. Wojtyła counsels that one of the most important reasons for choosing a spouse should be that the person either has or is likely to develop the virtues needed to be a good parent. Thus, Wojtyła believes that responsible people seeking a spouse should choose a good parent for their children. That in itself is a hugely affirmative act – “I choose you because you will make a good parent – you are kind, reliable, compassionate, generous, hard-working, faithful, etc. (Not to mention that I love your smile, your laugh, and your way of being in the world.)”

God gives most people strong sexual appetites both because He wants spouses to experience the intimacy, affirmation, and bonding that comes through the pleasure and vulnerability inherent in the sexual act. He also wants them to enjoy the profound meaningfulness the task of raising children bestows upon life (not to mention the unsurpassable fun of raising children!). God knew that learning to live with another and others and learning to be good parents requires great maturity and growth in selflessness. In fact, marriage and family are a natural path to holiness.

### **Cooperating with God**

In 1968 Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on “birth regulation” made a stunning claim – “it is the mission of spouses to cooperate with God in transmitting human life.” The cooperation is this: the male provides the sperm, the female provides the egg, and God provides the soul. What an enormous honor it is for spouses to help God create new human beings who are to be with him for an eternity!

Love-making and baby-making are meant to go together. Each spousal act of intercourse is meant to say, “I am making a complete gift of myself to you. A gift that God’s gift of sexuality enables me to make. This gift may result in a new life, a new life that you and I will do our best to prepare to be a member of God’s eternal kingdom.”

It can’t be denied that contraception attempts to shut God out of the baby-making possibility of the sexual act. Those who contracept are saying: “I want to enjoy a great pleasure with you, but I do not want to make a gift of my fertility to you.” They are not making a complete gift of themselves to each other and to some extent, they are using each other. In the words of Saint John Paul II they are not being “just to the Creator.” Nor are they being just to each other, or to any future children, or to their own dignity.

## Natural Family Planning

Does this view turn spouses into “baby-making” machines, used by God for His purposes of populating heaven? No, not at all. God does not mandate that spouses have as many children as possible. He wants them to have the number of children they can raise well,

Spouses may have all sorts of good reasons for wanting to limit their family size – *Humanae Vitae* 10 speaks of physiological, psychological, economic or social reasons. It is up to the couple to prayerfully decide whether they are called by God to have more children. Should they hear God’s voice say that it would be wise for them to postpone having children or to cease altogether, they have recourse to natural methods of family planning (NFP). These methods enable a woman to determine when she is fertile; generally couples need to abstain 7 to 10 days a month to avoid a pregnancy.

Many people have trouble understanding how NFP differs from contraception since both enable couples to have sex while not intending to have babies. Those who have used both will tell you there is a huge difference in the way that they think about sex, their spouse, children, God and the Church. Contraception is “against” life; the couples must actively thwart their fertility to prevent a new life from coming to be. Couples who use a method of NFP leave their fertility intact. They must learn self-mastery and must learn to put their sexual desires in service of the family.

There is an enormous difference in the level of commitment expressed in contraceptive sex and non-contraceptive sex. The couple using contraception is essentially saying: “We want sex with each other. No long term promises here.” Couples using a method of NFP express a respect for fertility and retain an openness to life. They know sex “means” babies, and babies mean a lifetime commitment to another.

Couples vary in their reports on how difficult or easy methods of NFP are to use; those who have abstained before marriage, generally find NFP very doable because they have developed an admirable degree of self-mastery and a large repertoire of ways to enjoy spending time with each other. Those who were sexually active before marriage can find NFP to be quite a challenge since they have become accustomed to sexual intercourse as the chief or one of the chief ways of experiencing intimacy.

The vast majority of those who use some method of NFP, whether it is relatively easy for them or difficult, find it greatly enhances the quality of their marriage. Some of the wives tell of how they feel truly loved and cherished by their husbands who control their sexual appetite for the sake of the family and these husbands speak of feeling respected by their wives who appreciate that they are especially good men.

And we must not fail to mention that couples using methods of natural family planning almost never divorce. Their marriages become stronger as they learn how to mutually plan their sex lives and to plan the size of their family – as they work to get their priorities straight. They learn to communicate better and to feel very in sync with God – they experience great peace in knowing they are doing God's will. They become fantastic models of chastity to their family, friends, and especially their children.

### **Bad consequences of contraception**

If you haven't already listened to the talk *Contraception: Why Not*, now is the time. It explains the many bad consequences of contraceptives, among them, a huge increase of sex outside of marriage which leads



to abortions, or single parenthood or rushed marriages. You will learn that the chemical contraceptives have a deleterious effect on a woman's body, on relationships, on society and on the environment.

There are multiple bad physical side effects of the chemical contraceptives, among them weight gain, depression, a reduced libido, migraines and life-threatening blood clots. They work by suppressing a woman's natural fertile hormones (which make women very attractive to men) by polluting a woman's body with synthetic hormones that prevent her from ovulating. Women who chose a spouse while using chemical contraceptives are in danger of choosing an unsuitable spouse since the chemical contraceptives alter their choices in men. Contraception greatly facilitates the practice of cohabitation which has been shown to be a very poor way to prepare for marriage. In a very real sense, the use of contraceptives is a major contributing factor to divorce and there are few greater blows to human happiness, for the spouses, for the children, for the extended family and friends, than divorce. There is also increasing evidence that chemicals from contraceptives are harming the environment to the point, for instance, of threatening the survival of some fish populations.

### **No small matter**

It should be no surprise that when we refuse to accept God's plan for sexuality, that we do ourselves great damage – proudly doing our will rather than God's we keep ourselves from the paradise, even this very imperfect present "paradise", He intended for us. Love, babies, virtue, grace, God, marriage, family, happiness, salvation, this is what is behind the Church's teaching on contraception. It is no small matter.

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1. What stood out the most to you in this article and why?**
- 2. What are the consequences for individuals, relationships, and society when contraception is used?**
- 3. How are contraception and natural family planning different?**
- 4. What are you still wrestling with in regard to the Church's teaching on this issue?**
- 5. How do you think God is asking you to grow with respect to this teaching?**

For further information on contraception and natural family planning see:

Mary Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve After the Pill*. (Ignatius Press, 2012)

Simcha Fisher, *The Sinner's Guide to Natural Family Planning* (Our Sunday Visitor Press, 2014)

Angela Franks, *Contraception and Catholicism: What the Church Teaches and Why*. (Pauline books and Media, 2013)

Mary Healy, *Men and Women are from Eden: A Study Guide to John Paul II's Theology of the Body*. (Servant, 2005)

Janet Smith, *Contraception: Why Not?* (Audio) [www.janetesmith.org](http://www.janetesmith.org)

Edward Sri, *Men, Woman and the Mystery of Love: Practical Insights from John Paul II's Love and Responsibility* (Servant, 2015).

For information on methods of Natural Family Planning see:

[The Couple to Couple League](#)

[The Pope Paul VI Institute](#)



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