

# Why does the Church Reject Contraception?

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The Catholic Church accepts the responsibility for couples to regulate the size of their families and the spacing of births. However the Church has not accepted the use of interventions in the body of the woman or the man on in the marriage act itself in order to achieve this end.

Instead the Church has approved using knowledge of the natural cycle to determine whether or not to have sexual intimacy at a time when pregnancy is possible or likely.

Today the ability to identify the fertile and infertile parts of the cycle and when ovulation occurs is well developed and couples can readily access that information through well established programs. The scientifically established methods include Sympto-Thermal, Billings and Napro-tech or Creighton. Each of these methods has an established reliability that is on a par with the use of the low dose oral contraceptive pills and better than the results for barrier methods such as condoms or caps or diaphragms or intra-uterine devices.

The lesser popularity of fertility awareness in Western countries is not to do with their established effectiveness, but to do with perceptions of poor success and the fact that they do require abstinence if pregnancy is to be avoided. It is also sometimes claimed that women need regular cycles to use them. The latter may be true for methods that rely on calendar calculations, at least in so far as they can require extensive abstinence. But it is false for most methods because they rely not on calendar, but on charting signs and symptoms that accurately map the cycle and can identify the oestrogen rise associated with the start of possible fertility and the progesterone rise that marks ovulation, and the infertile part of the cycle begins soon after because eggs do not survive more than 24 hours.

The Church has always rejected contraception. It was rejected in Old Testament times and that rejection extended through the Early Fathers, such as St John Chrysostom and St Augustine through the medievalists, such as St Albert the Great and St Thomas Aquinas to the Popes of the modern era.

In a recent work on the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, D. Vincent Twomey writes,

“For the spouses to take the initiative to exclude the possibility of new life is to act against the possibility inherent in that union of God’s creative action; it is to act in contradiction with the image of the Triune God as reflected in the union of the spouses.

In a word, it amounts to an attempt to exclude God from that human act where he is most present in the created order.”<sup>1</sup>

Explaining the modern acceptance of contraception he speaks of the modern era placing trust in our relationship to material reality in which through science we have become maker and producer able to dominate and manipulate the natural world.

Contraception and to an extent, in vitro fertilization (see the section on that topic) represent our efforts to turn this capacity on himself with the body becoming raw material to be shaped and used at will.

Twomey argues that therefore contraception is inherently dualist and morality becomes utility measured by outcomes rather than by meaning and relationship with God.

Instead he argues that in the Christian vision of man, we are not masters of the sources of life but ministers of the design established by the Creator. This is the view taken in *Humane Vitae* (n.13) in which Pope Paul VI said,

“...to experience the gift of married love while respecting the laws of conception is to acknowledge that one is not the master of the sources of life but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator. Just as man does not have unlimited dominion over his body in general, so also, and with more particular reason, he has no such dominion over his specifically sexual faculties, for these are concerned by their very nature with the generation of life, of which God is the source.”

Twomey writes that mutual self-giving in marriage is self surrender to each other, but also to God, respecting God’s initiative in the woman’s cycle to give life. The use of self control through fertility awareness is in itself a virtue whereas control by manipulation of the body is vicious.

Addressing this same issue, Pope John Paul II said that at the origin of every human person there is a creative act of God. No man comes into existence by chance; he is always the object of God's creative love. From this fundamental truth of faith and reason it follows that the procreative capacity, inscribed in human sexuality is - in its deepest truth - a cooperation with God's creative power. And it also follows that man and woman are not 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.

The Pope went on to say,

“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

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<sup>1</sup> D.Vincent Twomey *Moral Theology after Humane Vitae: Fundamental Issues in Moral Theort and Sexual Ethics* Four Courts Press/ Dublin 2010 p. 195

coming into existence of a human person. They assume the qualification of not being cooperators in God's creative power, but the ultimate depositaries of the source of human life. In this perspective, contraception is to be judged objectively 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>2</sup>

The issue is complex because in part it depends on an exalted notion of Christian marriage. Pope Paul VI taught that husband and wife, through the mutual gift of themselves, which is specific and exclusive to them alone, develop that union of two persons in which they perfect one another, cooperating with God in the generation and rearing of new lives. This perfection he said stemmed from the fact that the marriage of those who have been baptized is invested with the dignity of a sacramental sign of grace, for it represents the union of Christ and His Church.

In his explanation, Pope John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body* catechesis (see section on the Theology of the Body) referred to the passage in St Mathew's Gospel in which Jesus refers to the genesis account of the origin of marriage in the creation of men and women both equal in God's Image, and in their relationship being the sign and symbol in the world of God's love, the love of God for all creation the perfect and fruitful love between the persons' of the Trinity, and the love that Jesus expressed at Gethsemane in accepting the Father's will and subsequently on the Cross.

The sacramental significance of marriage, therefore, is that it is a sign and a witness to God's perfect, fruitful and self-giving love.

The difficulty with contraception, therefore, is that it involves rejecting this sacramental role. It involves the couple no longer aspiring to make their love a perfect likeness to the Divine love. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, after him states that "means negating the intimate truth of conjugal love, with which the divine gift (of life) is communicated."<sup>3</sup>

Pope John Paul refers to contraception as a falsification:

"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 oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II *L'Osservatore Romano*, Oct. 10, 1983

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI Interview on plane to Africa, AFP – Oct 3, 2008

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"<sup>4</sup>

To accept this thinking about the meaning of contraception within marriage, one first needs to accept what is a substantial development of doctrine about marriage.

The contemporary teaching has elevated the love between the spousal to the level that their sexual intimacy is the ongoing celebration of the sacrament. Through their love they seek their own perfection as a sign and symbol of God's love.

The change in doctrine no longer refers to the *debitum* the duty of have sex referred to by earlier Popes such as Pope Pius XI and Pope Pius XII and by St Augustine. Nor does the new doctrine refer to any right to have sex. Gone also is the notion that one of the purposes of marriage is to quieten concupiscence or lust. Instead Pope Paul II explained married love as fully human, fully free and total mutual gift of self that is also open to the possibility that God may endow the relationship with the gift of life. Husband and wife should not see each other as sex objects to be used for mutual sexual gratification. Instead their love expresses the deep meaning of being a sign and symbol of God's love by being a complete and mutual gift of self.

In this they have restored the earlier teaching of St Augustine and St Thomas that the marriage act has three purposes – the unity and fidelity (*Fides*) of the couple, their fruitfulness and openness to God's will in having children (*Proles*), and the sacramental nature of their love in being a sign and symbol of God's love (*Sacramentum*).

That their sexual intimacy is therefore holy takes on a much stronger meaning is its role within their relationship as a means by which they seek perfection in God's image. That notion of marriage which has its basis in Scripture thus provides a new and deeper understanding of the meaning of contraception. It is an intervention in the body or in the marriage act to reject God's cooperation and design to make the marriage fruitful. The explicit purpose of contraception is to render the expression of love that might otherwise have been fruitful unfruitful. It is thus a rejection of God's design and a falsification of what the marriage act means.

In a way, a parallel can be drawn to chastity. The man who at the office party has a sexual relationship with a co-worker or with his boss, may say to his wife that this was an important to protect his job prospects which may have been damaged by rejection of the other. He may also say that it does not mean what his marriage means because it is only one act and the relationship will be thus passing. But no amount of persuasion on his part is likely to persuade her to accept that this was not a betrayal of the love and their commitment. His adultery will always be wrong no matter the good consequences it might produce.

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<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* n.32

In a similar way contraception is an attack on the important meaning that their marital love has in the context of their love for God with respect to the imago dei, and with respect to them being stewards of their bodies, not masters, cooperators with the divine plan. Essentially the body is the person, but contraception involves treating the body as an object and not a person.

On the other hand, a couple who genuinely loves each other and wishes to seek perfection in their imitation of the Divine love, can decide not to make love at times when their love-making may produce a child. There is no obligation to make love and it is not the only way in which they express love for each other. By abstaining they express the virtue of temperance and chastity and can ensure that their love-making when they do choose it is completely intact, is truly a total gift of self open to the divine plan for fertility. They have done nothing to interfere with its purpose and meaning.