

Catholic Teaching on Contraception

What Is Contraception? Contraception is "any action which, either in anticipation of the sexual intercourse, 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" (*Humanae Vitae* 14). This includes sterilization, condoms and other barrier methods, spermicides, withdrawal method, the Pill, and all other such methods. In 1968, Pope Paul VI issued his landmark encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* ("Human Life"), which reemphasized the Church's constant teaching that it is always intrinsically wrong to use contraception to prevent new human beings from coming into existence.

History: Birth control has been around for millennia. Scrolls found in Egypt, dating to 1900 B.C., describe ancient methods of birth control that were later practiced in the Roman Empire during the apostolic age. Wool that absorbed sperm, poisons that fumigated the uterus, potions, and other methods were used to prevent conception. In some centuries, even condoms were used (though made out of animal skin rather than latex). But few people realize that up until 1930, *all* Protestant denominations agreed with the Catholic Church's teaching condemning contraception as sinful. At its 1930 Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Church, swayed by growing social pressure, announced that contraception would be allowed in *some* circumstances. Soon the Anglican Church completely caved in, allowing contraception across the board. Since then, all other Protestant denominations have followed suit. One of the famous Hindus of modern times, Mahatma Gandhi, was completely opposed to unnatural birth control. He called for self-control, and his statements in the 1920s have many similarities to the statements of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. Today, among the Christian denominations, the Catholic Church alone proclaims the historic Christian position on contraception.

Why Is Contraception In Conflict with God's Laws?

1) Against Natural Law: Contraception is wrong because it is a deliberate violation of the design God built into the human race, often referred to as "natural law." The natural law purpose of sex is procreation. The pleasure that sexual intercourse provides is an additional blessing from God, intended to offer the possibility of new life while strengthening the bond of intimacy, respect, and love between husband and wife. The loving environment this bond creates is the perfect setting for nurturing children. But sexual pleasure within marriage becomes unnatural, and even harmful to the spouses, when it is used in a way that deliberately excludes the basic purpose of sex, which is procreation. God's

gift of the sex act, along with its pleasure and intimacy, must not be abused by deliberately frustrating its natural end – procreation.

2) Against Bible Teaching: The Bible mentions at least one form of contraception specifically and condemns it. *Coitus interruptus*, was used by Onan to avoid fulfilling his duty according to the ancient Jewish law of fathering children for one's dead brother. "Judah said to Onan, 'Go in to your brother's wife, 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 wife 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 also" (Gen. 38:8–10). The biblical penalty for not giving your brother's widow children was public humiliation, not death (Deut. 25:7–10). But Onan received death as punishment for his crime. This means his crime was more than simply not fulfilling the duty of a brother-in-law. He lost his life because he violated natural law, as Jewish and Christian commentators have always understood. For this reason, certain forms of contraception have historically been known as "Onanism," after the man who practiced it, just as homosexuality has historically been known as "Sodomy," after the men of Sodom, who practiced that vice (cf. Gen. 19). Since the principle that contraception is wrong has been established by being condemned when it is mentioned in the Bible, every particular form of contraception does not need to be dealt with in Scripture in order for us to see that it is condemned.

3) Against Apostolic Tradition: It is the belief of the Roman Catholic faith and of many other Christians that Jesus did not leave us with only a book, subject to everyone's personal and sometimes contradictory interpretations, for a source of His Truth, but also established His Church as an authoritative teacher guided by the Holy Spirit. The constant teaching by the Church on a matter of faith and morals is called Tradition. The question of birth control has been raised many times for 19 centuries of Christian life, and the Church has always responded with a firm and universal negative to abortion, sterilization and all forms of unnatural birth control. The encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 simply reaffirmed this universal Tradition. The Biblical teaching that birth control is wrong is found even more explicitly among the Church Fathers, who recognized the principles of Biblical and natural law underlying the condemnation. In AD 195, Clement of Alexandria wrote, "Because of its divine institution for the propagation of man, the seed is not to be vainly ejaculated, nor is it to be damaged, nor is it to be wasted" (*The Instructor of Children* 2:10:91:2). Hippolytus of Rome wrote in AD 255 that "on account of their prominent ancestry and great property, the so-called faithful [certain Christian women who had affairs with male servants] want no children from slaves or lowborn commoners, [so] they use drugs of sterility or bind themselves tightly in order to expel a fetus which has already been

engendered" (*Refutation of All Heresies* 9:12). The First Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council and the one that defined Christ's divinity, declared in AD 325, "If anyone in sound health has castrated himself, it behooves that such a one, if enrolled among the clergy, should cease [from his ministry], and that, from henceforth, no such person should be promoted. But, as it is evident that this is said of those who willfully do the thing and presume to castrate themselves, so if any have been made eunuchs by barbarians, or by their masters, and should otherwise be found worthy, such men this canon admits to the clergy" (Canon 1). Augustine wrote in AD 419, "I am supposing, then, although you are not lying [with your wife] for the sake of procreating offspring, you are not, for the sake of lust, obstructing their procreation by an evil prayer or an evil deed. Those who do this, although they are called husband and wife, are not; nor do they retain any reality of marriage, but with a respectable name cover a shame. Sometimes this lustful cruelty, or cruel lust, comes to this, that they even procure poisons of sterility [oral contraceptives]" (*Marriage and Concupiscence* 1:15:17). The apostolic tradition's condemnation of contraception is so great that it was followed by Protestants until 1930 and was upheld by all key Protestant Reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Wesley.

4) Against the Uninterrupted Teaching of the Church's Magisterium: The Church also, fulfilling the role given it by Christ as the identifier and interpreter of apostolic Scripture and apostolic tradition, has constantly condemned contraception as gravely sinful. In *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI stated, "[W]e must once again declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun, and, above all, directly willed and procured abortion, even if for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as licit means of regulating birth. Equally to be excluded, as the teaching authority of the Church has frequently declared, is direct sterilization, whether perpetual or temporary, whether of the man or of the woman. Similarly excluded is every action which, either 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). This was reiterated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "[E]very 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 is intrinsically evil" (CCC 2370). "Legitimate intentions on the part of the spouses do not justify recourse to morally unacceptable means . . . for example, direct sterilization or contraception" (CCC 2399). The Church also has affirmed that the illicitness of contraception is an infallible doctrine: "The Church has always taught the intrinsic evil of contraception, that is, of every marital act intentionally rendered unfruitful. This teaching is to be held as definitive and irreformable. The Catholic case against contraception is really a

case for respecting sex. It rests not only on the "procreative significance" of intercourse but also on the act's "unitive significance"—its role in bonding the partners—and on values that implicitly reached beyond marriage: reverence, care, affection, love.

Morally Acceptable Methods of Birth Regulation: "If there are serious reasons to space out births, reasons which derive from the physical or psychological conditions of husband and wife, or from external conditions, the Church teaches that it is morally permissible to take into account the natural rhythms of human fertility and to have coitus only during the infertile times in order to regulate conception without offending the moral principles which have been recalled earlier" (*Humanae Vitae*, 16). Thus, the same teaching of the Church which condemns the use of the unnatural methods of birth control explicitly approves of the use of Natural Family Planning when there is a sufficient reason to avoid or postpone pregnancy. With its emphasis on the necessity of a serious reason to use even the natural methods, the Church is warning against selfishness in family planning. In decisions about family size, the married couple "will thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which may be foreseen" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 50).

The Rev. Robert E. Knippenberg, Pastor
Holy Family of JMJ Catholic Church
Victoria, Texas
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