

EDITORIAL : THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND ARTIFICIAL BIRTH CONTROL

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For five years before 1968, Catholics had been led to believe by Vatican watchers and some theologians that the teaching on artificial birth control was about to change. When the Pope's answer finally came out, many did not welcome it. Many still do not.

Without doubt, Pope Paul VI showed great courage in promulgating *Humanae Vitae* when he did. But it also cannot be denied that the Papal teaching was poorly implemented in practice. No serious attempt was made to correct false teachings prior to 1968 and for ten years after the publication of *Humanae vitae*, the Holy Father chose not to elaborate on the teaching or to discipline those theologians who openly dissented. Indeed, when Cardinal O'Boyle of Washington tried to discipline Fr Charles Curran, a theologian who organized public dissent on the issue, he received little support from the Vatican.

From a medical perspective, it also has to be admitted that the promotion of Natural Family Planning was often poorly implemented. Many Catholics remain confused regarding the significant moral difference between the use of NFP and the use of artificial birth control. As the great philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe put it so well in "Contraception and Chastity":

"Contraceptive intercourse and intercourse using infertile times may be alike in respect of further intentions and these further intentions may be good, justified, excellent...But contraceptive intercourse is faulted, not on account of this further intention, but because of the kind of intentional action you are doing. The action is not left by you as the kind of act by which life is transmitted, but is purposely rendered infertile, and so changed to another sort of act altogether."

One of the best works to (in effect) defend the traditional teaching was the book "Contraception" by the legal scholar John Noonan who, interestingly, dissented from the Papal teaching himself. In this work, he showed that the Catholic Church has always been against the use of contraception in marriage. To claim, therefore, that a Pope could change the constant teaching of the Church on this moral issue was to grant him a power that he simply does not possess.

It is sometimes claimed that the Church teaches as *she* does because some Christians believed the male seed to contain a human life, so that a contraceptive act is therefore tantamount to an act of homicide. However, Christians held differing views among themselves about the biology of conception, while remaining united on the rejection of contraception. The Christian rejection of contraception cannot be attributed to a single cause. In the end, the single unifying issue is that contraception separates the unitive from the procreative. And from that has always flowed societal trends towards promiscuity, divorce and illegitimacy.

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Some hope that the Church will change Her mind on this issue. They see the Church's willingness to engage with scientific advancements - the Catholic burial of suicides comes to mind - so why, they ask has the Church not changed on this issue? They do not seem to see that any argument for change permits the separation of the unitive from the procreative and the consequences that that brings.

It is also claimed that the Church was unduly influenced by Augustine's emphasis on the procreative good of the marriage act above other goods. Augustine did indeed emphasize the procreative good because he was an enemy of the Manicheans who believed that procreation was evil. It is also unfair to suggest that Augustine had no interest in marriage apart from its capacity for procreation. In his work "De Bono Conugali," he writes that human beings are born for friendship. From this it follows that marriage must be based on the sure foundation of friendship.

Augustine also described the human body as something holy. Marital intercourse is a sign of the union between husband and wife and thus the unitive and procreative meanings of the marriage act are both always to be respected. He did however say that the sexual instinct is out of joint because of original sin so that there is a tendency for it not to be subject to reason. The widespread tendency towards promiscuity seen in societies which embrace contraception surely proves St Augustine's point. However, when the Pelagian Julian of Ecalanum claimed that Augustine also believed sexual attraction and pleasure to be sinful, Augustine responded: "All these things (sexual attraction and pleasure) are of God."

The teaching of *Humanae Vitae* is not going to change. Indeed, the encyclical ought to be seen as prophetic because the Holy Father warned that the widespread use of artificial birth control would lead to a breakdown in the moral order, the exploitation of women and state mandated population control. All these things have happened. And soon, logically enough, there will be same sex marriage.

As clinicians we are in a position to promote Church teaching and, above all, Natural Family Planning. Research shows that NFP is as effective as the Pill, where modern methods of NFP are used. Such research needs to be out in the public domain.
