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**Married Love and Responsible Parenthood:
Changing the Discussion on the Ethics of Birth Control**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Bachelors of Arts in Theology
at
The College of Saint Benedict
by
Hannah Renner

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Introduction

The Catholic Church is notorious for enforcing a rule-based sex ethic. Seemingly, many couples going through their church's marriage preparation classes are given a list of "do's and don'ts" for the bedroom. This kind of sexual ethic bases itself on a set of rules in order to keep people accountable in fear of scandal.¹ While the Church may come off this way, it intends to teach sexual ethics in the framework of it being good and beautiful in reflection of God's love for humanity. Yet, this fails. This framework fails to effectively teach sexual ethics because the long-standing history of sexual stigmatization is still prevalent and has led people to misunderstand human sexuality itself. Even with some of the Church's recently updated teachings, we do not reiterate the meaning of sex, or the importance of sex, or even the nature of our sexualities. When the Church tries to teach sex as good and beautiful, it only emphasizes the rules rather than sexuality at its very essence. In order for us to ethically practice sex as good and beautiful like the Church intends, we must come to understand human sexuality more fully.

Disclaimer: This proposal is written in the context of heterosexual, marital relations with purpose to shape conscience. Therefore, it is intended to only guide heterosexual, married couples with the intent of family planning purposes in order to limit the number of live births. This proposal does not seek to justify contraception outside of this context such as in cases of premarital sexual relations or extramarital sexual relations.

Church History

There is a very long, winding, complex history to Christian sexual theology and how it has evolved over the centuries, especially in the past few decades. In the first few centuries of Christianity, sex was viewed negatively as wholly evil and the only good thing to ever come out

¹ Marvin Ellison, *Making Love Just* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 4.

of sex is children because pleasure and union were seen as sources of evil in the sexual relationship. The Constantinian empire established what theologian Daniel McGuire calls a “pelvic theology,” in which the Church exploits power to control sex and sexuality.² For a very long time, the Church only saw there to be one end of sex which is procreation.

Consequently, the Church also has a substantial history of condemning contraception. In the 4th century, Augustine reinforced this condemnation by denouncing “poisons of sterility” and equating contraception to homicide; however in later centuries, Aquinas rebutted this claim and instead condemned contraception because it went against nature.³ In the centuries following Aquinas, theologians attempted to justify sexual intercourse without procreation but failed. In the 20th century, these attempts finally started to take root with Popes Pius XI, Paul VI, and John Paul II.

While the Church’s teachings on sexuality still seem outdated and ancient, much to our disbelief, the 20th century marked a time of progressive change in sexual theology. For so long, the Catholic Church taught that procreation was the only end of sex. Then in 1930, Pope Pius XI declared there to be two ends of sex, procreation and union.⁴ While Pius XI still upheld the procreative end as more important than the unitive end, this was a major step forward as the Pope introduced this new end of union to sex. Thereafter, Vatican II occurred in the 1960s and became the first council in all of Church history to address matters on sexual intercourse.⁵ In 1968, Pope Paul VI brought forth *Humanae Vitae* which further changed church teaching. Instead of primary and secondary ends, *Humanae Vitae* points out that there are “two great realities of married

² Ibid, 5.

³ Janet Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 4.

⁴ Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, December 31, 1930.

⁵ John Noonan, “Contraception and the Council,” in *The Catholic Case for Contraception*, ed. Daniel Callahan (Toronto, Ontario: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 5.

life.”⁶ Neither of these two great ends yield more importance because both ends carry equal weight. This is an instance of radical development in Church teaching yet, there were several frustrations on the part of both the clergy and lay people. For example, several bishops and cardinals opposed this development while Father Charles Curran and other theologians devised a statement in opposition to *Humanae Vitae*.⁷ Even Bishop James Shannon of Minneapolis resigned because of his dissenting views on the encyclical. It was not until the later half of the 20th century that we began to see some change in sexual teaching.

After his election to the papacy, John Paul II began to expand on the teachings contained in *Humanae Vitae* through a lecture series which is now titled *Theology of the Body*. John Paul II’s work is rooted in the embodied, anthropological experience of men and women which addresses the real struggles of human beings. He takes on the fundamental inadequacies bred by *Humanae Vitae* to give Catholics an absolute awareness of sexual teaching.⁸ John Paul II presents his work in a “personal language” that “replaced the contractual language” of *Humanae Vitae* so that Catholics could better grasp this absolute awareness.⁹ Topics on his *Theology of the Body* range on all matters of human sexuality including the nature of marriage, contraception, the metaphysical analysis of love, chastity and parenthood, among myriads of other topics. Again, this is another instance of progressive development that occurred in the 20th century. Still, John Paul II’s *Theology of the body* is considered “far from being a breakthrough for modern thought” because it has “little to say to ordinary people” as it lacks “awareness of ordinary life.”¹⁰ While

⁶ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, July 25, 1968, sec. 7.

⁷ Philip Kaufman, *Why You Can Disagree and Remain a Faithful Catholic* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 1-45.

⁸ Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco, CA: William Collins Sons & Co., 1981), 11.

⁹ Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 66.

¹⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, “A Disembodied Theology of the Body: John Paul II on Love, Sex, and Pleasure,” In *Human Sexuality in the Catholic Tradition*, edited by Kieran Scott and Harold Daily Horell. (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 112.

our culture may not appreciate John Paul II's teachings and his *Theology of the Body*, there are several good things that have come out of his work which have further enhanced our ideas of sexuality. For example, *Theology of the Body* taught that men and women are equals, and it also understood sex as a very powerful gift. Therefore, at the current moment in Catholic Church history, our two leading sources on the topic of human sexuality are *Humanae Vitae* and *Theology of the Body*.

Talking about Ethical Sex

Despite such progress, the framework of *Humanae Vitae* and *Theology of the Body* prove to be inadequate as many perceive the teaching of sexuality to center merely around sexual sin and not much else.¹¹ Because we are taught sexual ethics within a framework of rules harping on chastity in the teenage years, we are confused on how to deal with sex and our sexualities. So many Christians grow up in their Church believing that sex is a bad, impure thing which should be avoided because when it is taught, we place it in a box with sin. Even though the Church teaches sexual intercourse to be a “noble and honorable” behavior in the context of marriage,¹² there is still a shame and stigma around sex as if it is something to hide. Furthermore, sex education in our society fails because we are given the facts which have little meaning because they are not presented in a framework of values. The “most important truths about sexuality are about the meaning and value of sexual acts.”¹³ We need to place sex in a box of values equating them to goodness in order for sex education and sexuality to be taught and understood

¹¹ Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 15.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2362.

¹³ Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 51-52.

effectively. Otherwise, this “sex is evil” mentality will carry from child to adulthood and could cause a warped sense of sexuality.¹⁴

The Christian tradition is so centered around sinful sexual acts and each sexual act in itself. The Church teaches sexual ethics as designed by sin instead of teaching sexual ethics as designed by the nature of our human sexualities.¹⁵ Emphasis on sexual values rather than on sexual rules would guide Christians in the formation of their consciences, allowing them to gain a deeper understanding of the two sexual ends, unity and procreation, that the Church upholds. Instead of practicing a rule-based sex ethic relying on fear and guilt, Christians should practice a sex ethic out of honor and respect for our sexualities based on values shared in our Catholic tradition. Instead of one thinking “I can’t do this and I’m not allowed to do that,” one should be saying, “I want to do it this way and should do it that way because I value and respect the gift of sexuality given to me by God.” The only way to get people thinking like this is to change the framework of a rule-based sex ethic with some values to a framework of a value-based sex ethic with some rules. The “most important truths about sexuality are about the meaning and value of sexuality and sexual acts.”¹⁶ Therefore, understanding sexual ethics structured around sexuality would prove to be more effective in teaching sex ethics.

Catholic teaching of sexuality is as follows: God created humans in His own image. In other words, humans were made as basically good creatures, given the ability to reason and choose while reflecting the love of God. God is love so humans are love; therefore, humanity’s vocation is “the capacity and responsibility to love.”¹⁷ To love another is in our human nature and

¹⁴ Callahan, Sidney. “Procreation and Control,” In *The Catholic Case for Contraception*, edited by Daniel Callahan. (Toronto, Ontario: The Macmillan Company, 1969).23

¹⁵ Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 51-52.

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2331.

we can use our gift of sexuality to express a certain kind of love. Human sexuality is an embodied experience gifted by God which carries on great physical and emotional complexity. Sexuality plays quite a sizeable role in the human person as it influences one's capacity to love, to procreate, and to establish relationships with others.¹⁸ Essentially, sexuality is at the very being of who a human person is. Sexuality is a normal part of human nature and it is wholly good; therefore, sexual identity is a gift to be affirmed by every human being.¹⁹

Towards a Value Based Sexual Ethic

Ever since Vatican II the Catholic Church has taught the two ends of sex as “inseparable but equal,” and no longer believe that the procreative end of sex is more important than the unitive end.²⁰ However, is the Church reflective of this teaching today? Are the members of the Church reflective of this as well? It seems as if the Catholic Church still holds the procreative end higher while the members hold the unitive end higher. There is a common agreement among Catholics that a divide exists between Church teaching and the lived, human experience.²¹ We must find a way in which to stress the importance of both ends as equal in a culture that largely seeks out sex centered on self-gratification. If the Church wants Christians to fully embrace both sexual ends and move away from a self-seeking, self-gratifying focus on sex, the Church must “recover” and equally uphold the end of unity within intimacy.²²

Because of the current framework by which the Catholic Church teaches, Christians must assume the responsibility of changing the conversation from a rule-based ethic with some values to a value-based ethic with some rules. A value-based sex ethic would reiterate the

¹⁸ Ibid, 2332.

¹⁹ Ibid, 2333.

²⁰ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*. sec.7.

²¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, “A Disembodied Theology of the Body: John Paul II on Love, Sex, and Pleasure,” 3.

²² Lisa Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1996).

goodness and beauty of sex while it would also highlight the nature and the importance of the gift of human sexuality which the Catholic Church is already trying to accomplish. In the framework of Christian ethical sex based upon sexual values, there are two values we must pursue when understanding sexuality: namely, married love and responsible parenthood.

Married Love

In our current American culture, we recognize love to be an essential part of expressing our sexualities. The Catholic Church appreciates sex “for its power to communicate and enhance intimacy” because it expresses a power for union and a desire for intimacy within marriage.²³ Therefore, the significance of married love is central to the teaching on sexual ethics. God has “cleansed, perfected, and elevated” the sexual act²⁴ within married love so that it might be honorable and virtuous. Sex was created for the union of two spouses to renew their marital promises and unite their bodies as one. Sex is an act, showing reciprocal love, which “contains the abandonment and enjoyment of the whole person and is not simply an isolated activity of the organs.”²⁵ There is a much more meaningful, emotional significance to sexual intercourse rather than merely the accomplishment of procreation and the enjoyment of pleasure, making married love a value to uphold in ethical sex.

Within Catholic Church teaching, one of the rules for ethical sex is that sexual intercourse must occur within the context of marriage. Theologian, Margaret Farley notes that committed love exists within a covenant which reflects this love in its highest form.²⁶ While Farley hints at marriage, she does not explicitly identify a specific covenant. The Church dictates

²³ Lisa Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 47.

²⁴ John Noonan, “Contraception and the Council,” 7.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

²⁶ Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, (New York, NY: Continuum International Publications Group, 2006), 207-215.

that sexual behavior can only take place within the covenant of marriage. This is because true, genuine sexual intercourse can only exist within marriage. All other contexts in which sexual intercourse occurs is a falsity of the real and proper act.²⁷ Therefore, to honor and respect the nature of sexual intercourse, marriage is one necessary rule which must always be followed to uphold the value of married love and thus engage in ethical sex.

Love calls for intimacy, and the intimacy that married love calls for is usually sexual intimacy. “Sexual expression” is a term often used by the Catholic Church to teach sexual ethics, yet theologian Lisa Cahill brings to light that “sexual intimacy” is the more appropriate phrase as it creates a “practical reality within the limits of the human condition”.²⁸ In Cahill’s mind, sexual intimacy is genital intimacy and genital intimacy is a practice that should be carried out but is sometimes impossible to achieve under all circumstances, like in the case of an impotent person. While certain sexual behaviors might not be possible, there is still an expression of intimacy used in married relationships so a more appropriate term for the practice of intimacy in marriage would be “relational intimacy” rather than “genital intimacy.” There are other physical ways to express sexual love and pleasure such as cuddling, hand-holding, and hugging, just to name a few. Therefore, rather than applying a practice of sexual or genital intimacy that excludes a group of people as Cahill suggests, we should embrace a practice of relational intimacy in our sexual ethics. The practice of relational intimacy encompasses an act of closeness and a maintenance of an emotional connection.

In accordance with relational intimacy, there are two other practices that follow including mutuality and equality, and self-giving which serve as important ingredients in the flourishing of married love. Part of acknowledging sexual identity is the practice of mutuality by recognizing

²⁷ Janet Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, 85.

²⁸ Lisa Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 70.

the differences between the male and female sexualities. While there are physical, emotional, and spiritual sexual differences between men and women, and the two sexes experience their sexualities in different ways, they are oriented towards each other in that their differences lead to complementarity in their sexual relationship.²⁹ Because the sexes are different but complete each other's differences through mutuality, both sexes share equal dignity. This equality is rooted in the belief that the covenant of marriage is a "one-flesh" union in which two individuals are joined together in a union as one person.³⁰ The two partners in the sexual relationship are equals. Neither partner has more or less power than the other partner. Thus there is a practice of mutuality and equality within the value of married love which also relates to the practice of self-giving.

Because man and woman are created differently but complement each other in a one flesh union, there must be total self-giving to uphold the value of married love. Self-giving is the most prominent good of marriage,³¹ and it is a practice that strengthens the value of married love. John Paul II believes that we exist as a "communion of persons" in which we ascribe to each other through the gift of self-giving where we must genuinely care about the other person.³² Genuine love and genuine care out of self-giving for another is an act of sacrifice where we surrender our will for the good of another which is reflected through Christ's death on the cross. Self-giving is an "open embrace" in which both partners in the marriage "withhold nothing from each other"³³ because Christ withheld nothing from us. This is the power that married love contains.

²⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2333.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 2335.

³¹ Julie Rubio, "Beyond the Liberal/Conservative Divide on Contraception: The Wisdom of Practitioners of Natural Family Planning and Artificial Birth Control." *Horizons* 32, no. 02 (2005): 279.

³² Jennifer Bader, "Engaging the Struggle: John Paul II on Personhood and Sexuality," In *Human Sexuality in the Catholic Tradition*, edited by Kieran Scott and Harold Daily Horell. (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 93-94.

³³ Julie Rubio, "Beyond the Liberal/Conservative Divide on Contraception: The Wisdom of Practitioners of Natural Family Planning and Artificial Birth Control." 279.

Furthermore, the two ways that we can affect mutual self-giving are the giving of fertility and the giving of pleasure.

Oftentimes, there is this trend among Catholics to believe that sexual pleasure is evil and sinful which is rooted in the natural law approach teaching that sex is only ordered to procreation. However, going off the natural law approach, we can see that sex is also ordered to pleasure. While the male orgasm might be life-giving, a female orgasm is not needed in order for conception to occur because the function of the female clitoris is for pleasure only. Because God created women with an organ whose only purpose is for pleasure, we see that clitoral placement follows the natural law approach and reflects God's will of sex not only for procreation but for pleasure as well.³⁴ Pleasure is not evil nor sinful but is normative and needed for self-giving in a sexual relationship. While some people cannot experience sexual pleasure as noted above, it is important to give pleasure when it is possible.

While pleasure is part of God's divine will for sex, the teaching and importance of pleasure is often neglected in theology. From Church we learn all about the rules of sex but nothing about how to have pleasurable sex. Yet, pleasurable sex allows for the strengthening of the marital union. Sexual pleasure is good; it allows us to be vulnerable, to open ourselves up, and to trust, helping us better relate to our partners.³⁵ We must also recognize that in many cases sex is only about seeking pleasure for self and does not seek to give pleasure, to give life or to enhance any type of union out of self-giving. Total self-giving needs to be a mutual, simultaneous act of surrendering, so as to eliminate any power or gender inequalities, to ensure neither partner becomes an object or a slave to the other.³⁶ Selfishness can spring out of sexual

³⁴ Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 65.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 109.

³⁶ Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 99.

pleasure and lead us to concentrate on our own satisfaction while we might neglect and wrongly use our partners.³⁷ We must be careful and direct our sexual pleasure not for self-gratification but for the good of the relationship. When we seek pleasure from sex that is not open to life or open to the other sexual partner, the gift of sex is then misused and we end up treating our partner like an object or a slave. Nonetheless, we must not limit self-giving in the sexual relationship only to the giving of fertility but also to the giving of pleasure for the benefit of our marriages and the fulfillment of married love.

Sexual intercourse to express sexuality is always good as long as it occurs within the context for which it was made and because God ordered sex for a specific purpose, we must fulfill this ordering so as not to misuse God's gift. Sex is ordered to an obligation of fecundity and fidelity and these ends cannot be separated as it would harm the goods of marriage and the spiritual lives of the couple.³⁸ It is important for us to uphold the sexual act as God intends because sex is not ours and it is not a right. Sex is a privilege and a gift in which God as master of sex has designed humans to be ministers of this gift. It is important to note there is nothing wrong or sinful in seeking pleasure from sex as long as the ends of fidelity and fecundity are present. Sexual pleasure becomes sinful when one seeks sex for the sake of pleasure itself, severing the act's procreative and unitive ends.³⁹

Responsible Parenthood

Responsible parenthood is a value of notable importance in *Humanae Vitae* which defines it as:

a husband and wife who "recognize their own duties towards God, themselves, their families, and human society" with "an awareness of, and respect for, the proper [biological processes];" where "reason and will must exert control over [sexual drives];" and is "exercised

³⁷ Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 83.

³⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2363.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 2351.

by those who... decide to have more children, and by those who, for serious reasons and with due respect to moral precepts, decide not to have additional children...”⁴⁰

In fact, *Human Vitae* stresses the duty of responsible parenthood over procreation so that the intention to procreate and the action of sex are separable from each other so long as the biological sexual structure is preserved.⁴¹ Therefore, using contraception to practice the value of responsible parenthood is permissible in the Catholic Church, however there are unethical ways (means) to uphold responsible parenthood (ends) as the Church teaches “the ends do not justify the means.” In other words, it is very important that the way we uphold responsible parenthood is practiced carefully and ethically in ways which preserve the biological structure of the sexual act.

What does “preservation of the biological act” even mean? Neither, *Humanae Vitae*, nor the Church, explicitly define this preservation nor do they leave us with much direction. However, it is universal knowledge that sexual intercourse is biologically ordered to procreation as it is the only natural way to procreate. On a biological basis in the way that biology is ordered, procreation includes two processes: 1. insertion of the male genitals into the female genitals, ending with male ejaculation inside the woman and 2. fertility of both the male and female reproductive systems left intact and unchanged by human intervention. Therefore, the Catholic Church may argue that preservation of the biological processes in the sexual act means male climax inside the female genitalia as well as leaving fertility fully intact the way that it naturally is. While preserving the biological act seems more like a rule rather than a practice, it is a rule that we must honor in upholding responsible parenthood.

⁴⁰ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, sec. 10.

⁴¹ Lisa Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 51.

In a sexual relationship honoring the value of responsible parenthood, both partners are called to the practice of sharing sexual responsibility upon the principles of mutuality and equality. The traditional interpretation of sex often times sees one person, usually the man, as active, and one person, usually the woman, as passive.⁴² This practice renders power inequalities in a sexual relationship leading to an imbalance of shared responsibility out of the disrespect of the sexual natures of both partners. However, throughout his papacy, John Paul II consistently reaffirmed the equal dignity and respect for the sexualities of both man and woman in marriage along with a recognition of mutuality.⁴³ In order to celebrate this embodied truth of sexualities, man and woman must share the responsibility of making sexual decisions using principles of mutuality and equality. Oftentimes, our culture goes against this equality and enforces gender roles by placing the responsibility of contraception on one person and that person is usually the woman. However, shared responsibility works to transcend the limits of gender roles and power inequalities by calling for a mutual responsibility that reflects the equality of both partners in a sexual relationship. Therefore, in a relationship where both partners sincerely reflect mutuality and equality both take on the contraceptive responsibility together, consequently upholding responsible parenthood for Christian, ethical sex.

Because sex is ordered to procreation, the Church encourages married couples to carry on the responsibility of regulating births through the practice of responsible parenthood so as to recognize the importance of fertility. Responsible parenthood calls for the spacing or prolonging of the birth of children, not out of selfish motives but out of motives that would contribute to the well-being of the family and society.⁴⁴ Regulating births is one way to practice responsible

⁴² Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, (New York, NY: Continuum International Publications Group, 2006), 207-215.

⁴³ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, November 22, 1981. sec.19.

⁴⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2368.

parenthood. However, The Church states that responsible parenthood cannot ever be used as an excuse to justify the use of artificial contraception.⁴⁵

In addition to preservation of the biological processes and sharing responsibility, the value of responsible parenthood also calls for the practice of fruitfulness. The real fruit of love extends beyond just the married couple and opens up to a community much bigger than just themselves. If the love between two persons encloses upon themselves, that love would then “violate” their relationality because all interpersonal love is meant to be fruitful.⁴⁶ The nature of all love is to yield fruitfulness so that something greater, something fruitful and invigorating, may blossom from it.

Current Catholic teaching reduces sexuality and the value of fruitfulness to merely the transmission of life and we therefore fail to see the other ways fruitfulness can bless the marriage and the sexual relationship. It is important that we recognize how our sexual desires and passions contribute to the good of our relationships and the “life-giving and sustaining” properties of married love by means of parenting, the building up of our communities, and the betterment of our world.⁴⁷ Fruitfulness includes “the rearing of children, the initiation of new generations into a culture and civilization, and the ongoing building of the human community.”⁴⁸ We must approach the value of fruitfulness within sexuality as multimodal where love can prosper through many means which are not exclusively limited to making a baby and giving birth. Not all people are called to procreation, such as the vowed religious and infertile persons. However, all people are called to be fruitful in the way they exert their love through transcendence of self in

⁴⁵ Ibid, 2399.

⁴⁶ Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 227.

⁴⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, “A Disembodied Theology of the Body: John Paul II on Love, Sex, and Pleasure,” 118.

⁴⁸ Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 227.

illuminating a fruitfulness of charity, hospitality and sacrifice.⁴⁹ Fruitfulness as a practice is what brings meaning to the sexual relationship, not procreation, and thus upholds the value of responsible parenthood.

Interlude

The Catholic Church defines “intrinsic evil” as an act contrary to nature and is always opposed to the authentic good of persons.⁵⁰ An intrinsically evil act is immoral by its very nature. It is always bad. It is always sinful. It is never good. It is never acceptable. One such act the Catholic Church recognizes as intrinsically evil is the use of artificial contraception. Pius XII stated “no reason for however grave may be put forward” as an excuse to use the intrinsically evil act of artificial contraception.⁵¹ No circumstances can cause this act to become moral or acceptable.

The Catholic Church has essentially deemed all artificial contraceptives intrinsically evil. The Catholic Church may even argue the point that all artificial contraceptives are equated to each other on the same moral basis. In fact, John Paul II treats contraception to hold the same moral ground as abortion and sterilization.⁵² However, Vincent Genovesi points out that all artificial contraceptives are not morally equated to each other, but are in fact very morally different. He says:

“My intention here is to indicate, among other things, that not all the methods and devices employed in an attempt to avoid procreation have the same status in terms of moral evaluation... They must therefore be judged accordingly.”⁵³

⁴⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1564.

⁵⁰ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, August 6, 1993. sec. 79-80.

⁵¹ Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*.

⁵² Philip Kaufman, *Why You Can Disagree and Remain a Faithful Catholic*, 51.

⁵³ Vincent Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 206.

Genovesi proves that some contraceptives are more or less inferior to others in regards to their morality. Their morality is based on each of their individual mechanisms with the prevention of life, and sometimes even in the destruction of life. In order to effectively evaluate the moral differences of available contraceptive methods, we must ask ourselves: Is this method temporary or permanent? If it is permanent is it reversible? Is the method in place to directly prevent conception or is it preventing conception as an indirect consequence in using the method for a different reason (i.e. therapeutic means)? Is the method natural or unnatural? Does the method prevent ovulation or does it prevent implantation or both (what is the exact mechanism)? Does the method contain an abortifacient potential?

There are several controversies surrounding the ethics and morals of contraception, even within the marital bed of two freely consenting spouses. However, there has not been much discourse on the topic of contraception among theologians in the past twenty years; nor has there been much discussion on the topic of contraception within the Holy See since Pope John Paul II. We seem to have come to a dead-end with *Theology of the Body* and need some updated direction. Yet, contraception is still a prevalent ethical issue not only among followers of Roman Catholicism, but also within the context of national and global politics. These ethical issues related to contraception must be addressed.

Before delving into a discussion on the ethics of birth control and contraception, something must be made very clear. There is nothing wrong nor immoral with not wanting a child or not wanting a pregnancy.⁵⁴ This idea of thinking is something many Catholics are tricked into. In fact, *Humanae Vitae* encourages us to practice responsible parenthood through contraception when it is needed. While preventing pregnancy must be done for “serious reasons”

⁵⁴ So long as the reasons are not selfish.

as *Humanae Vitae* teaches, the better and truer translation of the Latin phrase into English is “just reasons”.⁵⁵ The Catholic Church does not come out and define what these “just” reasons are, allowing the couple to make judgements and decide for themselves based on their duties to each other, to their family, to God, and to society.

This mistake in thinking allows people to see no moral difference between natural and artificial methods of contraception. The intention of couples who use either artificial or natural methods is one and the same; it is to prevent conception, to prevent pregnancy, to prevent having a baby.⁵⁶ Again, there is nothing wrong with wanting to prevent conception. Even Lisa Cahill notes, “the intention to procreate is...separable from sexual acts as long the biological structure is preserved.”⁵⁷ from There is nothing wrong with using contraception to prevent pregnancy. In approving the use of natural contraceptive methods *Humanae Vitae* states:

“It cannot be denied that in each case... both [artificial and natural practitioners are] perfectly clear in their intention to avoid children and wish to make sure that none will result.”⁵⁸

However, the way that couples go about this intention is what the Catholic Church finds problematic. Practitioners of both methods want to achieve the same end, but the ends do not justify their means. Theologian Janet Smith wonderfully illustrates:

“Two men may wish to support their families and thus both have identical ends for their actions. But one chooses to get a job and another chooses to rob a bank. Clearly, one has chosen moral means to his end; the other has chosen immoral means.”⁵⁹

The Catholic Church sees that the intention of contracepting is okay, but the only moral way to achieve this end is through natural contraceptive means.

⁵⁵ Janet Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, 120.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 119.

⁵⁷ Lisa Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 51.

⁵⁸ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, sec. 16.

⁵⁹ Janet Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, 120.

Methods of Contraception

Natural Family Planning

There are several different methods of contraception that are considered “natural” and are therefore acceptable by the Catholic Church. These natural contraceptive methods include both the Rhythm method and the Fertility Awareness method. Often times the Fertility Awareness method is quickly dismissed because many people believe it is the same as the Rhythm method. Take note, the Fertility Awareness method and the Rhythm method are distinct from each other in several ways. The Rhythm method is the oldest natural family planning method that includes use of periodic abstinence. It is also the most ineffective method at preventing unintended pregnancies; it has a high failure rate.⁶⁰ In practice of this method, the woman uses a calendar system to predict her ovulation date based on her menstruation date. The couple would then periodically abstain from sexual intercourse on her fertile days based on her predictions.⁶¹ The Rhythm method generalizes all women as having the same exact cycles and ovulation dates. In actuality, the length of each cycle and ovulation date varies from woman to woman based on factors including individual differences, lifestyles, and health.⁶² While this method was largely used in the past, it is unreliable as it is not firmly based in science like the Fertility Awareness method.

The Fertility Awareness method includes several different models including the Basal Body Temperature model, the Cervical Mucus model, the Symptothermal model, and the Marquette model, among others. Similar to the Rhythm method, the Fertility Awareness models

⁶⁰ “Quick Reference Guide for Clinicians: Choosing a Birth Control Method” Association of Reproductive Health Professionals, updated June, 2014. <http://www.arhp.org/Publications-and-Resources/Quick-Reference-Guide-for-Clinicians/choosing/failure-rates-table>

⁶¹ Adele Pillitteri, *Maternal and Child Health Nursing: Care of the Childbearing & Child Rearing Family* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2014), 114.

⁶² Aharon Zorea, *Health & Medical Issues Today: Birth Control* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2012), 5.

also predict ovulation so that a couple may periodically abstain during fertile days.⁶³ However, these models are specific to the individual woman and work to detect ovulation rather than merely predicting it. The Fertility Awareness method requires daily monitoring of physical signs which will indicate fertile days or non-fertile days. While each model is a little different from the other, the general goal of these models is to monitor for one or more signs of fertility which includes: measuring basal temperatures, monitoring cervical mucus, and/or noting the height, openness, and firmness of the cervix.⁶⁴ Compared to the Rhythm method, and some artificial methods, Fertility Awareness method models have lower rates of unintended pregnancy at 0.4-5% (average = 3%) based on which model is used.⁶⁵

Natural Family Planning is a contraceptive method that entirely preserves the biological processes of the sexual act because male climax occurs inside the female and fertility is left intact. Unlike many other contraceptive methods, NFP is the use of human intelligence in a way that acts with nature rather than acting against nature.⁶⁶ NFP also calls for the shared contraceptive responsibility between partners. While the female usually takes charge in monitoring signs and tracking her fertility, both partners must periodically abstain to prevent pregnancy. Both partners must periodically sacrifice sexual relations and both partners must make this decision together therefore, it does not insist on gender roles nor does it promote power inequalities.

Because Natural Family Planning calls for the shared responsibility of abstinence, practices of mutuality and equality are applied. Most importantly, with periodic abstinence there

⁶³ Adele Pillitteri, *Maternal and Child Health Nursing: Care of the Childbearing & Child Rearing Family*, 114.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ “Quick Reference Guide for Clinicians: Choosing a Birth Control Method” Association of Reproductive Health Professionals.

⁶⁶ Janet Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, 120-121.

is a mutual knowledge of both partners fertility systems and an understanding of how each person contributes to the formation of new life. Because humans were given dominion on Earth, humans have the ability to control their fertilities through knowledge of the human body and the potential for procreation.⁶⁷ NFP encourages its practitioners to a full awareness of body and fertility where many ABC practitioners sometimes blindly accept their chosen method of birth control with little knowledge of how fertility operates or how their method works to prevent pregnancy. NFP is always fruitful because this method allows for the love to extend beyond the couple. While a couple may be using this method to contracept, fertility is never suppressed but is left open. Additionally, NFP is the only birth control method that can help users achieve pregnancy as thus it is a “true method of family planning.”⁶⁸ Because NFP and ABC have the same goal of preventing pregnancy, many find there to be no difference between them.

It is in total self-giving that we see the biggest difference between natural and artificial methods. Arguably, total self-giving manifests itself only in the natural family planning (NFP) methods and not in any of the artificial birth control (ABC) methods. While all contraceptive methods, including NFP, are used with the intent to prevent conception, NFP still allows for total self-giving of fertility. There is a common, false assumption where the giving of fertility is equated with making no attempt to contracept. In other words, if one is totally giving their fertility to his or her partner, there can be no action done with the intention to prevent pregnancy. This would then mean that even NFP does not encompass the total giving of fertility. Yet, theologian Janet Smith shows there is nothing wrong with the intention to prevent pregnancy as long as it is done within moral means.⁶⁹ Therefore, the giving of fertility is not withholding use

⁶⁷ Callahan, Sidney. “Procreation and Control,” 48.

⁶⁸ Janet Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, 120-121.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

of contraception. That would mean any couple who is having sex with the intention of unity is not self-giving. How can there be any unity without self-giving? Rather, the “giving of fertility” is fertility that is uninhibited, meaning that fertility is not suppressed. To suppress fertility is to suppress the “inner truth of sexual love”.⁷⁰ In this way, NFP enforces total giving of self even when used as a contraceptive means because fertility is not in any way suppressed. Natural Family Planning leaves fertility intact and untouched.

Opponents of NFP will mainly argue that sexual intimacy, not relational intimacy, is hindered and therefore all intimacy is hindered. On one hand, uncertainty about correct documentation and calculation can cause anxieties about potential, unintended pregnancies. Thus this could ruin the comfortability needed for the sexual act which may frustrate closeness and hinder full expression of intimacy.⁷¹ This is a real and embodied experience of many couples who practice NFP. During sexual intercourse, their thoughts could be focused on fear of pregnancy out of lack of confidence in charting which could hinder their self-giving union and thus their sexual intimacy. Yet opponents of NFP focus too much on the hindrance of genital intimacy and not on the hindrance of relational intimacy. For example, opponents of NFP will argue that intimacy is disturbed and interrupted with periodic abstinence. Opponents of NFP commonly believe that sex is needed to express intimacy and maintain the relationship thus sex should be available at all times⁷² because abstinence could endanger a desire for mutual union and kill off any desire for sexual intimacy. This is a weak argument. Short periods of abstinence are not long enough to kill the desire for unity.⁷³ Periodic abstinence would not endanger the

⁷⁰ Julie Rubio, “Beyond the Liberal/Conservative Divide on Contraception: The Wisdom of Practitioners of Natural Family Planning and Artificial Birth Control.” 279.

⁷¹ Callahan, Sidney. “Procreation and Control,” 60.

⁷² Julie Rubio, “Beyond the Liberal/Conservative Divide on Contraception: The Wisdom of Practitioners of Natural Family Planning and Artificial Birth Control.” 283.

⁷³ Callahan, Sidney. “Procreation and Control,” 57.

relationship. In fact, periodic abstinence through NFP proves to be beneficial to the fruition of marriages as NFP has shown to increase levels of self-esteem, enhance men's growing knowledge and respect for their wives, and decrease divorce rates.⁷⁴ Additionally, the solace of sexual intimacy is "most needed when least available" in trying times such as disease, separation, loss, and death.⁷⁵ From these cases we learn that sexual intimacy is not something always readily available to us, yet relational intimacy can still take hold.⁷⁶ Relational intimacy can be expressed in a plethora of other ways outside of genital intimacy. Supporters of NFP will insist that overall intimacy is actually enhanced as love can be communicated in ways which are not only limited to sex.⁷⁷ Even though this contraceptive method requires periodic abstinence, there are other ways of communicating love with a higher focus on the relational rather than the genital intimacy.

Withdrawal

The withdrawal method is one of the many forms of contraception that the Church finds to be unacceptable, where male climax occurs outside of his partner's body. At the same time, artificial practitioners find this form ineffective. This method is not commonly used as the sole form of contraception due to a high pregnancy rate of 22% with typical use.⁷⁸ Many people use this method in conjunction with another method to ensure a lower failure rate. On the contrary, and like the Catholic Church, many natural contraceptive practitioners dismiss this method altogether considering it an artificial method. Because of this middle ground, the discussion

⁷⁴ Julie Rubio, "Beyond the Liberal/Conservative Divide on Contraception: The Wisdom of Practitioners of Natural Family Planning and Artificial Birth Control." 286-287.

⁷⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, "A Disembodied Theology of the Body: John Paul II on Love, Sex, and Pleasure," 117.

⁷⁶ Practicing sex on demand leads us to believe that sex is our right and our entitlement, not a privilege, which has led to several social injustices like sexual assault and sex trafficking.

⁷⁷ Julie Rubio, "Beyond the Liberal/Conservative Divide on Contraception: The Wisdom of Practitioners of Natural Family Planning and Artificial Birth Control." 283.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

surrounding the ethics of the withdrawal method is lacking with little substance and weak arguments. Is the withdrawal method all that artificial though? Could it ever be considered a natural method?

The withdrawal method, also called *coitus interruptus*, does not require anything to be put on or in the man nor on or in the woman. Withdrawing prior to male climax is not a human-made invention. Rather, this method is taking advantage of what the body can do naturally and therefore many people see it as nature's own form of contraception. If the male body has the ability to withdraw before ejaculation, some ask why not take advantage of that like like Natural Family Planning users do with abstaining during infertile periods? Seemingly, the withdrawal method is a natural method.

During the marital act in which a couple uses withdrawal, the man's attention is not fixated on total self-giving and mutuality between him and the woman. Rather, the man is fixated on withdrawing just before the moment of climax while the woman may be distracted, hoping the man withdraws in time.⁷⁹ This selfish fixation detracts from maintaining intimacy and total gift of self because the focus of the sexual act is not on the elevation of unity but rather on thoughts of anxiety, distraction, and self-pleasure. Furthermore, intimacy is neglected because it is as if there is closeness happening during the sexual act and then at the last moment that closeness and that intimacy is discontinued before completion, almost as if the intimacy being provided before was being taken back. Consequently, the marital act between these two people can leave them with feelings of dissatisfaction and superficial intimacy which therefore hinders the value of married love.

⁷⁹ Vincent Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, 209.

Additionally, *Humanae Vitae* teaches any action “either before, at the moment of, or after” the sexual act which is “intended to prevent procreation” is an unlawful form of birth control and thus sinful.⁸⁰ While some argue this method is completely natural with no human-made inventions, withdrawal impedes the natural act of sexual intercourse and the preservation of the biological processes of the act because male ejaculation occurs outside the female’s body. How natural is it to interrupt your sex act so that ejaculation can occur someplace else? Even though the fertility of the reproductive systems is left intact and unchanged, the withdrawal method ends with ejaculation outside of the woman’s body, or with no ejaculation at all, which therefore frustrates the nature of the sexual act and the preservation of the biological processes.

Whether the withdrawal method is fruitful or not is debatable. Some may argue that this form has such a high pregnancy rate that users of this method are more likely to conceive and are thus being fruitful in a way of which something greater comes of it. On the other hand, others may argue this form has such a high pregnancy rate that users might practice it carelessly and are thus irresponsible in being fruitful. Additionally, there is little intimacy involved with this method and since intimate love calls for fruitfulness, is there then any love to share?

When discussing the ethics of the withdrawal method, it is also important to note only one person carries the contraceptive responsibility, and that is always the man. One person is always passive and the other is always active. The withdrawal method does not transcend the limits of gender roles contrary to popular belief that artificial contraceptives always transcend the limits of gender roles when compared with natural contraceptive methods.⁸¹ The withdrawal method is completely and totally dependent on the power of the man in the marital act and even

⁸⁰ Paul IV, *Humanae Vitae*. sec. 16.

⁸¹ Julie Rubio, “Beyond the Liberal/Conservative Divide on Contraception: The Wisdom of Practitioners of Natural Family Planning and Artificial Birth Control.” 287.

with limited communication, there is no way of passing or sharing the responsibility to or with the woman. Therefore, the practice of shared responsibility is not utilized in this method and in combination with lack of preservation of the biological processes and lack of fruitfulness, the withdrawal method does not uphold the value of responsible parenthood.

Another argument often used by some Christians is the Biblical story in which God killed Onan in the Old Testament, therefore finding the withdrawal method sinful. In Levirate law, when a married man dies without ever having children, his brother is required to procreate with the man's wife in order to bear children for the dead man's lineage and name.⁸² The book of Genesis 38:8-10 states:

“Judah said to Onan, ‘Have intercourse with your brother’s wife, in fulfillment of your duty as brother-in-law, and thus preserve your brother’s line.’ Onan, however, knew that the offspring would not be his; so whenever he had intercourse with his brother’s wife, he wasted his seed on the ground, to avoid giving offspring to his brother. What he did greatly offended the Lord, and the Lord took his life too.”⁸³

Many scholars and theologians argue God took the life of Onan for refusing to follow Levirate law. In the footnotes of the New American Bible, it only mentions that God punished Onan for his refusal to follow the law.⁸⁴ Additionally, Biblical interpreters present Onan's sin as a selfish motive in refusing to give his brother's widow offspring, and the punishment is not in any way related to the contraceptive method Onan used.⁸⁵ Other theologians beg to differ. They believe God took the life of Onan for using the withdrawal method by claiming that the punishment for refusing to carry on a dead brother's lineage is described in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. “The elders shall go up to him and strip his sandal from his foot and spit in his face.”⁸⁶ In

⁸² John Kippley, “The Sin of Onan: Is it Relevant to Contraception?,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, (2007).

⁸³ Gen. 38: 8-10 NAB

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Brian Harrison, “The Sin of Onan Revisited,” *Living Tradition*, November, 1996.

<http://www.rtforum.org/lt/lt67.html>

⁸⁶ Deut. 25:5-10 NAB

their method of reductionism, these theologians realize “stripping of the sandal” and “spitting in his face” would have been the punishment for Onan for refusing his brother any children. Since Onan was not punished this way, it can only mean God killed him for using the method of withdrawal.⁸⁷ While the magisterium recognizes this story in opposition to the withdrawal method, it does not serve as sufficient enough evidence alone to determine whether this method is moral or immoral as it could be translated in different ways.

Because the withdrawal method can hinder both the values of married love and responsible parenthood in the sexual relationship, it leaves sexual intercourse completely devoid of any meaning or purpose. Some may even consider the withdrawal method to be the most unnatural of all contraceptive methods since it leaves the sex act “[in violation of] the physiological and psychological integrity.”⁸⁸ What then, is the point of having sex when neither value is met? Most importantly, if this method hinders both ends, does that make this specific sex act any less immoral?

Hormonal Methods

Hormonal methods are a widely prevalent choice of contraception in American culture. It is in most cases financially affordable, easily accessible, convenient, and not disruptive of sexual activity. The pregnancy rate of women who use hormonal pills is 9% with typical use and the average pregnancy rate of all hormonal methods is 4.33% with typical use.⁸⁹ It can also be used not just for contraceptive purposes but also for therapeutic reasons and it is seemingly everywhere. Recent data states 1.5 million women are using oral contraceptives solely for the

⁸⁷ John Kippley, “The Sin of Onan: Is it Relevant to Contraception?,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ “Quick Reference Guide for Clinicians: Choosing a Birth Control Method” Association of Reproductive Health Professionals.

purpose of non-contraceptive purposes for treating conditions like irregular menstrual cycles, acne, and endometriosis.⁹⁰

There are several different types and routes of hormonal methods including intramuscular injections, subdermal implants, transdermal patches, intra-vaginal devices and intrauterine devices in addition to oral contraceptives, which are also referred to as “the pill.” Despite the fact that there are so many different routes and so many women using hormonal methods, are these women actually aware of how exactly the hormonal method works in their bodies? Within hormonal oral contraceptives, there are two types of pills used. These two pills are progestin-only pills and estrogen/progestin combination pills. There are three particular functions that both these pills and all hormonal methods implement in the prevention of pregnancy.

Firstly, the pills work to prevent pregnancy by producing thick uterine secretions which “discourages” the sperm from reaching the ovum because the density interferes with the sperm’s ability to penetrate through the secretions.⁹¹ The thicker the secretions are, the less mobile the sperm are. Secondly, the pills work to prevent pregnancy by suppressing ovulation.⁹² When an ovum does not ovulate the sperm cannot fertilize it because the cell is not mature enough. Thirdly, to the surprise of many people, the pills work to prevent pregnancy by inhibiting the implantation of an already fertilized embryo by making uterine conditions less favorable so that the pregnancy cannot continue.⁹³ If the sperm are not hindered by the thick secretions and the egg does in fact ovulate, then fertilization of the ovum by the sperm will occur to produce a viable human embryo. At this point, contraception has already been achieved so instead of the

⁹⁰ Rebecca Wind, “Many American Women Use Birth Control Pills for Noncontraceptive Reasons,” The Guttmacher Institute. November 15, 2011. <https://www.guttmacher.org/news-release/2011/many-american-women-use-birth-control-pills-noncontraceptive-reasons>

⁹¹ Adams, Michael. *Pharmacology for Nurses: a Pathophysiologic Approach*, (United States: Pearson Education, 2017), 786.

⁹² *Ibid*, 785.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 785-786.

pills working as a contraceptive to prevent conception, the pill acts as an abortifacient and is thus both a contraceptive and a birth control method.⁹⁴

While both pills carry out all three functions and have similar pathophysiologies, they do have slight differences which impact each of their moralities. For example, progestin-only pills are more likely to interfere with sperm mobility and prevent implantation and are less likely to stop ovulation.⁹⁵ Therefore, the progestin-only pills bring up the moral problem of temporary sterilization. On the other hand, the estrogen/progestin combination pills are more likely to prevent implantation and are less likely to interfere with sperm mobility and ovulation.⁹⁶ Therefore, the estrogen/progestin pills bring up the moral problem of abortifacient potential. Regardless of which pill is more likely to cause what, both pills have the potential to both temporarily sterilize and abort.

The abortifacient potential of hormonal contraceptives is a widely debated topic. There are several medical professionals, government agencies, and pharmaceutical corporations that state hormonal contraceptives cannot induce abortion or miscarriage. They are partially true. The Guttmacher Institute states:

“ A contraceptive method, by definition, prevents pregnancy by interfering with ovulation, fertilization or implantation. Abortion ends an established pregnancy, after implantation.”⁹⁷

These organizations define abortion as ending a pregnancy and they define pregnancy as occurring after implantation of the embryo into the uterine lining, therefore these organizations

⁹⁴ Birth Control is limiting the number of live births. Contraception is limiting the number of conceptions.

⁹⁵ Vincent Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 211.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Joerg Dreweke, “Contraception Is Not Abortion: The Strategic Campaign of Antiabortion Groups to Persuade the Public Otherwise,” The Guttmacher Institute. December 9, 2014.

<https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2014/12/contraception-not-abortion-strategic-campaign-antiabortion-groups-persuade-public>.

do shed some truth. Yet, these organizations do not define life or when life begins, or what hormonal contraceptives do to the life, therefore these organizations promote false ideas. In theory, these organizations believe that life does not begin until implantation but science says life begins at conception. For something to be considered life, it must show 4 characteristics: cells and metabolism, responsiveness, growth, and reproduction.⁹⁸ At conception, the zygote has cells and uses chemical energy, responds to the environment and stimuli, undergoes the process of growth, and can asexually reproduce cells.

In the mid-1960s, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists redefined pregnancy from “starting at fertilization” to “starting at implantation” because pregnancy could not be detected before implantation.⁹⁹ This happened after the United States created a health document which defined abortion as the termination of life from the point of fertilization up until the point of birth.¹⁰⁰ However, today’s scientists and doctors are able to detect pregnancy prior to implantation,¹⁰¹ so should organizations now come out with a new definition of abortion that takes into account this progressive discovery of women’s health? While these organizations can use various words, definitions, and get caught up in technicalities of what abortion and pregnancy “actually” are, they fail to get at the main idea and the truth being hormonal contraceptives can cause termination of a viable and already existing human life.

Because hormonal methods contain an abortifacient potential, hormonal methods for the purpose of birth control should never be considered fruitful because abortion is never fruitful.

The termination of an already existing human life opposes exactly what the value of fruitfulness

98 Bailey Rodriguez, “What Are the 4 Characteristics Biologists Use to Recognize Living Things?” Sciencing. April 30, 2018. <https://sciencing.com/4-use-recognize-living-things-8464464.html>.

99 College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, “Terms Used in Reference to the Fetus,” *Terminology Bulletin* 1 (Philadelphia: Davis, September 1965).

100 Public Health Service Leaflet no. 1066, U.S. Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare (1963), 27.

101 Shu-Juan Cheng, et al., “Early Pregnancy Factor in Cervical Mucus of Pregnant Women,” *American Journal of Reproductive Immunology* 51:2 (February 2004), 102–105.

represents. Some people may argue that fruitfulness can still be accomplished through other means, yet how can destruction of already existing life better the community or our world? Love should never harm a third party. To do so would promote a culture against life and against love, the two very things that blossom out of marriage. Abortion as birth control is the ultimate way for the love of two people to become selfish and close in upon themselves. Humans are made for better. There is no fruitfulness, not even multimodal fruitfulness, because destruction of life is never fruitful or life-giving no matter the circumstances and nothing good ever comes from it. Christ would never nullify or destroy one of the fruitful results of his love, so why should we? Because there is no way to determine or influence which one of the three actions will occur, it is never fruitful to use a hormonal method as a form of birth control.

There is not a shared responsibility between the couple who is using hormonal methods. The responsibility of contraception in every hormonal case, is placed solely on the female in the sexual relationship, again enforcing gender roles. Again, the female is active and the male is passive. Despite failed efforts to create a hormonal contraceptive geared towards male sex organs,¹⁰² the only legally approved and existing hormonal contraceptives aim to suppress female fertility and only female fertility. Hormonal contraceptives can also lead to power inequalities. In response to Melinda Gate's 'No Controversy' campaign that kicked off in 2012, Human Life International released a video of third-world women who discussed how her campaign of birth control distribution did not lead to liberation but rather more power inequalities. Women in the video noted, "Ms. Gates, you say you want to help empower women, but how is it empowering to simply give us drugs so we don't get pregnant then send us back to

¹⁰² Dina Fine Maron, "A New Push for the Male Pill," Scientific American. September 25, 2017. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-new-push-for-the-male-pill/>

men who do not appreciate us? How is this empowered?"¹⁰³ This illustration further demonstrates how hormonal contraceptives do not uphold responsible parenthood because suppression of the female fertility system does not enforce shared responsibility.

Even though the sexual act in this context can be fully completed in the way that sex is ordered, hormonal methods leave the woman's fertility temporarily sterilized. This temporary sterilization is a result of the suppressed ovulation that the hormones inflict.¹⁰⁴ Even though hormonal methods induce sterilization temporarily, hormonal methods nevertheless act as anti-ovulatory agents because the ability for egg fertilization to occur is eliminated.¹⁰⁵ Similar to hormonal contraceptives' abortifacient potential, temporary sterilization from suppressed ovulation cannot be determined or influenced. Clearly, hormonal methods do not in any way uphold the value of responsible parenthood considering they work in direct violation of fruitfulness, shared responsibility, and biological preservation.

During sexual intercourse that uses hormonal means for contraception, relational intimacy is not always absent or limited. At the same time, practices of mutuality and equality cannot always properly manifest themselves because hormonal methods are easily used to treat a person like property. However, with hormonal contraceptives, there are no disruptions in the sexual act and both partners are able to fully express their love for each other and give mutual pleasure with no anxieties holding them back which enhances their self-giving and their union by maintaining closeness and emotional connection.

On the other hand self-giving is incomplete, not just because conception in this case is inhibited but because fertility is sterilized; fertility is suppressed. Even if the couple wanted to

¹⁰³ "No Controversy? Facts for Melinda Gates." Human Life International. July 12, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IuitL4XhDAA>

¹⁰⁴ Adams, Michael. *Pharmacology for Nurses: a Pathophysiologic Approach*, 785-786.

¹⁰⁵ Vincent Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, 213.

enforce that total gift of self, including fertility in the moment, total self-giving cannot even have the chance to occur which could disrupt their relational intimacy. While intimacy can occur and might sometimes be limited, the value of married love is not upheld very well with practices that disregard mutuality and equality and self-giving. Since hormonal methods can ignore certain aspects of married love and can completely nullify responsible parenthood, hormonal methods can never be considered a moral contraceptive choice, especially when that choice is harming a third party. In fact, hormonal contraceptives serve as the most immoral choice for birth control next to the method of abortion.

Barriers

There are several forms of barrier contraceptive methods which include spermicide, male condoms, female condoms, sponges, diaphragms, and cervical caps. All of these barrier methods act as contraceptives by preventing the migration of sperm through the cervix which inhibits embryonic fertilization.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, barrier methods serve as a “barrier” between the sperm and the ovum. The average failure rate of all barrier methods with typical use is astonishingly high at 17%¹⁰⁷ however, the average failure rate of all barrier methods with perfect use is about 9%.¹⁰⁸

There is nothing fruitful about using barrier methods yet there is nothing unfruitful about these methods either. Unlike hormonal methods, barrier methods do not have any effect on the fertilized embryo and unlike the withdrawal method, the barrier method does not withhold the completion of the sexual act in the way that it is ordered. However, do barrier methods preserve the biological processes of the sexual act? Barrier methods do not induce any type of sterilization and leave the fertility systems fully intact because fertility is not suppressed but is left open.

¹⁰⁶ Adele Pillitteri, *Maternal and Child Health Nursing: Care of the Childbearing & Child Rearing Family*, 117.

¹⁰⁷ “All About Birth Control Methods.” Planned Parenthood. <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/birth-control>

¹⁰⁸ Quick Reference Guide for Clinicians: Choosing a Birth Control Method” Association of Reproductive Health Professionals.

Even though “cide” means “to kill”, spermicide does not actually kill sperm but just makes sperm less mobile,¹⁰⁹ similar to how thick cervical mucus affects sperm, and is therefore not sterilizing male fertility. Furthermore, barrier methods do not interfere with the processes of male-female genital penetration or with male ejaculation occurring inside the female even though the seminal fluid is barricaded from passing through the cervix. Yet, the Catholic Church still deems barrier methods as artificial and not preserving of the biological processes of the act.

Despite this fact, barrier methods are one of the few methods that can be equally shared between the man and the woman. There are methods tailored to the anatomy of both males and females and both sexes can acquire these methods and thus promote shared responsibility. Additionally, male and female barrier methods can be used together in combination such as using the male condom and the female diaphragm. In this case both sexes are simultaneously contributing to shared responsibility during the sexual act. However, because only one person in the relationship is required to provide the barrier to prevent pregnancy, this could lead to only one person in the sexual relationship consistently using the barrier leading to one passive partner. Still, this responsibility always has the ability to be transferred to the other partner.

Because the various barrier methods are made specifically for one sex or the other, this form of contraception acknowledges the male and female differences relative to their anatomical functions. This, therefore, promotes mutuality and equality in the sexual relationship, especially when both partners in the sexual relationship can share the responsibility of contraception. Furthermore, barrier methods are very unlikely to promote power inequalities or to enforce gender roles because either partner can be responsible for a barrier.

¹⁰⁹ “Spermicide.” Planned Parenthood. <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/birth-control/spermicide>

Even with the various barrier methods, not all methods allow for intimacy to carry on continuously. For example, the female cervical cap can be inserted prior to the start of sexual activity but in the case of the male condom, the couple must interrupt their sexual activity before engaging in sexual intercourse. One common complaint and disadvantage of the male condom is that couples must stop their sexual activity to apply the device.¹¹⁰ For some couples this not problematic but for others, this interruption can hinder their intimate union because it interferes with the heat of the moment and the spontaneity of sex which can inhibit their closeness in intimacy.

Do barrier methods serve as barriers to self-giving? Barrier methods do not suppress fertility and therefore lift up the giving of fertility, but do barrier methods allow for the giving of pleasure for benefit of the union? Some barrier methods can decrease pleasure for both partners¹¹¹ which might also affect the couple's intimate and self-giving union because pleasure is reserved. However, this is not always the case. Some people who use these barrier methods can experience the gift of pleasure and not all barrier methods decrease pleasure. In fact, some barrier methods can increase pleasure such as male condoms designed specifically for enhancing female stimulation. Additionally, knowing that there is a barrier to conception reduces the worry and anxieties that a couple might experience during unprotected sex so that the focus can center more on mutual pleasure and therefore self-giving and intimacy in the union.

Sterilization

Sterilization through surgical means includes surgeries that are specific to both male and female reproductive systems which include vasectomies and tubal ligation procedures. The

¹¹⁰ Vincent Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, 222.

¹¹¹ Stephanie Sanders, "Condom Use During Most Recent Vaginal Intercourse Event Among a Probability Sample of Adults in the United States." *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, (2010): 7.

average failure rate of all surgical sterilizations with typical use is 0.32% and is highly effective at preventing pregnancies.¹¹² These sterilization procedures are permanent forms of birth control that physically prevent the union of sperm with an egg so that conception cannot ever occur. While some surgical sterilizations are reversible, these reverse procedures are very rare, complicated, and expensive with no guarantees and very low rates of success.¹¹³ Therefore, when one is made aware of this risk and elects for surgical sterilization, one does so with the intention of permanent sterilization.

Sterilization should be approached differently compared to other forms of birth control because it is so unique that it carries on different moral implications. Because sterilization is almost always permanent and rarely reversible, it indefinitely severs all ability and openness to new life and a person who chooses and consents to this method is made fully aware of that. In this case does the love close in on itself or can it still be fruitful? Often times, partners in a sexual relationship use this method because many of them have already had children. These people are typically middle-aged and have allowed their love to be fruitful through past pregnancies, parenting, and other life-affirming and community-giving ways. Does this mean their ongoing fruitfulness served in other ways is severed through sterilization?

Female sterility is normative. Biologically, women were created with a specific number of sterile days within each cycle and then to eventually reach sterility through menopause with age. In fact, the average woman who lives to reach older adulthood is more sterile than fertile as she will naturally spend two thirds of her life as sterile and incapable of procreation.¹¹⁴ The sterilization of the female body is a natural process that God created women to have. When these

¹¹² “Quick Reference Guide for Clinicians: Choosing a Birth Control Method” Association of Reproductive Health Professionals.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Callahan, Sidney. “Procreation and Control,” 46.

women become naturally sterile with menopause, it does not mean that they cannot make fruitful efforts through other various means. A couple who has reached old age and is incapable of procreation can still demonstrate the fruitfulness of their marriage in building the community and bettering the world. However, surgical sterilization is not natural because surgical sterilization advances this normative process in an unnatural way. Because of this, surgical sterilization is seemingly unfruitful as all possibility of new life is permanently severed, but when judging its fruitfulness, or the fruitfulness of any birth control method, we might need to also consider the other ways the couple has been fruitful and plans to be fruitful.

Surely, when two people engage in sexual intercourse, they are open to the possibility of new life no matter what method of birth control they use because all methods have some type of failure rate. Yet this is not true in the case of sterilization. Surgical sterilization does not in any way preserve the biological act because fertility is not left intact, even if the sexual act can be completed in the way that it is ordered. People who choose sterilization as their birth control method do so with the intent to not only suppress their fertility but to suppress their fertility indefinitely. Because reversal surgeries are rare and unpromising, there is no way for the full preservation of the biological act in the future either. Furthermore, because sterilization severs fertility, self-giving in the relationship is also severed, because again, fertility is completely, totally, and permanently suppressed.

Sterilization takes into consideration the male and female differences as sterilization procedures are suited to the reproductive systems of men and women individually. While this can help enforce mutuality and equality, such as in the case of barrier methods, sterilization does not always enforce mutuality and equality. Like hormonal methods, sterilization can also be used for power and control. In fact, sterilization exists today because it emerged out of the goal to

purify the human race.¹¹⁵ We can look to instances like sterilizations in Nazi Germany, the sterilizations of mentally ill patients, and forced sterilizations of American prisoners to see that a primary use of sterilization is for power and control. Now, people who freely elect and consent to a surgical sterilization are usually not in a position to be controlled, however there is still the potential for one person in a sexual relationship to misuse and objectify their partner.

Contraceptive responsibility is not always shared among the couple who practices sterilization. While both partners in a sexual relationship can undergo sterilization, oftentimes only one of the partners undergoes sterilization¹¹⁶ which leaves full contraceptive responsibility on that one partner. Like hormonal contraception, sterilization cannot be passed or transferred to the other partner. Unless both partners were to undergo sterilization procedures, shared responsibility could never ensue. While sterilization infringes on all of the practices our two values contain, the practice of intimacy is always and will always be upheld. Genital intimacy is always available, is always continuous and other ways of expressing intimacy are always encouraged.

Discussion

Discussion on the fruitfulness of sterilization poses a question for us to consider with all contraceptive methods. Can the values of married love and responsible parenthood occur throughout the marriage journey and the lifetime of the couple rather than in every single instance of sexual intercourse? The Catholic Church is so fixated on each and every sexual act that the Church loses sight of the sexual relationship over the lifetime and journey of the couple's

¹¹⁵ Harry Bruinius, *Better for All the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America's Quest for Racial Purity* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2006).

¹¹⁶ Renata Forste, "Sterilization Among Currently Married Men in the United States." The Guttmacher Institute. May, 1995. <https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/psrh/1995/05/sterilization-among-currently-married-men-united-states-1991>.

marriage. Some may argue that rather than focusing on what is happening with each act, we should be focusing on the moral character of the couple.¹¹⁷ For example, it is common in Protestant Christian tradition to be open to children at some point during the marriage but not with every sexual act. In contrast, John Paul II even teaches that use of a barrier method cancels out the entire disposition of openness to procreation.¹¹⁸ Many ask, does this mean that a couple planning on children in the future is completely shut off from the idea of fruitfulness when they sometimes use a condom? Is it possible to not be open at certain times in the relationship and open at other times? Before we can answer these questions, we must first ask ourselves, can the values of married love and responsible parenthood be separated? These are questions I am still not ready to answer.

Conclusion

John Paul II presents a science-based, and life-affirming theology of sexuality which has revolutionized how we think about sexuality today. Unfortunately, our culture has not developed an appreciation for this new thinking on sexuality because the media is so focused on covering the controversy and not the substance of the matter.¹¹⁹ We're not focused on what is presented but rather we are focused on how this information divides us. Thus, we are so engrossed in issues like premarital sex, abortion, birth control that we do not focus on the substance and the truths that lie beneath each argument. Currently, we are in a battle of "us *versus* them" and this causes us to get caught up in the rules of sexuality. Instead, we must come together in a "us *and* them" mentality to discuss the substance, the truth, the information that matters and discuss the foundations of how we should live and why.

117 Luke Timothy Johnson, "A Disembodied Theology of the Body: John Paul II on Love, Sex, and Pleasure," 119.

118 Ibid.

119 Ibid, 112.

There is no reason to completely disregard *Humanae Vitae* and *Theology of the Body* or for the Catholic Church to change its fundamental teachings on sexuality. *Humanae Vitae* produced a landmark in progressive sexual theology of the 20th century which gave us a fuller understanding of sexuality for the first time in Church history. *Humanae Vitae* revealed key information and has several valid points from which many goods resulted. John Paul II takes on the information *Humanae Vitae* lacks and addresses the pastoral failures *Humanae Vitae* contains. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* "grounds" and "expands" upon the messages *Humanae Vitae* teaches so that we may have an even fuller understanding.¹²⁰ Still, today's Catholics and today's society find John Paul II's work to be inadequate because John Paul II does not "respond to the anxieties [or give the] practical guidance" of which young adults are in dire need.¹²¹ We need something more clear, something everyday people can understand. As John Paul II revisited and did not disregard the material of *Humanae Vitae*, we also need to revisit and not disregard the material of *Theology of the Body*. We must "ground" it and "expand" on it to address Catholic's anxieties, guide them practically and thus give them an even fuller understanding for sexuality.

Though there may be disagreement with the Church's teaching on sexual ethics, contraception, rules, and sex theology, we are nevertheless, still members of the Catholic Church. Our primary purpose as Catholics is to do the will of God with the community of the faithful so that we may know, love, and serve Him. When we come to see this, we realize there are bigger things at play than just sexuality. Some of us may find the current teaching on sexuality fulfilling while others may find it to be inadequate no longer applicable. Despite this, there are weaknesses on both sides. The conservatives are so fixated on the rules while the

120 Ibid, 113.

121 Ibid.

liberals show an attitude of flippancy to sex. We must strike a middle ground by retrieving the values and using them as our starting point so that we can stop arguing about the rules and instead engage in conversations regarding married love and responsible parenthood.

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