

A Way to Understand Why Contraception is Wrong

-Rev. Eric James Albertson

"Beloved priest sons, by vocation you are the counselors and spiritual guides of individual persons and of families. We now turn to you with confidence. Your first task -- especially in the case of those who teach moral theology -- is to expound the Church's teaching on marriage without ambiguity."

#28, Humanae Vitae, Pope Paul VI, 25 July 1968.

Perhaps the most difficult task before the priest in the area of marriage preparation is helping the couple to understand the Church's teaching against the use of artificial contraception. So difficult is this task, that some priests will omit it altogether; either because they themselves do not understand the teaching, or worse, they believe the Church is wrong in this area of moral theology. Yet failing to present this most critical teaching places the couple at an extreme disadvantage and may lead to the eventual collapse of their marriage. Catechists, parents, priests, deacons, religious, and couples themselves must have an ability to explain this teaching readily if they are to effectively evangelize and protect the integrity and sacredness of the marriage vow.

A common objection is that the Bible does not mention this teaching. If one looks closer, the exact opposite is true. Jesus said, "A man will...be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate," Mt 19:5-6. Traditionally, the understanding here has been that divorce is the man-made separation. However, there can be other kinds of man-made separations. Condom use, for example, separates the couple. Such methods are even called the "barrier methods." The two are not becoming one because there is something between them, specifically, a man-made latex shield. It is not as clear when one considers the birth control pill, but the principle still applies: where God is to join the two as one, man is present to separate. In this case, the couple uses a man-made chemical to prevent ovulation or embryo implantation (the pill's abortifacient potential).

It is interesting that those who question the Church's presence in their marital bedroom think nothing of inviting a condom manufacturing company or contraceptive pharmaceutical company to be a part of their most intimate moments. The fact is that artificial contraception, in any form, comes between the couple during their sexual union and so interferes with God's ability to join. Jesus teaches us that this union is a sacred moment. God's presence makes it sacred, and man's interference removes this sacredness. Fundamentally, if man separates, God cannot join.

It is important to understand this type of separation. Marriage is the absolute giving of self to the other. It involves no holding back, no reservations. It is selfless and sacrificial, like Christ's love for the Church (Eph 5). The marriage vows are the highest form of human commitment. No two people can give themselves to one another any more than through this spoken exchange of love. Sexual intimacy is the highest form of human

intimacy. Two people can be no closer than through this expression of love where the two become as one flesh. Jesus teaches that so powerful is this union, that God reveals marriage to be a Sacrament, because God Himself is the bonding force (what God joins together).

Artificial contraception removes the essential element of fertility from the sexual union. In the highest form of human commitment, and during the most intimate expression of that commitment of love, there is reservation, a holding back. It as if they say to one another: "I will not give myself to you entirely. You can have all that I am except my fertility. This you cannot have and so I will hold it back from you." Was not the vow an expression of total giving? With this reservation, the sexual union fails to be an expression of total giving, and therefore of total love. If there is not total giving of self to the other in marriage, then there is reservation and a holding back. Selflessness leaves the marriage, and selfishness enters. When there is selfishness at the most intimate expression of marital love, then there will be selfishness elsewhere. This is because selfishness is like a cancer. It does not remain stagnant, but grows and infiltrates every area of a marriage, seeking its destruction.

Further, artificial contraception violates the very definition of marriage. The two equal ends (reasons for becoming married) are unitive and procreative love. United with one another in Christ the two become as one, and at the same time the couple respond to the Genesis directive to be fruitful and multiply. Intrinsic to marriage itself are these two ends. Without them, Christian marriage does not exist. This is the Church's objective definition of what is present in Christian Matrimony. It is not an opinion. Rather, it is a refinement of what is truly there.

These two ends are connected so that if one is missing, the other will also be missing. The contraceptive couple fail to express their unitive love. Because of the separating effect of contraceptive use, they are not united. With the elimination of fertility, the couple also remove their procreative love. Procreation is pushed aside in such a way that the couple are not open to the possibility of new life. Some may argue that the contraceptive couple are still open to fertility because the artificial means are not 100% effective. The fact is, their intention, is to remove as much of the possibility of conception as possible. If a contraceptive was available that was 100% effective, they would use it. Couples can only preserve the sacredness of the sexual union, and therefore of marriage, by ensuring the two ends of marriage are always present.

We must also remember that marriage has its origin in God. It is a vocation, a calling by God for two people to be united in His love. The goal of the couple is to continually remove anything that separates or interferes with this union in God's love. Through selfless charity, their union takes on a mystical dimension. Leaving behind the realm of worldly love, they begin to love one another on an entirely new level, the level of supernatural love. By stripping away the obstacles, marital love gradually becomes perfect and complete. It becomes a pure, radiant love; a love that reflects the very love of Christ for His people (the Church). Such a love was the most complete and perfect the world has

ever known, setting the standard for discipleship. This is the holy (whole) love that God calls his couples to know in the Sacrament of Matrimony.

On their wedding day, the couple respond to this vocation by inviting God into their marriage, asking Him to join them together through the exchange of vows. Marriage is not a partnership of two, but of three. This is why the Church traditionally compares marriage to the Trinity. God is the unseen Presence who serves to sustain and supernaturalize this love of husband and wife. He does not, however, restrict His presence to the wedding day. He is present every day and in every way of their married life. In particular, He is present during the sexual union where the two become one flesh. Simply stated, the Church is in the bedroom because God is there.

Married couples are called upon to observe a morality that enters even into the privacy of their own sexual intimacy. This is indeed a radical and extraordinary teaching. As His disciples, we are to conduct ourselves in a certain way even in our private lives. Jesus spoke of another private morality when He taught that a man can offend God in the privacy of his own mind. "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart," Mt 5:28. God holds us accountable for these unseen, undetected actions. He desires us to love Him with our entire selves, just as He has loved us with His entire self (Mt 22:37-38; Jn 3:16). Such total devotion to our Lord reveals the true sons and daughters of His Church. This devotion immerses us in Christ so that we may put on Christ (Ga1 3:26-27): Christ living in us and our doing all for His glory (Gal 2:20; Col 3:17 and 1 Cor 10:31).

We can admire and marvel at the sheer courage of the Church to speak so boldly against the overwhelming tide of opposition to this teaching. Not seeking to be popular, but seeking only the proclamation of Truth, here the Roman Catholic Church stands alone, abandoned by many of her own. Studies that show most Catholics reject this teaching, and that other denominations view it as outdated because it goes against popular culture. Yet popular opinion has never dictated Church teaching, nor will it ever. St. Paul reveals that the Church is the very Bride of Christ (Eph 5:25-33). Christ and the Church are one. To hear the voice of the Church is to hear the voice of Christ. When speaking in the areas of Faith and Morals, the Holy Spirit protects the Church from error through supernatural guidance in Truth (Jn 16:13-15) and through the infallibility granted to the Pope (Mt 16:18-19). To selectively reject one teaching is to bring into question every teaching of the Church in these areas. For these teachings all come from the same source--the Deposit of Faith entrusted to the apostles. Without the Church, we walk in the shifting sands of subjective opinion, rather than on the secure foundation of objectively defined and revealed Truth.

A humble respect for and adherence to this teaching will allow God's love to flow freely and supernaturally between husband and wife. Indeed, it is only through observance of this sublime teaching that a couple protects their marriage from being reduced to a worldly, secular love. Only when procreative and unitive love are present in their entirety can the sexual union be elevated as God wills it to be. The presence of the two ends alone marks the sexual union as distinctly sacred. Removal of them, by definition, places

marital sexual union on the level of masturbation. Although this may be difficult to say, the point must be made. Contraceptive sex reduces marital sexual union to a selfish action that falls into the same category as pre-marital sex, adultery, solitary sex, homosexual relations, and all other forms of extramarital sex. This is because all of these have the same common foundation: an absence of unitive and procreative love.

With this in mind, we can see the inherent danger of contraceptive use. Physical dangers exist, but the potential for spiritual disaster is far greater. A couple may disagree with this teaching, but that does not change the outcome of contraceptive use. We can disagree with the law of gravity, but if we walk off a cliff, we will suffer the consequences. Where there is contraceptive use, God is not able to join the two into one. The couple remain separate, growing in selfishness, and thus growing apart. So tragic has been the promotion of contraceptive use, that one can conclude that it is perhaps the reason for divorce today. Without God joining couples together, there is no bonding force to hold them together.

In so many ways our catholic couples have been the victims of secularism. Rather than being taught the selfless way of Christ, they have been seduced into the selfish ways of the world. These voices so often encourage the faithful not to listen to the voice of their Church. They say: "Listen to us instead, we know better." One need only look around with open eyes to see the devastating effects of contraceptive use. The world does not know better. Divorce, broken homes, promiscuity, abortion, and infidelity are among the worst effects of the contraceptive mentality. The world cannot understand the spirituality of marriage, and so cannot give authentic guidance. For such answers, we must always turn to the Church.

The Church teaches that only the natural means of birth regulation preserve the sacredness of sexual union by allowing unitive and procreative love to always be present. Rather than removing their fertility by means of a man-made separation, the couple using natural means are working in harmony with God's created order to delay or achieve pregnancy. Unlike the contraceptive couple, this couple's intention is not to interfere, but to work in harmony with what is already there. Namely, a divinely established cycle of fertility and infertility that calls for periodic abstinence. Without any interference, God's bonding force takes hold of this couple joining them in a remarkable union of love that, sadly, the contraceptive couple will never know.

To learn these methods, couples should seek the advice of other couples familiar with them. The Couple to Couple League provides an invaluable apostolate to the Church by offering couples the opportunity to learn that Natural Family Planning (NFP) from couples who practice it at a minimum, they should know that NFP does work, and that it is not the Rhythm Method.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of this topic. However, these reflections have helped my couples to become enthusiastic about Catholic Matrimony. By giving them this understanding, they are sufficiently equipped to defend the Church's teaching and practice it with conviction.