



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

### Scripture

Is contraception a modern invention? Hardly! Birth control has been around for millennia. Scrolls found in Egypt, dating to 1900 B.C., describe ancient methods of birth control that were later practiced in the Roman empire during the apostolic age. Wool that absorbed sperm, poisons that fumigated the uterus, potions, and other methods were used to prevent conception. In some centuries, even condoms were used (though made out of animal skin rather than latex).

The Bible mentions at least one form of contraception specifically and condemns it. *Coitus interruptus*, was used by Onan to avoid fulfilling his duty according to the ancient Jewish law of fathering children for one's dead brother. "Judah said to Onan, 'Go in to your brother's wife, and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.' But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife he spilled the semen on the ground, lest he should give offspring to his brother. And what he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he slew him also" (Gen. 38:8–10).

The biblical penalty for not giving your brother's widow children was public humiliation, not death (Deut. 25:7–10). But Onan received death as punishment for his crime. This means his crime was more than simply not fulfilling the duty of a brother-in-law. He lost his life because he violated natural law, as Jewish and Christian commentators have always understood. For this reason, certain forms of contraception have historically been known as "Onanism," after the man who practiced it, just as homosexuality has historically been known as "Sodomy," after the men of Sodom, who practiced that vice (cf. Gen. 19).

Contraception was so far outside the biblical mindset and so obviously wrong that it did not need the frequent condemnations other sins did. Scripture condemns the practice when it mentions it. Once a moral principle has been established in the Bible, every possible application of it need not be mentioned. For example, the general principle that theft is wrong was clearly established in Scripture; but there's no need to provide an exhaustive list of every kind of theft. Similarly, since the principle that contraception is wrong has been established by being condemned when it's mentioned in the Bible, every particular form of contraception does not need to be dealt with in Scripture in order for us to see that it is condemned.

### Apostolic Tradition

The biblical teaching that birth control is wrong is found even more explicitly among the Church Fathers, who recognized the biblical and natural law principles underlying the condemnation.

In A.D. 195, Clement of Alexandria wrote, "Because of its divine institution for the propagation of man, the seed is not to be vainly ejaculated, nor is it to be damaged, nor is it to be wasted" (*The Instructor of Children* 2:10:91:2).

Hippolytus of Rome wrote in 255 that "on account of their prominent ancestry and great property, the so-called faithful [certain Christian women who had affairs with male servants]

want no children from slaves or lowborn commoners, [so] they use drugs of sterility or bind themselves tightly in order to expel a fetus which has already been engendered" (*Refutation of All Heresies*9:12).

Around 307 Lactantius explained that some "complain of the scantiness of their means, and allege that they have not enough for bringing up more children, as though, in truth, their means were in [their] power . . . or God did not daily make the rich poor and the poor rich. Wherefore, if any one on any account of poverty shall be unable to bring up children, it is better to abstain from relations with his wife" (*Divine Institutes* 6:20).

The First Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council and the one that defined Christ's divinity, declared in 325, "If anyone in sound health has castrated himself, it behooves that such a one, if enrolled among the clergy, should cease [from his ministry], and that from henceforth no such person should be promoted. But, as it is evident that this is said of those who willfully do the thing and presume to castrate themselves, so if any have been made eunuchs by barbarians, or by their masters, and should otherwise be found worthy, such men this canon admits to the clergy" (Canon 1).

Augustine wrote in 419, "I am supposing, then, although you are not lying [with your wife] for the sake of procreating offspring, you are not for the sake of lust obstructing their procreation by an evil prayer or an evil deed. Those who do this, although they are called husband and wife, are not; nor do they retain any reality of marriage, but with a respectable name cover a shame. Sometimes this lustful cruelty, or cruel lust, comes to this, that they even procure poisons of sterility [oral contraceptives]" (*Marriage and Concupiscence* 1:15:17).

The apostolic tradition's condemnation of contraception is so great that it was followed by Protestants until 1930 and was upheld by all key Protestant Reformers. Martin Luther said, "[T]he exceedingly foul deed of Onan, the basest of wretches . . . is a most disgraceful sin. It is far more atrocious than incest and adultery. We call it unchastity, yes, a sodomitic sin. For Onan goes in to her; that is, he lies with her and copulates, and when it comes to the point of insemination, spills the semen, lest the woman conceive. Surely at such a time the order of nature established by God in procreation should be followed. Accordingly, it was a most disgraceful crime. . . . Consequently, he deserved to be killed by God. He committed an evil deed. Therefore, God punished him."

John Calvin said, "The voluntary spilling of semen outside of intercourse between man and woman is a monstrous thing. Deliberately to withdraw from coitus in order that semen may fall on the ground is doubly monstrous. For this is to extinguish the hope of the race and to kill before he is born the hoped-for offspring."

John Wesley warned, "Those sins that dishonor the body are very displeasing to God, and the evidence of vile affections. Observe, the thing which he [Onan] did displeased the Lord—and it is to be feared; thousands, especially of single persons, by this very thing, still displease the Lord, and destroy their own souls." (These passages are quoted in Charles D. Provan, *The Bible and Birth Control*, which contains many quotes by historic Protestant figures who recognize contraception's evils.)

## The Magisterium

The Church also, fulfilling the role given it by Christ as the identifier and interpreter of apostolic Scripture and apostolic tradition, has constantly condemned contraception as gravely sinful.

In *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI stated, "[W]e must once again declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun, and, above all, directly willed and procured abortion, even if for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as licit means of regulating birth. Equally to be excluded, as the teaching authority of the Church has frequently declared, is direct sterilization, whether perpetual or temporary, whether of the man or of the woman. Similarly excluded is every action which, either in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible" (HV 14).

This was reiterated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "[E]very action which, whether in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible is intrinsically evil" (CCC 2370). "Legitimate intentions on the part of the spouses do not justify recourse to morally unacceptable means . . . for example, direct sterilization or contraception" (CCC 2399).

The Church also has affirmed that the illicitness of contraception is an infallible doctrine: "The Church has always taught the intrinsic evil of contraception, that is, of every marital act intentionally rendered unfruitful. This teaching is to be held as definitive and irreformable. Contraception is gravely opposed to marital chastity, it is contrary to the good of the transmission of life (the procreative aspect of matrimony), and to the reciprocal self-giving of the spouses (the unitive aspect of matrimony); it harms true love and denies the sovereign role of God in the transmission of human life" (*Vademecum for Confessors* 2:4, Feb. 12, 1997).

## Human Experience

Pope Paul VI predicted grave consequences that would arise from the widespread and unrestrained use of contraception. He warned, "Upright men can even better convince themselves of the solid grounds on which the teaching of the Church in this field is based if they care to reflect upon the consequences of methods of artificially limiting the increase of children. Let them consider, first of all, how wide and easy a road would thus be opened up towards conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality. Not much experience is needed in order to know human weakness, and to understand that men—especially the young, who are so vulnerable on this point—have need of encouragement to be faithful to the moral law, so that they must not be offered some easy means of eluding its observance. It is also to be feared that the man, growing used to the employment of anti-conceptive practices, may finally lose respect for the woman and, no longer caring for her physical and psychological equilibrium, may come to the point of considering her as a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment, and no longer as his respected and beloved companion" (HV 17).

No one can doubt the fulfillment of these prophetic words. They have all been more than fulfilled in this country as a result of the widespread availability of contraceptives, the "free

love" movement that started in the 1960s, and the loose sexual morality that it spawned and that continues to pervade Western culture.

Indeed, recent studies reveal a far greater divorce rate in marriages in which contraception is regularly practiced than in those marriages where it is not. Experience, natural law, Scripture, Tradition, and the magisterium, all testify to the moral evil of contraception.

### **Wishful Thinking**

Ignoring the mountain of evidence, some maintain that the Church considers the use of contraception a matter for each married couple to decide according to their "individual conscience." Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. The Church has always maintained the historic Christian teaching that deliberate acts of contraception are always gravely sinful, which means that it is mortally sinful if done with full knowledge and deliberate consent (CCC 1857). This teaching cannot be changed and has been taught by the Church infallibly.

There is no way to deny the fact that the Church has always and everywhere condemned artificial contraception. The matter has already been infallibly decided. The so-called "individual conscience" argument amounts to "individual disobedience."

*NIHIL OBSTAT:* I have concluded that the materials  
presented in this work are free of doctrinal or moral errors.  
*Bernadeane Carr, STL, Censor Librorum, August 10, 2004*

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