

Contraception: Why Not?

Contraception is nothing new, but the almost universal acceptance of contraception is certainly new. With the mass marketing of the newly invented 'pill' in the 1960's contraception has gone from an illegal product to something considered as normal as toothpaste. Until 1930 every Christian Church had always maintained use of contraception was immoral. In this paper we go behind 'the rule' to discover why the Catholic Church continues to teach that the use of contraception is an immoral act that is destructive of marriage and the sexual union.

Love which is totally and mutually self-giving. Love which is life-giving. This is God's design for the love between husband and wife. And it is the reason for the Church's moral teaching about fertility control.

The Church does not warn us against the use of contraception because it is unnatural, or because the Church wants couples to have as many children and as little sex as possible! Catholic moral teaching urges us to say 'no' to contraception, so that we are free to say 'yes' and to experience the truth, goodness and beauty of marital love.

The decision to use contraceptives has left many Catholic couples feeling alienated from God, from the Church, and perhaps, from each other. But it is never too late to develop a new or deeper understanding and appreciation of God's vision for marriage and family life. It is never too late to embrace the fullness of God's plan for marriage, sex and children.

Marriage is a Community of Life & Love

The love between a husband and wife is intended to give us a glimpse of the love that God has for each one of us. Husbands and wives are called to love each other in the same way that God loves - with a love which is free, total, faithful and fruitful.

We see this expressed in the wedding vows that a couple makes to each other and before God, when they promise to:

- ~ Give themselves to each other in marriage (freedom, totality)
- ~ Love and honour each other as husband and wife for the rest of their lives (faithfulness)
- ~ Accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church (fruitfulness)

Love in which any of these aspects is deliberately excluded cannot be truly 'marital love'. Marital love

needs to be nurtured in all of its dimensions and be a total act of self-giving if it is to remain strong.

Sex is Life-giving Love

Sexual union has two inseparable meanings. It is an act of loving union between a married couple and it is also an act of open, unique collaboration with God as the creator of new life. Sex is both unitive and procreative; both love-giving and life-giving.

This isn't an accident – it is part of God's plan that sexual union is a participation in God's life giving power. Sex is meant to be the ultimate expression of marriage as a relationship of life and love. Pope John Paul II in his Theology of the Body describes the human body as having its own specific and unique language. Within the context of marriage, sex is the body language which expresses, again and again, a couple's wedding vows: their commitment to free, total, faithful and fruitful love.ⁱ

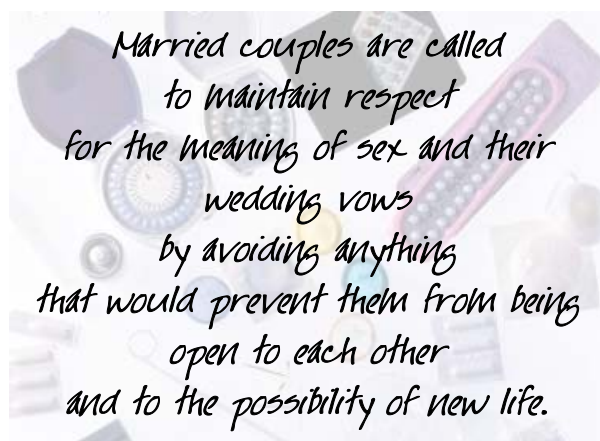
If we deliberately separate the love-giving (unitive) and life-giving (procreative) dimensions of sex by the use of contraception, we change the meaning of our sexual



acts. An intentionally sterilised act of intercourse changes the 'I do' of wedding vows to an 'I do not.' It contradicts the language of spouses' bodies by saying: "I give you all of myself except my fertility" or "I receive all that you are except your fertility, as I am not willing to accept the possibility of having a child with you."ⁱⁱ

Irrespective of how much a couple love each other, if they use contraception, they are unable to give themselves to each other freely, totally, faithfully and fruitfully in imitation of Christ. They risk treating each other as objects of pleasure rather than true lovers.

They also exclude God from their love making. Sex is meant to be an expression of God's life-giving love in the world. When it is open to the possibility of the procreation of a child it is the sacred space of God. Contraception shuts the door on God.



Each and every sexual act needs to be open to the possibility of children. It is not enough that a couple is simply 'open to children' at some stage over the course of their marriage. This makes as much sense as saying that a couple can be 'faithful to each other' over the course of their marriage without each and every act of intercourse needing to be with each other.

This doesn't mean that a couple can only have sex when they are hoping to have a baby, but it does mean that they should only have sex when they want to renew their marriage commitment and are, therefore, open to the possibility of conceiving. They can certainly choose to have sex during the infertile phase of a woman's cycle without violating their marriage commitment in any way. The fact that pregnancy doesn't follow from these intimate acts is a result of God's doing, not theirs.

Responsible Parenthood

God wants couples to be responsible stewards over their fertility: to carefully weigh their responsibilities to God, each other, the children they already have, and the world in which they live when making decisions about the number and spacing of children.

But God also desires couples to live out responsible parenthood within the structures which he has established in human nature.ⁱⁱⁱ John Paul II wrote that responsible procreation happens when a "family is generously open to new lives, and when couples maintain an attitude of openness and service to life,

even if, for serious reasons and in respect for the moral law, they choose to avoid a new birth for the time being or indefinitely." (*The Gospel of Life*, n. 97)

Natural fertility methods are moral methods of fertility control. Couples are taught to identify the signs of a woman's fertile and infertile phases of her ovulation cycle, so that they can time intercourse to either avoid, or try to achieve, conception.

When couples understand the methods and are motivated to follow them, modern natural fertility methods are up to 99% successful in spacing or limiting births. Because they are not based on the probability of fertility (like the old 'rhythm' or 'calendar' methods) but on the detection of the signs of fertility they can also be used successfully by any woman, even if she has irregular cycles, is breast feeding, or is pre-menopausal. You can learn more about them at www.totalgift.org

Using natural family planning (NFP) to space pregnancies for a just reason is different from using contraception. A couple using a natural method chooses to abstain from fertile acts of intercourse, while a contracepting couple chooses to sterilise fertile acts of intercourse. Unlike the couple who use a natural method, the contracepting couple does something to change the meaning of their sex; they do something which prevents them from being fully open to one another and to the possibility of new life.

The decision to embrace the Church's teaching about marriage, sex and family is not without challenges. But while no one should pretend that this is easy, with God by our side, it is both possible and deeply fulfilling.

"Practicing NFP takes self-control, trust in one's spouse, trust in God, honest and open communication, and willingness to sacrifice for each other. But love isn't harmed by these things. Love is these things."^{iv}

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ⁱ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: Frequently Asked Questions*, 8.

ⁱⁱ Christopher West, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*. Freedom Publishing: Melbourne, 2003, 108.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Diocesan Development Program for NFP, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *NFP: Myth and Reality*.

^{iv} West, 128.