

A Sample from the Magisterium of the Catholic Church on Contraception

Pastoral letter of Bp Glennon Flavin, diocese of Lincoln USA 1991

Today we live in what could be accurately called "a contraceptive culture." The use of contraception is widely practiced. Even some Catholic couples use this method to prevent conception and some Catholic physicians do not hesitate to recommend the use of this means of birth control and even to prescribe contraceptives. To have certitude of faith in regard to use of marriage, and indeed in regard to all teachings of the Catholic Church, we must understand the nature of the Church. Christ, Who cannot be deceived and cannot deceive us because He is God, is still in the world today as He promised, teaching us through His Church what we must believe and how we must live; and the voice of His Church is the successor of Peter, now Pope John Paul II. This is our Catholic faith: We believe that when Pope John Paul II teaches in matters of faith and morals, the Church teaches; and when the Church teaches, Christ the God-man teaches. Therefore, we who have been blessed by God with the gift of the Catholic faith can have no doubt about the immorality of contraception. The Catholic Church clearly teaches that the use of contraception in all its forms, including direct sterilisation, is gravely immoral, is intrinsically evil, is contrary to the law of nature and nature's God. This is and always has been the uninterrupted teaching of the Catholic Church from the beginning.

The ban on contraception is not a disciplinary law of the Church, like abstinence of Friday, which the Church can enact and which the Church can dispense for good reasons. Rather, it is a divine law which the Church cannot change any more than it can change the law of God forbidding murder. Contraception is wrong, not because the Church says it is wrong (it was wrong before Christ established the Church); it is wrong because God Himself, through the revelation of His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, has declared it to be wrong. Because contraception is intrinsically evil, it may never be practiced for any reason, no matter how good and urgent. A good end never justifies the use of an evil means.

Catholic physicians and others who prescribe contraceptives or recommend their use are cooperators with those who use them. Such cooperation is gravely sinful. The same is true for physicians who advise contraceptive sterilisation, or perform this procedure or refer a person to another physician for this purpose. In doing so they, too, commit grave sin.

It should be obvious that Catholics who practice birth control and those who cooperate with them in their immoral actions may not receive Holy Communion without committing sacrilege. Only the worthy reception of the Sacrament of Penance, which requires genuine sorrow for sin and the sincere intention to discontinue the sinful practice, will bring God's forgiveness, restore grace to the soul and make one worthy to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion. While contraception is always immoral, there is a morally acceptable way by which married couples may space the births of their children. For good and sufficient reasons, spouses may regulate births by abstaining from the marital act during the wife's easily identified fertile periods. This practice is known as Natural Family Planning. Recent scientific research has so refined the methods of Natural Family Planning that today, couples may space their children in ways that are altogether reliable, medically safe, and morally acceptable. Dear Catholic spouses, there can be no true happiness in your lives unless God is very much a part of your marriage covenant. To expect to find happiness in sin is to look for good in evil. Sin is a bane to married life, as it is to all life. Like a cancer, it destroys everything that is good and joyful in your marriage relationship. On the other hand, to keep God in Your married life, to trust in His and love and to obey His laws in the use of the marriage privilege will merit His special graces for you during the difficult times in married life, will deepen your love for each other and will bring to you that inner peace of mind and heart which is the reward of a good conscience. You will find the desire and the strength to follow God's law through the frequent and worthy reception of Holy Communion, the regular reception of the Sacrament of Penance and daily prayer.

Plus XI *Casti Connubii* (1930) 54,56

No reason, however grave, can make what is intrinsically contrary to nature to be in conformity with nature and morally right. And since the conjugal act by its very nature is destined for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose are acting against nature, and are doing something that is base and intrinsically vicious... Our mouth proclaims anew, any use of marriage exercised in such a way that through human effort the act is deprived of its natural power to procreate human life violates the law of God and of nature, and those who commit such an action are stained with the guilt of grave sin.

Vatican II *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) 51

Sons of the Church may not undertake methods of birth control which are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church in its unfolding of the divine law.

Paul VI *Humane vitae* (1968) 14

Therefore We base Our words on the first principles of a human and Christian doctrine of marriage when We are obliged once more to declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun and, above all, all direct abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children. Equally to be condemned, as the magisterium of the Church has affirmed on many occasions, is direct sterilisation, whether of the man or of the woman, whether permanent or temporary. Similarly excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means.

John Paul II *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) 32

When couples, by means of recourse to contraception, separate these two meanings that God the Creator has inscribed in the being of man and woman and in the dynamism of their sexual communion, they act as "arbiters" of the divine plan and they "manipulate" and degrade human sexuality—and with it themselves and their married partner—by altering its value of "total" self-giving. Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality.

Pope Francis *Message to Participants in the Womb International Congress* (2023)

There is a need always to keep in mind the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act. The former expresses the desire of the spouses to be one, a single life; the latter expresses the shared desire to generate life, which endures even at times of infertility and in old age. When these two meanings are consciously affirmed, the generosity of love is born and strengthened in the hearts of the spouses, disposing them to welcome new life. Lacking this, the experience of sexuality is impoverished, reduced to sensations that soon become self-referential, and its dimensions of humanity and responsibility are lost.

Catechism of the Catholic Church 2399

The regulation of births represents one of the aspects of responsible fatherhood and motherhood. Legitimate intentions on the part of the spouses do not justify recourse to morally unacceptable means (for example, direct sterilisation or contraception).

John Paul II *Address to the Bishops of USA* (1987)

It is sometimes reported that a large number of Catholics today do not adhere to the teaching of the Church on a number of questions, notably sexual and conjugal morality, divorce and remarriage. Some are reported as not accepting the Church's clear position on abortion. It has also been noted that there is a tendency on the part of some Catholics to be selective in their adherence to the Church's moral teachings. It is sometimes claimed that dissent from the Magisterium is totally compatible with being a "good Catholic" and poses no obstacle to the reception of the sacraments. This is a grave error that challenges the teaching office of the bishops of the United States and elsewhere. I wish to encourage you in the love of Christ to address this situation courageously in your pastoral ministry, *relying on the power of God's truth* to attract assent *and on the grace of the Holy Spirit* which is given both to those who proclaim the message and to those to whom it is addressed.