

Contraception Distorts Sexuality

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Recently, I discussed the subject of contraception with another Catholic, a Catholic who attends Mass every Sunday, has a regular prayer life, and carefully oversees her children's education in the Faith. As we talked, a look of concern appeared on her face, and she became more and more troubled. After asking me several searching questions about the history of contraception and the validity of various aspects of the doctrine concerning it, she suddenly asked, "So, was it wrong for my husband to have a vasectomy? We had researched it, we prayed about it, and everything seemed to indicate that it would be alright. I've never heard any of the things you're telling me." She was honestly distressed, for, despite her work and prayer, she had no idea the teaching on contraception was a grave moral issue that could not be dispensed. She is not alone. Polls regularly show that the majority of Catholics in the United States do not follow the Church's constant teaching on contraception.

The problem has two parts. The first part resides in the nature of the adult Catholic population itself. Due to the historical success of teaching children in a parochial setting, Catholic adults often have the mistaken impression that being educated in the Catholic tradition during childhood means they need no further education in the Faith. Catholics who have received eight to twelve years of Catholic education, either through the parochial system or the public-school religion system (formerly CCD), assume they know all there is to know about being Catholic. It is a peculiar attitude. Certainly few thirty-year old adults assume a grade school or high school understanding of the business world is sufficient to maintain a successful career,

yet these same adults regularly attempt to live a successful adult Catholic life based on a grade school understanding of the Faith. As a result, they often attempt to solve serious moral problems with inadequate formation.

Though this woman claimed to have researched the contraception problem, and I have no doubt that she did, she had never heard of *Humanae Vitae* or *Casti Conubii*. While the names of the encyclicals were undoubtedly present in what she read, she also undoubtedly never registered those names – she has never read an encyclical, nor does she know where to get a copy of one if she wanted to. It is unlikely that she would think it necessary to read one even if she knew how to obtain one – no one who taught her the Faith in grade school or high school ever showed her encyclicals, or even provided excerpts from one. How important can they be?

The second part of the problem resides in the delivery of the doctrine. This aspect itself has two parts. The first is easily identified and often remarked on. The teaching on contraception is simply not heard from the pulpit. Despite the high likelihood that the majority of parishioners in every U.S. congregation are habitually involved in an intrinsically evil act which alienates them from Christ and makes Eucharistic reception a sacrilege, few pastors are willing to address the topic from the ambo for fear of a backlash. But even those pastors who are interested in dealing with the issue often inadvertently approach it from a less than ideal perspective.

This leads to the second problem: the delivery of the doctrine. Given the heavy emphasis this society pays to a personal self-determination based in a freedom that opposes authority, appeals to the divinely instituted teaching authority of the Church do not often carry the weight we would like. While some parishioners will turn from

contraception based solely on Church authority, it is not likely that the majority will – social expectations and habits will often counteract this appeal.

Adults won't live the teaching until they understand it, and they won't understand it unless it is deeply tied to something they personally know to be true. That is, the teaching will more likely be accepted if it is based in the context of a relationship most Catholic adults understand and live out on a daily basis. For married Catholics – to whom this teaching is most specifically addressed – the doctrine is best explained through the relationship which both Scripture and the Holy Father use regularly in their writings on the family: the Bridegroom-Bride relationship between Christ and His Church. Indeed, the Holy Father has stated that not only this doctrine, but the Church itself, cannot be understood without this imagery:

“The church cannot therefore be understood as the... universal sacrament of salvation unless we keep in mind the great mystery involved in the creation of man as male and female and the vocation of both to conjugal love, to fatherhood and to motherhood.” *Letter to Families, #19*

In short, adult Catholics need to be made vibrantly aware of the absolute fullness of this imagery. They need to see all the nuances, implications and derivations of this imagery brought out explicitly. This is their daily life, it is what they understand. Unless someone explicitly connects what the Church does for me to what I do for my spouse, I will always see the Church as something extrinsic to my life, instead of the basis for my life. This adult understanding is precisely what cannot be delivered in Catholic grade school.

“The great mystery, which is the church and humanity in Christ, does not exist apart from the great mystery expressed in the ‘one flesh,’ that is, in the reality of marriage and the family.... Unfortunately, Western thought...

has been gradually moving away from this teaching.” *Letter to Families*, #19

The teaching on contraception is rejected because Western rationalism has imposed a dualism that rejects the conjugal Bride-Bridegroom relationship. Because catechesis typically fails to make the Bride-Bridegroom connection explicit, graduates from our parochial system believe they know all there is to know. Grade school catechesis does not take children on a quiet study of the Song of Songs, or fully explain the Bride-Bridegroom relationship, nor should it. However, no adult can truly live out an adult Faith without adult understanding of this same relationship. In short, neither society nor the parochial system is providing adults with the grounding necessary to live an adult faith.

The teaching on contraception is therefore difficult - at first glance, it is hard to see why Christians have always opposed the use of contraception. Why is contraception always sinful? The answer begins in knowing who God is. The Trinity is a family of persons whose life is love: “I bow my knee before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (Ephesians 3:14-15). That is, the Trinity is the First Family. My family, your family, each of our families, can only be called a family because it in some way images the Trinity of Persons within the Godhead.

Saying “God is love” (1 John 4:8) is a shorthand way of saying God the Father pours out everything He is, His entire Person, into the Person of God the Son, eternally begetting Him. God the Son imitates the Father by pouring Himself out to the Father completely. Both Father and Son pour themselves out to each other through the Spirit. God made us persons so that we could give ourselves to Him and to each other as fully as He does. This is the first key to understanding the teaching on contraception.

Because each Person of the Trinity pours Himself out completely to the other two, each Person of the Trinity completely contains within Himself the other two Persons of the Trinity. However, each Person always remains entirely distinct. That is, the Divine Persons inter-penetrate one another. This is the second key.

We need a third key; an understanding of how Christ's suffering and death heals original sin. When God created Adam and Eve, He created them in His image and likeness. They were in His image because they were made persons like the Divine Persons. They were in His likeness because they had *power*: they were created with all the grace they needed in order to grow into the kind of full communion with God and with each other that the Divine Persons have. Grace is *power*. God called Adam and Eve to this fully intimate union with Himself through obedience. God's grace gave them everything they needed in order to accomplish this.

This gift of original holiness, the full power of grace they had, was meant to be passed on as an inheritance from Adam and Eve to their descendants, as each generation participated in the creation of more immortal persons (Genesis 1:28). Adam and Eve were meant to give themselves completely to each other as the Divine Persons do. Sadly, through the first couple's disobedience they essentially reached inside of themselves, scooped out the inheritance of grace given to them, threw it away, and said to God, "We don't *want* to be like you, God. We will do it our way." This loss of our inheritance of grace, this lack of grace, is original sin.

God's intentions, however, cannot be destroyed by something as puny as human error. God intended us to participate in the family life of the Trinity. He accomplishes this by sending His own Son to be our Bridegroom (John 3:29), to marry us into the Divine

Family of Persons. The Son of God emptied Himself, taking on our flesh and the name Jesus: "God Saves." In taking on a human body, He began restoring to human flesh and blood the grace Adam and Eve threw away. In fact, the blood of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, is so holy the smallest drop of His shed blood is sufficient to pay for all the sins of humanity, past, present and future. This raises a question: if the smallest drop of Jesus' blood is sufficient to pay for all sins, then, when that first drop of His blood fell to the pavement in front of Pontius Pilate, why didn't Jesus begin a victory dance? He could have sung, "I win, Satan loses, I am the King, there's the blood that pays for it all!" Why didn't He?

Remember how God loves. When God loves, He pours Himself out completely, He doesn't hold anything back. Blood is the source of life (Leviticus 17:11). Though that first drop paid for all our sins, our Bridegroom still had more life, more love to give. So He did. He accepted thirty-nine lashes, making His back a bloody mess. He accepted the crown of thorns, and let blood stream down His face and mat His hair. He carried the splintered wood on His shoulder uphill for a mile, breaking open both knees. He allowed nails to tear through His flesh. He hung for three hours as blood soaked the wood and turned the ground beneath into a red sponge. Even after He died, He had more life and love to give, so He allowed a soldier to pierce His side with a lance, and still more blood and water flowed out. This is how God loves, superabundantly. He pours out everything He is, holding nothing back.

Think of it. God the Son pours Himself out in love to us simple human beings as He does to the Father. His total gift of Himself to us takes away our sins. He shows us how we, who are images of God, are supposed live. But best of all, He marries us into

His family, the First Family. Drawing their power from the incredible love of the Cross, the seven sacraments establish and consummate our marriage to God. In this marriage, we not only regain our inheritance, we actually gain the very inheritance God the Son receives from God the Father. The grace of our marriage to the Bridegroom empowers us to participate in the intimate communion the Son has with the Father and the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:3-4). This marriage calls for us to totally give ourselves to our Spouse.

For us the most important title God carries is “Bridegroom.” In Scripture, the very word “sacrament” refers to marriage (Ephesians 5:32). The Wedding Feast, the Eucharist, is the center of our life in Christ precisely because marriage is the way we relate to Jesus. The only barrier I can place between myself and the Bridegroom is sin.

“Conjugal love goes to Christ the Bridegroom through a human union...”
General Audience, 23 Nov 1994

Because I am first married to Christ by my baptism, and my spouse is first married to Christ by her baptism, it is only through the person of Christ that we are joined to one another. In the Incarnation, Christ joins the divine nature to human nature in His own Person. In marriage, Christ joins man to woman in His own Person. Thus, in marriage I live out my relationship with my Bridegroom, the divine Person, in how I relate to my spouse, a human person. Because I relate to my spouse only through Jesus, how I treat my spouse is how I treat Christ.

“We find ourselves at the very heart of the Paschal Mystery, which completely reveals the spousal love of God. Christ is the Bridegroom because ‘he has given himself’: his body has been ‘given,’ his blood has been ‘poured out.’... The Eucharist is the Sacrament of our Redemption. It is the Sacrament of the Bridegroom and the Bride... Christ is united with this ‘body’ as the bridegroom with the bride... Since Christ, in instituting the Eucharist, linked it in such an explicit way to the priestly service of the

Apostles, it is legitimate to conclude that he thereby wished to express the relationship between man and woman.” *Mulieris Dignitatem*, #26

The Eucharist is the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ in His glorified body giving Himself entirely to us, His Bride. In Mass, the flesh of the Bridegroom enters the flesh of the Bride, and life springs forth within Her. God intends the sexual act between spouses to intimately live out the Eucharist. The Eucharist, in turn, intimately lives out on earth the inner life of God in heaven. In the sexual act, we human persons image in our own bodies the total communion, the total outpouring of self to another, the inter-penetration of persons that the Divine Persons invite us to live out in heaven with them. Nothing stands between the Divine Persons, nothing can be placed between the human persons. The spousal relationship images the Trinity. Contraception desecrates marriage because it denies both who God is and who man is.

“Man is a person in the unity of his body and his spirit. The body can never be reduced to mere matter. It is a spiritualized body, just as man’s spirit is so closely united to the body that he can be described as an embodied spirit.” *Letter to Families*, #19

When I turn to my spouse in the marriage bed, I am living out my relationship to Jesus in the Eucharist. God gives Himself entirely to me in the Eucharist. He calls me to give myself entirely back to Him. God creates each human person at conception. He pours Himself out completely into each human person through the blood of the Cross, giving each of us life. How the man gives of himself in the marital act is meant to image how Jesus gave of Himself on the Cross. How the woman receives the man in the marital act is meant to image how all mankind receives the blood Jesus poured out for the Church (Ephesians 5:21-33). The result of this communion of Divine Person with human persons can be the creation of an immortal image of the living God, the

generation of a third human person. The marriage act at its height images the inner life of the Trinity, the life God intends for all of us to partake in. Marriage and the marriage bed together establish on earth a living, sacred image of the divine family of God.

The joy of the marriage bed echoes the joy God takes both in our creation and in our redemption. My refusal to give entirely of myself is a refusal to act in the image and likeness of God. When spouses put up physical or chemical barriers, we put barriers between ourselves and Jesus. We live out in our bodies the message, “I don’t *want* to be like you, God.” We have already made that mistake once – that was the mistake that cost us our inheritance in the beginning. Through the power of God, we have gained a much more glorious inheritance. It is foolish to throw it away.

With a good understanding of these theological bases, adult Catholics will quickly see how contraception distorts sexuality. We must give our adult Catholics the tools they need to see contraception as an integral part of a coherent whole. It is only in such a delivery that the serpent’s back can be broken.

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