

Your Right to Know: Chaste Natural Family Planning

The organized natural family planning movement started in the mid-1960s in reaction to the rejection of traditional moral teaching about birth control. Catholic teaching against contraception can be traced back to the New Testament and even has its roots in the Book of Genesis. The teaching against marital contraception was universal among all Christian churches until 1930. In August of that year, the Church of England was the first organized Christian body to break from that teaching and to allow marital contraception in some cases. Pope Pius XI quickly reaffirmed, on December 31 of that year, that contraception is the grave matter of mortal sin (*Casti Connubii*, n.56). The big majority of Catholics formed their consciences accordingly during the Thirties through the Fifties.

The advent of the birth control pill in 1960 raised new questions, and many Catholics erroneously assumed that the Church would change its teaching. In 1968, Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* which reaffirmed the traditional teaching to a Church and a world that had become increasingly contraceptive. A priest at Catholic University of America led a movement for dissent, and many priests were telling their parishioners that they no longer had to form their consciences according to the *actual* teaching of the Church. Most bishops in the West treated the issue as a “hot potato” to use the words of New York’s Cardinal Timothy Dolan. Many or most Catholics, to say nothing of non-Catholics who respected the Church for its moral teaching, were confused.

The dissent movement provided a great stimulus to the NFP movement, largely led by the laity. Sheila and I became involved in 1968. That summer she researched and wrote her first book, *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing*, and I wrote *Covenant, Christ and Contraception* which was the predecessor of the current *Sex and the Marriage Covenant*. **Publications by dissenters** soon made it clear that the acceptance of marital contraception also involved **the acceptance of the entire sexual revolution** with its situation ethics that cannot say “no” to any imaginable sexual activity between consenting persons of legal age, and even includes the acceptance of bestiality.

People have a need and a right to know specific moral teaching and to see that teaching in the context of Christian discipleship. Why bother to state something that seems so obvious? Within the NFP movement, some have said that modern NFP systems are so good as a method of birth control that we don’t need to say anything about morality. They seem to think that to teach Catholic morality is to bring in a crutch, as if the method couldn’t stand on its own. I think that approach is seriously flawed.

Moral teaching has at least two obvious functions. One is to tell us what to do and what not to do. The second function is to explain why something is good or evil, why we ought to do some things and not do other things. The context for moral teaching is a holy combination of Bible and Tradition.

The Ten Commandments are the prime example of telling us what to do and what not do. They are also a prime example that God's commandments are much more of a blessing than a burden. It is true, of course, that at times it is very difficult to say "No" to temptations against the Commandments, and that's a burden, but a little reflection reveals that each Commandment is much more of a blessing.

Just consider what a culture would be like if its members were not constrained by the Commandments. You don't have to exercise your imagination; just pay attention to the daily news. In the United States we are living with two or three generations of men and women who have received no moral and religious education in the public schools. As Sheila and I watch the evening local news, we commonly hear a litany of robberies, beatings, shootings, murders, and sexual crimes including rape. I feel almost as sorry for the criminals as for the victims. When would most of these criminals have been taught that these crimes are seriously sinful and are putting them on the path to hell?

Excluding God from public education wasn't part of the game plan of the Founding Fathers. The first tax-supported legislation for education in Massachusetts was called the Old Deluder Act. Its purpose was to prevent the work of the devil. The Ten Commandments are so necessary for the well-being of society that some skeptics have claimed that they were not revealed by God but are simply the accumulation of human wisdom. Even the commandment dealing with keeping holy the day of worship could be rationalized because experience shows that people do not function well without at least one day of rest per week.

Three of the Ten Commandments prescribe our relationship with God. Seven of them describe our relationship with each other. One of these is concerned with our parents, six deal with everyone else, and they are all stated in the negative—Thou shalt not... Of these, two deal with sexuality. That is, one-third of the Commandments dealing with ordinary relationships are concerned with sex. So it should not be a surprise that the Catholic Church has to keep addressing sexual issues.

Moral teaching is, of course, not confined to the texts of the Ten Commandments. For example, they say nothing *directly* about fornication, incest, sodomy, contraception, prostitution, usury, and all sorts of social injustices including slavery. These are subsets of the Commandments, so to speak, and are addressed in other places in the Bible and in the Sacred Tradition of the Church. It is important to realize that Jesus did not give us an expanded book but instead gave his Church the Holy Spirit to guide the teaching of the Church. This is called the Magisterium or teaching authority of the Church.

The Onan account. In Chapter 38 of Genesis, we read the story of Onan who is slain by God for his contraceptive sin of withdrawal. The anti-contraception interpretation was provided in the footnotes of Catholic bibles for many years, and probably Protestant bibles as well. After all, Luther called the sin of Onan a form of sodomy, and Calvin called it a form of homicide. The writers of the footnotes in the New American Bible of 1970, writing at a time when they were undoubtedly influenced by the spirit of dissent raging in the Sixties, changed that interpretation and wrote that it was only for his

violation of the Law of the Levirate, a sin of selfishness, that Onan was slain. (The Levirate required the brother of a childless widow to give her children who would be considered as children of the dead brother.) However, the text of Deuteronomy 25:5:10 spells out the punishment for the selfish refusal to fulfill the Levirate, and it is only an embarrassment, not a death penalty. Further, in the Onan account there are three people who violated the Levirate—Onan, Judah his father, and Shelah his younger brother—but the only one to receive the death penalty is the one who went through the motions of the covenant act but made it an act of contraception.

I have inserted this short note on the Onan account because dissenters keep bringing up the Levirate-only interpretation or claim that they have no idea for what sin Onan was slain. For a more complete treatment, please see http://www.nfpandmore.org/2006_SIN_OF_ONAN.pdf.

The all-important context of the New Testament is the teaching of the Lord Jesus about the daily cross. “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). Of course that does not mean that just because something is difficult, it is demanded by the Lord. But when a teaching of the Church is denied primarily because it involves carrying the daily cross, the argument is simply meaningless in terms of Christian discipleship. Yet, that is the theological nonsense that is behind the dissent movement.

I do not mean to imply that many Catholics have been deceived by the dissenters’ “can’t say no to anything” arguments. I suspect that few have read them. No, they have accepted contraception because they have been seduced by the culture and have heard almost nothing from the pulpit or other avenues of adult Catholic education to contradict the culture and to affirm the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. And perhaps many of them, seeing public criticism of Catholic teaching on birth control but never hearing it supported from their local priest or bishop, rationalize that such silence means consent to dissent.

Ordinary people have both a need and a right to know what the Catholic Church teaches about love, marriage and sexuality—and why.

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