

# Apologetics and Birth Control

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Is CATHOLIC teaching on birth control something Catholic apologists have to apologize for?

Or does it have true apologetic value in supporting Catholic claims to being the unique source of the fullness of divine truth about love, both human and divine?

I maintain the latter, and this has been the experience of some famous American converts. In the 1930s Herbert Ratner, a Jewish physician very much in tune with the wisdom of the natural law, was grieved at the growing departure of Protestant churches and, presumably, Jewish congregations, from the traditional biblical teaching against unnatural forms of birth control. His observation that only the Catholic Church was standing firm in the face of this flight from reality led him to investigate and to enter the Church.

JUST A FEW YEARS AGO, Rex Moses, who now heads up Operation Rescue in Corpus Christi, read a brief explanation of the birth control issue in the newsletter of the Couple to Couple League, and that led him to investigate and to join the Catholic Church. At the time he was a Fundamentalist, married to a Baptist, and reluctantly practicing the periodic abstinence of natural family planning simply to please his wife, who did not want to use unnatural methods of birth control. The former Episcopalian and now Roman Catholic priest, Father Christopher Phillips, made it very clear to his theological examiner that he and his wife believed and lived the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, and the same holds true for a former Lutheran minister, now a married Catholic priest, with whom I have discussed this matter.

I think there are several important steps in providing an apologetic for the teaching against marital contraception and then demonstrating how that teaching is one more reason for the truth of the Catholic Church.

THE FIRST STEP IS rather brief and simple in words but may be profoundly difficult and time-consuming in practice, namely, seeing the issue of birth control in the context of Christian discipleship.

The second step is a bit more academic, but it's easy and requires no change of heart, namely, understanding that birth control did not become a Catholic-Protestant "issue" until August 14, 1930.

The third step would be to understand what the teaching *is* and how the relatively recent discoveries of natural family planning have made this teaching incomparably more livable than in previous ages.

The fourth step is more theological, understanding a meaning for sexual relations that accords well with the entire biblical teaching on sex and love, including the teaching against marital contraception.

The emphasis in the first step is on the attitudes necessary for Christian discipleship. In a brochure first published in 1981, *What Does the Catholic Church Really Teach about Birth*

*Control?*, I put it this way:

"It is the belief of Catholics that Jesus came to redeem us and to teach us the truth about love--God's love for each one of us and how we are to love each other. Jesus showed how fully love commits God to each one of us throughout our lives, how God loves and even pursues the sinner in order to embrace him again in the life of grace. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life' (John 3:16).

"Jesus sacrificed his life that we might share eternal life with him, and throughout the Gospel, Jesus teaches us that love is not always easy. He teaches that in married love man and wife are called to love each other until death. He shocked his listeners by declaring that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery (Mark 10:1-12), and at the Last Supper he gave us the new commandment, one that most of us find quite difficult: 'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:35).

"On the other hand, Jesus promised not only eternal happiness to those who follow him on the narrow way (Matt 7:14); he also promised a special peace and joy to those who really accept him and his way. 'He who seeks his life will lose it; he who loses his life for my sake will find it' (Luke 9:24)."

BECAUSE OF THE common way of speaking about sexual relations as "making love," most people will agree that sex is intended by God to be an act of love. Most Christians will agree that there is a distinction between love and lust, that not every sex act is an act of love. Of key importance is an internal acceptance of the fact that Jesus never speaks about love being easy; if it were, he wouldn't have to command us to love each other as well as our enemies.

I suspect that a primary reason for the practice of contraception is that many Christians have subconsciously absorbed a secular attitude that whatever is connected with the term love, especially sexual love, should be easy and pleasurable. All they can see in the traditional teaching is difficulty which they fail to relate to the cross.

Perhaps it has not occurred to them that living the truth about married love must necessarily involve the cross in some way or other, perhaps the daily cross. Once this basic reality of Christian doctrine and life is internalized, the rest is relatively easy.

ALMOST NO ONE --Catholic, Protestant, Jew or secularist--realizes in 1990 that before 1930 Christian churches were united in teaching that it was immoral for married couples to use contraception. Evangelical Charles Provan, in *The Bible and Birth Control* [available through the Mini-Catalogue], has done all Christians a favor by collating an extensive series of quotations from classical Protestant theologians on the subject of birth control, specifically on the text of the Onan account (Gen. 38).

The first part of the book provides Provan's interpretations of Scripture against any form of family planning--what I call the "providentialist argument." The last part contains quotations from 66 Protestant theologians against Onanism, plus a list of 33 more who are not quoted. It is this last part that is valuable for showing birth control was not a Catholic-Protestant issue before 1930.

I suspect it will be quite surprising for most Christians to realize that Martin Luther taught

that the practice of Onanism (withdrawal and ejaculation) was a form of sodomy, that John Calvin thought it was the murder of future persons, and that John Wesley "declared that taking 'preventative measures' was unnatural and would destroy the souls of those who practiced it."

IN THE SAME VEIN, most Christians are unaware that American anti-contraceptive laws of the late nineteenth century were passed by basically Protestant legislatures for a basically Protestant United States. In 1873 a Protestant reformer, Anthony Comstock, persuaded Congress to outlaw the sale and distribution of contraceptive devices in federal territories, and many states followed suit. The body of legislation was called the Comstock Laws and remained in effect in some states until 1965.

Some background may be helpful. In my opinion, the sexual revolution started in 1798 with the publication of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* by Thomas Malthus, an economist and Anglican minister. Providing a good example of why economics was called the "dismal science," Malthus predicted that unrestrained population growth would outstrip food supplies and result in mass starvation.

He advocated family limitation through late marriage and abstinence after reaching the desired family size. He probably would have been appalled to see his warnings used as an excuse to use unnatural forms of birth control, but the population scare he generated long outlived his teachings of marital chastity.

Because that same fear of increased population has been--and remains--such a widely used excuse for advocating marital contraception, I think that Malthus can be called the remote Father of the Sexual Revolution.

AFTER CHARLES GOODYEAR accidentally discovered the vulcanization of rubber in 1839, there was a technological improvement in the manufacture of condoms, and, armed with this "improvement," the neo-Malthusians began a public advocacy for contraception in the 1860s, much the same as their spiritual descendants would do after the technological breakthrough of the Pill 100 years later. It was this public agitation for contraception that in the United States drew the reaction of the Comstock laws in 1873.

As advocacy for marital contraception continued in England, the Church of England reaffirmed the traditional teaching against all unnatural forms of birth control in 1908 and again in 1920 at its periodic Lambeth Conferences of those years. In 1930 a majority of the Anglican bishops capitulated in the face the continued pressure and allowed recourse to contraception, fully admitting this contradicted their own previous teaching.

Anglican Bishop Gore led the minority fight against the approval, pointing out it would open the door to the acceptance of sodomy. Of course, he was entirely correct. The Lambeth decision was followed in the United States by a similar acceptance of contraception by a committee of the Federal Council of Churches on March 21, 1931.

The impact of these two actions cannot be overestimated, for they constituted the embrace of the sexual revolution by Christian churches.

Without the support of the dominant religious sentiment, the American anti-contraception laws began to fall, one after another, starting in the mid-thirties. The final blow was delivered in 1965 by *Griswold vs. Connecticut*, in which the Supreme Court invented a

constitutional right of privacy which it said made unconstitutional any and all laws against the sale, distribution, and use of contraceptive devices. This legal fiction was used only eight years later to label "unconstitutional" any laws restricting abortion for the full nine months of pregnancy.

LET'S GO BACK to the historic year of 1930. On August 14 the Lambeth Conference broke away from the anti-contraceptive teaching that had been universal among Christian churches. Until that time, no Christian church had taught it was morally permissible for married couples to use unnatural methods of birth control.

On December 31, just four and one-half months later, Pope Pius XI responded with a clear affirmation of the traditional teaching in his famous *Casti Connubii* ("Concerning Chaste Marriage"). This encyclical is such a wonderful compendium of Christian teaching on marriage that I feel Pius XI must have been working on it for some time before the Anglican break, but its publication was undoubtedly triggered by the need to respond to Lambeth. Its key paragraph dealing with birth control merits full quotation.

"Since, therefore, openly departing from the uninterrupted Christian tradition, some recently have judged it possible solemnly to declare another doctrine regarding this question, the Catholic Church, to whom God has entrusted the defense of the integrity and purity of morals, standing erect in the midst of the moral ruin which surrounds her, in order that she may preserve the chastity of the nuptial union from being defiled by this foul stain, raises her voice in token of her divine ambassadorship and through our mouth proclaims anew: Any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin" (par. 56).

Rather obviously, the Pope was assuming sufficient reflection and full consent of the will on the part of such contraceptors, so the last phrase of that paragraph amounts to a very clear and forceful statement that marital contraception is the grave matter of mortal sin, and that remains the teaching of the Catholic Church, even in this era of dissent.

AS INDICATED by the contraceptive-embracing action of the Federal Council of Churches less than three months after *Casti Connubii*, the encyclical did not have the desired effect of getting all the Christian churches to join with the Catholic Church in retaining the teaching against marital contraception.

It did have the practical and salutary effect of forestalling the embrace of the sexual revolution by rank-and-file Catholics, both lay and clerical, for approximately a generation, about 35 years.

Although the language of *Casti Connubii* sounds strong to our ears, equally strong terms were used in an editorial in the *Washington Post* (March 22, 1931) regarding the action of the Federal Council of Churches, and I think they are worth repeating because they indicate the general recognition of the evil of contraception among thoughtful people of the day:

"The departures from Christian teachings are astounding in many cases, leaving the beholder aghast at the willingness of some churches to discard the ancient injunction to teach 'Christ and Him crucified.' . . . Carried to its logical conclusion, the committee's

report, if carried into effect, would sound the deathknell of marriage as a holy institution by establishing degrading practices which would encourage indiscriminate immorality. The suggestion that the use of legalized contraceptives would be 'careful and restrained' is preposterous."

Any person of good will and open heart will admit that what has happened since 1930 is what was predicted. As Bishop Gore had indicated, accepting marital contraception has led to the wholesale acceptance of sodomy by homosexuals and by married couples alike; the notion that the use of legalized contraceptives would be restrained has been proven to be preposterous, and marriage has become for many simply a form of legalized prostitution--goods and services in return for sex, with no sense of lifelong commitment or an obligation to raise children in and for the Lord.

THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION provides a twofold apologetic for the truth of the Catholic Church and especially for the prophetic role of the Pope as the Vicar of Christ. As we have seen, as soon as the Anglican Church initiated the break from nineteen centuries of Christian teaching against unnatural forms of birth control, Pope Pius XI quickly reaffirmed the traditional teaching. That's precisely what one would expect if the teaching role of Peter has been incarnated by Christ himself in the successors of Peter.

The second apologetic takes a bit more consideration. The reality is that the marketing of the Pill in 1960 added fuel to the fires of the already existing sexual revolution. Many Catholics were seduced by the new propaganda. The real embrace of the sexual revolution didn't occur until the massive dissent organized by certain clergy immediately after the issuance of *Humanae Vitae*, July 25, 1968.

It is whistling in the dark to deny that the Catholic rank-and-file and most of the clergy have bought into the sexual revolution. The latest survey on birth control practices (1988) showed that among "family planners," 97% of Catholics (and 98% of Protestants) used unnatural forms of birth control. The proportion of unmarried Catholics, as well as Protestants, who are regularly fornicating--and contracepting--is so high that it is dishonest to call it anything but a bearhug embrace of the sexual revolution.

DESPITE ALL of the bad practice and despite all of the pressures to change the teaching to conform to the common practice, the Pope has been singular in his frequent teaching that marital contraception is a violation of the truth about human love. To anyone who is concerned about the unhappy effects of the sexual revolution, the teaching of the Pope is like a lighthouse on a stormy night and an excellent example of Jesus remaining faithful to his promises that the Spirit would guide the Pope and the bishops in full union with him.

The third step in an apologetic for the Church stemming from its teaching on birth control is an understanding of the role of modern natural family planning. Let's return to the crucial years of 1930-1931.

Researchers in the mid-1920s discovered for the first time in recorded history that ovulation occurs approximately two weeks before the start of the next menstruation. This physiological reality is at the basis of all forms of natural family planning. At Lambeth in 1930 the Anglican bishops drew a false dichotomy between permanent abstinence and contraception; that is, they seemed unaware of the possibility of periodic abstinence and seemed to think that the only alternatives to unlimited pregnancies were total abstinence or contraception.

THE STATEMENT of the Federal Council of Churches gave considerable emphasis to the desirability of abstinence, but it was not clear if it was talking about permanent or periodic abstinence. On the other hand, Pope Pius XI clearly recognized the liceity of periodic abstinence. In fact, there had been medical speculation about an infertile time of the woman's cycle since the mid-nineteenth century. Questions about the morality of confining relations to the infertile time had been addressed to the Vatican during the last half of the 1800s, and the practice had been approved.

Thus, long before calendar rhythm became a practical possibility, its theoretical possibility had been foreseen and had been approved. This is all part of the context for this statement in *Casti Connubii*: "Nor are those considered as acting against nature who in the married state use their right in the proper manner, although on account of natural reasons either of time or of certain defects, new life cannot be brought forth" (par. 59).

The calendar rhythm of the 1930s was the Model T of natural family planning, and natural family planning (NFP), like cars, has come a long way since then. Modern NFP has become so effective that the major concern about it in some Catholic publications is whether it is being used generously or selfishly. In the light of the hazards of the IUD and the Pill, a new appreciation has developed for the safety of NFP. Not only is NFP free of risk to a woman's health, but the self-awareness it develops in women can enable them to notice health problems much sooner than they would otherwise.

I ONLY WISH TO MAKE one point about modern natural family planning relevant to an apologetic for the Church regarding birth control. Modern NFP makes the living out of the traditional Christian teaching of marital non-contraception incomparably easier than it was in the 1920s and 1930s. If the effectiveness and relatively short abstinence of modern NFP had been well known in the late 1920s, perhaps the Church of England and the Federal Council of Churches would have retained the traditional teaching. Furthermore, instruction in NFP is available in the 1990s to an extent not even dreamed of in 1930.

Sooner or later, in any discussion of the morality of birth control, the question will arise, "Why is it wrong for married couples to use unnatural forms of birth control?" There are different ways to explain the evil of contraception, but an explanation that is scriptural will have the highest apologetic value.

First of all, by reviewing the various texts which teach the evil of adultery, fornication, and sodomy, you can most likely get agreement that Scripture teaches that God intends sex should be a marriage act. By a process of elimination, that's all that's left.

Only when a couple have entered the covenant of marriage can it be morally good for them to celebrate their love in the sexual union. Why? What is there about marriage that makes morally good the same physical action that would have been morally evil for them the day before they married?

In marriage they pledge to each other and before God and man that they will exercise caring love toward each other, for better and for worse, until death do they part. If they should contract to live with each other for better but not for worse, they would not be married in a moral-religious sense; it would only be a form of legalized co-habitation.

Acts of marital relations must reflect, at least implicitly, the acts of the will that made the

couple married in the first place, but there are two kinds of acts which contradict the essence of married love.

NO ONE WOULD HAVE trouble admitting that acts of marital rape are not acts of marital love and that they in fact contradict the whole concept of the gift of self which occurred at marriage. Not so easy to see for many couples because of their own practice is that contraceptive intercourse likewise contradicts the essence of the marriage covenant. Indeed, what is the meaning of marital contraception except, "I take you for better but not for the imagined worse of possible pregnancy"?

If the couple made that act of the will at the time of the marriage ceremony, the "marriage" would be invalid. Similarly, if the couple choose "for better but not for worse" by the practice of contraception, such acts of sex are invalid as a renewal of their marriage covenant. In short, in order for sexual acts to be morally good, they must flow from the marriage covenant (no sex outside marriage), and they must not contradict it (no marital rape or contraception).

THE MARRIAGE COVENANT provides a single, biblical standard for explaining the immorality of the various sexual acts which are condemned by Scripture and Tradition. (Much more on this is developed in my forthcoming *Sex and the Marriage Covenant*, due out next year.) Regarding Scripture, the Onan account needs more extensive treatment than is possible in this article. Suffice it to say for the immediate apologetic that Onanism was the word for contraception before the latter word was invented, and Onanism was condemned by both Catholic and Protestant theologians alike up until the break of 1930.

The various elements described above can be used to develop an appealing apologetic for Catholic teaching against marital contraception. If one approaches the subject in a true spirit of Christian discipleship, if one understands that this teaching was universal among Christian churches until 1930, if one internalizes the idea that marital relations are intended by the Creator to be at least implicitly a renewal of the marriage covenant, then the reality of natural family planning can be seen as a real gift of God to those who have a real need for avoiding or delaying pregnancy. And then the Catholic Church is seen not as an object of derision but as the light of Christ for its unwavering teaching of the divine truth about human love and for doing so much to foster the practical help to live those truths in family life today.

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