

Contraception

**A Personal
Odyssey**

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THE TRUTH of the teaching on contraception in *Humanae Vitae* is unfortunately not self-evident—not even to sincere Christians. Both my wife and I were raised in devout Protestant households. We went to church at least every Sunday as I was growing up. We frequently read and discussed Scripture together as a family. My father taught adult Sunday School well over twenty years until the day he died.

We tried to be faithful Christians and prayed God to help us lead a moral life. Part of that moral life for married Christians was, in our opinion, the use of contraceptives to determine the size of the family. We did not simply tolerate the use of contraception as a lesser evil to

achieve a greater good. There was no ambivalence about it. Contraception was, in our minds, a moral good. I still remember the minister from the pulpit enjoining the married members of his congregation to contracept and limit the size of their families. For the married, contraception was virtually morally obligatory!

So it was not the teaching on contraception which drew my wife and me to the Catholic Church. In fact, the Church's teaching on contraception seemed to make no sense at all. It seemed unreasonable and arbitrary. A newscaster on one of the three major networks' seemed to capture it when he announced during a broadcast: "The long-awaited Vatican document on sexuality has finally been released, and what it says is, 'No!'" We could not understand how the Church could say no to contraception.

Nevertheless, through God's grace, we had come to the decision to become Roman Catholic. I still could not understand the Church's position on contraception. Yet the more I thought about this question, the more it seemed unreasonable that the Catholic Church could be correct with all her other teachings and be wrong in this one small, yet terribly important matter. I was ready and willing to accept Catholic teaching on the seven sacraments, the hierarchical ministry, the immaculate conception and assumption of the Blessed Virgin, papal infallibility, transubstantiation. So in the final analysis it just did not seem reasonable that the Church could be correct about all these matters and wrong about contraception. So initially I accepted the teaching on contraception on the basis of the Church's authority. The Church had been given the divine mandate to teach all nations and to lead them to

the truth. I had to trust the Church. As St. Augustine had said, "I would not believe the Gospel were it not for the authority of the Catholic Church."

A Need to Understand

Accepting Catholic teaching on contraception on the basis of Church authority might have been sufficient for the rest of my life were it not for a development in my career shortly after our conversion. Because I had earned an advanced pontifical degree in moral theology while I was still a Protestant clergyman, I was offered a teaching position in a Catholic seminary. Taking note of my married state, the seminary authorities informed me that I was to teach sexual morality! Simply accepting the Church's teaching on contraception was not enough; I now had to try to *understand* it.

The task of coming to understand the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* was ultimately made possible by the truth of another insight of St. Augustine's: "Understanding is the reward of faith. Do not therefore try to understand in order that you may believe; but believe in order that you may understand." I am not so sure that grace made the task of understanding Catholic teaching on contraception any easier in my case, but I know it did make it possible.

As I struggled through hours in the library on this subject, I found some intellectual attempts to explain the teaching on contraception wholly inadequate. Through this experience I came to see clearly that the truth of Church teaching and our obligation to accept it cannot be dependent on the adequacy with which the teaching is presented.

However, I also knew that the moral teaching of the Catholic Church is accessible to the powers of natural reason, even unaided by grace, for, as St. Paul said, God's laws are written in the hearts of all. So I continued to search.

The "perverted faculty" theory

One inadequate explanation of the Church's teaching on contraception, in my opinion, might be called the "perverted faculty" theory. (This does not refer to the professors at the college where I teach!) This theory maintains that God created us with certain faculties ordered toward particular purposes and if we prevented the faculty from achieving its God-given purpose we perverted it and thwarted God's will. As the word implies, genitalia are ordered toward the generation of new life and if one prevented them from achieving their purpose, one perverted that divinely given faculty. The problem with this approach was that it was easy to think of any number of "perversions" of faculties which could hardly be considered immoral. Factory workers use ear plugs to keep their ears from achieving their purpose. A husband plops a pillow over his face to block out the light of his wife's bedside reading light.

Another poor explanation of the immorality of contraception led to terrible problems for the Church. It was taught that the immorality of contraception could be seen in its unnaturalness, its artificiality. "Artificial" contraception was wrong because it was contrary to the natural order which was created by God. Condoms, diaphragms and foams interfered with natural marital sexual

acts. They were intrusive, distasteful and unnatural.

Other practices of the Church which had nothing at all to do with morality seemed to underscore this approach. No synthetic or artificial substances were to be used in worship, for example. Altar candles had to be of pure bees wax. There could be no artificial coloring in communion wine. Mass vestments and altar linens could not be made from synthetic fibers. The attitude seemed to prefigure the disdain—almost moral revulsion—which young upwardly-mobile professionals now show toward individuals wearing polyester. Only natural fibers will do.

Introduction of "the pill"

The weaknesses of the approach became apparent, I believe, with the introduction of the birth control pill. And untold confusion resulted in many Catholic circles. Taking the pill had seemed no more unnatural than the taking of an aspirin. In fact, it was argued, it remedied "a defect of nature." Furthermore, it did not interfere with the spontaneous love-making of the marital couples unlike other methods of birth control. It seemed the natural—and hence moral—contraceptive had been found. The issuance, then, of *Humanae Vitae* came as a terrible blow to Catholics who were using the pill, and it convinced the secular world that the Catholic Church was thoroughly unreasonable in its sexual teachings.

One of the things *Humanae Vitae* taught us, however, was that it is contraception itself which is immoral not the artificiality of it.

How, then, can the immorality of contraception be understood? I must admit that I was helped more by the writings of married Catholic philosophers than I was by the books of moral theologians. It is, of course, possible that the rationale which I have found convincing will not be helpful to others. However, this would not alter the authenticity and binding character of the Church's teaching.

Acting rationally

We can legitimately ask what is natural for the human person so that we can know what will contribute to his self-fulfillment. That which is most natural for the human person is to act rationally. Rationality is the most distinctive characteristic of the human. But how do we know a person is acting rationally? We know a person is acting rationally if he is acting with a purpose, with a goal or an end in mind. The person who acts aimlessly, who wanders about with no purpose is perceived as acting irrationally. He is usually locked up for his own good and is cared for by others.

The rational act is understood as being freely and consciously ordered toward an end, a goal. We understand what a person is doing by virtue of the end he has in mind. We see a young woman standing on a street corner in a light rain on a cold, miserable November day. She just stands there, and we think she must be insane. Even a dog would know enough to seek shelter in such weather! When we ask her what she is doing she replies that she is waiting for a bus. Suddenly what appeared to be irrational behavior becomes eminently reasonable. And the more we

enquire of her the more reasonable her behavior appears. She is waiting for the bus to go to the stationery store to buy paper to type her research report for her physiology class in the medical school she is attending in order to become a physician so that she can help and heal others. The act of medical healing becomes the "end" or goal which ultimately explains her actions on that cold November day.

Ends seen as goods

Of course, we do not act simply on behalf of or for ends, but rather for ends perceived as goods. A good is something perfective of our nature which we desire to possess because it will lead to our happiness, as was the case, for example, with the young woman whose goal was to be a physician. In fact, it is ends perceived as goods which make human action possible and which enable us to exercise our freedom. As T. S. Eliot said, "The end is where we begin." The end, or goal, defines our action and makes it intelligible. Indeed, it makes it possible. One of the beautiful things about life is that we have a virtually endless array of goods spread before us for the choosing. The moral life consists in being open to all the goods which are offered to us and in choosing those which truly perfect our nature.

We are clearly not obliged to act on behalf of all the goods which are arrayed before us. That would be an impossibility. We are finite creatures and can only act on behalf of so many goods. I cannot attend a conference, spend time with my family and read the latest novel on the best-seller list all at the same time. It is

impossible, and to think we could do so is unreasonable. However, what we are obliged to do is never to act directly against a good, for to do so would mean not recognizing its properties of goodness and the role it plays as the source of free, rational human action. We may never treat a good as though it were an evil. This would undermine, indeed make impossible, free human action since reasonable human behavior is understood as being ordered towards ends perceived as goods. When I was younger, I enjoyed sketching. Now that I am older with family responsibilities, I no longer have time for this avocation. However, that does not mean that I regard sketching as a frivolous activity unworthy of a human being. I remain open to it as a good to which I may some day return.

One time a young priest came to give our parish Lenten retreat. In the course of the retreat, he revealed a tremendous hostility against football. Professional football was the most evil of American activities, he maintained. The Soviet Union was a far superior social system to that of the United States because there the workers and ordinary citizens went to the ballet rather than football games. I was perplexed by this hostility toward a perfectly (potentially) wholesome game of athletic prowess and team cooperation. Some years later the priest's name came up in conversation, and I learned he had had a rather sad childhood. His father had been a football coach and his older brother a star quarterback. However, as a boy the priest had contracted polio and was never able to play football. Suddenly his aversion to the sport exhibited during the retreat became understandable. There had been a good which he

had been incapable of realizing. But instead of maintaining an appropriately open and accepting attitude toward the good, he rejected it as though it were an evil.

At times I may have to choose between playing tennis with one of my children and undertaking a professional task such as writing a paper. I may choose *for* the professional task without choosing *against* friendship with my child, and the child knows it. There will be another opportunity for a game of tennis. However, if I respond with, "Beat it, kid! You make too many demands on me. You're interfering with my professional career!" then, clearly, I have acted against friendship with my child.

Again, there is no obligation to act on behalf of all goods of which we are capable, but there is an obligation never to act against a good as though it were an evil, for this would undermine the basis of reasonable human behavior. To misread a good as though it were an evil is to misread reality; it is not to trust and act upon the truth. It is rather to act on the basis of a falsehood.

Making sense of sexuality

Now what makes sense of human sexuality? What makes sense of the fact that we are differentiated as male and female? As the Second Vatican Council teaches us, we can look at the nature of the human person and his acts to find the answer. (*Gaudium et Spes*, #51). Reasonable human acts are those directed towards ends perceived as goods. And three fundamental goods or ends can be found to be inherent within our

sexuality: Sensual pleasure, friendship and the child. But which of these most adequately and fundamentally explains our sexual natures? Sexual pleasure does not ultimately explain our natures as male and female since it can be achieved to some degree even in isolation. Friendship is a great good of our sexual natures, but we know it does not ultimately explain the differentiation of sexes since even homosexuals seek this end—although they are never able adequately to realize it. Ultimately what explains the sexual differentiation of our natures as male and female is the child toward which our sexuality is ordered. Clearly this priceless good of human life toward which our sexuality is ordered is not the only end of our sexuality, but it is the one which ultimately and most adequately explains it. This is all that is meant by the traditional formula that the primary end of marriage is the procreation and education of children.

It seems to me that what is fundamentally wrong with contraception is that it invariably treats the procreative good, the child, as though it were an evil. Contraception always involves the positing of an act, other than the marital act, which act is directed against the realization of the procreative good which otherwise might arise from the marital act in which two people have freely chosen to engage. The very name of the practice makes it clear that this is what is happening: CONTRA (against)-ception. Contraception always posits an act against the good of life, whether it is taking a pill or using a condom, an IUD, a spermicidal foam, a diaphragm or *coitus interruptus*.

Now the motives of people using contraception are often quite moral. They are usually the same ones Pope Paul VI himself used in *Humanae Vitae* as justifications for limiting the size of one's family: the physical or emotional health of the mother, or to "secure the harmony and peace of the family, and better conditions for the education of the children already born." (*Humanae Vitae*, #16). Indeed, the Church has always encouraged married couples to be as generous as possible with the gift of life, but she never enjoined them to breed as many offspring as they are capable of having physically with no regard to the task of nurturing and educating them. Our family name Haas is Dutch for rabbit, and some people have accused us of trying to live up to our name with our eight children! But human beings are not to breed as animals; they are to raise up a family in a reasonable way.

The spacing of one's children is a morally legitimate undertaking in the eyes of the Church, but using contraception to do so is not because, as has been said, contraception always involves the positing of an act against the good of human life. Even if people do not think they are doing this, the reality of their act has a way of manifesting itself even when people are not aware of it. The misreading of the procreative good of a child has insinuated itself insidiously into our culture at all levels. A pregnancy becomes a contraceptive failure or mistake, and failures and mistakes have to be corrected. The attitude has thoroughly worked its way even into our pop culture. Think of the number of films a few years ago which portrayed the child as the

terrifying embodiment of evil: *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Omen*, *The Exorcist*.

AID's greatest fear

It sometimes seems that the greatest fear of the United States Agency for International Development is the human child. Millions of dollars in economic aid to developing countries are made contingent upon those countries first launching an assault on their children. *People* become the problem. Rather than addressing the real problems such as an inefficient economic system or maldistribution of goods or an inadequate delivery system for medical care, which would require some real effort, the easiest solution is sought: eliminate the children already conceived and prevent more from being conceived. During the population scare of the Sixties a new word was coined: pollution. It was not pollution which threatened our population, rather it was people which became the threat. People became the new pollution! The good of human life was seen as an evil.

When I grew up it was not unusual to find vending machines which dispensed condoms in the men's rooms of gas stations. The machines always bore the message: "Prophylactics: Sold for the prevention of disease only." A prophylactic, of course, is a treatment or device for the prevention of disease. It is interesting that the machines had to carry that message. Most of the states in the Union at that time had laws *against* the selling of contraceptives because their use was considered immoral and harmful to the common good. The State legislatures at the time these laws were passed were *not* populated

primarily by Catholics but by Protestants. One thing we forget is that until very recently Protestants believed the same thing about contraception as Catholics. In fact, a tremendous propaganda effort was required to change Protestant attitudes on contraception. This effort is chronicled in a book entitled: *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The History of the Birth Control Movement and American Society since 1830*.

However, it was not principally disease that my classmates thought of when they used the vending machines. It was unthinkable that one's girl friend had a disease. The condoms were purchased to prevent babies. But a curious and subtle thing happened. A certain association developed between disease and babies, both of which came to be seen as evils to be avoided.

Babies as disease

This attitude was poignantly illustrated at a convention of Planned Parenthood Physicians a number of years ago. A physician representing the federal government came from the Center for Communicable Diseases in Atlanta to talk about the deplorable spread of venereal disease among teenagers. He stated that the most prevalent form of venereal disease in the country was gonorrhea. The second most prevalent form of venereal disease was unwanted pregnancies and the most effective way of dealing with it is abortion! This outrageous statement was made by a highly educated man to a group of highly educated medical professionals and was apparently accepted without protest. The priceless good of human life, a precious child, has come to be viewed as a

disease. To this monstrous assault on the good of human life the Church does indeed deliver a resounding "NO". The Church says no to the practice of contraception and abortion because she pronounces first a "yes" to the good of human life.

What I came to see was that the basis of the Church's teaching on contraception was affirmation of the good of human life. That was really the subject of Paul VI's encyclical. It was not primarily a condemnation of contraception, but rather an affirmation of the good of human life, as the name of the encyclical itself implies—*Humanae Vitae*, Of human life.

An early heresy

The defense of human life by the Church is obvious throughout her history. From the very beginning the Church had to face threats to this good. There was a very early heresy under the guise of Christianity known as Gnosticism. The Gnostics believed that the material world was not good. It was supposedly created by a fallen demi-god and was thought to be evil. The flesh was a prison for the divine spark within us. The goal was to shed the body and release the spark to be reunited with God. They denied that Jesus was actually in the flesh because it was unthinkable that God would have united himself with the filthy material world. The Gnostics also opposed marriage because it led to children and the entrapment of more divine sparks within the prison of the body.

The Church responded early and forcefully to this threat to the good of human life by insisting that our bodily existence was a divine gift. The

sounds of the struggle against this early heresy can be heard in Holy Scripture itself. The *First Epistle of St. John* stresses in the strongest language that Jesus had come in the flesh. All the senses are enlisted to testify to this truth.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested unto us;) that which we have seen and heard we declare unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we write these things that your joy may be full. (1 Jn 1:1-4)

Jesus Christ came in the flesh, and God thereby gave the strongest affirmation possible of the essential goodness of this created world. And the Church trusted this truth, affirmed the goodness of human life and triumphed finally over Gnosticism.

However, this dualistic heresy which assaults the goodness of the crown of God's creation, human life, has surfaced again and again throughout history under a number of names: Docetists, Manichaeans, Bogomils, Cathars, Albigensians. Time and again the Church had to launch a defense of human life against these threats. Always these heretical groups claimed the name of Christian and insisted they were morally superior to the Catholic Church since it was carnal and they were spiritual.

Cathari, for example, is Greek for the "pure ones". They became dominant in southern France

during the twelfth century. The Cathars believed that the material world was created by an evil principle. They rejected marriage because it led to offspring, the greatest evil which could be perpetrated by a human being. They would go through the marriage ceremony and simulate marriage, but went to great lengths to avoid conception.

The Cathars were a rigorous lot and were quite disruptive to the social fabric. The "perfected ones" would undergo a practice known as "endura" which was essentially a fast unto death so that the spirit could escape the body. They became a real menace to society and on one occasion murdered the papal legate sent to deal with them. Eckbert of Schoenau in 1163 likened them to the Manichaeans and wrote, "If they indulge in marital intercourse, they nevertheless avoid conception and generation by whatever means they can." The greatest evil for a Cathar was conception, for it brought another "son of the Devil" into the world.

The Cathars had a sacrament necessary for salvation known as the "consolatum." After sinning they could confess to their priest and receive anew this "consolatum." However, there was one sin which was so horrible it could not be forgiven even if the person were at the point of death—pregnancy.

The Church reacted against this threat to the basic good of human life and family with an intense vigor. When this dangerous heresy had finally been extirpated in southern France, the Catholic bishops held a council in Albi, the former seat of the movement, in 1254, to enact measures for the restoration of the Faith and to counter any recurrence of Cathar belief. Up to

that time all Catholics over the age of seven were required to memorize the Creed and the Our Father. At the Council of Albi another prayer was prescribed for the faithful: The Hail Mary. The phrase within that prayer which would effectively counter the anti-life beliefs of the Cathars was: "... and blessed is the Fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

The fruit of the womb is blessed. It is holy. It is not a curse. It is not evil. It is a wondrously beautiful gift from God. Yet the threat against the good of human life has continued throughout history to rise up, and the Church has continued to fight back in defense of life.

Descendants of the Puritans

A namesake of the Cathars arose in England centuries after their elimination in France. The Puritans, the new "pure ones," had, in a less extreme form, the same uneasiness with the flesh. It was somehow dirty, fallen, corrupt. Catholics were denounced as sensual and dissolute and worldly. And the modern descendants of the Puritans, Planned Parenthood, continue to see the locus of evil in the world as the flesh, the human child, new life.

Yet as we saw earlier, the child is one of the goods which makes sense of our sexuality. It is one of the goods on behalf of which we act when we engage in the marital embrace. If we treat it as though it were an evil something on behalf of which we should not act, we render our sexual acts meaning less. We limit our potential for human actions since the source of our actions are ends perceived as goods. When those goods are

not seen and understood as such, we obviously cannot act on their behalf.

Also, as was said earlier, the child is just one of the goods on behalf of which we act in the marital embrace. Another is friendship. It is truly inseparable from the good of human life since the child born of the marital union is an embodiment or manifestation of the profound friendship of the husband and wife. My father had a natural insight into this truth when he told me on my wedding day, "John, the greatest thing you can do for your children is to love their mother." Each good, that of friendship and that of children, flourishes when both are loved together. Pope Paul VI expressed the inseparability of these two goods more theologically in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* when he spoke of "the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning." (*Humanae Vitae*, #12)

The question might be asked how natural family planning, or abstinence from sexual intercourse during fertile periods to avoid a child, could be justified in light of this approach. Earlier, it was pointed out that we have no moral obligation to realize all the goods of which we are capable. This is true in the area of child-bearing as well. If there is a weighty moral reason to avoid a child at a particular time, the couple merely refrains from engaging in an act which would likely result in the generation of new life. Consequently, one does not have to posit an act, other than the marital act, which itself is directed against the good of human life. One simply refrains from acting altogether.

Openness to life

Yet a section of the encyclical which judges the use of periodic abstinence to be licit also has led to confusion regarding Church teaching. In section 11, Pope Paul VI states that "each and every marriage act (*quilibet matrimonii usus*) must remain open to the transmission of life." This does not mean that procreation must be the specific intent of every marriage act, as the very context makes clear. Yet some people have interpreted it to mean that.

The intent of the teaching might have been clearer if it had been expressed in the negative. No marriage act may ever willfully and knowingly be closed to the transmission of life. Such a formulation might make the teaching clearer. Contraception is always wrong because it always involves an act against the realization of the procreative good when two people have freely chosen to engage in marital intercourse. Periodic abstinence from intercourse during fertile periods is in itself morally indifferent, but would be immoral if the intention were immoral or licit and chaste if the intention were good and the circumstances warranted its practice.

Through some considerable reflection, then, I came to see that the Church's teaching on contraception was reasonable because it was based on an understanding of human behavior being judged reasonable on the basis of its being ordered toward an end perceived as a good. I was also surprised to see some of the unexpected quarters from which the Church received support for this view. I ran across the following in the

writings of Sigmund Freud which could have been lifted from the pages of a Catholic moral theology text:

It is a characteristic common to all the (sexual) perversions that in them reproduction as an aim is put aside. This is actually the criterion by which we judge whether a sexual activity is perverse—if it departs from reproduction in its aims and pursues the attainment of gratification independently. (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Allen and Unwin, 1952, p. 266)

I came to see that the Church's teaching was indeed reasonable and could be supported by rational argument—even by non-theological disciplines. I came to see that the Church's teaching on contraception was not so much a No as a Yes. It was a Yes to the gift of human life, the most precious gift God gives us. And through the centuries, the Church has consistently and faithfully echoed the Yes which Mary declared when she was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and ushered in the Lord of Life and our redemption.