

Birth Control and the Catholic Conscience

by Philip St. Romain

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Introduction

Sometime during the summer of 1993 I received a call from the editor of the newspaper for the Catholic Diocese of Wichita, where I was serving as Family Life Coordinator at the time. That year was the 25th anniversary of *Humane Vitae*, the encyclical by St. (Pope) Paul VI on human life and best known, perhaps, for its teaching that only natural methods of spacing children were approved by the Church¹. Contraceptive methods like birth control pills and barrier strategies like condoms and diaphragms were considered unacceptable and immoral. The editor was highlighting this anniversary with several articles and wondered if I'd look over one sent to him on Natural Family Planning, also known as NFP. I do not recall if it had been written by someone in our diocese, or was a syndicated piece he was considering, but he was clearly ambivalent about publishing it and the bishop had suggested he run it by me to see what I thought. He either faxed it or delivered it (life before the Internet and email!) and within an hour I had the article.

The piece was written by someone who was obviously knowledgeable of NFP and had experience with both living and teaching the practice. It explained in detail ways to detect when a woman of child-bearing age is in the fertile time during her monthly cycle and when she is not. This knowledge can help couples either enhance or avoid the likelihood of pregnancy, depending on where they are in their discernment about the timing of children, which *Humane Vitae* affirmed as legitimate². All fine and well, including an engaging writing style, until the end of the article, when the author stated that NFP was God's gift to the human race to help in family planning, and Catholic couples who knowingly chose to reject NFP in favor of contraceptive approaches were guilty of serious sin and were being selfish with their sexuality. Those were the statements that bothered the editor, and I agreed that this was needlessly harsh. I don't recall if he published it or not, or deleted that section, but I do recall receiving a phone call from the bishop's secretary shortly afterwards, requesting that I come to meet with him. So we set up a time. No indication was given concerning the focus of our meeting.

Several days later I traveled to the Chancery office and met with Bishop Gerber, whom I had come to know fairly well during the three years I'd worked in the

¹ *Humane Vitae*, #11.

² *HV*, #16.

diocese. Apparently the editor of the newspaper had informed him of my response, and given my position as Family Life Coordinator, he wanted to discuss my objections in more detail. It was a frank and open exchange and I think he agreed with the editorial concerns, but he wanted to go more into the deeper issues swimming under the surface of that article — namely, the role of conscience in making decisions about birth control. Could a Catholic couple use artificial contraception and be in good conscience? Catholic teaching emphasizes the primacy of conscience in making moral decisions — that one has a duty to both form one's conscience using Church teaching, and to follow its guidance after having done so.³ *This is a complicated issue*, which we both acknowledged. The bishop's priority was that we emphasize NFP as a means approved by the Church for couples to use in their family planning.

I might mention that I am married, and at the time of my meeting with the bishop, my wife and I had three children and had traveled our own journey in reflecting on Catholic teaching about birth control. This was no abstract moral issue for me! I personally understood the dilemma faced by couples who want to be faithful to Church teaching, but who also felt torn by their experiences and life circumstances. As Family Life Coordinator who was also a spiritual director, I had listened to stories from women who'd been told by their priests that they had to be available for sex with their alcoholic husbands and could not use artificial contraception even though they had more children than they could support. Several young women had told me their priest said if they used artificial contraception it would be a Mortal Sin — spiritually deadly! If they died in that state they'd go to Hell. But many others through the years had also shared stories of priests who were gentle, understanding, encouraging them to follow their conscience — that this was what the Church taught, after all. The laity were receiving mixed messages from their religious leaders, and to make matters worse, Catholic moral theologians were still debating over this topic, with sharp divisions separating them.

Around this time too Pope St. John Paul II wrote an encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor* (*The Splendor of Truth*), which seemed to imply that artificial contraception was always grievously wrong regardless of circumstance or intent. *Or did the encyclical really say that?* Theologians debated! Meanwhile, all but a minority of Catholic couples seemingly went their own way, making decisions about sexual love-making and bearing children while using some form of artificial contraception in their

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1776 - 1785

marriage.⁴ Some were still active in parish life, but even these had pretty much decided that the issue of birth control was something of a no-talk area for them. So had many parish priests and catechists; they said as little about the topic as possible. Reading around various websites addressing this topic in 2022, it seems that very little has changed since the summer of 1993. If anything, the comments sections in articles and blog discussions point to more division with battle lines hardened and civility diminishing.

1. What is Conscience?

The term *conscience* is generally used in reference to moral decision-making. Typically, a definition or description will emphasize conscience as a rational employment of one's moral values in a specific circumstance. It's also noted that conscience must be properly formed if it is to make sound moral judgments, and the teachings of the Church are given to assist unto this end.

This understanding is helpful, only there is a spiritual dimension of conscience as well. In the Vatican II *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* we read:

⁵ In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. *For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.* In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth,

⁴ 2020 report by Guttmacher Institute notes that 99% of Catholic women use some form of birth control besides natural methods at some time.
<https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2020/10/people-all-religions-use-birth-control-and-have-abortions>

⁵ Many Catholic documents use non-inclusive language with regard to the human race, and I have quoted them as they were written. I acknowledge that this might be offensive to some, but there is only so much liberty one can take with quoted material, and I have decided to take none. This present quote is from a 1965 publication and typical of the times. More recent works are sometimes more inclusive.

and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships.⁶

I have italicized an important part of this teaching as I think it acknowledges a deep, spiritual dimension to conscience. There is more to conscience than simply studying what's right from wrong and trying to choose what is right. The spiritual dimension of conscience entails our doing so in awareness of our accountability to God for our decisions — that our “doing good and avoiding evil” expresses our response to how we discern God's will in our lives. For this to happen, we will need to be people who live in faith and become more aware of our inner life.

It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of *interiority* is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection.⁷

The teaching here and in other documents goes on to stress Church teaching as important for properly forming conscience. Conscience is not a “blank slate;” all people everywhere have basic moral sensitivities. But *reflection* on moral teachings help us to authentically take responsibility for the moral and spiritual direction of our lives. In the end each individual is ultimately *alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths*, and the individual will be judged on how he or she has followed this inner voice/guidance. So important is this point that the Church stresses that one is *obligated* to follow one's conscience.

Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. “He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters.”⁸

- and -

A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.⁹

⁶ *Gaudium et spes*, #16

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1779

⁸ CCC, #1782

⁹ CCC, #1790

Catholic teaching on conscience even affirms salvation for non-Christians who are faithful in following their conscience.¹⁰ In stating this, the Church is not denying that it is Christ who saves, but that in many who have not found their way to Christian faith for various reasons, their obedience to divine guidance in their conscience constitutes a kind of implicit faith in Christ that is saving. This is not meant to be a substitute for Christian faith, nor to excuse Christians from reaching out to invite non-believers to become part of the Church. I mention it here because it is another powerful example of the importance of listening to God's guidance in the depth of one's conscience. A quote from St. John Henry Newman in the *Catechism* notes that "conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ,"¹¹ a title used in reference to a pope.

2. Conscience and the Superego

Part of the socialization process we all undergo is learning what's acceptable and unacceptable behavior in our families, schools, and the broader society. Much of this learning happens spontaneously by simply observing how others act, and the responses to their actions. Sometimes there are explicit teachings given as well, to reinforce positive behavior, or to discourage harmful ones. If we grew up in a religious family, some of these behaviors are often linked with teachings about God's will — such as lying, for example, or stealing. We learn that these are not only socially unacceptable, but an offense before God that might even have consequences for one's eternal destiny. Teachings on sexual behavior seem to be especially significant in this regard.

Several schools of psychology use the term *Superego* in reference to that part of the mind that has absorbed the rules, regulations and obligations associated with different groups to which we belong. It emerges early in life and continues to act as an inner advisor to the Egoic part of our consciousness all through our lives. In the self-help approach called Transactional Analysis (TA), it is called the Parent System, and it interacts with the Adult (Ego) and Child parts of our lives. It can be healthy and nurturing, or critical and harsh, damaging both the Ego and Child aspects of the psyche. I will use the terms Superego and Parent as synonyms in this work.

¹⁰ CCC, #847

¹¹ CCC, #1778

I like the TA approach and am tempted to present more about it at this point, demonstrating how Parent, Adult, and Child interact.¹² By way of example, I recall when our daughter Theresa was about three. We were living in Louisiana at the time, and there were plenty of bugs outdoors. She would take great interest in them, and we would invariably take the bug away and tell her not to play with them. One day I saw her approaching a bug and was about to stop her when, to my surprise, she stretched out her hand but then began shaking her head, saying “no, no!” Her inner Parent/Superego was intervening and, happily, she just walked away from the fascinating little critter.

It’s tempting to say that conscience and the Superego are the same thing, but from our previous section, it’s clear that they are not. Conscience in the TA perspective would refer to an inner dimension of the rational Adult Ego system. The Adult is influenced by the Parent system — perhaps to even accomplish great good! — but this is not yet an act of conscience. Conscience formation would entail examining the rules and regulations stored in the Superego and holding them in the light of faith and reason to decide what makes sense about what was learned, and what one now chooses to claim as worthwhile. There is a sense in which the Parent hosts *someone else’s values*, and if we do not make the important journey to examine these and choose what we will keep or modify (or even toss!), we are living by someone else’s standards rather than our own.

Another example might help to illustrate what I mean here. When I was in graduate school in biology at the University of Southwestern Louisiana during the 1970s, my grandparents were in a nursing home on the route between the university and our home. Trip after trip my father would ask me if I planned to stop in and say hi to them on my way back, and it annoyed me because it felt like pressure. This was a clear case of my father’s values pushing into my own Parent system, which he had already deeply influenced through the years. Often I did stop at the nursing home to make a brief visit, but mostly so he’d approve of my behavior. Then one day, while driving to college, I asked myself what my own value was about visiting my grandparents. Did I want a relationship with them at this time in our lives? They had been a very important source of loving support when I was young, but now I was in my 20’s and they were in their 80’s, and it didn’t seem we had much to talk about. I decided that I did want to keep in touch and would stop in at

¹² See Thomas Harris’ book, *I’m OK — You’re OK* (Harper Perennial, 2004) for a good introduction to Transactional Analysis.

least once a month. The first visit after I made that decision had an entirely different feel, even though it wasn't any longer and the conversation was about the same. I wasn't doing it to please my father, however, nor to avoid a sense of guilt. Visiting was *my choice*, and it felt good to do it. Of course my Dad would occasionally ask if I would stop in, but I think he noticed that something had changed in my attitude, for after awhile he stopped.

What I've described above is a good example of moving a value from the Parent system to the Adult, from a *should* to a *choice*. It's not yet a full decision of conscience, however, although it's surely moving in that direction. At that time in my life, I wasn't especially religious, so I never really held up this situation before God, nor did I reflect on what I heard from the Gospels and Church teachings about visiting the sick and shut-ins. *Decisions of conscience are more than self-chosen values and behaviors*. It's certainly a healthy movement to go from a should to a choice, but the next step is even better — that *this choice be in reference to the deeper meaning of life one lives by*. Religious values can provide this sense of inner meaning, especially if they are held authentically. We might, then, factor in our understanding of *God's will* in our decision-making,

The language of God's will can often assume strong Superegoic connotations, however, and we need to watch out for that. So many teachings about the moral life have come to us cloaked in religious language with overtones of eternal reward and punishment included. In many ways a religious Superego can be a more harsh inner critic than one picked up from our families; it can even produce painful scrupulosity. Many have been wounded by excessively harsh teachings from their churches; the term, "recovering Catholic" is one I've heard from people many times through the years. The solution here is not for churches to stop teaching moral values, but to do so in a more healthy way. We can also do much to help ourselves move toward an authentic development and exercise of conscience by following the approach described in our next section.

3. Steps to Forming Conscience

Because forming conscience regarding moral issues is so important, Catholic teaching provides us with guidance on how to do so. A brief but excellent summary can be found on the website of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops which describes four steps:¹³

1. *Prayer*

This step opens us to the influence with the divine concerning the issues we're considering. Prayer enables us to move from Superegoic concerns to that inner room where God is present to us, interacting with our freedom. Growing in grace through Sacraments like the Eucharist and Reconciliation are also encouraged.

2. *Learn*

We need to study the teachings of the Church concerning the kinds of issues we're deliberating. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is an indispensable resource for doing so, as that is where we will find a summary of official teachings. It's often helpful to read what theologians and authors on works of spirituality have had to say on a topic as well.

3. *Reflect*

Informed by our study and motivated by our prayer, we consider what we have learned and how it speaks to us. What makes sense? What doesn't? How do we sense God's call? It's OK to raise questions here and do more study, or seek counsel with professionals to help clarify your understanding.

4. *Nurture friendships*

This is the step of community. We have to form our own conscience, but we don't have to do it alone. Join a study group, talk to a priest or theologian, share your process with a spiritual director, and consult with others on how they understand and respond to the issues under consideration.

Engaging these four steps can take time, but it's well worth it. The alternative is to act out of a position of Superegoic conformity and that's inauthentic, often leading to resentment. The U. S. Catholic Bishops' website also warns against indifference — not really taking the time to consider the issues and just doing what you feel like, for example. It also warns about coercion, feeling pressured to act in a certain way out

¹³ <https://www.usccb.org/committees/pro-life-activities/understanding-conscience>

of fear or threat. I will discuss this more in the section on “moral acts,” but for now it’s important to focus on the four steps encouraged by the bishops to form one’s conscience about birth control or any other moral issue.

Of course, it often happens in life that we don’t have the luxury of taking the time to go through these steps, but have to make moral decisions “on the go,” as it were. Someone drops their wallet and doesn’t notice: will you pick it up and return it to her/him, or keep it to yourself? A co-worker begins to flirt, and even though you’re married, you’re tempted to respond. Will you? These and many other situations that arise regularly test our moral character, which is formed by engaging the four steps described above regarding various moral issues and by the Christian life as a whole. A couple of readers of this work pointed out that conscience formation and practicing virtue needs to begin at a very young age, and I completely agree with them. In time we come to sense an inner moral compass pointing the way to goodness and right-living in many aspects of life. We are drawn to do good and steered away from doing evil as the Holy Spirit directs our conscience in many circumstances.

The issue of birth control is one of several unique situations where we can usually reflect in advance on what action is best. Even so, moral clarity is sometimes difficult to discern, however. For many couples it is not so simple as a choice between doing good and avoiding evil, but a struggle to discern what is best for the marriage and family. For example, NFP might not be a viable option for any number of reasons, and complete abstinence from sexual relations deprives a couple of the healing and bonding of marital lovemaking. It might also be the case that such a couple is not open to having a child at this time, and this could also be for a variety of legitimate reasons. I wish this were merely a kind of “lifeboat ethic” scenario, but it is quite common, in my experience, even for newlyweds. Telling such couples they just need to try harder in their practice of NFP, or practice abstinence, or become pregnant and trust in God to provide what is needed — such counsel seems to be the kind of coercive influence that the bishops discourage.

This raises the question that has been heatedly (and often dysfunctionally) debated since *Humane vitae* was published in 1968: *Is it possible that a married couple could in good conscience choose to practice some non-abortive form of contraception?* If they have sincerely and prayerfully engaged the four steps recommended by the bishops and come to discern that this is what is best for their marriage and family at this time in life, would they not (according to Catholic

teaching) actually be morally *required* to act according to this direction of conscience? The alternative for them might seem to be dreadful — that they are to continue trying to put into practice a teaching that frustrates both the unitive and procreative aspects of their sexual relationship! There is no peace in that option, and yet Catholic moral teaching on sexuality leaves them feeling somewhat rebellious or “selfish,” as the author of the article on NFP I mentioned at the beginning of this work stated. The reason for this concerns the view that artificial contraception is an evil act — a topic we need to reflect on more deeply.

4. The Issue of “Intrinsically Evil Acts”

Sooner or later a Catholic couple studying and reflecting on methods of spacing children will have to grapple with the Church’s teaching on human sexuality and birth control. Thus far the approach taken in this work has proceeded from the subjective, experiential perspective, with conscience serving as an inner guide for moral decision-making. And so it is precisely that! But as the previous section and Church teaching points out, *conscience needs to be informed*, and that’s what the steps on learning, reflection and dialogue are about. We might think of Church moral teachings as a kind of objective guidance to help form our inner sense of direction. After all, the Church has been on the journey of following Christ far longer than any couple has been and has accumulated enormous wisdom to assist us in our personal lives.

In studying the teachings on human sexuality and birth control, couples will come across the term *intrinsically evil act*. This refers to behavior that substantively violates the Church’s teaching on a particular moral issue. Common examples include lying, adultery, murder, masturbation, and artificial contraception.¹⁴ Intrinsically evil acts are always considered immoral. As Pope St. John Paul II noted:

“If acts are intrinsically evil, a good intention or particular circumstances can diminish their evil, but they cannot remove it. They remain ‘irremediably’ evil acts per se and in themselves they are not capable of being ordered to God and to the good of the person.... Consequently, circumstances or

¹⁴ See <https://catholicmoraltheology.com/voting-against-intrinsically-evil-acts-a-working-list/> for a longer listing of acts deemed intrinsically evil.

intentions can never transform an act intrinsically evil by virtue of its object into an act ‘subjectively’ good or defensible as a choice.”¹⁵

The term *evil* is one no Christian wants to be associated with, so one might wonder why such a term is being used. Certainly no Catholic couple wants to be doing evil, especially with regard to their sexual lovemaking. And so it’s natural for them to want to understand this judgement more deeply.

Artificial birth control is considered intrinsically evil in and of itself, without any consideration of the intent of the couple or their circumstances, because it thwarts the procreative possibility in a sex act. The principle expressed by Pope St. Paul VI in *Humane Vitae* is that *each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life*,¹⁶ and artificial contraception negates this possibility, separating the unitive and procreative aspects of sex in favor of the unitive. The term *evil* is used because contraception is thus considered disordered and in violation of what is held out to be *good*, which is keeping the dual purposes together — *in every single sex act*. The teaching does acknowledge that it is not always possible for the procreative aspect to be realized, and it is not considered wrong for couples to have sex during those times even though they know it won’t result in a pregnancy. For example, the woman might be beyond child-bearing years or pregnant, the man might be infertile, and there are times in a woman’s monthly cycle when she is not likely to conceive. The latter example opens the door to using natural methods of pregnancy-avoidance like NFP.

Space does not allow for a summary of how Catholic teaching on birth control has evolved through the centuries,¹⁷ nor for review of the critiques of the present teaching shared by many theologians and even conferences of bishops.¹⁸ Hardly

¹⁵ *Veritatis Splendor*, 81

¹⁶ *Humane Vitae*, 11

¹⁷ See <https://religiondispatches.org/the-story-behind-the-catholic-churchs-stunning-reversal/> for a brief historical perspective on where we are now. Note that it wasn’t until Pope Pius XII’s 1951 “Address to Midwives” that it was unequivocally affirmed that married couples could make use of the infertile time of a woman’s monthly cycle to have sexual relations without incurring sin.

James Arraj’s book, *Is there a Solution to the Catholic Debate on Contraception?* also provides information about the history of the teaching and how its articulation has changed, especially during the 20th Century, to include consideration for the experiences of married couples. See <http://innerexplorations.com/catchtheomor/is.htm> for the online edition.

¹⁸ This link describes a high-level, ongoing debate ongoing about the birth control teaching. <https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/guest-voices/conservative-defense-humanae-vitae-not-just-about-contraception>

anyone denies the dual purposes of sex acts, but many have questioned the principle that both need to be in play with every sex act, which is the basis for judging those that do not as intrinsically evil. Why not say, some have opined, that openness to both possibilities ought to be enacted in the relationship as a whole rather than every sex act? And doesn't NFP, which is approved by the Church, allow couples to have non-procreative sex? Saying that they are doing nothing to thwart procreation ignores the fact that they go through a great deal of deliberation to insure that *the acts they do make use of* will not result in a conception. Indeed, using NFP to avoid conception seems to be more a biological form of contraception, indistinguishable in many ways from what couples who use artificial contraception are doing — certainly at the level of intent. The Internet has many discussions on these kinds of issues, some of which can help to inform one's thinking.¹⁹

After all is said and done, however, what we are left with is the fact that official Catholic teaching considers artificial contraception to be wrong/disordered in all circumstances. That's what is implied in designating an act to be intrinsically evil, as the quote from St. John Paul II above makes clear. The consequence for violating this teaching implies some degree of sin, *Mortal* in the minds of many Catholic theologians.²⁰ It would seem, then, that there is no alternative for Catholic couples who wish to be faithful to Church teaching to do anything besides avoiding the use of artificial means of preventing conception. NFP is emphasized as an approved alternative for spacing children, and if this doesn't work as planned, couples ought to accept the children that come, or practice abstinence to avoid unplanned pregnancies. That was the emphasis when I was Family Life Coordinator in the 1990s, and in reading around the Internet, it seems to be the case in many teachings and discussions today as well.

5. The Three Fonts of Morality and Conscience Formation

Catholics forming their conscience concerning birth control and other moral issues cannot avoid considering Church teaching regarding the *moral nature of the act, per se*, and that is what we have just done in our previous section. But study also

¹⁹ See <https://catholicmoraltheology.com/im-using-birth-control-am-i-a-bad-catholic/> for a thoughtful reflection and good sharing in the comments.

²⁰ E.g. <https://www.catholic.com/qa/contraception-is-a-mortal-sin>
Catholic Answers is a popular website with a strong traditionalist emphasis.

compels us to reflect on two other factors: the intention and circumstance in which the act is being considered. These three factors — *object (the act), intention, and circumstance* — are sometimes called the *Three Fonts of Morality*, for they contribute uniquely and collectively to the moral quality of behavior.²¹

If Catholic morality was simply a matter of stating which acts were wrong or right in any and/or all circumstances, that might seem to simplify things, but it would be eliminating the human person and his or her conscience from the equation. Some might prefer such a completely objective approach, but it was precisely this matter of conformity to Law as a basis for moral righteousness that the Apostle Paul thoroughly rejected in his epistles.²² It is good to ponder the objective significance of an act, and the designation that some are intrinsically evil indicates a “red flag” that ought to be considered in conscience formation. Behavior is enacted in a certain circumstance, however, and out of one or more motives, and those need to be considered as well. Conscience takes experience and circumstance into account, as Pope Francis notes:

We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfillment than as a lifelong burden. We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.²³

We noted in the section above St. John Paul II’s quote to the effect that intrinsically evil acts are always wrong and incapable of being transformed into good acts regardless of intent and circumstance. He also did note that the degree of evil could be diminished in certain circumstances and intents, however. Take the intrinsically evil act of lying, for example. Obviously, the object of the act is to deceive, and that’s hardly ever a good thing. But suppose I am a German citizen in World War II and I am hiding Jewish people in a room in my home. Suppose too that

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1750 - 1754

²² Stated most emphatically in Gal. 5:4.

²³ *Amoris Laetitia*, #37

Nazis come asking if I know the whereabouts of some of these Jews. Is it better to tell the truth, or to lie and say I know nothing about it? Lying, in this circumstance, reinforces my good intent to provide safety for threatened people, and is clearly more moral than disclosing their hiding place to avoid committing an intrinsically evil act. Because lying is a disordered act, there will be consequences to the liar — some kind of confusion in the mind, perhaps. But the main point is that good intent and urgent circumstance justified the act of lying.

This brings up a related consideration: *some intrinsically evil acts are more serious or consequential in nature than others*. Abortion, for example, is worse than masturbation as it destroys another human life. When reflecting on the object of an act along with intent and circumstance, the gravity of the act per se must be taken into account. Where does artificial contraception fit in when we take this consideration into account? There are many writings that take a very harsh view on this matter while others consider it a minor offense, at best.

As with the example given about lying, intent and circumstance come into play when forming conscience regarding contraception. *Our first intent ought to be to put into practice what the Church teaches*, otherwise we are just deluding ourselves. But intent, in this regard, is much more than simply avoiding forbidden forms of contraception. The heart of what the Church teaches is the goodness of both the unitive and procreative aspects of sex in marriage, and a right-intent is oriented in this direction.

Circumstance is the concrete situation in which intent is to be exercised, and life presents a wide range of possibilities here. For example, the couple's health and financial situation needs to be considered, or their experience of NFP. One can acknowledge the object of an act and one's intent to put it into practice while also recognizing that there are circumstances where alternative behavior may well be the better choice.

Object, intent, and circumstance are the data we bring to conscience formation, with openness to have intent directed by the Spirit according to God's loving influence. What kind of practice is best for the family and marriage relationship at this time?

It is really important, here, to keep in mind that love is primary in the Christian life. *Conscience seeks to know and do what will lead to an increase in love for God and others*. Church teaching serves this end as well, but can sometimes feel more like a matter of Law informing the Superego than directives supporting the path of love.

Conscience formation grapples with these tensions, and shares the struggle with one's religious leaders and mature Christian couples.

We pray, ponder, share, and wait for clarity. When it comes — and this might take awhile in some cases — we will know it by the peace and sense of rightness concerning a particular direction that conscience points us toward. Even then, we can test our decision in different ways: imagining going a different direction, for example, and noting how that feels. It might also be that perfect clarity is not attained, so we go with the best lights we have, continuing to seek the guidance of the Spirit. What we ought never do, however, is forfeit the responsibility to form and follow conscience, nor must we allow the judgments of others from various sides of an issue to saddle us with guilt or shame.

It may be that in some cases the decision made is temporary rather than permanent. A couple might discern, for example, that it is right for them to use some form of contraception during a certain period of time and will continue to evaluate their decision in terms of how it affects their marriage and family life. Or perhaps they might choose to use NFP for awhile and see what that's like. Circumstances change, and decisions made at one time in life might not be suitable for other periods. So it goes in many aspects of life!

6. A Few Common Questions

1. Our parish priest told me that would be a Mortal Sin if my spouse and I used artificial contraception. I shared that we'd tried NFP for years, but it didn't work for us. His response was that we should then refrain from sex if we don't want any more children, but we don't think that would be good for our marriage. What should we do? We don't want to go to hell!

Your priest cannot tell you and your spouse what to do about your sexual relationship in marriage, and he cannot pronounce judgment on your eternal destiny! You and your spouse need to consider the Church's teachings on birth control in light of your experiences with NFP, your present life circumstances, and your good intent to do what is best for your marriage and family. Follow the steps for conscience development described above and choose what seems right for you at this time.

2. Can we really trust Catholic couples to make authentic decisions in conscience about this complicated topic? Isn't there a danger that they will merely rationalize using artificial contraception and call it conscience?

This question gets at the issue of whether we can really trust couples to make conscience-based decisions or not. The plain fact is that they will make decisions about family planning and will use some method or process for doing so. Encouraging them to properly form their conscience is a healthy spiritual alternative to acting out of Superegoic compliance, or maybe not even considering Church teaching at all and just doing what seems easiest. If couples follow the steps to forming conscience described above, we can trust that they will come to make responsible decisions about sexuality in marriage.

3. If artificial contraception is intrinsically evil as Catholic teaching maintains, then why is it permitted in most Protestant churches?

At the Lambeth Conference in 1930, Anglican Church leaders voted to recognize that there are circumstances when couples could choose to use artificial forms of birth control. Since then, many Protestant denominations have followed suit. Catholic teaching draws on contraception draws heavily on principles derived from natural law, which makes use of reason to discern the purpose and meaning of actions. Protestants, in general, don't rely as much on natural law in forming their teachings.

4. If one acknowledges conscience-based decisions to use contraception in certain circumstances, doesn't this open the door to other practices considered sinful, like abortion or homosexual relations?

This question gets at "slippery slope issues," which sometimes are legitimate concerns. Each issue must be considered separately, however. Abortion, for example, entails the killing of innocent, unborn human life, and that's different from preventing a conception to happen in the first place. Conscience formation must still take place, but the gravity and consequences of the act itself must be properly weighed during the process of prayer, study, reflection and dialogue. It certainly doesn't follow that allowing for a decision to use contraception in certain circumstances legitimizes all acts considered intrinsically evil. Such reasoning would constitute a *slippery slope fallacy*, which is an illogical exaggeration.

5. Is it possible for one to simply disagree with the teaching that every sex act must be open to life and still remain a Catholic in good standing?

This question goes beyond the concerns related to conscience formation we've been discussing in this work, but it's an important one, pertaining to the issue of dissent. Since the publication of *Humane Vitae* in 1968 there has been much debate concerning its core principle that every sex act must be open to procreation. That is the teaching, however. Couples who make a decision in conscience to act otherwise will be at odds with the teaching, but they are still Catholics.

6. Why not just emphasize the teachings forbidding contraception stated in several encyclicals since 1930? None of them allow for artificial contraception use in any circumstance.

Anyone who's entrusted with educating others about Catholic teaching concerning sexual morality has a duty to accurately convey the teachings of the Church on this topic. As I hope this work has made clear, however, *the Church also has important teachings on conscience, and these need to be taught as well* — even more-so, I might add, as conscience comes into play in a broad array of moral issues, not just those pertaining to sexuality.

7. The Church allows for natural methods of avoiding conception like NFP. Why not just emphasize those as the legitimate alternative for Catholics?

There are many good reasons why couples can benefit from using NFP in addition to its effectiveness in helping them avoid (or succeed) conceiving children. It encourages communication, sensitivity to fertility, respect for the body, and many other healthy values. It doesn't follow, however, that allowing for this option prohibits couples from considering other methods when forming their conscience. The experience of the couple is an important part of their reflection in conscience formation.

8. One of the great things about NFP is that it provides for a God-given natural rhythm of sexual activity and abstinence. If couples don't use this or some other natural method, how would they set boundaries regarding their sexual activities?

It's difficult to make the case that NFP is God's gift for couples to use in their family-planning, considering that it's only since the 20th century that a woman's cycle of fertile and infertile periods of the month was understood. What we can say is that couples do need to learn to set their own boundaries concerning their times of sexual love-making. NFP encourages this, but one can learn the same skills and put them into practice without using NFP, as infertile or older couples need to do, for example. Learning to love and respect one's spouse's needs is at the heart of the matter, as is communicating honestly with one another about this.

9. Pope St. Paul VI predicted a wide range of moral and social problems that would ensue if the practice of artificial contraception became widespread, and it seems many such have come to pass.²⁴ Shouldn't Catholics be encouraged more than ever to avoid contraception and the mentality that liberal attitudes that have are associated with this practice?

As noted in this work, Catholics should indeed learn what the Church teaches and give priority to putting the teaching into practice, but this does not preclude the duty to form their conscience regarding what is best for their marriage and family. It should also be noted again that the primary reason contraception was condemned had little to do with social implications, and everything to do with the principle that both the unitive and procreative possibilities should be open in every sex act. Many of the social issues that are sometimes associated with liberal birth control can be explained by other influences. Since the 1968 publication of *Humane Vitae*, we've seen the emergence of cable TV and a wide variety of programs, materialistic attitudes, consumerism, cynicism regarding political and religious leadership, changing economies and many other factors. Correlations and causation are two different kinds of considerations.

10. What kinds of artificial birth control methods cause abortions, and shouldn't those be considered off-limits by couples who oppose abortion?

Couples considering various birth control methods will need clear answers to this question. They will need to research the topic and discuss it with experts like their doctors and pharmacists.

²⁴ See *Humane Vitae* #17 for a discussion of social concerns.

Summary

Perhaps the most important decision to be made by married couples of child-bearing years concerns when (or even if) to have children. If they marry relatively young and remain healthy, it's possible that the woman could conceive for 20 years or longer. Most couples are not open to having the maximum number of children possible during this time of fertility, so they will need to consider methods for regulating the size of their families. In doing so, they will be evaluating the importance of their sexual love-making and its place in their relationship as well.

Roman Catholic couples receive affirmation from Church teaching concerning this two-fold role of sex in marriage, referring to them as procreative and unitive in concern. Church teaching also holds that neither of these purposes can be intentionally thwarted in any sex act, thus explicitly condemning all methods of birth control except those that make use of natural cycles of fertility and infertility in the woman's cycle. Natural Family Planning, or NFP, is the method taught in most dioceses. Many couples who attempt to use NFP come to experience difficulties practicing the method successfully, with unplanned pregnancies ensuing and/or frustration in their sexual lovemaking.

As this work has emphasized, the Catholic Church also has strong teaching on the role of conscience in moral decision-making. Couples are to form their conscience concerning family planning methods through study and reflection on Church teaching, prayer, and dialogue. In doing so, they open themselves to guidance from God concerning what is best for their marriage and family in their own unique circumstances. In this work we have seen that even teachings considered intrinsically evil can be acceptable in certain circumstances.

It follows from all of the above that *couples receiving guidance from Church teachers concerning the morality of birth control methods in marriage ought to be given teaching and guidance on conscience and its formation as well*. Anything less is a shirking of responsibility in assisting couples to follow Christ in their marriages. Neglecting teaching on conscience formation shifts the focus to a matter of law and obedience, activating Superego dynamics and leaving couples feeling pressured and unfree. Affirming moral principles and norms is one thing, but we also need to reflect on how these interact with the experiences of couples in real-life circumstances.

The purpose of moral teachings is to help form conscience, not to provide ultimatums on how one must act (or not) in every circumstance of life. Moral principles like those concerning sexual behavior in marriage are gifts to the People of God, providing a foundation and direction to assist in conscience formation. The Church's teachings on conscience — its importance, and formation — are equally important, calling attention to one of the most important ways we discover God's guidance in our lives. Ideally, there is agreement between Catholic moral teachings and behavior directed by conscience, and we need to continually work at realizing this ideal. When the two are in conflict, however, *conscience must take precedent*, even when its judgment is in conflict with Church teachings. Such a conclusion is congruent with the Church's teaching on the primacy of conscience, and this too needs to be taught widely.

Acknowledgement and Bio

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