

## What Our Parish Does About Contraception and Family Planning

July 11, 2014  
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*(Third in a series in response to Pope Francis' call for input from the faithful in preparation for the Synod of Bishops on the family to be held in Rome in October. The previous columns dealt with annulments and gay relationships.)*

What does our parish do about contraception? We teach as the Church teaches.

Are we having any significant impact? No.

Most couples in our parish, like most parishes in the developed world, are certainly using artificial contraception. Practically every young family has two or three children. I doubt that they are practicing NFP.

How do we teach in regard to contraception?

Once a year or so I try to preach on the topic. It is not easy. There are almost no scripture readings that lend themselves to homilies against contraception. When I do preach on it, I try to keep the emphasis on the positive aspects of Natural Family Planning (NFP) rather than the negative of birth control as a sin.

Whenever people come in for marriage preparation, I give them a CD by Professor Janet Smith entitled "Contraception, Why Not?" I also give them some brochures from Our Sunday Visitor and brochures from our Family Life office on NFP. I also encourage each couple to take a class in NFP. It is hard to "require" an NFP class because many couples live in different parts of the country and often they are religiously mixed marriages. We also cover the church's teaching in RCIA and adult education classes and in the confirmation classes for youth.

There is very little awareness of the Church's view on artificial contraception and engaged couples don't really think that it is any of my business.

I have a standard 20 minute talk that I give, encouraging couples to use NFP. I stress that it is good for five reasons. It is natural. It works. It is mutual. It is respectful of women. And it is open to life.

It must be admitted that NFP couples are not always "open to life." John Paul II spoke of how a "contraceptive mentality" can pervade even the practice of NFP.

Again, I try to emphasize the positive values of NFP rather than the negative value of "sin." Young people are not much impressed by the magisterium and they certainly don't think that God will send them to hell for all eternity for using the pill. Do our bishops actually believe that either?

Our teaching isn't having much of an effect on our people. I once asked a doctor in my parish, a very devout Catholic, what percentage of his Catholic patients were practicing some form of artificial birth control. "Do you think it is as high as eighty percent?" I asked. He thought for a moment and replied, "No, more like ninety percent."

As Bishop Robert Lynch from St. Petersburg, FL, said back in February, on the matter of artificial contraception, "That train left the station long ago. ... Catholics have made up their minds and the *sensus fidelium* [the sense of the faithful] suggests the rejection of church teaching on this subject." (NCR 2/24/2014)

The first birth control pill went on the market in the U.S. in 1962. In the early 1960s birth control was *the* "hot topic" in Catholic circles.

From 1962 to 1968 the question of contraception was an "open question" in Catholic moral theology. Some bishops, mostly in Europe, even came out in favor of some contraception, so long as Catholic marriages were "over all" open to the transmission of life.

In 1968 Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, ("Of Human Life") sparked a firestorm. The Pope wrote that "direct interruption of the generative process already begun" was "absolutely excluded as a lawful means of regulating the number of children." (HV #14). He also condemned sterilization and any action "before, after, or during intercourse" that was intended to prevent procreation. *Each and every* act of intercourse must be open to procreation. It was not enough, he said, that a marriage be open to life over all. Inconsistently the pope allowed for NFP, which has a contraceptive intent. (H.V. #16).

The Pope's words were a bombshell. He rejected the report of his own special commission of advisors, which included some lay people. They had recommended some openness to contraception in the totality of marriage.

*Humanae Vitae* is a well written encyclical but it has two fundamental problems, both of which arise not from the text, but from its implementation.

First, it appears to be doing what Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing. "They tie up heavy burdens (hard to carry) and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them." (Mt. 23:4). Celibate bishops and priests appear to be putting a burden on married couples that they themselves will not and could not lift.

Second, it became a struggle over authority not the substance of the issue. In 1968 many bishops framed the issue in terms of obedience to them rather the persuasiveness of their argument. By making it a question of their magisterial authority, the magisterium actually lost credibility. Every parent knows that their argument is weak when they have to resort to the old argument closer, "Because I said so, that's why!"

Fr. Andrew Greely wrote in the 1970s that *Humanae Vitae* was the beginning of the wholesale erosion of lay respect for magisterial teaching. It is no longer true that when "Rome commands, America obeys."

I remember vividly a Labor Day church picnic in 1968, when people got into a shouting match over the encyclical. They probably would have come to blows if our pastor had not intervened. Back then people cared what the church said. Today, I don't think they would care too much. We cannot just stand on our authority. Besides, after the child abuse scandals of the last decade we have no credibility on sexual matters.

In some ways *Humanae Vitae* was prophetic. Pope Paul predicted that public authorities might be tempted to resolve social problems, like overpopulation, by imposing contraception on everyone (H.V. #17). It happened in China with their "one child policy."

He also predicted that people would start to see themselves as the "masters of the source of life" rather than its ministers. (HV # 13). Today we see children as a "choice."

Paul VI also said that contraception would "open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards." (HV #17).

Certainly contraception has been partly responsible for huge increase in out of wedlock births. In 1960 about 7 % of U.S. babies were born out of wedlock. Today about 40.7% of U.S. babies are born out of wedlock. (See 2013 CDC statistics at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)). That upward trend is consistent with most developed countries.

Today, sexual activity has little or nothing to do with marriage and marriage seems to have little or nothing to do with child rearing. People see sex as recreational and child rearing as a "lifestyle choice" unconnected to marriage.

Partly as a result of "consequence free" sex, young people don't see why they have to wait for marriage to have sex. "Hooking up" and "friends with benefits" are phrases that reflect the ethical atmosphere. Certainly contraception has facilitated such ethics.

Some of the Pope's predictions do not seem to have come true.

Paul VI said that contraception would cause men to “forget the reverence due to a woman” and “disregard her physical and emotional equilibrium, reducing her to a mere instrument for satisfaction of his own desires.” But surely, that train also “left the station” long ago, well before contraception came along. No doubt, men often reduce women to mere objects. But that phenomenon is not new. Men have objectified women for centuries. Women have been the targets of brutality and disrespect quite apart from contraception. I would argue that it is the feminist movement has made men see women as equals for the first time in history.

As pastor I have to say that the teaching of the magisterium on contraception does not seem to take into account the reality of most people’s lives.

While we pay lip service to the “difficulties” married couples encounter in living the Church’s teaching, we don’t provide much of an answer. What are people supposed to do in difficult situations like the ones I have encountered in ministry.

What do we say to a mother of six children, in her late 30s, came to me once. She had chronic high blood pressure and diabetes. Her doctor told her that another pregnancy would be life threatening. Her periods were very irregular. What should she and her husband do? They also did not see how they could care for more children in their family, since her husband had recently lost his job. They were overwhelmed with trouble. Neither abstinence nor NFP seemed to be an answer. She clearly had a responsibility to her six children and her husband, as well as to an openness to life.

What do we say to women in abusive marriages --- leave your husband? Abstain from sex with him and risk his increased anger?

How can we tell families struggling with unemployment, mental illness, alcoholism, drug addiction, natural disasters, or other serious problems that they should risk another pregnancy?

Is it prudent for families facing long separations from things like military service or deportation to have another child?

We don’t seem to have a good answer for the complex ethical struggles that beset our people. Our teaching, at times, seems inadequate. Even worse, at times it seems insensitive.

But we just continue on as before.

What does our parish do about contraception? We teach as the church teaches.

Are we having any significant impact? No.