

Contraception

by Sebastian R. Fama

Discussions on subjects such as the Trinity or the Eucharist can usually be kept on the intellectual level. But when it comes to a subject like contraception a person's position may be influenced by forces beyond mere intellect. That's because what people believe on this issue can have a profound impact on their lives. Consequently, people aren't always willing to consider the arguments against contraception.

Up until 1930, all Christian bodies taught that contraception was illicit. At that time the Anglican Church decided that it was permissible for "grave reasons in a marriage." It wasn't long before "grave reasons in a marriage" became any reason. And that's pretty much the way it is today for most of Protestantism.

Scripture, the Early Church Fathers and even the Founders of Protestantism all condemned contraception. It had always been referred to as "onanism." The word onanism is derived from the name Onan. Onan was an Old Testament figure whose brother had died. According to the Levirate Law, if a married man died before fathering any children, his brother or nearest relative was duty bound to marry his wife in order to give the dead man descendants.

For selfish reasons Onan did not want to do this. Consequently, he spilled his seed on the ground rather than take a chance that his brother's wife would get pregnant. The Lord was so displeased that He killed Onan for "**what he had done**" (Genesis 38:6-10). Onan's sin was that he interrupted intercourse to prevent procreation. In other words, he contracepted.

Some say that Onan's sin was not that he contracepted but that he failed to provide his brother with offspring. This is hardly the case. Note that the text says that he was slain for what he did (spill his seed), not for what he didn't do (provide his brother with offspring). If the opposite were true why would it be necessary to describe Onan's actions so explicitly? Why not just say, he refused to give his brother offspring?

Further evidence is found in the New Testament. In Galatians 5:2, Revelation 9:21, 18:23, 21:8, and 22:15, sorcerers or sorcery is condemned. Upon reading these passages, the average reader might associate these terms merely with the practice of witchcraft. But the Greek words used in these passages mean more than that. The two Greek words used are pharmakeia (φαρμακεία) and pharmakeus (φαρμακεύς). Pharmakeia is defined as: medication (pharmacy), i.e. by extension magic (literally or figuratively): sorcery, witchcraft. The definition of pharmakeus is even more explicit: a drug, i.e. spell giving potion; a druggist (pharmacist) or poisoner, i.e. by extension, a magician or sorcerer. Note that both definitions give precedence to terms having to do with drugs or medication.

What type of medicine would be likened to witchcraft or sorcery? It certainly couldn't be the general use of medication for healing. It would have to be a destructive application, something like contraception. The writings of Hippolytus show us that contraception was practiced by some in the early Church. He writes: "Whence women, reputed believers, began to resort to drugs for producing sterility, and to gird themselves round, so to expel what was being conceived on account of their not wishing to have a child either by a slave or by any paltry fellow, for the sake of their family and excessive wealth. Behold, into how great impiety that lawless one has proceeded, by inculcating adultery and murder at the same time!" (*Refutation of All Heresies* 9:7, 225 AD).

John Chrysostom, another of the Early Church Fathers confirmed the teaching of the early Church when he wrote: "Why do you sow where the field is eager to destroy the fruit, where there are medicines of sterility [oral contraceptives], where there is murder before birth? ... Indeed, it is something worse than murder, and I do not know what to call it; for she does not kill what is formed but prevents its formation. What then? Do you condemn the gift of God and fight with His [natural] laws?" (*Homilies on Romans* 24, 391 AD).

The Church recognizes that there are two dimensions to the conjugal act (sexual intercourse). These are the procreative (bringing children into the world) and the unitive (expressing love and bonding). By nature these cannot be separated. Just as every conjugal act must be an expression of love it also must be open to the possibility of life. The conjugal act must be motivated by love, tenderness and respect. It should never be reduced to an act of self-satisfaction.

Some think of the Church's stance as being out of touch or impractical. But is it? The prohibition on contraception is not merely a religious tenet. It is based on the Natural Law. The Natural Law is not a written law. It is something that is programmed into our nature. All living things have a nature. When they live in accord with their nature they flourish. When they don't it creates problems. For instance, if we don't get enough sleep and the right kind of food our physical health will suffer. This is not a matter of opinion or religious belief. It's a fact of life. The same principle applies to the moral and psychological realms. Simply stated, the things we do have an effect on the way we think. And the way we think can change who we are.

Experience has shown that ignoring the Church's teaching on contraception has consequences. The use of contraceptives has made the sexual revolution possible. If sexual intercourse can be separated from procreation, why reserve it for marriage? Self-control is no longer necessary. After repeating a few obligatory phrases men are allowed to indulge themselves. Women become objects to be used rather than partners to be cherished. Predictably adultery and sexually transmitted diseases have increased dramatically.

In his book "*50 Questions on the Natural Law*" Charles Rice explains how abortion and euthanasia naturally flow from the contraceptive mentality. On page 256 he writes:

Abortion: Contraception is the prevention of life, while abortion is the taking of life. But both involve the willful separation of the unitive and procreative aspects of sex. The contraceptive mentality tends to require abortion as a backup. And many so-called contraceptives are abortifacient in that they cause the destruction of the developing human being.

Euthanasia: Once the contraceptive ethic and abortion accustomed people to the idea that burdensome lives are not worth living, the way was clear for euthanasia for the aged and the "useless." If man is arbiter of when life begins, he will predictably make himself the arbiter of when life ends.

As Mr. Rice notes, many contraceptives are abortifacient. Abortifacients don't prevent conception. They work by creating a hostile environment on the wall of the uterus. The fertilized egg cannot implant and is aborted. The IUD works this way as does Norplant, Depovera, and occasionally the Pill. Abortions caused in this manner far outnumber abortions performed in clinics.

So what does this all mean? Are we supposed to have babies until we die? No, not at all. The Church recognizes that there are natural means of regulating births that are consistent with nature and Divine Revelation. *Natural Family Planning* (NFP) has been shown to be reliable in controlling family size. And it does so while respecting the spouses and the conjugal act. It also does not carry with it all of the dangerous side effects associated with contraceptives. Side effects can include liver disease, blood clots, strokes, heart disease, migraines, cervical cancer and breast cancer.

A scientific survey conducted in 2000 under the direction of Dr. Robert Lerner of the University of Chicago showed that couples who use NFP have a 0.2% divorce rate, attend church more often and have happier, stronger marriages. With NFP intimacy and communication are enhanced. The family is made stronger and consequently society is made stronger. Not only is the Church's position not out of touch or impractical, it is the solution for much of what ails us. For more information on NFP contact the Couple to Couple League (www.ccli.org).