

titled *Humanae Vitae* (Concerning Human Life). Here he reaffirmed the traditional teaching against unnatural forms of birth control

The dissent from *Humanae Vitae*

A dissenting priest had received a copy of the encyclical before it was made public. He organized a resistance movement that sprang into action as soon as *Humanae Vitae* was published and even before the American bishops had a chance to read it. The result was a disaster within the Church. There is no question: the dissenters won the 1968 public-relations battle, but core problems remained.

Why the Pope could not change the teaching

The pro-contraception members of the birth control commission presented the Pope with an argument they thought would justify the use of contraception by married couples. They called it the argument from Totality. It was a “Big Picture” argument. In this view, the morality of contraceptive acts would take their morality from the morality of the non-contraceptive acts.

The Pope saw that this provided an open door to every sort of sexual immorality. In very polite language he taught that “it is an error to think that a marriage act which is deliberately made sterile and thus is intrinsically dishonest could be made honest and right by the ensemble of a fertile married life” (HV 14).

The Totality argument applied elsewhere

Imagine that a teacher makes it clear that cheating on a test is wrong and that it will merit a failing grade on that test. A student is caught cheating. He pleads the Totality argument. He says he cheated only on one item so his cheating on the one item should be viewed as taking its rightness from the totality of non-cheating on the rest of the test. That’s what the Totality argument is all about. It’s unreal.

Intrinsically honest or dishonest

When the Pope teaches that contraceptive marriage acts are “intrinsically dishonest,” we are led to ask, “What is an intrinsically honest marriage act?” Is there a divinely built-in meaning of the human sexual act? And can we know it? Certainly yes. God has not left us in darkness. We have not only the biblical teaching but also the Church’s teaching of 20 centuries.

To be an honest sexual act, first it must be a marriage act of a male husband and female wife. Second, it needs to reflect the “for better and for worse” of the marriage covenant including the sometimes imagined worse of possible pregnancy. That is, it must not be closed to life. Third, it should reflect the caring, self-giving love pledged at marriage.

Yes, there is a divinely built-in meaning of the human sexual act. Very briefly:

Sexual intercourse is intended by God to be, at least implicitly, a renewal of the marriage covenant.

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Why Sex?

What is God’s plan for sexuality?

In a world in which some claim that there are multiple genders by which a person can self-identify herself or himself, it is more necessary than ever to understand the traditional Christian teaching on human sexuality.

Biblical foundations

The Old Testament of the Bible teaches by a process of elimination that the human sexual act should be exclusively a marriage act. In alphabetical sequence, it condemns adultery, bestiality, contraception, fornication, incest, masturbation, prostitution, and sodomy. The Sin of Onan in Genesis 38 is a form of contraception and masturbation. That leaves only the normal sexual act between a male husband and a female wife as the God-intended marriage act.

In the New Testament, Jesus strongly affirmed the permanence of marriage and taught that divorce and remarriage is a form of adultery. (Mt 19:3-9; Mk 10:1-12). St. Paul clearly teaches against adultery, fornication, prostitution, and sodomy (Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor:6-9, and more.)

In recent years, St. John Paul II taught positively as follows: “In the conjugal act, husband and wife are called to confirm in a responsible way the mutual gift of self which they have made to each other in the marriage covenant” (Letter to Families, 12.12, 1994, italics in original). The built-in meaning of the marriage act is related to the spouses’ own marriage covenant. It should affirm and renew what the couple promised on their wedding day.

From biblical norms to “whatever...”

How did Western culture change from making anti-contraception laws to a culture in which we are told that a person can self-identify himself or herself sexually in multiple ways. It did not happen overnight, and we can identify the path.

In the 18th century, atheistic philosophers did their best to undermine faith in the Bible as a source of moral truth. In the 19th century, skeptics began to promote contraceptive practices. Still, the traditional Protestant communities did not accept contraception. In fact, in the 1870s a Protestant reformer named Anthony Comstock led the Protestant effort to enact federal and state laws against the advertising and mailing of contraceptive devices. Catholics at this time had almost no influence in federal and state legislatures. The American Comstock laws were passed by Protestant-majority legislatures.

The Beginning of the “Sexual Revolution”

As long as Christians held together in affirming the biblical teachings on sexuality, the contraceptive movement in the West did not gain ground. However, that all changed in the early 20th century.

The battle was played out most visibly in the Church of England. In 1908 and again in 1920, the bishops of the Church of England condemned efforts to get them to accept marital contraception. In August of 1930, however, they reversed themselves and accepted marital contraception. The conservative bishops among them warned that the acceptance of marital contraception would lead to the acceptance of sodomy. They were correct, as proved by subsequent developments in the Church of England.

The Catholic response

On December 30, 1931, Pope Pius XI responded. He first laid out a beautiful vision of Christian marriage in which the spouses are called to help each other on the way to heaven. (See *Casti Connubii* [On Christian Marriage] #23-30).

Then he strongly reaffirmed the biblical teaching against marital contraception (#53-59). Here the Pope also reaffirmed the long-established Catholic teaching that couples with a serious reason to avoid or postpone pregnancy may practice chaste abstinence during the fertile time for that purpose.

The “Pill”

In 1960, the oral contraceptive birth control drug came on the open market. It was soon called “the Pill” and it greatly fueled the already large sexual revolution.

In 1962, a book by a radical feminist urged women to be financially independent and to have sexual relationships outside of marriage. It sold two million copies. The author became well known for telling women that they should want to be regarded as sex objects. “The fact is, if you’re not a sex object, that’s when you have to worry.”

Of course, that message wasn’t delivered only to women. So, when you read about prominent middle-aged men being recently accused of sexual offenses that occurred some years ago, remember the encouragement they had from some feminists.

Catholics and birth regulation in the 1960s

When the veterans returned from the horrors of World War II that ended in August of 1945, they wanted families. There was a cultural desire for large families. Catholics were not unique in having large families. The non-Catholics with whom I worked seemed to be competing to see who could fill up a big station wagon the fastest.

Unfortunately, in the postwar years, breastfeeding had largely been replaced by formula and baby foods, and the natural baby spacing of frequent breastfeeding was lost. It was not uncommon for babies to be born 12 to 15 months apart. This fueled the economy, but it could be quite difficult for some mothers. For example, In the mid-Sixties I knew a 30-year-old woman who had seven children, and she also had pregnancy-related varicose veins. She and her husband knew nothing about Natural Family Planning (NFP) and neither did I when she raised the question of birth regulation for them in their next 15 years.

I should have been more helpful. Our landlord had told us that he and his wife had successfully practiced a Calendar Rhythm method of Natural Family Planning (NFP) in the 1930s and had only three children. I had recently completed a year of theological training in which I learned Catholic teaching on birth control, but we learned nothing about NFP. My wife and I had been given a great Catholic marriage manual, but the only thing it said about this issue was to check with your local priest to find out about the “rhythm method.” It didn’t give even the simple calendar-temperature calculation.

Conflict & confusion in the Catholic Church

This situation led some sympathetic but not well-informed people in the Church to speculate that the Church could change its 1900-year teaching against unnatural forms of birth control. This was not limited to theological journals but was in pamphlets you could find near the church doors.

During the years of the Second Vatican Council, (1963-1965) Pope John XXIII set up a commission to study the birth control issue. After he died, St. Pope Paul VI renewed the commission. The majority of the members of the birth control commission asked the Pope to accept marital contraception, and in 1968 he issued a definitive response in an encyclical