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The Context: Embodied Love

The Catholic Church's teachings on contraception, though controversial to some, are in fact an integral part of its proclamation of the Gospel, the Good News that each person is infinitely loved and cherished by God, our Creator. We are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), Who is a communion of three divine Persons (Father, Son, and Spirit). Thus we are created as persons, gifted with the capabilities for knowledge, self-awareness, and freedom. By our very nature, we are called to relationships of self-giving love. The long ages of human history demonstrate that we long to know truth, that we desire happiness, and that we find true fulfillment in loving and being loved by others.

However, we are also embodied, sexual persons, created "male and female" (Genesis 1:27). Our sexuality is an essential part of who we are, of how we view the world and our place in it. Women and men are both made in the image of God, equal in that personhood, dignity, and responsibility. But women and men are created as complementary persons, capable of reflecting the image of God with one another by sharing a creative, life-giving, unselfish love.

For most, this communion of persons willed by God finds its expression in marriage, the faithful, life-long, exclusive covenant of love between a man and a woman. At the heart of this partnership of the whole of life is love: the total gift of oneself to the other, and accepting the other also as gift.

For human love to be total self-giving, it must involve not only the emotions and the will, but also the body, because the body is an integral part of our identity. Sexual intercourse is created to be the most profound bodily expression of this interpersonal communion of love. So powerful is this personal love that it also has the potential to co-create with God a new person, a new human life. Reflection on human experience confirms the Scriptural vision that sexual intercourse is designed by God with a two-fold, simultaneous purpose. It is the privileged means for a couple to celebrate their loving union through the gift of their bodies (the "unitive" meaning), and it is also the way in which God cooperates with couples to bring new human life into the world (the "procreative" meaning).

The Catholic tradition, basing itself on both this vision of marriage and family revealed in the Scriptures and on such reasoned reflection on long experience, recognizes that these two aspects or meanings of sexual intercourse in marriage are morally inseparable. It is evident that sexual activity unites the couple in love, and pregnancy can also result from engaging in it. The various forms of contraception are themselves based on accepting this same truth: that if you have sex, you might have a baby.

Contraception: Altering the Meaning of Sexual Intercourse

Contraception attempts deliberately to exclude the procreative meaning so that only the unitive meaning is intended: the couple wants to celebrate their relationship sexually, but does not want to become pregnant. They may even have good reasons to do so. But by going to the very heart of the meaning of intercourse and altering it, contraception always frustrates the unitive meaning as well. Intentionally withholding a beautiful and good part of oneself - one's fertility - prevents that act of intercourse from being a truly total gift of self.

This is radically different from the use of NFP. Even though both the contracepting couple and the NFP couple may have good reasons to avoid pregnancy, the NFP couple chooses to cooperate with the very inner structure of their created fertility by having intercourse during the woman's naturally-occurring infertile phase. The contracepting couple instead strives to change or block their created fertility. Where the NFP couple gratefully accepts the complex gift of their sexuality and is motivated by the desire for responsible parenthood, the contracepting couple effectively treats God's design for sexuality as flawed in its two-fold purpose. Sexual maturity requires recognizing the great power and sacredness of this potential to communicate love and co-create life, and the willingness to cooperate with God's wisdom in living our gift of sexuality in a way that is fully human: that is, embodied, aware, and free.

This positive vision of the simultaneous two-fold meaning of human sexual intercourse is at the root of the Catholic tradition's opposition to whatever would separate those meanings and reduce its beautiful potential to create a true communion of persons through the body.

"Barrier" Methods of Contraception

Of course, contraception in various forms has been part of human history for ages. However, only in the last century have somewhat reliable chemical means to prevent pregnancy been widely available (often collectively known as "the Pill"). Prior to that time, and for most, up until

the later 1950s, by far the most common form of contraception was some form of "coitus interruptus" - the withdrawal of the penis before ejaculation. Condoms were used by some, although latex condoms are a more recent invention, and condoms seem to have been used at first primarily as a protection against sexually transmitted disease (with poor success). Even more recently, diaphragms and female condoms have been used. The overall statistical success rate of barrier methods is lower than that of chemical contraception, and much lower than NFP when properly used. Nonetheless, it is true that barrier methods, when successful, do act as true contraceptives: they prevent conception rather than cause an early abortion (as chemical contraceptives sometimes do and as IUDs and RU 486 always do).

Nonetheless, the Catholic tradition's rejection of barrier methods of birth control is not based on practical reasons of advantages and disadvantages, but on the fact that such methods contradict the very purpose of sexual union. This is perhaps easier to understand with barrier methods than it is for chemical contraception, simply by looking at what barrier methods do. Like coitus interruptus, barrier methods essentially interject some kind of physical separation between the couple's bodies. Thus even the desired "union" of bodies does not take place totally, because the sexual organs themselves are barred from uniting. It is evident that the inner meanings of sexual intercourse, both the unitive and the procreative meanings, are distorted by such methods.

Again, the couple may have good reasons for wanting to avoid a pregnancy at that time. However, the Catholic moral tradition understands that good intentions must be carried out with morally appropriate actions in order to respect the values at stake. Barrier methods of contraception fail to respond adequately either to the value of fertility or the value of self-giving love in sexual intercourse.