



Contraception: The Evidence for the Ethics

from the Philadelphia Guild of the Catholic Medical Association (<http://www.cathmedphila.org/>)

The purpose of this piece is to explain some of the scientific evidence that supports the Catholic Church's teaching on contraception. The Church's opposition to contraception is based primarily on moral grounds. As such, scientific evidence is not needed to justify the Church's position. However, there is mounting evidence that opposing the natural moral law, which the Church upholds, has negative effects on individuals and on society. Some of the scientific evidence for negative effects from contraception is presented here.

Q: What is the Church's teaching on contraception?

A: As noted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC: 2369-2370), "Called to give life, spouses share in the creative power and fatherhood of God. "Periodic continence, that is, the methods of birth regulation based on self-observation and the use of infertile periods, is in conformity with the objective criteria of morality. These methods respect the bodies of the spouses, encourage tenderness between them, and favor the education of an authentic freedom. In contrast, "every action which, whether in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible" is intrinsically evil: *Thus the innate LANGUAGE that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory LANGUAGE, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality. . . . The difference, both anthropological and moral, between contraception and recourse to the rhythm of the cycle . . . involves in the final analysis two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality.*" This teaching is not accepted by many in our society, nor by many in the Catholic Church. If this teaching is correct, there should be objective evidence that use of contraception has negative effects on individuals and within society. Here are some of the scientific facts.

Q: Are there medical consequences from the use of hormonal contraception?

A: Yes, there are several. Hormonal contraceptives increase the risk for blood clots, strokes, heart attacks (which can be fatal), high blood pressure, breast cancer, cervical cancer, liver tumors, gall bladder disease, and others. The longer a woman takes hormonal contraceptives and the older she gets, the higher the risks, especially of breast cancer. In addition, hormonal contraceptives are not recommended for use in women with a history of high blood pressure, insulin dependent diabetes, heart disease, stroke, complicated valvular heart disease, breast cancer, cancer of the uterus or the ovaries. These precautions and complications pertain also to injectable and implantable contraceptives, as well as the contraceptive patch. It is also noteworthy that hormonal contraceptives have no effect on the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. Finally, it is worth noting that the current low dose contraceptives do not always prevent ovulation. When break-through ovulation does occur, hormonal contraceptives can also act to prevent implantation of the embryo. This becomes essentially an abortion of the newly formed human embryo. Since medical decision making should be based on an evaluation of the risks and the benefits of a treatment, one has to wonder if the benefits (sterilizing sexual intercourse) justify the risks of hormonal contraceptives.

Q: Are there medical considerations in the use of barrier methods of contraception?

A: Although the medical consequences of barrier methods (condoms, diaphragms, etc.) are fewer, there are some important considerations. First, these methods are not 100% effective even when used perfectly and consistently. In cases where contraception fails, the unwanted child is frequently aborted. In addition, they are not 100% effective in preventing sexually transmitted diseases. In particular, human papilloma virus infection, which can cause cervical cancer, is clearly not prevented by barrier methods. Although technically not a barrier method, intrauterine devices (IUD) have their own issues. These devices, implanted in the

uterus (the womb) prevent fertilization or implantation of the embryo. By preventing implantation, and IUD may be abortifacient, similar to hormonal contraceptives. In addition, they may predispose to serious pelvic infections, ectopic pregnancy, cause longer, heavier, and more painful menstrual periods, and can decrease fertility after they are removed.

Q: Are there psychological effects of contraception?

A: There are many psychological effects of contraception. These logically flow from the fact that contraception encourages spouses to use each other for their own selfish pleasure. Thus, contraceptive use increases the risk of depression, decrease in libido, and decreased self esteem. For example, a recent study showed that women who have had a tubal ligation were more than 2 times as likely to report stress interfering with sex over the previous 12 months, and 1.79 times as likely to report having seen a physician about sexual problems within the previous 12 months (Warehime et. Am J Reprod Med 2007; 52:263).

Q: What are the effects of contraception on interpersonal relationships?

A: This is the area where the effects of contraception become most obvious. The divorce rate among couples who contracept is 40-50%. This compares with the divorce rate of 5% or less for those who use natural family planning. This is a problem for the spouses and their children, all of whom are negatively impacted by divorce. The rise in divorce rate parallels the increase in the use of contraception, further linking the two.

Q: What are the societal consequences of the widespread use of contraception?

A: In *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI made some statements which appear prophetic regarding widespread use of contraception. From Section 17 of *Humanae Vitae*, “Let them first consider how easily this course of action could open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards. Not much experience is needed to be fully aware of human weakness and to understand that human beings—and especially the young, who are so exposed to temptation—need incentives to keep the moral law, and it is an evil thing to make it easy for them to break that law. Another effect that gives cause for alarm is that a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection.” Sociological research supports the Pope’s contention, in that all of these negative consequences have increased in the years since this encyclical was issued (1968). Societal trends of note include a six to seven fold increase in number of unmarried women who have given birth; increase in child abuse and neglect, the increase in abortion which parallels the increase in contraceptive use, increase in suicide and depression. While there may be many causes of some of these trends, it is striking that the increase in these has paralleled the rise contraceptive use.

Q: Are there any resources available for couples who wish to postpone pregnancy, but want to live in accord with Church teaching?

A: Yes! The Family Life office of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia has an active program in natural family planning (NFP). NFP is a modern, scientific approach to birth regulation based on the observation of naturally occurring signs and symptoms of the fertile phase of a woman's menstrual cycle. NFP can be used either to achieve or postpone pregnancy. The Archdiocese NFP resources are available by calling 215-587-5639 or through the Archdiocesan website <http://www.archdiocese-phl.org/> : <http://archdiocese-phl.org/evangelization/famlife/planning.htm>. Other excellent resources include the Couple to Couple League (<http://www.ccli.org/>) and the Philadelphia Natural Family Planning Network (<http://www.pnfpn.org/>).

For more information on contraception check out the “Life Issues” link on the US Conference of Catholic Bishops website: <http://www.usccb.org/index.shtml> and the “Evidence Based Ethics” link on the Philadelphia Catholic Medical Association website <http://www.cathmedphila.org/>.