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Sex in Marriage: Love-giving, Life-giving

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(The following text was prepared by Patrick Cardinal O'Boyle, and originally printed in booklet form on September 8, 1968 by the Archdiocese of Washington)

1. Why can't a Catholic form his own conscience on the subject of contraception?

As a matter of fact, each individual Catholic can and does form his own conscience on this and every other subject. If he does not, who can do it for him? But a Catholic does not form his own conscience in the sense that his conscience becomes the judge of the teaching of the Church. For a Catholic, formation of conscience begins at an earlier stage than deciding about a particular issue, whether it is contraception or anything else.

At the most fundamental level, a Catholic forms his conscience about the meaning of life, and in doing so he reaches the decision that he ought to be a Catholic. But if a person is going to be a Catholic, he has to accept what goes along with being a Catholic, and that includes accepting the teaching of the Church on particular issues, like contraception.

When a particular issue arises, he willingly accepts the Church's authoritative resolution of it. A loyal Catholic sees the authority of the Church not as an imposition, but as a directing principle in line with his most fundamental commitment to Christ. In the case of contraception, he makes a conscientious judgment to accept the teaching of the Church that contraception is always wrong (which does not rule out, of course, the possibility that he can arrive at that conclusion by himself). A Catholic forms his conscience in the light of what the Church teaches in the sense that he forms it *in accordance with what the Church teaches*.

* * *

In an effort to forestall misinterpretations of its teaching on religious liberty, Vatican II explained that true freedom of religion is not a license to form one's conscience independently of the Church's moral teaching:

"In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. The Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that Truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origin in human nature itself." (Vatican II, DECLARATION ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, # 14)

Dealing specifically with birth control, the Council explained the true relationship between the consciences of married people and the Church. The Council first answers the question, "Who should judge the right size for each family?" Then it explains how parents should form their consciences about *methods* of limiting family size. The passage reads as follows:

"The parents themselves should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God. But in their manner of acting, spouses should be aware that they cannot proceed arbitrarily. They must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive toward the Church's teaching office, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel." (Vatican II, CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD, # 50)

2. Does the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* say contraception is always wrong?

Humanae Vitae teaches with great clarity that contraception is always wrong. Pope Paul takes pains to say that any deliberate measure to render the marital act sterile—before, during or after—is wrong. Putting it affirmatively, he says that each and every marital act must of itself be open to the procreation of new life. This means that the couple themselves must not do anything to take away the life-giving meaning which a marital act always has in its own structure, even if the couple happen to be unable to have a baby.

It is important to note that the Pope is mainly talking about the evil of what is done in contraception, not about the guilt of the persons who do it. Ignorance or weakness may reduce or even at times entirely take away an individual's guilt. Only God can judge that. But the act itself is evil, quite apart from the guilt or innocence of the person who does it.

This important distinction—between the evil of what is done and the guilt of the one doing it—used to be expressed by saying that there are three conditions for mortal sin—grave matter, sufficient reflection, and full consent of the will. By reaffirming the constant teaching of the Church concerning contraception, the encyclical makes it clear that each and every use of contraception is a grave matter.

Some married persons—for instance sincere non-Catholics—may honestly hold the view that contraception is not wrong. The encyclical does not pass judgment on such persons.

Also, some couples who are doing their best to avoid the sin of contraception may fall through weakness. The encyclical does not exclude the possibility of serious sin in such cases; it urges those who do fall to go to confession. Confession is obligatory only in cases of grave sin. However, a deliberate rejection of God's loving commands should not be too quickly presumed in the case of a person who is honestly doing everything he can to avoid sin and its occasions.

Couples with problems should by all means consult a priest who is loyal to the Church's teaching and in whom they have confidence.

* * *

Paul VI first presents the Church's teaching in an affirmative form:

"The Church reminds man to observe the precepts of the natural law; she interprets it continually; she teaches that *each and every marriage act* must remain open to the procreation of human life." (HUMANAE VITAE, # 11)

Having stated the principles of the Catholic position, the Holy Father explains their application to the specific questions of abortion, sterilization, and contraception:

"Therefore, relying on these principles of the human and Christian view of marriage, we must declare once more: the direct interruption of generation already begun, and especially direct abortion, even if done for therapeutic reasons, must be entirely repudiated as a legitimate way of regulating the number of children.

"In the same way, as the Magisterium of the Church has taught many times, direct sterilization whether permanent or temporary, whether of men or of women, must be condemned.

"Likewise every act that intends to impede procreation must be repudiated, whether that act is intended as an end to be attained or as a means to be used, and whether it is done in anticipation of marital intercourse, or during it, or while it is having its natural consequences." (HUMANAE VITAE, # 14)

3. How do Catholics know what God wants of them?

A Catholic determines this not simply from the light of reason and experience—which are available to all men equally—but also and especially from divine revelation and the new light it throws on human life.

Revelation is communicated to us in scripture and tradition, which make known to us the reality of God, who has entered the world, who has taken on our own human nature in Christ, in order that we might share in His divinity. The Church has received from Christ the power to interpret revelation and to explain its implications for human life. Because the Church is trying to teach us how to be Christ-like, she must tell us how to be good and perfect men, for Christ is a perfect man—a man like us in everything except sin.

Sometimes the church shows us the direction we must follow to become more Christ-like. Occasionally she points out a prohibition we cannot

ignore, a boundary we cannot cross, without serious sin. Since Christ has promised to remain with the Church, a Catholic is confident that what the Church absolutely prohibits is incompatible with a Christ-like personality.

4. Won't the next pope, or the one after him, reverse what Pope Paul has done?

The whole Church rejected contraception from the beginning of Christianity. Her teaching was not just a papal edict subject to reversal by some future papal edict. On the contrary, she always appealed to objective standards "based on the nature of the human person and his acts." (Vatican II, CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD, #51)

Nobody can predict the future growth of Catholic doctrine, either of faith or of morals, but we can be sure that the Church *will not contradict herself on contraception*. By contrast, the next pope or the one after him could change the language of the Mass back to Latin—not that it is likely. The language of the Mass is something the Church can decide as she sees fit. But the teaching on contraception is not a matter of Church discipline, for the morality of contraception is based on the nature of man and woman as God created them.

* * *

In reaffirming the constant teaching of the Church on contraception, Paul VI refers to the condemnations of it by Pius XI and Pius XII. The latter spoke most eloquently to our present question:

"This precept is as valid today as it was yesterday; and it will be the same tomorrow and always, because it does not imply a precept of the human law but is an expression of a law which is natural and divine." (Pius XII, ADDRESS TO THE MIDWIVES, AAS, 43 [1951] 843)

5. Pope Paul wasn't teaching infallibly in *Humanae Vitae*, his encyclical on birth control, was he?

You have to make a distinction between the form in which the teaching is presented and the teaching itself. It is clear that *Humanae Vitae* is not itself a formally infallible document. However, the opposition of the Catholic Church to contraception is an unbroken tradition going back to the very beginning of Christianity. Pope Paul refers to the Church's teaching on contraception as *firmissima doctrina ecclesiae*—"the firmly

solid teaching of the Church." Similarly strong expressions were used by Pius XI and Pius XII in their condemnations of contraception.

All this—the unbroken tradition condemning contraception and the very strong language used by popes in their statements on the subject—points to the conclusion that this point of Catholic teaching might eventually be infallibly defined. As a matter of fact, many of the theologians who discussed this question between 1930 and 1960 judged that the Catholic Church's position on this moral question is part of her infallible teaching.

6. But suppose the condemnation of contraception isn't infallible. Then it's fallible, isn't it? And if it's fallible, couldn't it be mistaken?

This argument looks convincing at first glance because it is perfectly logical except for one thing—the words "fallible" and "infallible" are used in theology with a technical meaning. If you say in ordinary English that someone's statements are fallible, you suggest that they are not very trustworthy—that he is likely to be mistaken.

But when we say a particular point of Catholic teaching is not infallible, and so in the technical sense is fallible, the word "fallible" should not be taken as suggesting that the teaching referred to is unreliable.

The teachings of the Church which are proposed with the guarantee of her divine gift of infallibility and which Catholics accept on faith have a kind of certainty that is absolutely unique for the mind of the person who has the gift of faith. When a doctrine is not infallibly taught, we do not have that same unique kind of certainty.

However, it would be wrong to suppose that only the infallible teaching of the Church really counts for Catholics. It is not as if there were infallible doctrines on the one side, and mere fallible human opinions on the other. Short of infallible doctrines there is a whole spectrum of Catholic teaching. It goes all the way from pious reflections up to very certain points of Catholic doctrine.

For instance, the doctrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, body as well as soul, into heaven, was infallibly defined by Pius XII. Before this doctrine of faith was formally proclaimed it already was an unquestionable truth of Catholic doctrine. Though not yet infallibly defined, it would have been farfetched to argue: "It's fallible, and therefore possibly mistaken."

The teaching on contraception is not in the same situation that the

doctrine of the Assumption was the day before Pius XII defined it. The whole Catholic world is not demanding that Pope Paul put the seal of infallibility on this point of Catholic moral doctrine.

However, in the whole *moral* teaching of the Catholic Church there is very little that has been infallibly defined. But this does not mean that all this non-defined teaching is of doubtful validity. It is authentic teaching of the Church, and faithful Catholics accept it as solid Catholic doctrine. The teaching on contraception that Pope Paul has reaffirmed at least falls under this heading.

And we should remember that the Church does not exist just to provide something for theologians to speculate about. It exists to bring men to God, and we can be confident that its moral teaching does show men the way to God, whether the teaching is *ex cathedra* or not.

Of course, the fact that many find it hard to accept the teaching of the Church on contraception is being used as an argument that this teaching is not true and certain. But we must remember that dissent is a common feature of life today—from the family to the university, from the government to the Church.

Moreover, moral teachings affect our lives very intimately, and there are many personal reasons that make it harder for us to accept them than, for instance, the doctrine of the Assumption.

It is also pertinent to notice that dissent from a particular point of the Church's moral teaching does not prove a great deal. There is more or less intense and widespread dissent from solid Catholic moral teachings on other matters ranging all the way from premarital sex to the killing of innocent persons in war to the demands of racial justice.

7. If the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, is not infallible, then we're not bound by it, are we?

Yes, we are. Infallible pronouncements of the Church are rather rare. But we must learn how to live our Christian lives every day. And so, besides infallible teachings, the Church teaches with its day-to-day instruction how to fulfill God's will. Christ did not merely promise: I shall be with you on extraordinary occasions when infallible pronouncements are necessary. Rather, He said: "Behold, I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world." He made this promise just after He had told the apostles to go and teach all nations "to observe all that I have commanded you" (MATT. 28:20).

In *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul says that he is speaking in virtue of

the mandate entrusted to him by Christ. This mandate was given to Peter, the first pope, when Christ said: "I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (MATT. 16:19).

Pope Paul's teaching in *Humanae Vitae* is not something novel by which he has suddenly imposed a new obligation on Catholics. Rather, he is only restating the constant teaching of the Church that contraception is always wrong. The Church has not bound us to this "hard saying" arbitrarily but has only presented what she has always believed to be the law of God and of the moral order God has designed.

So if the words of Christ promising to be with His Church until the end of the world mean anything, they must mean that in a case like this the teaching of the Church is binding on us whether the pronouncement happens to be infallible or not.

* * *

The teaching of the Catholic Church on contraception is an unbroken tradition going back to the very beginning of Christianity. Vatican II at least refers to papal statements reaffirming such constant Catholic teachings when it says:

"In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent of soul. This religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*. That is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme Magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will. His mind and will in the matter may be known chiefly either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking." (Vatican II, CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH, # 25)

8. Isn't it common teaching in the Church that Catholics have a right to dissent from authoritative, non-infallible, papal teachings when there are sufficient reasons?

This is a rather tricky question, because it could mean two things. If you take it in one sense, the answer is a flat "No." If you take it in the other sense, the answer is still negative, but the "No" isn't quite so flat.

The two senses depend on the phrase "common teaching in the

Church." The Church's own common teaching is what it teaches with authority, whether infallibly or not. In this sense, there is no common teaching on dissent, because—at least up to the present—the popes and bishops have not dealt with the question of the permissibility of dissent.

On the other hand, if you are talking not about teaching *of* the Church, but about teaching *in* the Church, you have to consider what theologians say. The consensus of reputable theologians can be called "common teaching *in* the Church," especially when there is no official teaching on a certain point. Moreover, at times the official teachers of the Church, the popes and bishops, have given some weight of authority to the common teaching of accepted theologians. (This authority, of course, never goes so far as to set the theologians up as judges over the teaching of the popes and bishops themselves.)

If you look at accepted theological textbooks, you find that some do mention the possibility of someone's not being able to assent to a particular point of non-infallible teaching. One way of putting the matter, for example, is this: An expert in a given field who thinks a mistake has been made may withhold assent while he presents to the teaching authority of the Church facts or arguments about the matter that were not offered before. According to this view of dissent, theologians might, at most, privately call the Holy Father's attention to any *new* evidence or arguments about birth control.

As a matter of fact, however, theologians presently are *not* offering any new evidence or arguments. They are simply repeating what Pope Paul already carefully considered and deliberately rejected. In any case, there is no common agreement among theologians that would give a blanket permission for public dissent, much less a license to foster opposition to the teaching authority of the Church. Nor do rallies and statements to the mass media really seem to be an appropriate way to call something to the attention of the Church's authorized teachers.

We also should ask ourselves what kind of doctrines the theology books had in mind when they suggested the unusual case of possible legitimate dissent. The Church's doctrine on contraception is very authoritative. It has been the common teaching of the Church from the beginning—"common teaching" in the very sense that the new theory of dissent is not.

Moreover, as a moral teaching, this point of doctrine bears directly on the Church's Christ-given mission to lead men to salvation. One can hardly believe that the Catholic Church could be what she claims to be and still have made a mistake on a matter like this for nearly two thousand years.

Some who are dissenting have argued that they have a basis in sacred scripture itself, because St. Paul says he withstood St. Peter to his face (GAL. 2:11). Actually, as this passage itself and related ones make clear, Peter and Paul agreed completely in their *teaching*, but Paul criticized Peter's *conduct* on a particular matter. (The related passages are ACTS 11:4-18; 15:6-12.)

9. Doesn't the fact that distinguished theologians disagree with the Pope show that this is still an open question?

Unfortunately, throughout history many of those who turned away from the truth of the Church's teaching have been distinguished theologians. The fact that theologians disagree with the Pope does not prove anything, if the theologians are in opposition to the authentic teaching of the Church.

The question is, how do you tell a *Catholic* theologian? Every theologian uses something as his final criterion of truth—scripture, or his own conscience, or whatever it may be. The ultimate criterion for the Catholic theologian is divine revelation—which is both a given fact of history and a living reality. For the heart of revelation is Christ, in whom God reveals Himself to us, and Christ is not merely a given fact but also a living Person. He presents Himself to us today, we Catholics believe, by the medium of the authorized teachers of the Church He founded.

So when the bishops, and especially the pope, speak in the name of Christ, Catholics recognize their authority to do so, for they are successors of the apostles, who were the only teachers Christ Himself commissioned. The Catholic theologian will accept this criterion as a test of his own theories and opinions, while the theologian who is not acting as a Catholic will judge the validity of episcopal and even papal teaching by some other standard.

* * *

Pius XII explained very clearly that in a case like the present one, a papal teaching changes things, so that questions that were open to theological debate before the encyclical are no longer open questions afterwards:

"Nor must it be thought that what is contained in encyclical letters does not of itself demand assent, on the pretext that the popes do not exercise in them the supreme power of their teaching authority. Rather, such teachings belong to the ordinary Magisterium, of which it is true to say: 'He who heareth you, heareth Me' very often, too, what is expounded and inculcated in encyc-

lical letters already appertains to Catholic doctrine for other reasons. But if the supreme pontiffs in their official documents purposely pass judgment on a matter debated until then, it is obvious to all that the matter, according to the mind and will of the same pontiffs, cannot be considered any longer a question open for discussion among theologians." (Pius XII, HUMAN GENERIS, AAS, 42 [1950], 568)

10. The Church condemned usury. It condemned Galileo. It was wrong in the past, so how can one be sure it is not wrong now?

The issue in the Galileo case was partly one of Church discipline, partly one of scientific theory, and partly one of faith. The Church was not altogether wrong, and particularly was not wrong in refusing to allow an astronomer to dictate to her the proper way to interpret sacred scripture. The condemnation of Galileo, in any case, had nothing like the authoritative status, the significance for Christian life, or the traditional foundation of the condemnation of contraception.

Usury is perhaps a nearer parallel, but the moral issue there depended partly on economic conditions which obviously could and did change. The immorality of contraception depends on things which do not change: the nature of a human person and the nature of the powers God has given him over his own body and his sexuality.

The closer one gets to the core of what it is to be a human being, the less room there is for change, and the principles involved in the condemnation of contraception proceed very directly from the nature of a human person and from the essential meaning of sex. So the contraception issue is different from the Galileo case and usury, because the core of the human person is involved, and the human good at stake does fall within the Church's competence.

11. The Pope gathered the best available experts on his birth control commission. Why shouldn't I accept the commission's conclusions rather than the Pope's?

First of all, one may question whether the commission was all that well balanced. In fact, the Pope seems to have bent over backwards to make sure that the new ideas in the air were well represented. In any case, the commission members could speak only as private specialists on the basis of their own knowledge and competence. By contrast, when the

Pope speaks on this matter, he is not speaking as an expert whose authority rests on how much he personally happens to know, but as the chief teacher in Christ's Church.

Vatican II itself clarified this difference between the experts and the Pope when it said that the Holy Father had handed certain questions over "to a commission for the study of population, family, and births, in order that after it fulfills its function, the Supreme Pontiff may pass judgment" (CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD, #51, note 14). In this way the Council itself pointed out that it was the commission members' job to gather materials and to offer their professional comments, but that Pope Paul would make the final decision.

Cardinal Heenan, who was pro-president of the final commission, recently put the matter very well in a widely printed statement to the press: "The members of the commission did not regard themselves as a jury. We did not think it was for us to pronounce the final verdict condemning or reprieving pills and other contraceptives. It was for us to give a view on the evidence before us. It was for the Pope alone to make the decision."

It is also of some significance that the so-called "majority" and "minority" reports of the commission, which were published without the Pope's permission, are not what the titles given them imply. In the first place, the two documents were not counterparts of one another. The so-called "minority" report was part of a working paper dealing only with certain limited questions. It was prepared at an earlier stage of the commission's work than the so-called "majority" document and was in no sense a final report. At a later stage, the "majority" document was prepared as a draft of a full treatment of the matter.

All this may be ancient history and somewhat beside the point now that the Pope has spoken, but it does illustrate the sort of distortion which has become part and parcel of this whole debate.

* * *

Pope Paul explains the advisory role of his birth control commission. It was not established to be a substitute for the Pope's own judgment. The commission's work was his way of consulting the faithful, but the Holy Father's judgment, rather than the commission's conclusion, is definitive:

"The consciousness of that same mission induced us to confirm and enlarge the study commission which our predecessor, Pope John XXIII of happy memory, had instituted in March, 1963. That commission which included experts in the various relevant disciplines, and married couples as well, had as its scope

the gathering of opinions on the new questions regarding conjugal life, and in particular on the regulation of births, and of furnishing pertinent elements of information so that the *Magisterium* could give an adequate reply to the expectation not only of the faithful, but also of world opinion." (HUMANAE VITAE, # 5)

"The conclusions at which the commission arrived could not, nevertheless, be considered by us as definitive, nor dispense from a personal examination of this serious question; and this also because, within the commission itself, no full concordance of judgments concerning the moral norms to be proposed had been reached, and above all because certain criteria of solutions had emerged which departed from the moral teaching on marriage proposed with constant firmness by the teaching authority of the Church." (HUMANAE VITAE, # 6)

12. But if the Pope is so sure of his teaching, why did it take him five years to make up his mind?

Pope Paul is a scholarly man, and he reacted as a scholar. When objections were raised, he made an exhaustive study of the issue. He never said, however, that he was in doubt about the teaching on contraception. On the contrary, it seems clear that he was never in doubt at all that contraception is always wrong. What he may have been in doubt about was whether or not the "pill" was really a contraceptive.

Another point to remember is that even in fundamental matters of faith, the Church must constantly re-examine its teaching as new challenges to the doctrines of faith arise. Such re-examination does not put the faith in doubt, but an honest person simply cannot reject apparent counter-evidence as it arises. So both the Church's teaching and the new challenge must be carefully examined.

This is the sort of thing Pope Paul has been doing. He indicated as much on June 23, 1964, in announcing the work of the commission. His encyclical shows that he has not brushed aside objections to the Church's teaching on contraception. He has thought through the contemporary challenge to this teaching, and has provided a guide for those who wonder how the population problem, our modern understanding of marital love, and other factors are to be squared with the constant teaching of the Church.

13. Isn't the Pope really advocating a Victorian standard of sexual conduct?

The Pope is advocating Christian chastity, which was not invented in the Victorian age nor even in the middle ages. The Church never taught that sexuality is something outside one's personality; it is an intrinsic part of human personality. Sexuality touches on the sources of human life, on the core of personality, and on the creative power of God.

Moreover, if "Victorian standards" implies prudery or hypocrisy, this is hardly an accurate description of Pope Paul's teaching, which is that the marriage act itself is noble and worthy. The Pope teaches that the deepest meaning of the conjugal act is both life-giving and love-giving.

14. How can a bachelor pope and bachelor bishops presume to tell married people what to do?

How can a male obstetrician presume to tell a woman how to have a baby? Arguments based on experience are tricky and don't prove a great deal. In arguing from experience, most married people are limited to the experience of their own marriage. They certainly have much that is valuable to say, but what they say on the basis of their experience cannot settle matters involving fundamental moral principles. (It is surprising, by the way, that those who appeal to the experience of the married in this controversy do not seem to pay much attention to the experience of married people who reject contraception.)

Experience is a poor guide on quite a few matters. The experience of anyone looking at a consecrated Host is that he sees a piece of bread. For a non-believer, that is the end of the matter. But the believer, having the same experience, nevertheless sees the Reality in a very different light because of his faith.

Finally, one might note that even bachelor popes and bachelor bishops have experienced family life from the inside in their own parents' families. They have also talked with and counseled married people in and out of the confessional. They know something of the experience of married life, but they are not limited to their own personal experience in this area.

15. What right does the Pope have to condemn people to large families they don't want?

Pope Paul is not condemning anybody to anything. The Pope doesn't

decide arbitrarily what morality demands. As the successor of Peter and vicar of Christ, he does what he is obliged to do "in explaining the divine law" (Vatican II, CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD, #51). As to family size, this is a matter for the conscientious decision of individual couples. What the Pope has done is to restate that contraception, sterilization, and abortion are not legitimate methods of limiting family size. It is sometimes said that Catholics are obliged to have as many children as they can, but Pope Paul does not say this and it has never been the teaching of the Church.

Pope Paul clearly explains why he cannot decide arbitrarily what moral law demands and why he cannot change moral law to suit public opinion:

"It can be foreseen that this teaching will perhaps not be easily received by all. Too numerous are those voices—amplified by the modern means of propaganda—which are contrary to the voice of the Church. To tell the truth, the Church is not surprised to be made, like her divine Founder, a 'sign of contradiction,' yet she does not because of this cease to proclaim with humble firmness the entire moral law, both natural and evangelical. Of such laws the Church was not the author, nor consequently can she be their arbiter; she is only their depositary and their interpreter, without ever being able to declare to be licit that which is not so by reason of its intimate and unchangeable opposition to the true good of man." (HUMANAE VITAE, # 18)

16. How can the Pope urge responsible parenthood and take away the most effective means of responsibility?

In speaking of responsible parenthood Pope Paul discusses the responsibility of parents to the child who is to be born, to the other children, to themselves and to the community. But he insists especially on a couple's responsibility to God and to the moral law. "Responsible parenthood," after all, means something more than just preventing babies. And the "most effective means," as Pope Paul sees it, are means that best fulfill this total responsibility—including above all the responsibility to abide by the will of God. This broad view of "responsible parenthood" is not Pope Paul's alone. It was already explained in this way by Vatican II, but many people seem to ignore what the Council actually said on this matter.

If one thinks responsible parenthood is just a matter of using the most efficient means to prevent babies, then any effective means—even abortion—will become a "responsible" one. Pope Paul's teaching on truly

responsible parenthood takes for granted a Christian morality based on the nature of human persons and human acts. The so-called "responsible parenthood" that requires contraception and even abortion takes for granted a secularist morality ultimately based on the idea that the end justifies the means.

Vatican II presents the Catholic idea of responsible parenthood. True responsibility is not just birth prevention; it is a soundly moral and genuinely Christian attitude toward parenthood:

"The parents themselves should ultimately make this judgment, in the sight of God. But in their manner of acting, spouses should be aware that they cannot proceed arbitrarily. They must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive toward the Church's teaching office, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel. That divine law reveals and protects the integral meaning of conjugal love, and impels it toward a truly human fulfillment.

"Thus, trusting in divine providence and refining the spirit of sacrifice, married Christians glorify the Creator and strive toward fulfillment in Christ when, with a generous human and Christian sense of responsibility, they acquit themselves of the duty to procreate. Among the couples who fulfill their God-given task in this way, those merit special mention who with wise and common deliberation, and with a gallant heart, undertake to bring up suitably even a quite large family." (Vatican II, CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD, # 50)

17. Did the Pope frown on the practice of rhythm?

No, and it is very unfortunate that some early reports about the encyclical suggested that he did. Actually Pope Paul simply restates previous teaching about the morality of rhythm. He also encourages scientists to seek ways to make it more effective and he commends the efforts that have already been made to teach the proper and effective practice of rhythm.

Paul VI clearly distinguishes between contraception and rhythm. The latter is permissible whenever there is a good reason:

"And so, if the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or external circumstances furnish good reasons to space subsequent births, the Church teaches that it is then permissible to take into account the natural periods of the generative powers and to restrict intercourse to the sterile periods. Thus they provide

for the good of future children in such a way that the moral principle just explained is not violated." (HUMANAE VITAE # 16)

18. Doesn't the Pope know that rhythm doesn't work?

The Pope knows that rhythm could be improved. That's why he urged scientists to work in this direction. But he also knows that modern rhythm can be extremely effective—more so than most methods of contraception.

However, the practice of rhythm requires correct information and a willingness to regulate one's sexual impulses. False information, even outright misinformation, about rhythm is more widespread than the true facts. Many people do not realize that the most effective type of rhythm usually requires the woman to take her daily temperature systematically, and to know how to interpret her temperature record correctly. Most people do not realize that the safe period just before menstruation is much safer than the one during and after menstruation.

Furthermore, effective rhythm requires understanding of the meaning of marital love. It depends on strong motivation, both natural and supernatural—the necessity of avoiding another baby now and the sincere determination on the part of both wife and husband to respect the plan of God for married love.

As far as the technical know-how of rhythm is concerned, it isn't particularly difficult. The Family Life Bureau of the Diocese will direct to reliable sources any couple who ask for help in learning to practice rhythm. Your parish priest can put you in touch with the Family Life Bureau.

The couple-to-couple movement for teaching rhythm is an aspect of the lay apostolate that needs to be encouraged and developed in this Diocese. Generous couples who are willing to share their own experience with others can do a wonderful act of charity by contributing to this needed work in the service of other Christian couples.

* * *

Pope Paul encourages the couple-to-couple movement. In praising it, he points out that it is truly a way in which laymen can be apostles in today's world. The Holy Father is familiar with the magnificent work of Father Stanislas de Lestapis, S.J., who has led many French laymen in the development of such a movement for the proper teaching of rhythm. The following can therefore be taken as a suggestion that others follow the lead of this celibate apostle of true conjugal love:

"Among the fruits which ripen forth from a generous effort of fidelity to the divine law, one of the most precious is that married couples themselves not infrequently feel the desire to communicate their experience to others. Thus there comes to be included in the vast pattern of the vocation of the laity a new and most noteworthy form of the apostolate of like to like; it is married couples themselves who become apostles and guides to other married couples. This is assuredly, among so many forms of apostolate, one of those which seems most appropriate today." (HUMANAE VITAE, # 26)

19. Doesn't rhythm undermine married love by taking the spontaneity out of marital relations?

Rhythm does take spontaneity out of marital relations if "spontaneity" just means responding to a natural urge. But that sort of spontaneity is not necessary for married love.

To practice rhythm a couple has to learn to restrain natural urges. At first this seems unnatural. But it does not mean extinguishing sexual desire. It means domesticating its fire so that it will burn under control. Like other fires in the home, this one should serve life and love rather than threaten them. The gift of sexual love is all the more free and meaningful when a husband and wife sometimes show their love by restraint. What is more, the "spontaneity" which lacks restraint may even dull the edge of desire and weaken sexual love.

It is also important to remember that the marital love a young couple really look forward to on their wedding day includes a great deal besides sexual relations. Marriage ideally is the closest and most faithful friendship. It means sharing everything. A husband and wife who deeply love each other forget about "mine" and "yours," they care about each other just as each cares about himself. This generosity—which hardly seems like generosity because it is done without thinking, without effort—brings to marriage a kind of spontaneity in caring and sharing that goes far beyond the level of any urge. This higher spontaneity makes the practice of rhythm easier, and this very practice is a fine way to cultivate generous love.

Finally, the sacramental love of a Christian husband and wife for one another shares the spontaneity of divine life, of grace, of the hope for salvation. This is the spontaneity experienced by countless Christians when heroism has been called for in the past, when martyrs died joyfully because they were sustained by the strength of the Holy Spirit. With this

spontaneity sacrifices do not work to undermine married love but to elevate it, raising it off its natural foundations and placing it upon the unshakable foundation of the rock who is Christ.

* * *

Vatican II explained what true married love is:

"Now this love is eminently human since it is directed by movement of will from person to person. Because it embraces the good of the whole person, it has the ability to give special value to the expressions of body and of mind, and to bring them to a higher plane as aspects and appropriate signs of the friendship between a married couple. The Lord has deigned to heal, perfect, to raise up this love with the special gift of His grace and charity.

"Love of this sort which mixes what is human together with the divine is demonstrated by kindly affection and action. This love leads a husband and wife to give themselves freely and mutually to each other, and it pervades the whole of their life together. By generous fulfillment in action, this love is refined and intensified. Therefore, it goes far beyond mere erotic inclination which quickly and sadly dies out when it is selfishly cultivated." (Vatican II, *CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD*, # 49)

20. Contraception and rhythm both aim at the same objective. What difference does it make which you use?

Both aim at the same thing—avoiding pregnancy—but it simply confuses the matter to say they are therefore morally the same. Contraception is a direct, intentional interference in a marital act that might otherwise give life. Rhythm, which is more properly called periodic abstinence, is the intentional omission of such acts. In this sense, then, contraception means doing something, rhythm means not doing something.

Morally speaking, the difference between acting against something and not acting against it can make all the difference in the world. For instance, to kill a terminal cancer patient with an overdose of drugs is one thing; to omit an operation that would keep him alive a little longer is another. Of course, contraception isn't murder, but that isn't the point of the example. The point is the difference between acting against something and not acting against it.

A couple may abstain from conjugal relations without taking a negative and immoral attitude toward the beginning of a new life. After all, married couples are not obliged to have babies whenever possible. Contracep-

tion was never condemned on the ground that people are obliged to have children. It was condemned because it involves an attack on life in its beginnings. A married couple are only obliged to respect the full meaning of their marriage by allowing every marital act performed to remain open to the passing on of new life—that is, they must not take away this meaning by their own intervention.

The practice of rhythm also may differ from contraception in regard to various important consequences. To learn to practice rhythm a couple must really talk to each other. They must learn to appreciate and respect each other's natures and feelings. They must learn a restraint which makes mutual giving more free and more meaningful.

21. Doesn't the Pope know about the population explosion?

Very likely he knows as much about it as anyone in the world. He has pored over mounds of documentation on the subject in the past five years and he has personally visited countries like India and Colombia where the population problem is particularly acute. It is clear from the encyclical, as well as from his other statements during the past five years, that this is one of the questions that weighed heaviest with him.

But not any and every means of population limitation is morally acceptable. Moreover, not any and every means works. Traditional contraceptives and even newer ones like the "pill" have not been effective among large masses of underfed, illiterate people. The techniques that work best among such people are ones we cannot imagine the Pope ever approving—abortion (or probable abortifacients like intrauterine devices), mass sterilization, or infanticide. Apart from being immoral in themselves, such methods, in order to be effective in controlling population among illiterate people, would have to be imposed on them, either by social engineering or by outright force, and this, too, is intolerable.

Unless methods like abortion and mass sterilization are used, population growth does not seem to level off until people have achieved through education and economic development the skill and motivation to control the size of their families. Stressing contraception as the answer to population problems is putting the cart before the horse. Economic and educational development must come first.

* * *

In rejecting contraception as a way of dealing with the population problem, Pope Paul cites Pope John. Both teach that social and economic development,

together with respect for all the basic human goods, is the way government authorities should follow:

"We are well aware of the serious difficulties experienced by public authorities in this regard, especially in the developing countries. To their legitimate preoccupations we devoted our encyclical letter *Populorum Progressio*. But with our predecessor, Pope John XXIII, we repeat: 'No solution to these difficulties is acceptable which does violence to man's essential dignity and is based only on an utterly materialistic conception of man himself and of his life. The only possible solution to this question is one which envisages the social and economic progress both of individuals and of the whole of human society, and which respects and promotes true human goods.'

"Neither can one, without grave injustice, consider divine providence to be responsible for what depends, instead, on a lack of wisdom in government, on an insufficient sense of social justice, on selfish monopolization, or again on blameworthy intolerance in confronting the efforts and the sacrifices necessary to ensure the raising of living standards of a people and of its sons." (HUMANAE VITAE, # 23)

22. But in *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical on birth control the Pope doesn't offer any solutions along these lines, does he?

He does not treat the subject in depth in this particular encyclical. But he did recently urge economic and educational development in another encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, in which he stated that "development is the new name for peace."

This teaching of Pope Paul on development is only the last item in a series of papal teachings calling for social justice. Other items in the series include Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, which did much to support the growth of free labor unions, and John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*, which defended man's natural and unchanging social, economic, and political rights in the rapidly changing world of the 1960's. Of course, these encyclicals have been rejected by some who prefer to go on exploiting others, just as *Humanae Vitae* is rejected by some who prefer to go on promoting contraception.

The Church can never be satisfied that the job of promoting social justice is finished. For example, better housing for poorer families is badly needed in most countries. Educational opportunities are still far from equal. The Church must work on these matters.

But the Church is not only the bishops and priests—it is the whole

People of God. The implementation of the Church's program for social justice is largely the work of the lay apostolate. Within his proper area of competence, every Catholic must use the political and social means at his disposal to see that social justice is done in his own neighborhood, in the nation at large, and even throughout the world.

23. Did the Pope say that the government should outlaw birth control?

No, not in the sense that the use of contraceptives must be made illegal. The Pope certainly does not suggest putting a policeman in everybody's bedroom. What he does say is that governments should not use the law of the land to impose practices against divine and natural law on the family. This possibility is not so farfetched. As a matter of fact, some scientists and government leaders in various countries are already discussing compulsory birth control.

* * *

Pope Paul nowhere demands that governments *prohibit* contraception by law; he does exhort heads of state not to introduce contraception by law. After speaking of pornography and public licentiousness, he adds:

"To heads of state, inasmuch as they are principally responsible for the common good and in a position to do so much to safeguard good morals, we say: do not allow the collapse of morals among your people. Exclude entirely the introduction by law into the family, the basic cell of the state, of practices contrary to divine and natural law. There is another way by which the civil authority can and should solve the demographic problem; namely, by passing laws that provide for families, and by educating the people with such wisdom that both the laws of morality and the liberties of the citizens are preserved." (HUMANAE VITAE, # 23)

24. When the encyclical came out, many couples said, "We just can't live with it." What should such couples do?

First, they might begin by talking to each other to find out the true nature of their problems. Very often people get themselves into apparent dead-end situations through simple lack of communication.

Of course, a couple with problems should go to a priest in whom they have confidence and who is loyal to the Church's teaching and discuss the matter with him. Often a sensible adviser can show people a legitimate way out of their difficulties, which they simply could not have seen by themselves.

Many good doctors will generously and patiently help couples especially those who are trying to learn how to practice rhythm. Other experienced married people can often help a couple with problems. The couple-to-couple approach is a most effective exercise of the lay apostolate. Finally, prayer and the sacraments are indispensable.

25. Can a couple who practice contraception continue to receive the sacraments?

Not if they have made up their minds to go on practicing contraception. One clear sign of such a frame of mind would be keeping contraceptives on hand.

But a couple who honestly try to stop using contraception and who fall into sin should not despair, even if it happens over and over. Such couples should go to confession and then return to Communion. They should stay close to Christ in the Eucharist by receiving Him often, even—or *especially*—when they are struggling with temptation. As Pope Paul says in his encyclical, Christ “was indeed absolutely unbending with sin, but patient and merciful with sinners.” (HUMANAE VITAE, # 24)

In going to confession, people should not demand more of themselves than God is demanding of them. A firm purpose of amendment is necessary for true sorrow for sin. But this does not mean being sure one will never fall again. In fact, a person can be truly sorry for his sins even while he knows that humanly speaking it is likely he will fall again. It is enough to be determined to do one's best with the help of God's grace and to continue to beg God for His help. We believe that God rewards those who keep seeking Him, no matter how unsuccessful they seem to be in their own eyes.

* * *

Pope Paul encourages Catholic couples to do their best, and to pray and frequent the sacraments. Those who fall into sin should keep going to confession:

“Let married couples, then, face up to the efforts needed, supported by the faith and hope which ‘do not disappoint... because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.’ Let them implore divine assistance by persevering prayer; above all, let them draw from the source of grace and charity in the Eucharist. And if sin should still keep its hold over them, let them not be discouraged, but rather have recourse with humble perseverance to the mercy of God, which is poured forth in the sacrament of penance.” (HUMANAE VITAE, # 25)

26. Suppose a person does not in practice accept the Church's teaching on contraception. What should he do now—leave the Church, stay in and work for a change, or find a confessor who agrees with him?

Let's take the suggested alternatives in reverse order. A person who started shopping around for a confessor who agreed with him but disagreed with the Church would certainly be putting himself in a false position as a Catholic and even as a person. Practically, this could amount to leaving the Church while pretending to stay in it. As for staying within the Church and working for a change in its authentic teaching, this hardly seems to be compatible with what it really means to be “in” the Church. A loyal Catholic must accept the Church's teaching and try to live by it.

But leaving the Church is no solution. St. Peter put it well when he said to Christ: “Lord, to whom shall we go?” (JOHN 6:69) One who finds himself in a position where he honestly cannot approach the sacraments should certainly go on praying and keep on going to church. God is not stingy with His grace, and problems that seem insoluble now may not always remain so.

A man may not be able to accept the reasons given for what the Church teaches, although he should certainly try at least to understand them. But the reasons are, in the last analysis, much less important than the teaching itself. With God's grace, one can always make a commitment to that teaching.

27. Pope Paul's reaffirmation of the traditional teaching on contraception was intellectually shocking. How can loyal Catholics really hold this doctrine?

There are excellent reasons for accepting this teaching. Above all, the authority of Christ's Church stands behind it. This doctrine involves no more—and no fewer—problems than many others. Christian chastity has always been absurd in the eyes of unbelievers. In the eyes and hearts of believers, it always has made excellent sense and still does.

One need not feel that he has to know all the answers on birth control any more than on any other moral teaching—for instance, on abortion or divorce. Even priests and theologians do not know all the answers. But every Catholic should try to understand the Church's teaching as well as he can, so that he can put it into practice in his own life and help others, too. Those who want to be loyal Catholics must help and support

and encourage one another. They should especially support the Pope.

Catholics who want to be loyal but who are disappointed in some way with this encyclical can at least not broadcast their disappointment. Those who want to take a more positive approach should do whatever they have the opportunity to do. Those who disagree with the encyclical have not been shy about expressing their disagreement, and those who agree should be at least as active and vocal in expressing their agreement.

28. Didn't Pope Paul decide the question on his own and forget about collegiality? Why didn't he go by the "sense of the faithful?" Didn't Vatican II give them a say?

Pope Paul did respect the doctrine of collegiality and did respect the sense of the faithful.

Collegiality does not mean that a pope has to take a public vote of all the bishops or that he must decide matters in accordance with a majority vote of the bishops. When Vatican II described collegiality, it emphasized the supremacy of the pope and declared that even the whole college of bishops holds its authority in union with the pope, not apart from him.

It should be noted, too, that Pope Paul did ask all the bishops of the Council to submit their views on these questions in writing, and a great many did so. Furthermore the Council itself voted overwhelmingly that Catholics were not permitted to use methods of regulating procreation which go counter to the authentic teaching of the Church. The Council voted at the same time to leave it to Pope Paul to make the final decision on whatever questions remained about birth control. In *Humanae Vitae*, the Pope mentions that he consulted his brother bishops.

As to the "sense of the faithful," Vatican II explains its true meaning when it says:

"The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. 1 JOHN 2:20, 27), cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole people's supernatural discernment in matters of faith when 'from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful' (St. Augustine) they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. *It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the People of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly*

the word of God." (Vatican II, CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH, # 12)

This is a far cry from the idea that the opinion of Catholics acting against the Church's teaching constitutes the "sense of the faithful" ("sensus fidelium"). The Church's teaching is not determined by public opinion among the People of God. The faithful at large have an important contribution to make in the development of doctrine, but the authorized teachers of the Church, the pope and the other bishops, must decide what constitutes a genuine development.

It is remarkable, incidentally, how little attention has been given to the witness of millions of Catholic couples who have continually tried, despite failures, to follow the difficult teaching of the Church on marital chastity. The Holy Spirit, who dwells in the whole People of God, perhaps dwells in a special way in those who silently hear the word of God and try perseveringly to keep it.

* * *

The Council's teaching on collegiality is as clear as its teaching on the "sense of the faithful." Collegiality does not mean that Catholics have ceased to regard the Pope as the vicar of Christ on earth:

"But the college or body of bishops has no authority unless it is simultaneously conceived of in terms of its head, the Roman pontiff, Peter's successor, and without any lessening of his power of primacy over all, pastors as well as the general faithful. For in virtue of his office, that is, as vicar of Christ and pastor of the whole Church, the Roman pontiff has full, supreme, and universal power over the Church. And he can always exercise this power freely." (Vatican II, CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH, # 22)

29. Didn't Vatican II drop the idea that children are the primary end of marriage?

No, it did not. What the Council did do was to omit the use of the terms "primary and secondary ends of marriage" from the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. This was probably done to avoid endless debate on just what is meant by "primary" and "secondary." After all, there is a legitimate sense in which the unitive or love-giving aspect of marriage is more important.

But there is an equally legitimate sense in which procreation is more basic—is "primary"—since this is what is proper to marriage and unique about it. It is the begetting and raising of children that distinguishes marriage from any other human relationship, and in this sense procreation

is the "primary" end of marriage (although to say that procreation is the primary end of marriage never meant that this is what people who get married have uppermost in their minds).

* * *

The Council's teaching on marriage is in the Catholic tradition, although the terminology "primary end" and "secondary end" does not appear:

"Marriage and married love by their own nature are ordained toward procreating and raising children. Children actually are the foremost benefit of marriage and they greatly contribute to their parents' good. It was God Himself who said: 'It is not good for man to be alone' (GEN. 2:18). It was also He 'who made man from the beginning male and female' (MATT. 19:4), for He wished in a special way to share with mankind the creative act proper to Himself. And so He blessed the man and woman, saying: 'Increase and multiply' (GEN. 1:28).

"Thus the true cultivation of married love and the entire plan of family life that grows out of it aim at this goal—without downgrading the other ends of marriage—namely, that with stout hearts the couple be ready to cooperate with the love of the Creator and Savior, for day by day He increases and enriches His own family through them." (Vatican II, CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD, # 50)

30. Doesn't Pope Paul's encyclical violate the spirit of Vatican II?

This is a hard question to answer, because for many people "the spirit of Vatican II" is apparently a subjective thing which means whatever they want it to mean. If one really wants to know the spirit of Vatican II, one studies the Council's documents.

The Council's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (# 50) certainly says it is up to married people to decide how many children they are to have. "But," it also says, "in their manner of acting, Christian couples should be aware that they cannot proceed arbitrarily. They must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive toward the Church's teaching authority, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel."

Then the Council states its conclusion concerning birth control in the following way: "It is not permitted to sons and daughters of the Church to use methods of regulating procreation that are disapproved of by the teaching authority of the Church in its explanation of the divine law" (# 51). Furthermore, the famous footnote number 14 at the end of this

sentence specifically says that the Council is leaving certain questions about the regulation of birth to the Pope to settle. Pope Paul has now done so, and in doing so he has acted precisely as the Council left it up to him to do.

31. What reasons does the encyclical give for saying that contraception is wrong?

For the most part the encyclical is not trying to develop an argument to show that contraception is wrong. Rather, it is mainly concerned with answering objections to the traditional teaching. It does, however, contain a rather compact, two-fold argument as to why contraception is wrong.

The Pope says that the marital act has two intrinsic purposes or meanings—life-giving and love-giving—and that these are inseparably linked. It is a mutilation of the act to deprive it of either meaning. Thus, a person might deprive the act of its love-giving aspect by forcing sexual acts on another against his reasonable wishes. And he would deprive it of its life-giving meaning by contraception. The two meanings and purposes of the sexual act are not arbitrary ones. They are intrinsic to the act itself. They are there because that is the way God planned it.

The Pope also says that while man is the master of material creation—the world outside himself—he is not the master of his own life nor is he the master of the process by which human life is handed on. The encyclical points out that the generative process is inviolable because by means of it new human life is engendered in cooperation with the Creator.

These are reasonable arguments and a reasonable man can accept them. It is important to note, however, that the truth of the teaching does not depend on the strength of the arguments presented in the encyclical, as Pope Paul himself makes clear. The encyclical is not a philosophical treatise which stands or falls on the strength and persuasiveness of its logic. It is a document presenting the authoritative teaching of the Church, and a Catholic accepts its truth for the same reasons that he accepts the authority of the Church.

* * *

Pope Paul states his central argument against contraception, not in negative terms, but as an argument for the affirmative point that there is an unbreakable link between the life-giving and the love-giving aspects of sexual intercourse. Stated in this way, the argument shows that Pope Paul is *against* contraception because

he is *for* the great human values at stake. In this concern he clearly affirms and defends the Christian tradition:

"This teaching often set forth by the Magisterium of the Church is based on an unbreakable link established by God between the two inherent meanings of the marriage act: its unitive meaning and its procreative meaning, a link not to be intentionally destroyed by man.

"For the conjugal act, in its deepest meaning, not only joins husband and wife in the closest union, but also makes them capable of bringing forth new life, by reason of laws inscribed in the very nature of men and women. And if both the essential meanings, of union and of procreation, are preserved, the marriage act retains in its fullness its sense of true mutual love and its destination to the supreme role of parenthood to which man is called. In our opinion modern man is particularly able to appreciate the compatibility of this doctrine with human reason.

"For one justly notes that the marriage act when imposed on the other partner without any consideration of the other's condition or reasonable desires is not a true act of love, and is therefore contrary to those harmonious relationships demanded by the moral order. Likewise, given due reflection, one must confess that an act of mutual love accompanied by interference with the power of procreation—a power in which God, the Creator of all of us, has inscribed special laws—violates both the divine plan according to which marriage was established and the will of the first Author of human life.

"Accordingly, to use the gift of God, destroying even if only partially the meaning and purpose of the gift itself, is to contradict the nature of both man and woman and their most intimate relationship, thus to go counter to the plan of God and to His holy will.

"On the other hand, one who enjoys the gift of married love while keeping the laws of procreation does not proclaim himself the lord of the sources of life, but rather the minister of the Creator's plan. Man has limited dominion over his body in general; so also, and indeed with special reason, he has limited dominion over his generative powers as generative. For these powers by their very nature look to the generation of human life of which God is the Author. 'For human life is to be held sacred by all,' our predecessor of happy memory, John XXIII, reminded us, 'seeing that in its very beginning it calls for the action of God the Creator.' " (HUMANAE VITAE, # 12 and # 13)

32. Isn't it true that nobody takes natural law seriously any more?

There is an old saying that the natural law always buries its own

undertakers. As a matter of fact, a great number of serious men take natural law seriously. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States are not out of date, and these documents were written by men who took natural law very seriously indeed.

Of course, "natural law" may be an unfortunate expression today. When one uses the word "law," people tend to think either of the laws of nature—like the law of gravity—or of civil law; whereas natural law is neither. Natural law means that beyond the civil law and the existing social order, with all their imperfections, there are absolute standards of right and wrong by which some things are morally good and other things are morally bad. These objective standards can be called *natural law*, for they are not norms that man makes, but ones that he discovers written in the human heart by the hand of God.

Man-made laws can be evil and unjust: for instance, the Nazi decrees under which millions of innocent persons were killed. These decrees were condemned by the judges in the trials at Nuremberg. The judges appealed to the higher moral standard of natural law. If one does not take natural law seriously, one could simply accept existing evils and do nothing about changing them. Or one could try to change things, not according to any higher norm or standard but simply according to his own feelings and desires, and the amount of pressure he can bring to bear on other people.

33. Even so, doesn't the Pope use an out-of-date theory of natural law in *Humanae Vitae*?

Pope Paul refers to natural law several times in this encyclical. But he has not given us a philosophical treatise on natural-law theory. His main reason for referring to natural law is perhaps to stress the fact that the immorality of contraception is not simply a matter of Church discipline or Church law. Pope Paul is reaffirming an uninterrupted Christian tradition which has rejected contraception as incompatible with the nature of the human person, incompatible especially with his God-given power to hand on life to others.

The traditional Christian view that man's sexual powers are somehow sacred and inviolable has been called "biologism" by proponents of contraception. In a sense it is biologism. But man's biology is part of his personality. Men are not angelic creatures, spirits without bodies. The human body is so much a part of the person that we cannot regard our bodies as if they were mere tools which we use and put away again.

In another sense this traditional view is not biologism. It does not imply that one can find the moral law, which is the will of God, just by looking at biological organs and their functions. Indeed, we must look at these if we are going to understand the fundamental human purposes—life-giving and love-giving—for which God has designed them. But these goods themselves are not merely biological. They also involved the psychological, the spiritual, and even the supernatural aspects of the personality.

Those who refuse to accept Pope Paul's teaching on contraception probably would have accused him of "biologism" no matter what he had said. Many who talk about "the old-fashioned, biologicistic theory of natural law" use this phrase merely as a handy label for the Catholic Church's teaching about contraception.

Maybe God is guilty of biologism. He created man a bodily creature. He redeemed man by becoming a bodily creature, by bodily death and resurrection. God destines man not for a ghostly afterlife, but for bodily life everlasting.

Thus God Himself in giving us His life and His love submits His omnipotence to our biological nature. Is it too great a humiliation for us to admit that in our own life-giving and love-giving acts we must consider their biological structure when we try to understand the will of God for us?

34. Must a Catholic accept the arguments that Pope Paul gives against contraception?

The Holy Father has proposed some new lines of argument, and he does not insist on the reasons he offers but rather on the conclusion, which has been the constant teaching of the Church. The encyclical itself states that its teaching ought to be accepted not so much because of the arguments given as because of the light of the Holy Spirit, who illumines the bishops and the pope in a special way to do their work as teachers.

Still, the arguments given have their importance, and Catholics should not brush them aside. The reasons offered by Pope Paul, and other arguments that support the Holy Father's teaching, can help us to make our position intelligible to those who do not accept the authority of the successors of the apostles.

Such arguments also can help us better to understand what we must

do in order to realize the high standard of Christian chastity the Church proposes to its sons and daughters. Finally, if we understand to some extent why contraception is wrong, this insight may stimulate our gratitude to Christ for the teaching authority of the Church, by which He has given us a living interpretation of His own instruction and commandments.

* * *

Pius XII explained the teaching authority of the Church and its relationship to natural law. This authority has more strength than the rational arguments it uses:

"The power of the Church is not bound by the limits of 'matters strictly religious,' as they say, but the whole matter of the natural law, its foundation, its interpretation, its application, so far as their moral aspects extend, are within the Church's power. For the keeping of the natural law, by God's appointment, has reference to the road by which man has to approach his supernatural end. But, on this road, the Church is man's guide and guardian in what concerns his supreme end. The apostles observed this in times past, and afterwards, from the earliest centuries, the Church has kept to this manner of acting, and keeps to it today, not indeed like some private guide or adviser, but by virtue of the Lord's command and authority. Therefore, when it is a question of instructions and propositions which the properly constituted shepherds (i.e., the Roman pontiff for the whole Church and the bishops for the faithful entrusted to them) publish on matters within the natural law, the faithful must not invoke that saying (which is wont to be employed with respect to opinions of individuals): 'the strength of the authority is no more than the strength of the arguments.'" (Pius XII, *MAGNIFICATE DOMINUM*, *AAS*, 46 [1954], 671-672)

35. Does Pope Paul's encyclical present a complete philosophical proof that contraception is always wrong?

He hardly seems to have attempted anything as complicated as that. The encyclical is addressed to a broad audience, and Pope Paul speaks as the chief teacher of the Church, not as a philosopher or theologian, although, in fact, Pope Paul is a competent scholar in these fields.

In arguing the issue philosophically, a great deal more could be said, but different philosophers—even among those who accept the Church's teaching—will argue in somewhat different ways. For instance, Pope Paul argues that the love-giving and the life-giving aspects of the marital act cannot be separated without mutilating the act itself. This line of reason-

ing seems to leave room for a supplementary argument that the contraceptive mutilation of the marital act is itself wrong. Such a supplementary argument could be along the following lines.

The use of contraception, it can be argued, implies a will turned against the beginning of a new human life, not a will open to it. Moreover, as Vatican II said: "The sexual characteristics of man and the human power of generation go astonishingly beyond those which belong to lower forms of life." (CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD, # 51) To do something directly to prevent conception involves more than a mere attack on a biological act and process.

Moral goodness does not depend merely on a balance in favor of good consequences, but on the thrust of one's will toward what is good. Contraception does not attack a human being already in existence, but it does oppose the beginning of a human life, and the beginning of human life is also a good that should be held sacred. Furthermore, this "beginning of human life" is not an abstraction, but rather is in each case the beginning of an absolutely unique, individual human life which can never be repeated. Thus a contraceptive act rejects human life—the human life—instead of being open to and welcoming it.

A will opposed to the beginning of life is not the same as a will to kill a life already existing. But the two are not completely different either. Recently developed methods of "contraception"—such as the intrauterine devices—probably gain part of their high degree of effectiveness by leading to the death of any developing individual who happens to have been conceived. Also, sociological studies show that the rate of abortion is extremely high among those whose efforts at contraception have failed.

The beginning of our life was absolutely basic to each one of us. Many goods are greater, but none so indispensable as the simple fact that we were allowed to come into existence. The beginning of each human life is continuous with that life itself, just as departure on a journey is continuous with the rest of the trip. For this reason, contraception is a serious matter, morally speaking, though abortion is even more serious.

36. If the immorality of contraception is a matter of natural law, why is it that only some Catholics seem to be able to see it?

As a matter of fact, many who were not Catholics, including those in the entire Judaeo-Christian tradition until recent times, have understood

the evil of contraception. Even today, Orthodox Christians, some Jews, and some in other religious traditions (e.g., some Hindus) consider the immorality of contraception a fairly simple and obvious fact—just as obvious, say, as the immorality of fornication, homosexuality, or abortion.

However, we should not think that a moral precept of natural law will be obvious to everybody. To say something is a matter of natural law mainly means that it is not a man-made law, nor even a requirement God sets for our supernatural life, like the requirement that we eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood. Rather, what is of natural law is a requirement God has made of us in His very plan of what human life itself is.

Unfortunately, our human nature has been damaged as a result of the sin of our first parents. For this reason we are often blind to our own true well-being. We need God's revelation and the interpretation of it by the teaching of the Church just to be good men. Who can doubt that slavery, torture, and other attacks on human dignity are wrong? Yet many men have accepted such practices with peaceful, but unenlightened, consciences.

Many factors have diminished modern man's ability to appreciate the norms of the natural law. One of these factors might be described in the following terms. Before the rise of modern commercial and industrial society, people were more sensitive to their organic bonds with one another. But a strong sense of individualism developed in modern times. Today we are trying very hard to recapture our lost sense of social solidarity, a solidarity that is first exemplified by the bodily ties of family life.

For our human love of one another to be really genuine, we must not break the bonds of community with one another. Perhaps only a hang-over from the individualism that is now going out of date prevents many people from noticing how contraception breaks the most intimate bonds of human love—the creative love of those living for those yet to live, and the love of husband and wife which gets its full meaning only by its reference to this creative love.

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Pius XII clearly explained why precepts of the natural law are not always obvious to unaided reason:

"Truth to tell, it is not surprising that discord and error should always have existed outside the fold of Christ. For though, absolutely speaking, human reason can, by its natural powers and light, arrive at a true and certain knowledge of the

one personal God whose providence watches over and governs the world, and also of the natural law which the Creator has written in our hearts, still not a few obstacles prevent reason from using its natural ability effectively and profitably.

"For the truths that have to do with God and the relations between God and men transcend completely the sensible order and, where there is question of their practical application and realization, call for self-surrender and self-abnegation. In the acquisition of such truths the human intellect is hampered not only by the impulses of the senses and the imagination, but also by evil passions stemming from original sin. As a result, men readily persuade themselves in such matters that what they do not wish to be true is false or at least doubtful.

"It is for this reason that divine revelation must be called morally necessary, so that those religious and moral truths which are not of their nature beyond the reach of reason may, also in the present condition of the human race, be known by all with ease, with unwavering certitude, and without any admixture of error." (Pius XII, *HUMANI GENERIS*, *AAS*, 42, [1950] 563-564)

37. Isn't the Church's condemnation of contraception an impossible demand for modern married couples—a demand few can possibly fulfill?

The standard set by this teaching is high, and it is difficult to fulfill. But it is never easy to be a good person. For instance, it is hard for an honest person to live in a cheating world. And the difficulty of moral life is nothing new. It has always been easier to think up a new morality than to live according to true morality.

Unless a married couple develop the virtue of chastity, they will not be able to keep God's law. This virtue is too often looked down on today, as if it were merely negative and limiting. In fact, however, chastity contributes to marital love and does not take anything away from it.

A person who cannot abstain, because he has not developed chastity, cannot perfectly express genuine love in his marital acts. For if one cannot control himself sexually, then he is a slave to an almost mechanical habit. This sort of habit often takes hold in adolescence. Modern advertising does not make it any easier for children to avoid it.

A perfect act of love, however, must be completely free. It must be fully the act of the person himself, not just the expression of a habit. For this reason, only those who have developed the virtue of chastity can give marital intercourse the full meaning it should have.

When a person who lacks chastity engages in intercourse, his act always has a certain ambiguity. Is the person expressing his love by means of his desire, or is he pretending love in order to satisfy desire? Is he giving himself to the other, or taking the other for himself?

Of course, the achievement of perfect chastity, like any other perfect virtue, is humanly impossible. That is, it is impossible for fallen men except with the help of grace. True, we are fallen in Adam, but we also are redeemed in Christ's death. The grace He won for us is ours for the asking. And if we ask for grace and do our best, we shall become Christ-like in our love as Christ wanted us to be—and as we ourselves would really like to be. Then, with all the saints before us who followed Christ in His suffering, we can share the certain hope of following Him in His resurrection.

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Pope Paul teaches the necessity of God's grace and the importance of the virtue of chastity. He explains the many benefits this virtue carries with it:

"The teaching of the Church on the regulation of birth, which promulgates the divine law, may doubtless seem to many to be difficult or even impossible to observe. And indeed, like all good things, outstanding for their nobility and utility, it demands serious engagement and much effort—individual, family and social effort. In fact, it cannot be observed without the help of God's grace which upholds and strengthens the good will of men. Yet, to anyone who reflects well, it cannot but be clear that such efforts ennoble man and are beneficial to the human community.

"The proper and upright regulation of birth demands first of all that husband and wife acquire and possess solid convictions concerning the true goods of life and of the family, and that they tend towards securing perfect self-mastery. To dominate instinct by means of one's reason and free will undoubtedly requires self-denial, so that the display of affection appropriate in married life will agree with due order. This is especially required for the practice of rhythm.

"Yet this discipline which is proper to the purity of married couples, far from harming marital love, rather confers on it a higher human value. It demands continual effort; yet, thanks to its healthy influence, husband and wife fully develop their personalities, and are enriched with spiritual values. Such discipline bestows upon family life fruits of serenity and peace, and helps to solve problems of other kinds. It favors mutual care and respect between husband and wife, helps both partners to drive out selfishness, the enemy of true love, and deepens their sense of responsibility. Finally, it gives parents a deeper and

more effective influence in bringing up their children, while children and teen-agers as they grow up have a proper sense of human values and make undisturbed and suitable use of their abilities of mind and sense." (HUMANAE VITAE, # 20 and # 21)

38. Is the Church's teaching on birth control a matter of faith?

It is not an article of faith like those of the Apostles Creed, or like the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, but it does depend on faith, because without our faith we could hardly know for sure that the teaching of the Church is true and that we can live up to it.

The teaching that each and every marital act must remain open to the transmission of life is warranted by an uninterrupted Christian tradition which extends back to the very beginning. The Catholic Church has continuously taught and repeatedly promulgated this precept. Over the centuries it has been defended by the Catholic theologians whenever it has come under attack. The arguments from natural reason, with which they have defended it, have varied somewhat from age to age. But from the beginning there was no variation about the inviolability of the life-giving meaning of human sexuality.

None of the early writers, not even the earliest, treats this precept as if Christians had adopted it from some non-Christian source, or as if it were something he had made up himself. On the contrary, the precept is always treated as something received, as part of the truly new morality of Christian chastity.

The precept was always taught to Christians not as an edict of the Church but as a precept of divine law, as one of the precepts of the virtue of chastity. This virtue was not found in its purity in the pagan ideal of life, but it is prominently included in the ideal proclaimed in the Gospel of Christ. The Catholic teaching on the marital act and conjugal relations was seen by the fathers and doctors of the Church as intimately linked with the new morality of Christ, a morality which set a new value on human life and love, human sexuality and chastity.

In fact, to reject this norm of conjugal chastity seems to lead progressively to greater and greater denials of the Christian norms which protect life and love. Many Catholics who accept contraception now defend abortion in certain cases. Furthermore, if married couples may choose for their own purposes to exclude the life-giving meaning of their sexual intercourse, there seem to be no discernible limits to what might

be called "married love." In the last analysis, if the life-giving and love-giving meanings of sexual intercourse are not inseparably linked, could not one man "marry" another man—always with true love-giving intent—or one woman, another woman?

Some Christians, having permitted contraception, now find themselves approving or at least tolerating practices very far removed from the morality of Christ, though compatible with the "new morality" of our day. The morality of Christ will always be fresh and new, but the "new morality" will soon be outdated.

We Catholics believe that the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ. Because we believe in Christ, we believe in His Church. Having faith in the Church, we are faithful to her teachings. Often they are hard to live up to. But when human ability fails, we call for God's help. When human judgment tempts us to think that what is right is unrealistic, we trust in God's care.