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The Use of the Condom for Disease Prevention: Catholic Doctrine for the Health Care Professional

by

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As a faculty member who is a priest teaching theology at a Catholic College Preparatory School, it is not uncommon for my students to express in class that since many adolescents are going to have sex regardless of what they are taught, we are “harming” them — if not “killing” them — by our not teaching them to practice “safer sex” or distributing condoms to them. Even more alarming is the fact that many of our Catholic physicians have adopted a position with their patients that abstinence is the preferred choice: however, it is also the position of too many that any adolescent or patient who is adamant that he or she is going to be sexually active should be counselled to “appropriate methods of protection.” It is the purpose of this paper to clearly delineate the serious moral obligations of all Roman Catholic health care professionals regarding the practice of artificial contraception as related to scandal in the practice of medicine.

It is alarming that despite the fact that at this time HIV is increasing in the adolescent heterosexual population, teenagers commonly engage in risky sexual behavior. Our youth have been led to believe that as long as two individuals freely consent to pre-marital sexual activity, it is no one else's business and there can be nothing morally wrong with it. This mistaken notion of “autonomy” ultimately leads to a form of anarchy where each person becomes a law unto himself. As a result, people are exploited in the name of hedonistic pleasure — “if

it feels good, do it." One cannot help but wonder why anyone — including adolescents — would continue to engage in high-risk behavior which today constitutes literally a matter of life and death — not only for the physical body but even more importantly the immortal soul.

The moral analysis of pre-marital sexual activity is formally expressed in Sacred Scripture. The Church's teaching — rooted in Divine Law which therefore can never change — is that fornication is gravely contrary to the dignity of persons and of the gift from God of human sexuality; furthermore, it goes against the welfare of the rights of children (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2353). Many today in society argue that it is unreasonable to conclude that adolescents could possibly be culpable for committing a sin such as fornication due to factors such as level of maturity, external peer pressure, etc. Classical moral theology — as well as the Church's Magisterium — teaches that one's moral culpability is dependent on three factors: the object chosen; the intention or the end result hoping to be obtained; the circumstances of the action as related to moral and psychological freedom (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1750). When these three criteria have been satisfied, even adolescents are morally culpable before Almighty God. Even though it is recognized that there can be factors that diminish or even extenuate moral culpability, the fact always remains that fornication is an "intrinsic evil" — it is always under any and all conditions seriously immoral. The teaching of the Church which is drawn from Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition is very distinct regarding the fact that sin which is not redeemed by repentance and forgiveness causes permanent exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell. The freedom which we as humans have been given by God has the power to make choices forever, with no turning back (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1861).

Though modern trends in society are trying to reflect that the sexual act has no specific objective nature or purpose outside of what individuals choose to give it, both Sacred Scripture and the Natural Law clearly delineate that the sexual act has been created by God with an objective purpose which is rooted in the authentic good of human persons and of what truly corresponds to the dignity of that purpose (John Paul II, 43). Our freedom as humans in this regard can be used to respect the dignity of others or it can be misused to exploit others for self-gratification. The tendency today in society to exploit others is traced back in origin to the sin of our first parents at the beginning of creation: the desire of the will to usurp the place of God by having individual humans — instead of God — give "meaning" or "purpose" to the conjugal act by having humans determine what is "good" or "evil" from a completely subjective perspective. This sin of pride fails to acknowledge that only in the context of marriage does the conjugal act reflect its two objective dimensions as willed by God: the unitive and the procreative. Once the objective nature of the conjugal act has been destroyed by deliberately disassociating the unitive from the procreative, sexual relations become purely recreational with individuals simultaneously exploiting each other for self-gratification. It then becomes very common for all forms of sexual perversion to become common as well as an increase in promiscuity: fornication, adultery, homosexual acts, masturbation, incest, and pedophilia.

All of these sexual perversions have one factor in common from a moral perspective: the failure to respect that the gift of human sexuality in expression only achieves its natural end as willed by God in the context of marriage where the unitive and procreative dimensions are not disassociated.

All men and women of good will are called to the recognition that both Sacred Scripture and the Church's Magisterium reveal that God's Holy Wisdom and Justice demand that sin be followed by consequences. This reflects the fact that God, Who is Justice itself, demands satisfaction and reparation for sins committed (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1473). Paul VI showed the Church to be a prophet in 1968 when he taught that since artificial contraception violated the natural law, certain consequences are inevitable: widespread marital infidelity, fornication, as well as a general trend to exploit others promiscuously for self-gratification. We should note the significant increase in divorce with subsequent breakdown of the family as a unit, along with an increase in the number of abortions performed as a back-up for contraceptive failure. Certain oral contraceptives are associated with an increase in the incidence of breast cancer, myocardial infarction, thromboembolism, and cerebrovascular disease (Moraczewski, 3-4). While condoms are being promoted as "safer sex" in regard to transmission of HIV, many today are unaware that one property of latex rubber is that it has synthetic pores one micron in diameter; the size of the HIV virus is one-tenth to one-third the size of that one micron, allowing the virus to be transmitted easily through a synthetic pore. In 1987, JAMA found that one in ten couples with an infected spouse passed on HIV when using condoms. Another study — federally funded at UCLA — concluded that four of the nation's most popular condom brands permitted HIV to escape in laboratory tests. Also, HIV leaked in one of ten condoms tested in each of three brands, and six out of twenty-five tested in a fourth brand (O'Donnell, 3-4). In 1995, the *American Journal of Epidemiology* reported that in a heterosexual population where condoms were always used, the risk of male-to-female transmission of HIV was 23%. Also to be noted in this same research study is the suggested association between the use of oral contraceptives and HIV infection (Guimaraes, Munoz, et al, 538-547). From a strictly scientific perspective, condoms are clearly not the answer. The Natural Law — which is discovered by reason alone and is a direct reflection of the Will of God — demonstrates that sins against human nature such as artificial contraception are followed by consequences of some type at some point in time. We cannot rebel against the natural law and expect there not be some type of consequences.

The sin of scandal commonly occurs today with little recognition of what scandal is due to many consciences which have become desensitized. Classical moral theology defines scandal to be a form of cooperation with another person in an evil action by supplying, assisting, or preparing for the sinful action of another (O'Donnell, 31). There is no doubt that Catholic physicians and health care professionals are in an extremely difficult bind: choosing between following current trends in secular society versus loyalty to Christ and His Church. What is the moral obligation of a Catholic health care professional who after counselling a patient as to the practice of abstinence is informed that the individual will

remain sexually active with the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV? Sacred Scripture calls all Christians to avoid scandal at all costs. Despite the subjective intentions of a physician or health care professional which are good — attempting to save the biological life of the patient by supplying a condom to reduce the risk of acquiring HIV — the action of counselling for “safer sex” practices of providing condoms is an evil action because it is scandalous: it supplies or condones the sinful behavior of another which makes one a cooperator in the evil action. Christ Himself warns against the sin of scandal: “It would be better for anyone who leads astray one of these little ones who believes in me to be drowned by a millstone around his neck in the depths of the sea. What terrible things will come upon the world through scandal! It is inevitable that scandal should occur. Nonetheless, woe to that man through whom scandal comes” (Matthew 18:6-8), Paul VI in 1968 taught that while there is already so much temptation to be unchaste especially among young men, it is evil to make it easy for them to break the moral law; on the contrary, they need incentives to keep the moral law (Paul VI, 406). Loyal Christians have an absolute obligation to remove any person or object that promotes the sin of scandal: “If your eye is your downfall, gouge it out and cast it from you! Better to enter life with one eye than be thrown with both into fiery Gehenna” (Matthew 18:9). Catholic health care professionals who hold staff and faculty positions are especially obligated to follow this moral law. The Church reaffirms that scandal is grave when given by those who by nature or office are obliged to teach and educate others (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2285).

This paper is a plea — an urgent plea — to all Catholic health care professionals and especially to those charged with the supervision and training of other professionals to remain faithful to the teachings of Christ in His Church. I frequently ask my students in class to reflect on the following question: If you lead a life of sexual promiscuity and were faced with dying of myocardial infarction during your sleep with no time for spiritual preparation or dying a death with AIDS with time to properly receive the sacraments and to repent before meeting Christ, which of these two would you choose? This dilemma reflects that you as health care professionals have been given a role by Christ not only in preserving the physical and psychological health of your patients’ bodies, but more importantly a share in the formation and guidance of the souls — especially of our youth by your counsel to them as well as your practice of your discipline. And, you are aware that each of your patients has a soul that is immortal: each of these souls will continue to exist eternally without end. What an awesome responsibility is placed upon your shoulders by your words and deeds. By your doing what is morally correct as well as challenging your colleagues to also do what is correct by word and example, you fulfill the words of John Paul II to thousands of our young people gathered three years ago in Denver for World Youth Day: “Do not be ashamed of the gospel! Be proud to be a Christian!” These moral precepts dealing with the expression of human sexuality are teachings which are not made by man; on the contrary, they are rooted in Divine Law and Natural Law. To reject them, therefore, is not to reject “the Pope” or “the Church” but to reject the authentic Word of God. Each of us is reminded by

Christ, "You cannot serve both God and mammon" (New American, Luke 16:13). Turn to St. Luke — the patron saint of physicians — and in prayer ask him to intercede for you to obtain the necessary graces to serve Christ in His Church faithfully. By doing so, you participate not only in the justification and salvation of the souls of your patients, but also the salvation of your very own soul.

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