

How Contraception Destroys Love

Posted by Dr. Edward Sri • March 30, 2011

In his book *Love and Responsibility*, Karl Wojtyla – now known as John Paul II – reflects not simply on why contraception is immoral, but even more, on how contraception actually can destroy the love between a husband and wife in marriage. Here, we will consider four points from his reflections on this topic.

Accepting the Possibility of Parenthood

First, Wojtyla stresses that for sexual relations to become a true union of persons, they must be accompanied in the mind and will by the acceptance of the possibility of parenthood. Sexual union itself does not automatically bring about a true union of love. A couple may have physical intimacy without having a deep personal intimacy based on total love, trust, and commitment to the other person. One of the key ingredients needed to make the bodily union between a man and woman a means of building an even deeper personal union of love is a willingness to accept the possibility that through the sexual act, "I may become a father" or "I may become a mother" (p. 228).

Approaching one's spouse with a genuine openness to the possibility of parenthood represents one of the most profound expressions of love and total acceptance of the other person in marriage. When a husband and wife are truly open to life in their marital relations, it is as if they are looking each other in the eye and saying, "I love you so much that I am even willing to embark on the adventure of parenthood with you! . . . I entrust myself to you so much that I am willing to become a partner with you in serving any new life that may come from this act."

In this light, we can see how openness to life actually increases the love between spouses and can even represent one of the highest levels of selflessness in a marriage. When a husband and wife accept the possibility of becoming parents together, not only do they merely stand face-to-face enthralled with each other and the good of their relationship, but they also stand shoulder-to-shoulder looking outward together toward the potential new life that may come from their love. And side-by-side, they stand committed not only to each other's own good, but also to working together to serve this potential new life. Here we see that "the relationship between the husband and the wife is not limited to themselves, but necessarily extends to the new person, which their union may (pro-)create" (p. 227).

Rejecting Parenthood, Rejecting One's Spouse

Second, Wojtyla shows how contraceptive sex is not just a rejection of the possibility of parenthood, but in the end, a certain rejection of the other person. It prevents the physical union of marital intercourse from blossoming into a personal union of love (p. 228). Ultimately, any sexual relationship that rejects the possibility of parenthood will be based on the sexual values of the other person—those aspects of the person that bring me physical or emotional pleasure—and not on the value of the person as she is in herself.

And that's the great damage contraceptive sex inflicts upon a marriage. According to Wojtyla, when spouses deliberately reject the possibility of parenthood through the means of artificial birth control, the fundamental character of their sexual relationship changes dramatically. Instead of being a union of love, in which the spouses are at least open to expanding their love by becoming partners in parenthood

together, contraceptive sex moves their marital relations in the direction of becoming merely a bilateral relationship of enjoyment, with no other purpose than to be used as a means to pleasure (p. 228). Instead of being viewed as a co-creator of love, the spouse now is seen primarily as a partner in a pleasurable experience.

For example, when a man rejects the possibility of becoming a parent with his wife in the marital act, the focus of his experience in sexual intercourse becomes centered on sexual pleasure. The value of the woman as a person and the opportunity for their marital bond to deepen fades into the background, as the woman becomes predominantly a means to sexual pleasure instead of being a potential partner in parenthood. It's as if the man is saying, "I want the sensual pleasure from this act, but I reject the possibility of becoming a parent with you."

When a man and a woman who have marital intercourse decisively preclude the possibility of paternity and maternity, their intentions are thereby diverted from the person and directed to mere enjoyment: "the person as co-creator of love" disappears and there remains only the "partner in an erotic experience." Nothing could be more incompatible with the act of love (p. 234).

That's why openness to life in the sexual act is "an indispensable condition of love" (p. 236). As Wojtyla explains, "When the idea that 'I may become a father'/'I may become a mother' is totally rejected in the mind and will of husband and wife nothing is left of the marital relationship, objectively speaking, except mere sexual enjoyment. One person becomes an object of use for the other" (p. 239).

Periodic Continence

Third, while couples should never reject the possibility of parenthood in sexual intercourse, Wojtyla teaches that they do not need to "positively desire to procreate on every occasion when they have intercourse" (p. 233). Sexual intercourse is needed for the good of deepening the marital relationship, not just for procreation.

Thus, as a wise pastor, Wojtyla explains how couples should be open to the possibility of new life coming from sexual relations, but that they do not have to enter into sexual relations with the specific intention of having a child each time. He says it would be enough for couples to say that "in performing this act we know that we may become parents and we are willing for that to happen" (p. 234).

Furthermore, couples may face certain situations in which they desire to avoid the conception of a child. In those cases, couples may choose to abstain from having sexual relations, especially in those periods in which the woman is most likely to be fertile. Wojtyla calls this practice "periodic continence." (Today, many Catholics practice periodic continence using the method known as Natural Family Planning). By refraining from the sexual act in the fertile periods of a woman's cycle, couples may avoid conception without in any way distorting the fundamental meaning of marital relations. As Wojtyla explains, "A man and a woman moved by true concern for the good of their family and a mature sense of responsibility for the birth, maintenance and upbringing of their children, will then limit intercourse, and abstain from it in periods in which this might result in another pregnancy undesirable in the particular conditions of their married and family life" (p. 243).

Still Open to Life

Finally, while periodic abstinence is a viable option for Christian spouses, Wojtyla explains that it is permissible "only with certain qualifications" (p. 240).

First, he says the most important point to consider involves the couple's attitude toward procreation. Periodic continence may be used to help regulate conception, but it should not be used to avoid having family. "We cannot therefore speak of continence as a virtue where the spouses take advantage of the periods of biological infertility exclusively for the purpose of avoiding parenthood altogether" (p. 242).

Second, Wojtyla points out that the good of the family should be weighed seriously before practicing periodic continence. He notes how giving children siblings can contribute in an important way to a child's education and upbringing, since brothers and sisters form a natural community that helps shape the child. In fact, in one intriguing statement, Wojtyla seems to indicate that the ideal minimum number of children for a family is at least three.

It is very important that this human being [a child] should not be alone, but surrounded by a natural community. We are sometimes told that it is easier to bring up several children together than an only child, and also that two children are not a community—they are two only children. It is the role of parents to direct their children's upbringing, but under their direction the children educate themselves, because they develop within the framework of a community of children, a collective of siblings (pp. 242-3).

Wojtyla certainly is not saying that parents who have only one or two children are not able to raise children well. But he does seem to suggest that having at least three children forms a more ideal environment for the children to be raised in a family. Why would he say that?

At first glance, this number seems somewhat arbitrary, and he does not give much of an explanation for this point. However, in light of what he has said elsewhere about love, he might be in part drawing upon the theme of "the bond of the common good"—how love is meant to unite two persons around a common aim that they are striving toward together (see pp. 28-9). This is clearly the case in marriage, in which two spouses are united around the common good of deepening their own union and serving any children they may have. But it may also be the case with the children themselves as they have the opportunity to strive together toward the common good of serving other siblings in the family.

For example, when my wife and I had our second child, it was fascinating to watch our firstborn, Madeleine, grow in love for her younger brother, Paul. She wanted to make him smile. She wanted to feed him. She wanted to serve him. And as Paul grew older, it was a joy to watch his own love for Madeleine develop and to see them playing with each other, enjoying each other and serving each other. While, like most kids, they certainly had many "less-than-virtuous moments" in their relationship, Paul and Madeleine nevertheless were steadily growing in a personal relationship of love as siblings.

However, something significant changed in their relationship when our third child came along. Suddenly, Madeleine and Paul's days were filled not simply with each one enjoying playing with the other. Now they were fascinated together with the new baby in the home. As sister and brother, Madeleine and Paul began to turn their attention not just to themselves, but together toward their new little sister, Teresa. Together they would sing songs to her. Together they wanted to feed her. Together they tried to make her laugh. Madeleine and Paul were learning to become not just playmates who enjoyed each other's company, but partners in serving a new life outside of themselves—their new baby sister. That could be one reason why Wojtyla says three is the ideal minimum number of children in a family: With at least three children, two can work together to serve another, and thus their opportunities to grow in love, friendship, and virtue as a community are deepened even more.

In conclusion, Wojtyla reminds us that if we are considering periodic continence, we must weigh not just our own financial security or our own comfort and lifestyle preferences when desiring to regulate conception. We must seriously weigh the blessing additional siblings can be for the well-being of our own individual children, for our family life as a whole and even for all of society. Wojtyla warns that parents who decide to limit the size of their family without considering these wider goods outside themselves can cause serious harm to the family and society.

Parents themselves must be careful, when they limit conception, not to harm their families or society at large, which has an interest of its own in the optimum size of the family. A determination on the part of husband and wife to have as few children as possible, to make their own lives easy, is bound to inflict moral damage both on their family and on society at large (p. 243).

Again, there certainly may be circumstances when regulating the number of children through periodic abstinence is necessary and indeed part of parental duty (p. 243). But the intention to limit the number of conceptions should never be a renunciation of parenthood itself. "Periodic continence as a method of regulating conception is permissible in so far as it does not conflict with a sincere disposition to procreate" (p. 243).

Therefore, in periodic continence, spouses should not be seeking to "avoid pregnancy at all costs" (p. 243). Two things must be kept in mind. On one hand, couples who are only having sexual intercourse during the times when the woman is not fertile should still approach the sexual act with a willingness to accept the possibility of becoming a mother or father, even if they do not desire a pregnancy and are practicing periodic continence in order to avoid a pregnancy. On the other hand, in addition to keeping their individual sexual acts open to life, they should also have "a general disposition" toward becoming parents in the broader scope of their marriage as a whole, since siblings are a good for children, for the family, and for society as a whole (p. 243).

Acknowledgement:

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