

A Matter of Principle

Why the Church won't budge on contraception, and what's at stake

By:

“Democritus”

My purpose in writing this essay is not to rehash all the arguments for or against contraception. What I want to do is to go beyond all the common arguments and to reduce them to the basic moral attitudes upon which lie the positions of the Church and her anti-life opponents. I will not attempt to describe all the principles that are at the heart of these respective positions; I will simply point out the attitudes that summarize these principles.

Broadly speaking, the supporters of contraception appeal to reasons or ends such as: the need to stop “overpopulation”; the “health needs” of sexual partners, be they married or not; and the alleged right of couples to determine the number of their children. Other reasons would include “personal choice”, “bodily autonomy”, “reproductive health,” and even “gender equality”. There is little if any consideration as to whether contraception, of itself, has any moral dimension. (For that matter, there is very little consideration whether the just-mentioned “ends” are actually good, or if they have any other purpose beyond themselves.) Contraception, then, is seen purely in relation to the above-mentioned ends, and it is seen as good because it makes these “ends” easier to attain. In short, contraception is seen as good basically because it is *a supposedly effective means to achieving supposedly good ends*. Whether they realize it or not, the supporters of contraception believe – and, to the extent that they actually use contraceptives, live – according to the dictum “**the end justifies any means**” Conversely, the defenders of contraception maintain that because the Catholic Church opposes contraception, therefore it also opposes all of the above-mentioned “ends”.

Now, the Church doesn't exactly share the view that all these ‘ends’ are really worthy ends of human behavior, or are even good. However, the Church does share some of the concerns of the defenders of contraception, although the Church does not look upon these concerns in the same way. For example, the Church is not blind to poverty and ignorance. She is not blind to the problems that unwanted pregnancies and irresponsible parenting could bring. The Church is not indifferent to the complexities that attend the size of certain populations and the consequent unavailability of basic resources for many. *In fact, the Church possesses an awareness and understanding of these problems far greater than any of her opponents could ever hope to have, for she has been in the business of understanding, alleviating and even sanctifying human suffering for 2,000 years.* Why then does the Church refuse to join the contraceptive bandwagon, opting instead to cling to unpopular moral principles and to teach difficult solutions?

There is but one answer to this question, and that answer consists of just one, oft-forgotten word: **Principle**. Principle means that **the end, no matter how good, can never justify any means!** It so happens that the Church has an exalted view of the sexual act; a view so exalted, that it refuses to reduce sex to an act of pleasure and instinct, requiring instead under pain of sin that it be always open to God's gift of life. Given her history, her record of heroic charity and her boundless experience, the Church is fully aware of the problems of the world, not least the problem of human self-restraint. But let nobody expect the Church to ever attempt to solve these problems by means that are morally unacceptable to her! *The Church will never condone the*

smallest sin in order to bring about the best possible state of affairs. And the Church knows that, by definition, no sin can ever be the direct cause of a better situation.

The supporters of contraception and the secular world say that we must be “realistic” in the solutions that we espouse. Since most people can never be so “virtuous” as to practice self-control, we must be content to promote measures that will simply clean up the aftermath of our libido. The poor cannot be expected to control themselves or take good care of their children; therefore we must be content to give them contraceptives. The rich cannot be expected to share their resources; therefore, the poor must be stopped from propagating unless they encroach upon the resources of the rich. Against such “realism” the Church can have only one response: to formulate solutions that take into account both the reality of human weakness and the even greater reality of his supernatural vocation.

In the face of the problems *apparently* caused by “overpopulation”, the Church firmly points out their real reasons, indeed, the real nature of these problems: social injustice on a global scale, contemporary man’s phenomenal greed and selfishness combined with a staggering waste and unequal distribution of resources. In the face of the problems caused by “unplanned families” and the seemingly uncontrollable libido of modern man, the Church all the more rejects contraception, preferring to point out the real remedies to these problems: chastity, fidelity, openness to life, trust in the providence of God and generosity in making sacrifices.

The Church knows that it is only by pointing out the real problems behind the apparent issues so loudly trumpeted by the secular world, only by rejecting “solutions” that are nothing more than compromises with sin and that only postpone (and aggravate) the coming catastrophes, can she truly contribute to the alleviation of human suffering.

The Church fully understands human weakness. Contrary to the distortions regarding the Church so often published by her enemies, the Church does not condemn sinners. She condemns the sin alone, but to those who fall short of her standards she extends mercy and understanding alongside justice. She shows mercy and understanding in recognizing that the poor squatter girl, who uses contraceptives in order to prevent an addition to her five malnourished children, has less guilt than the rich girl who uses the same contraceptives in order to maintain her lifestyle of reckless partying. The Church wields justice by denying communion to those who contracept, and even by excommunicating those whose hands are stained by abortion, but she sees these measures not as mere punishments, but as means to calling sinners back to their senses. The Church is far too wise to rely either on mercy alone or on justice alone; she knows that true love uses both.

In summary: the Church proclaims mercy and love coupled with firm understanding in the face of the world’s problems. What her opponents want her to do is to show weakness, and to give in with regards to basic moral principles.