

Contraceptive Contradictions

The Catholic Church remains almost a lone voice in our age defending the view that contraceptive sexual activity in marriage is wrong. Many young Catholic couples either are not aware of this teaching, or simply choose to ignore it.

When asked, few can explain the reasons behind it. Some venture to say that the church opposes sex in general, and pleasure in particular. Others think that the church wants everybody to have as many kids as possible. Some are even more cynical, and suggest that repressed, gray-haired celibates enjoy being able to stick their intrusive noses into people's bedrooms.

The reasons behind the church's position on contraception, however, are actually a far cry from any of these old clichés. Among the deeper reasons behind the teaching, the church stresses especially how contraception forces us to speak a false and contradictory language to our spouse through our body and our sexuality.

Because sex is a deeply interpersonal form of communication, we can consider some related examples of personal communication to see how the language of our own bodies is violated whenever we engage in contraceptive sex.

Would it be normal, for example, for a wife to insert earplugs, while trying to listen attentively to, or carry on a conversation with her husband? The earplugs bespeak the view that, "I don't really want to hear you and be with you," and they disrupt the couple's mutual communication.

If a woman inserts a cervical diaphragm or a vaginal sponge while having intercourse, she is likewise employing a language that says she doesn't really want to communicate openly and fully with her husband. She wants to keep part of who he is at a distance, at arm's length; that is to say, she shuns his fertility and fruitfulness. In that moment, she is rejecting the paternal aspect of his masculinity, and refusing to share with him the deep maternal meaning of her femininity.

We can further inquire whether it would be normal to surgically excise healthy vocal cords, and then try to carry on a conversation with our spouse. Opting for a vasectomy and then pursuing sex involves a similar contradictory language of the body. When a husband puts on a condom during intercourse, he

disrupts that intimate communication that is written right into the language of his body, much as if he had wrapped his mouth in cellophane before trying to have a verbal conversation with his wife.

As Professor Bill May puts it: "A person does not put on gloves to touch a beloved one tenderly, unless one thinks that some disease may be communicated. But is pregnancy a disease? And is not the use of condoms, diaphragms, spermicidal jellies and the like similar to putting on gloves? Do husband and wife really become 'one flesh' if they must arm themselves with protective gear before 'giving' themselves to one another genitally?"

The problem here is clear: marital sexuality is actually all about loving someone totally and unreservedly, giving and receiving totally, and not holding back who we are for ourselves. It is a unique language of total self-giving.

Contraception, on the other hand, allows marital sexuality to devolve into a kind of mutual masturbation where each pursues erotic satisfaction apart from the total gift of self, and apart from any openness to life. Because of contraception, marital sexual activity slips into a subtle mode of mutual exploitation — a lifeless, self-focused, needs-centered apparatus.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the famous BBC correspondent who converted to Catholicism late in life, instinctively appreciated how the church was resisting this trivializing of the gift of sex by its strong stance against contraception: "It was the Catholic Church's firm stand against contraception and abortion which finally made me decide to become a Catholic . . . As the Romans treated eating as an end in itself, making themselves sick in a vomitorium so as to enable them to return to the table and stuff themselves with more delicacies, so people now end up in a sort of sexual vomitorium. The church's stand is absolutely correct. It is to its eternal honor that it opposed contraception, even if the opposition failed. I think, historically, people will say it was a very gallant effort to prevent a



MAKING SENSE OUT OF BIOETHICS

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moral disaster."

The idea of serially eating and purging, in order to be able to eat and purge yet more, is a striking example of misusing our body in its most integral design. The one who dines in this way is seeking in a sense both to eat and not eat at the same time. Objectively speaking, he is engaging in damaging and contradictory behavior, violating the inner order and meaning of his own body, and cheapening the basic and quintessential human activity of eating. This destructive behavior crosses a real moral line insofar as a person freely and knowingly

chooses to do it.

Contraception involves this same sort of destructive and contradictory behavior. Unlike the case of the vomitorium, however, sex is an inherently relational activity involving two people. For that reason, the damage done by engaging in contraceptive sex as a couple will extend beyond the fabric of their individual persons and trigger damage at the heart of that delicate relationship which is their marriage.

The choice to use a condom during sexual intimacy speaks the same contradictory language of the vomitorium: the language

of trying to have sex, but not really have it; of trying to do it, without really doing it. One is militating directly against the sexual act itself, violating its inner order and harmony by actively flustering its obvious life-giving designs. Contraception, thus, always involves an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other in the face of that innate language of sex which calls for a complete self-giving.

The reasons behind the church's teaching thus run deep and flow from profound considerations regarding the integral design of human sexuality. Pope John Paul II put it well when he stressed how couples who use contraception in their marriage presume to, "act as 'arbiters' of the divine plan and they 'manipulate' and degrade human sexuality and with it themselves and their married partner by altering its value of 'total' self-giving."

Remembering Dorothy Day

I always know that when I get an e-mail from my son-in-law Rick he's giving me something to think about.



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One I received recently was no exception. He began: "My 2 cents for a column idea. It's the 75th anniversary of the Catholic Worker's presence on Manhattan's Lower East Side, and Dorothy Day is being considered for canonization."

Rick and my daughter Mary have long lived in Manhattan. Like many people there, they take great pride in the history, good people, tremendous art works, buildings, etc., that bring people from all over the world to the island. Manhattan is also the place that welcomed the poor, as proclaimed by the poem at the foot of the Statue of Liberty.

But as development of an area booms, history tells us, often the poor are left behind. And here is where Dorothy Day comes in.

"Anything but saintly in her young years," Cardinal Edward Egan, Archbishop of New York, once wrote, "she discovered the Lord and his church in 1918 through hours of prayer in St. Joseph's Church in Greenwich Village and Our Lady Help of Chris-

tians Church on Staten Island."

She was "reborn," he said, and "went to Mass and Communion every day. . . . She prayed the rosary with never-failing delight. And all the while, she handed herself over totally to the humble and courageous service of the poorest of the poor by fighting for their causes in her newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*."

Egan said Day provided the poor with "food, clothing and shelter in her Houses of Hospitality, which today number over 130 in urban centers across the nation."

Dorothy Day founded this service for destitute people in Manhattan 75 years ago with a French peasant named Peter Maurin. Maurin never stopped preaching that the Gospel had to be lived literally. Together they worked to help create a society where people would be better, not necessarily better-off. They put flesh on Catholic social teaching — helping the poor, the unemployed, the hopeless, the sick, working constantly for

peace and justice.

The work Day and Maurin did clearly falls under the definition of sainthood.

I often link Day with another incredible layperson, Frederick Ozanam of 19th-century Paris. So moved was he by the poverty and disorder in his city in the early stages of industrialization that he formed a Catholic organization of laypeople devoted to personal holiness and aiding the poor. Inspired by St. Vincent de Paul, he called his workers the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

Many people like me believe that if you want to define sainthood just say Frederick Ozanam or Dorothy Day.

It is so heartwarming to know that the light of Day — Dorothy Day — still shines far and wide since it was turned on in Manhattan 75 years ago.

For information on the guild, contact George Horton or Lourdes Serra at the Archdiocese of New York, 1011 First Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022. Telephone 212-371-1000.