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Of Human Life Addendum: some common questions

In the weeks following publication of his pastoral letter, Archbishop Chaput answered some common questions about family planning and related issues in his regular Denver Catholic Register column.

1. Isn't a couple's method of family planning a matter of personal conscience?

Yes it is. Catholics, like all people, are always obligated to follow their consciences -- on birth control and every other matter. But that's not where the problem lies. The problem lies in the formation of one's conscience. A conscientious person seeks to do good and avoid evil. Seeing the difference between good and evil, though, can sometimes be difficult. As Pope John Paul II has said, the basic moral law is written in the human heart because we're created in the image and likeness of God. But we bear the wounds of original sin, which garbles the message and dims our ability to judge and act according to truth.

Truth is objective. In other words, it's real; independent of us; and exists whether we like it or not. Therefore, conscience can't invent right and wrong. Rather, conscience is called to discover the truth of right and wrong, and then to submit personal judgments to the truth once it is found. Church teaching on the regulation of births, like all her moral teachings, is a sure guide for forming our consciences according to the truth. For we have the certainty of faith, as Vatican II reminds us, that the teachings of the Church on matters of faith and morals are "not the mere word of men, but truly the word of God" (Lumen Gentium n. 12). Too often, we use "conscience" as a synonym for private preference; a kind of pious alibi for doing what we want or taking the easy road. We only end up hurting others and ourselves.

2. I still don't see the big difference between a couple using "artificial" birth control and a couple using "natural" family planning. Don't both couples have the same intention, and isn't this what determines morality?

It's hard to see the difference when the emphasis is placed on "artificial" versus "natural" methods. People rightly point out that many things we use are artificial but not immoral. So it's important to realize that the Church doesn't oppose artificial birth control because it's artificial.

Rather, what the Church opposes is any method of birth control which is contraceptive, whether artificial devices, pills, etc., are used or not. Contraception is the choice, by any means, to sterilize a given act of intercourse. In other words, a contracepting couple chooses to engage in intercourse and, knowing that it may result in a new life, they intentionally and willfully suppress their fertility. Herein lies a key distinction: Natural family planning (NFP) is in no way contraceptive. The choice to abstain from a fertile act of intercourse is completely different from the willful choice to sterilize a fertile act of intercourse. NFP simply accepts from God's hand the natural cycle of infertility that He has built into the nature of woman.

Regarding the issue of intention: Yes, both couples may have the same end in mind -- to avoid pregnancy. But the means to achieve their common goal are not at all alike. Take, for example, two students, each of whom intends to excel in school. Obviously that's a very good intention. With the same goal in mind, one studies diligently. The other cheats on every test. The point is, the end doesn't justify the means -- in getting an education, in regulating births, or in anything else.

3. I'm a priest. If I preach about what's wrong with contraception, I'll lose people.

Let me turn that around: If priests don't preach the Church's message about contraception, heaven loses people. Don't be afraid. When Jesus preached the truth, He lost people. But, little by little, He gained even more people. Take courage in the Lord.

It shouldn't surprise us that people find this teaching hard to accept. Every Gospel-based life has things which are hard to accept. Should we stop teaching the truth because it's difficult? Of course not. We have the joy and the responsibility before God to preach the truth lovingly in season and out of season. The Church won't be renewed without a renewal of family life. And the family can't be renewed without a return to the truths taught in *Humanae Vitae*. Ignoring this issue can't be an option: In the long run, its cost is too high. Therefore, we should make every effort to better understand the importance of Church teaching in this regard, and witness to it boldly and with confidence.

4. In your pastoral letter, you said that the most intimate, powerful part of each person is his or her fertility. My husband and I are unable to have children. What does this mean for us?

Many couples bear a great cross because, despite their openness to life, they're unable to have children. But marital love is always life-giving when spouses give themselves honestly to each other, even if a child isn't conceived. Only when husband and wife intentionally withhold their fertility, or abuse their sexuality in some other way, can we speak of a "life-less" act of intercourse.

Spouses' self-giving in one flesh remains the most intimate, powerful and life-giving expression of their love for one another, even when nature, or some problem of nature, prevents new life from being conceived. Medical technology can sometimes correct a physical problem, allowing a child to be conceived by the loving embrace of parents. This is a proper and wonderful use of technology. However, couples should remember that, as creatures themselves, they're not the arbiters of human life. Ultimately, no one is free to manipulate the conception of a human person. No matter how sincere a couple's intentions, many of today's new procreative techniques treat human life as a product which can be manufactured -- and in doing so, they violate human dignity. Again, the end never justifies the means.

Children aren't the only way a marriage can be fruitful. If God, in His design, closes one option for a couple, He will open another. Their love can find expression in adoption, foster-parenting, or dozens of forms of apostolic work. This kind of counsel, of course, is much easier to give than to willingly accept. I would never want to understate the real pain and loss felt by infertile couples. But I know, both from faith and from my friendships with married couples over the years, that if a husband and wife choose to trust God, their love will always be rewarded with fertility and new life -- if not in the form of a child, then in the way they impact the world around them.

5. Why is the Church so obsessed with sex?

You know the old saying about the pot calling the kettle black -- well, here's a great example. Questions like this one may very well be honest, but they conceal where the real obsessions lie. American society is drowning in a sea of disordered sexuality. In such circumstances, it's hardly an "obsession" for the Church to speak clearly and forcefully about how to swim. It's her responsibility and mission.

God created our sexuality to be a sign in the world of His own life and love, and to reveal to us that we can only fulfill ourselves by loving as He loves. When sexuality becomes distorted, however, it's no longer able to communicate God's life and love. Empty of true love, life lacks meaning, and people soon seem disposable. Sex becomes a pursuit of selfish gratification at the expense of others. Children are no longer welcomed as the natural fruit of married love, but are seen as a burden to be avoided. We don't even shrink from killing (through abortion) thousands of innocent preborn lives a day in satisfying our convenience and appetites.

It's no exaggeration, then, to say that disordered sexuality is the beginning of what Pope John Paul II calls "the culture of death." In fact, we'll never build a culture of life and love without first restoring the true meaning of human sexuality. If the Church is so concerned about sex, it's because she seeks to defend the dignity of the human person, and to safeguard the true meaning of life and love which sexuality is meant to reveal.

6. How can I preach against contraception and praise the virtues of NFP? As a priest, I'm not married.

First, the truth is the truth, no matter who speaks it. Second, preaching isn't about the preacher; it's about the message. Third, in his promise of celibacy, a priest doesn't forget or deny his sexuality. Instead, he dedicates it to a different -- but equally fertile -- kind of fruitfulness. In other words, priestly celibacy is an affirmation, not a rejection; a strength, not a weakness. It's a "yes" to God which enables us to understand and serve our people better.

Remember that marriage, religious life, the single vocation and the priesthood are all designed to fit together and complement each other in the life of the Church. Each needs the other. Each, in its own proper way, fulfills the fundamental human vocation to give ourselves away in love. I think we priests often underestimate how effective our pastoral counsel can be on issues like contraception. People want and need the truth, and over time, the human heart naturally responds to it. But our people can't respond if they don't hear the message of *Humanae Vitae* faithfully and persuasively from their pastors. That's our job, and we should embrace it joyfully.

For further information, contact One More Soul (1.800.307.7685) or The Couple to Couple League (1.800.745.8252). Both organizations carry many helpful pamphlets, books and other materials for anyone interested in learning more. Other good resources include the Paul VI Institute (1.402.390.9168). and the Archdiocese of Denver's Office of Marriage and Family Life (1.303.715.3259).