

Not only does contraception negate the complete self-giving of the marital act but, as Pope Paul VI predicted in *Humanae Vitae*, using it results in many negative consequences, including:

- Men's loss of respect for the psychological and physical well-being of women.
- Depression and a greater incidence of breast cancer and stroke for women who use chemical contraception. (The chemicals also suppress a woman's natural hormones that make her naturally attractive to males and helps her select a suitable mate.)
- A general decline of morality, since contraception was a major igniting factor of the sexual revolution that has resulted in millions of aborted children and in many children being raised by single and divorced parents.
- A change in the understanding of sexual intercourse, which has resulted in the objectification of women (consider pornography, the high incidences of date rape and sexual harassment).
- The forced sterilizations and forced abortions practiced in many third-world countries.
- The widespread acceptance of homosexuality (related to the devaluing of the procreative possibilities of sexual intercourse).

Humanae Vitae does not teach that spouses must have large families. As much as God loves babies, he did not make it so every sexual act would result in new life. Instead, spouses have long infertile stretches where they can have sexual intercourse without inviting new life. *Humanae Vitae* speaks of spouses being responsible in their childbearing who, for "prudent and generous" reasons, elect to welcome many children as well as those who, for "just reasons," choose to limit their family size in order to better meet all their obligations of life.

Humanae Vitae acknowledges that those married couples who use contraception and those who use natural methods of family planning both may have good reasons for limiting their family size. But those who



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use contraception treat fertility as a "negative," whereas those who use natural family planning treat the fertile period as a kind of "sacred" ground upon which they do not tread unless they are prepared to accept new life. An additional inestimable value for couples using natural family planning is that such couples rarely divorce; living by God's will has tremendous benefits.

Humanae Vitae states that these teachings can be difficult to accept. But while Jesus' demands on his disciples always involve the Cross, he also promises us the graces we need to do what is good for us. And he is always prepared to forgive us for our sins, past and present. Just like dieting, budgeting, and exercising, working within God's design for married and family life can be challenging. But the rewards — a mission of lovingly serving God through being open to all the joys that new life can bring — are great.

For Further Reading

Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body* (Pauline Books and Media, 1997)

Pope John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility* (Ignatius Press, 1981, English edition)

West, Christopher, *Theology of the Body Explained* (Pauline Books and Media, 2008, revised edition)

Also see www.foryourmarriage.org

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The Beauty of God's Design



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Understanding and Appreciating
Humanae Vitae

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Those who read *Humanae Vitae* (Pope Paul VI's encyclical on the regulation of birth) often find it much more persuasive than expected. In fact, the first line puts forth a vision of the married vocation that can only be said to be ennobling — and which often catches people by surprise and delight — once they understand its meaning. It reads: “God has entrusted spouses with the extremely important mission of transmitting human life. In fulfilling this mission spouses freely and consciously render a service to God, the Creator.”

This is a bold beginning for a controversial document. At the time *Humanae Vitae* was issued, in 1968, there were great pressures on the Church to downplay the importance of the “procreative good” that is a part of married love and even to argue that it could be sacrificed to achieve the “more human goods” of marriage. *Humanae Vitae* responded that the unitive (the commitment to a lifelong faithful marriage) and procreative goods (welcoming children) are inseparable: to fail to honor one is a failure to honor the other.

What this beginning does is remind people of just how tremendously important the act of bringing forth new human life is. Human sexual intercourse brings forth a new immortal human being, someone with an eternal destiny. While some have claimed that the Church has put undue weight on the biological or

physiological purpose of the sexual act and has viewed the purpose of the human sexual act as the same as the sexual act of animals — that it is for the “reproduction” of the species — it is important to understand that human beings don't “reproduce”; we “procreate.” Human sexual intercourse creates families, and for it to be a moral act, it requires a husband and a wife who have pledged unconditional love for each other, and who are committed to working together to seek mutual holiness and to raising children to be citizens of God's heavenly kingdom.

The first sentence of *Humanae Vitae* makes two amazing claims. One is that spouses have an extremely important “mission,” or vocation. The Church teaches that spouses are called upon to provide a service to God. Those who are married are not just entering into a legal contract where they pledge to be pleasant companions with the bonus of sexual intimacy. Instead, they are doing something for God — and what they are



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doing is essential to God's plan for our salvation — for sharing the infinite riches of his eternal kingdom, free of pain and strife and awash in love, and filled with souls beloved by him.

The second amazing claim is that God chose to create new human beings through the love of spouses. *Humanae Vitae* speaks of spouses “transmitting human life,” a philosophically precise phrase. Although human genetic material — a sperm and an ovum — are essential to the creation of a new human being, they are not enough. Neither a sperm nor an ovum has an immortal soul; only God can create an immortal soul, and he does so when the sperm penetrates the ovum. So, when a husband and wife are having sexual intercourse during the fertile period, they quite literally are inviting God to create a new human soul. They do not “make” a new human being; rather, they “transmit” life from God to a child. This is quite a dizzyingly wonderful view of the purpose of sexual intercourse.

This understanding also helps us make sense of why the Church teaches that contraception is not in accord with God's plan for sexuality — a teaching that has been puzzling to many. Without the proper frame of understanding, it does seem strange that human beings can use their intelligence to mold nature in a wide variety of ways to make their lives more comfortable, more manageable, and more rational. Couldn't the argument be made that things such as cars, air conditioners, computers, hearing aides, and pacemakers all tamper with nature in some way? Given that, why can't spouses use chemicals and devices to control their fertility for the good of their marriage, the children they already

have, and for the good of the culture at large? The answer draws upon what we have already discussed — and more.

Pope St. John Paul II, in his theology of the body, spoke of sexual intercourse as being a kind of “language” that speaks a certain message that should not be falsified. Those who know what sexual intercourse is meant to do — create an indissoluble bond between spouses and transmit life, as *Humanae Vitae* teaches — know that it is far from the trivial activity that today's culture might have us believe. The only “safe space” for such activity is marriage. Marriage is an act that requires complete self-giving. Spouses give themselves to each other in a way that they give themselves to no other: they entwine their whole life with that of another and entrust their happiness to another. The marital act is well-designed to express the uniqueness of that giving: a committed, unconditional, indissoluble giving. A key element that enables the marital act to make such a statement, or to confirm vows already pledged, is that it can result in children. Those who use contraception are not making a complete gift of themselves to the other; rather, they are withholding what defines the act of marital intercourse and what makes it capable of expressing a lifetime commitment: their fertility.



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