

Celebrating the Richness of Church Teaching

Janet E. Smith

The Church's teaching on contraception is not just a doctrine that states what not to do. Many people would benefit from knowing that it is a doctrine that explains how extraordinarily important is the act of having children. One reason that modern culture has trouble understanding the truth of *Humanae vitae* is that it fails to appreciate what a profound good children are. It is true that most parents love their children beyond belief and frequently even acknowledge that they are great gifts from God. Many parents will testify that when they held their baby for the first time, they experience a rush of love matched by little else.

But they do not always realize that in having children they are “co-creators” with God. This is not a term used by *Humanae vitae*; it is a term used by John Paul II in his writing. *Humanae vitae* does speak of the “extremely important mission of transmitting human life” that God has entrusted to spouses. A human life is of inestimable value; a human soul is destined to share a blissful eternity with God, the angels and saints. Only God can create a new human soul but he needs the help of human beings to bring forth a new person. When engaging in sexual intercourse spouses are inviting God to perform his creative act of bringing a new human soul into existence: they supply the sperm and egg; God provides the soul. He then entrusts that soul to the parents to guide and educate and ultimately to help get them to heaven.

Our culture does not really focus on helping people to realize that some day they will likely be parents and how tremendously important a task that is. We do not often think that we should be spending much of our youth preparing for the responsibilities of being parents. Contraception enables us to think of sexual intercourse as a casual and to some extent as an insignificant act rather than an act that can change the universe – for the coming to be of a new human being truly changes the universe. Someone who did not exist before comes into existence and will remain in existence forever.

If people were conscious of the extreme significance of the sexual act, they could not possibly be as cavalier about it as they now are. They would choose their spouses very very carefully – and use as a foremost criterion the suitability of that person to be a parent. Those who succeed in marrying someone who will be a good parent – someone who is patient, generous, responsible, kind, other directed, and reliable also are nearly guaranteed to get a terrific spouse – for who wouldn't want a spouse with those virtues? Our sexually out of control culture and divorce culture has led 68% of children born in the U.S. to being born out of wedlock or born into households that will fragment through divorce. One out of four pregnancies is aborted.

Those who understand the Church's teaching on sexuality know that to a great extent it is shaped by a concern for the well-being of any children who may result from acts of sexual intercourse. Children born into families where their parents are sexually self controlled, where they are faithful, stable, and desirous of children are predictably much better off than those born to single parents, to the unfaithful, to those open to divorce or divorced. The Church's teaching is also shaped by a knowledge that those who become parents generally become much better people; they need to develop quite a set of virtues in order to be good parents. Those virtues also help them be good spouses, good co-workers, good citizens. Those who use natural family

planning to plan their family size develop the virtues needed to be good parents; they develop sexual self-control and patience and generosity – and they almost never divorce.

Catholics who have not heard a defense of the Church's teaching on contraception might be surprised how rich and full of common sense it is.

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