

The Catholic Church, Marriage and Regulation of Births

The Catholic Church encourages couples to intelligently and freely decide how many children they can responsibly care for. The Church teaches that couples need to take into consideration very serious factors, such as: physical health, psychological health, economic ability, and social conditions. Based on these factors a couple needs to decide how many children to have (a large or smaller family), whether to space their children or to not have any further children. Moral methods must be used to achieve these ends, which are chaste continence and reserving conjugal relations for the natural fertile or infertile cycles of the wife. The couple must always trust in God's providence and maintain the proper interior attitude toward new life.

The Church also teaches that there are certain actions that are immoral and must never be practiced, such as: direct interruption of conjugal relations, sterilization (temporary or permanent), artificial contraceptives, abortifacients and surgical abortion. The Church so forcefully rejects these acts, that they are categorized as "intrinsically evil."¹ This means that each and every one of these acts -- every time they are performed -- can never be ordered to God or the good of humanity, regardless of intention or circumstance. (This article does not address the issue of medically necessary procedures, such as hysterectomies.)

What are the Church's theological and philosophical foundations for these teachings? The Church's teachings are grounded in God's revelation, the constant Tradition of the Church and human reason. Based on these sources of knowledge, the Church has a clear understanding of Christian marriage and accepts some actions for being moral and rejects other actions for being immoral.

God Created Humanity as Man and Woman and Instituted Marriage

"For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and earth is named" (Ephesians 3:14). Our existence as male and female, as man and woman, as husband and wife, and as father and mother originates in God's wisdom and almighty power. God created us and did so with a purpose.

¹ Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Arcanum Divinae*, (10 February 1880), 5; Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii*, (3 May 1932), 53-58; Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*, (25 July 1968), 14; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 2366.

In creating human beings he endowed human nature with an immortal spirit and a body. God gave us three powerful gifts: reason or a thinking ability, free-will to choose to act or not act, and the senses. He gave us these abilities so that we can intelligently, freely and richly participate in His work. The author of the book of Genesis articulated this when he taught that God made humanity in His image and likeness, he made us fertile, and he gave us our mission: "Be fertile and multiply fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:26-28).

Leo XIII wrote this about the mission God gave to man and woman: "God thus, in His most far-reaching foresight, decreed that husband and wife should be the natural beginning of the human race, from whom it might be propagated and preserved by an unfailing fruitfulness throughout all time."² God also gave man and woman the mission to "subdue" the earth, which means they are to make the earth a more fitting place for human life, using its resources for the good of humanity and offering everything to the glory of God (Ephesians 1:12).³

Jesus called man and woman to live together in marriage as God had originally intended from the beginning of creation (Mark 10:1-12). Leo XIII wrote this about Jesus' renewal of marriage: "In truth, Christ our Lord, setting himself to fulfill the commandment his Father had given him, straightway imparted a new form and fresh beauty to all things, taking away the effects of their time-worn age."⁴ In addition to this, Jesus raised the union of a man and woman in marriage to a sacrament. Pius XI wrote: "He raised it to the rank of a truly great sacrament of the New Law, restored it to the original purity of its divine institution, and accordingly entrusted all of its discipline and care to His spouse the Church."⁵

Jesus -- in order to guard and strengthen married couples in their love and important work -- raised marriage to a sacrament.⁶ A sacrament is a sign instituted by Jesus, that confers grace or the life of God, giving people the power to obey God's will and Jesus' Gospel. The loving and caring union of a man and woman in marriage is a sign of the mystical union between Jesus and the Church and it confers divine grace to the couple, to sanctify and strengthen them.

² Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Arcanum Divinae*, 5.

³ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, (14 September 1981), 1.

⁴ Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Arcanum Divinae*, 2.

⁵ Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii*, 1.

⁶ Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Arcanum Divinae*, 9.

Pius XI, continuing the Tradition of the Church, taught that the union of a man and woman in marriage is ordered to three primary goods. Quoting St. Augustine, Pius XI wrote: "'These,' says St. Augustine, 'are all the blessings of matrimony; on account of which matrimony itself is a blessing: offspring, conjugal faith and the sacrament.'"⁷

With a better understanding of Christian marriage and the mission God gave to man and woman; knowing that Jesus renewed marriage and raised it to a sacrament, married Christians will more intelligently and freely live their vocation. This knowledge also makes it easier to understand why the Church rejects immoral actions as detrimental to marriage.

1. Contrary to Christian love.

For Christians, the model of love between husband and wife is the love Jesus has for the Church. Jesus' love for the Church is total, sacrificial and salvific (Ephesians 5:25). As Jesus unites the Church to himself in faith, hope, love and sacrament, Christian marriage is two people united in mind, heart, will and body. It is a relationship of authentic love and care for each other, helping each other to reach fulfillment as man and woman and in love of God and neighbor.

Christian love is a complete offering of oneself to the other, including offering one's fertility. Using contraceptives or other unnatural acts in order to prevent conception is contrary to love. It is saying: "I give myself, but not all of myself." It is holding back a fundamental aspect of who one is and injures the union of husband and wife.⁸

In addition, John Paul II, Paul VI, and Leo XIII taught that because of the tendency to sin within human nature, there is a great risk for the man or woman to isolate the pleasure that comes with conjugal relations, at the expense of the dignity of the persons and the true meaning of human sexuality.⁹

Given that every human being is a person with an intellect, freedom and the ability for self determination, reason demands that a person must never be used solely as a means to an end. A person is of such high dignity, he or she must be the end of one's actions; not used as a means to other ends, such as used solely for physical gratification.

⁷ Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii*, 10.

⁸ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), 16.

⁹ John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), pg. 30; Pius VI, Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, 17; Leo XIII, Encyclical *Arcanum Divinae*, 7.

To use a person simply as a means to an end is especially contrary to the dignity of women as wives and mothers. Leo XIII wrote this when discussing the abuses women and children have endured by men, due to their deviations from God's love and justice: "When the licentiousness of a husband thus showed itself, nothing could be more piteous than the wife, sunk so low as to be all but **reckoned as a means** for gratification of passion or the production of offspring."¹⁰

2. Contrary to the blessing of fertility and children.

Marriage, being the loving and caring union of a man and woman, is naturally ordered to having children: "A child does not come from outside as something added onto the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment."¹¹

The Christian teaching that fertility and children are blessings from God is opposed to the modern contraceptive and abortion mentalities, which views fertility and pregnancy as disease states to be prevented or eliminated. These false ideas are contrary to God's wisdom and order for life.

Contraceptives or immoral acts done to prevent conception creates very negative and evil attitudes toward new human life. Human beings conceived when they are not desired are often given the pejorative labels of accidents, burdens, mistakes, obstacles to success, biological waste, blobs of tissue and so forth. These are very false and evil attitudes to have toward human beings, especially toward one's children.

It is easy to recognize that when human sexuality is manipulated to achieve ends contrary to its true purpose, a mentality develops within the couple and toward their children that is completely contrary to Jesus' command to love. Justice to God demands deep respect and love for each other and for the transmission of human life.

Summary

The Church's teachings about Christian love and her rejection of immoral actions are rooted in her proclamation of the goodness of God's creation, especially the union of man and woman in marriage and the creation of new life. The Church's teaching comes from Jesus, his renewal of marriage and his call for people to conform to God's wisdom, justice and love.

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¹⁰ Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Arcanum Divinae*, 7.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2366.