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The Existential Isolation of Contraception

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On December 27, 1991, public broadcasting radio aired an interview with Sir Stephen Spender: "We thought we had finally achieved sexual freedom and then AIDS appeared." Spender, evidently an educated man, was serious. He really thought that one could separate procreation from sexual intercourse without encountering any consequences. And yet, apart from AIDS, the consequences are all around us, screaming for recognition.

Charles Osgood of CBS Radio talks about "structural damage." Discussing the ignored cracks below the Chicago River and the structural damage all around which had yet to be assessed, he drew attention to "other structural damage." In 1970, the average American family had 2.6 children. Today, the average American child has 2.6 parents. What happened? Non-coital methods of female contraception, especially the pill and the IUD were marketed as the tools of liberation in the late 1950's and early 1960's. A decade of "liberation" followed during which women initiated intercourse at younger and younger ages until today the median age of sexarche is 16 for both females and males. Physicians need not be reminded of the epidemic of single pregnancy and abortion which followed nor need they be told about the rise in all sexually transmitted diseases which was augmented by the immuno-compromised condition brought about by AIDS. Many STD's are now resistant to common antibiotics. There are penicillin-resistant strains, not only of gonorrhea but also of syphilis. Nor is the immuno-compromised state restricted to sexually transmitted diseases. Increasingly, one finds strains of the tubercle bacillus resistant to rifampicin and INH. This raises new concerns for those who would like to think that one cannot contract AIDS or its concomittants by simple social contact.

But the most serious consequence of the so-called female liberation is not medical, but social. Men no longer have a physical reason to be committed to women. After all, the reason why men were supposed to be committed to women in the area of sex was precisely because sex led to pregnancy and society wanted children to have a father, as well as a mother, support and a home. This is still a very necessary goal, but it has been undermined by societal attitudes about sex.

Sexual revolution or not, most women, far from being able to live without men, act as if all that is needed to pacify males is to be sexually available. There

seems to be an unquestioned assumption that whenever a man has an urge for sexual intercourse — really for sexual release — he has to be able to satisfy that urge within the context of sexual intercourse. This is nonsense. While it is true that the seminal reservoir begins to signal for release when the volume reaches 3 ml., nature has other ways of accommodating the need: apart from sexual intercourse and masturbation, nocturnal emission relieves the pressure, as does retrograde emptying of the reservoir which drains semen off with the morning urine without the man's being aware of it. And yet, our whole society has bought into the notion that sexual release via sexual intercourse or masturbation is mandatory. Even Catholic chastity educators have bought into this "group think" to the extent that they believe that someone who has lived a life of consecrated chastity cannot teach young people about sexuality! How did we get this way?

When the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was discussed and published, there were many, particularly priests, who disagreed. Ultimately, their disagreement dealt with the nature of the sexual act and the nature of the human person, although they did not acknowledge this. The disagreement is chronicled in Janet E. Smith's *Humane Vitae: A Generation Later*. Initially, dissent was directed against the level of the authority in the encyclical; soon it became an argument about philosophical systems, particularly ethical relativism. Relativism claimed that there were no moral absolutes and that one could choose among values using the criterion of the "loving choice" to justify whatever appeared most desirable. This argument was used to argue for legalization of abortion, sterilization, "necessary" contraception for the prevention of pregnancy from intramarital rape(!) to contraception for any purpose.

Usually objection to *Humanae Vitae* takes the form of condemning natural family planning as ineffective. The more honest objectors express their concern that men either cannot or will not abstain during the couple's fertile phase.

I remember a personal meeting with Fr. Bernard Haering, CSSR in Rome in 1978. Haering had written extensively against *Humanae Vitae* and against natural family planning. He began by complaining about the high rate of spontaneous abortions with natural family planning use. Data refuted that premise easily. Next, he spoke about the need to oppose rigorism. I could readily agree to that, but then he claimed a privileged position: the internal forum. He said that he had heard many confessions and that men find it so hard to abstain. I have not heard confessions, but still saw no reason why women needed to turn themselves inside out and upside down so that the man would not have to learn how to abstain. He did not convince me and I did not convince him, but the rationale — or lack of it — points out the difficulty that many clergy have in advocating modern, predictive natural family planning, which, by the way, is a highly effective means of avoiding or achieving pregnancy by the timing of intercourse. It is doubtful that Haering had reflected on the intrinsic contradiction inherent in contraception: the use of contraception in marriage prevents the total mutual selfgiving of which intercourse is meant to be a sign. By rejecting the fruitfulness of one or both partners, contraception prevents achieving the unitive end of marriage, which the dissenters claim to wish to facilitate through coitus.

The rising divorce rate parallels the rise in contraceptive use. Coincidence or cause and effect? So often couples divorce because they no longer have anything to keep them together. Alienation is present. Could their inability to bond coitally be a contributory factor?

Many priests think that because they have not experienced marriage, they know nothing about sexuality. If they believe that, they are using the wrong term. They may not know anything about genital relations from an experiential point of view, but they surely know about sexuality and they know about marriage. Sexuality is one's ability to love. The essence of marriage is the union of Christ and the Church which the couple are called to image. By their vows of celibacy, priests and religious are called to image that same reality, but in a different mode. The vow not only frees one to serve the people of God, but invites one to an exclusive relationship with the Lord which Canon 604 calls a "mystical espousal to Christ."

These truths are understandable for adults, but not yet comprehensible to early adolescents or to chronological adults who have remained fixed at adolescence emotionally as the result of premature initiation of genital relations, generally abetted by contraception or simply by the "contraceptive mentality."

Contraception has only one purpose: to remove the procreative potential from the sexual act. Ready access to contraception has made sex available to the unmarried who have begun to use it at younger and younger ages. Because teen sex has no apparent or immediate consequences — or so they think — teens come to view this adult activity either as purely recreational or, at best, unitive. Obviously a truly unitive sexual act is other-directed (that is, adult) and accepts the other person as they are. Each partner brings all he or she is and has to the act. That means that if the couple together are fertile, they bring their fertility. If they do not wish to bring their fertility to an act which says "All I have and all I am, I bring" then they may employ the knowledge gained from natural family planning and refrain from sex during the fertile phase.

Teenagers have never had to stop and think this through and engage in sex on impulse only. Impulsivity is sometimes thought of as spontaneity. This is hardly so because even spontaneously chosen acts have to be considered in terms of their consequences. Nevertheless, adolescents and contracepting adults are very often driven by impulse only. Since sexuality is part of our ability to love and is not restricted to the genital area, sexually impulsive persons are quite likely to act impulsively in others ways — lying, driving recklessly, stealing, abusing alcohol or drugs, not making good on promises, striking out at people when there is real or apparent provocation. The incidence of these self-centered behaviors parallels the rise of contraception, and may arguably be one of its consequences, perhaps even a direct result of having been technologically enabled to behave impulsively in the level of genital sex.

The existential isolation which comes from such impulsive behavior is often reflected in depression or substance abuse, sometimes even in panic. Returning to the human community through owning one's humanity in its fullness and as created by Our loving Father is our only hope. We can support that hope precisely by teaching young people to understand and value their sexuality.

When that has been done, as we have seen in our teen programs, we find that they make responsible decisions about their use of the sexual faculty: they wait until they're ready to deal with the outcomes. They also take responsibility for decisions in other areas of their lives. In other words, they begin to grow up. A society of adults would be a welcome change from our present situation. Let us begin to teach the truths of our embodiment as the seminal issue.

In the Catholic Church, the separation of sex from procreation has caused great confusion in the minds of many, including some vowed celibates who have helped to diseducate two generations. Sexual abuse of minors, homosexual acts, fornication and adultery are, unhappily, not unheard of not only among priests and religious, but even among bishops. Evidently those who think non-procreative sex has no consequences believe that it does not impact on any other relationship in their lives, whether to other humans or to God. We are indeed free to choose what we will, but we must be aware of the consequences: a breach of faith can destroy, or seriously impart an existing relationship, i.e., infidelity is cause for divorce.

If we wish to reverse the alienation of our society, we must help people to see the need for reestablishing the integral connection of sex with procreation. Our clergy must believe this in order to be able to teach it, and must understand ever more deeply what the Word did when He took flesh and became man. We can only understand what our nature is called to by understanding Christ. It is Christ who "reveals man to himself" as Vatican II has taught in *Gaudium et Spes* and as Pope John Paul II reiterated in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*. This requires faith but also a certain humility — qualities which appear to be in short supply in a world which believes that its existence is dependent entirely on its own resources.
