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# Can We Have a Sexually Intelligent Conversation?

Engaging the “palpable dissonance” between young adults and the Church’s teaching

By Robert J. Parmach

**G**ood teachers map out the pedagogical terrain and clarify its environmental contours by a process of disciplined inquiry. The aim is to investigate themes with critical scrutiny and offer discursive sustainable feedback within a dialectical discussion. When we do this we teach our students how to tackle fairly and faithfully the rich content of contemporary experience analyzed through multiple lenses.

Using this method, I think it’s important to find ways to make the sexual wisdom of Roman Catholic Church teachings to be more accessible to young adult Catholics today. Carefully tackling this triadic set of relations – official magisterial teachings, contemporary theology, and young adults themselves – the teacher as interlocutor productively engages the palpable dissonance often voiced between young adults and the magisterial teachings. This “teaching the conversation” is indispensable in cultivating the sexual maturity in young adult Roman Catholics.

## Theory in Action

The need for a better pedagogical paradigm is visible for those who see the “writing on the wall.” Theologian Gabriel Moran maintains that all genuine teaching is about *showing how* to do something in corporal and mindful ways. In what follows, I attempt to briefly sketch how to “teach the conversation” for a major issue today: contraception.

They need a teacher who models a dialogue of respect and intellectual and moral rigor. There are three guiding principles that this teacher keeps in creative tension: (1) teach clearly and faithfully the official church teachings; (2) teach clearly and faithfully other strands of wisdom, including the historical genesis and contemporary developments; (3) facilitate a creative interplay, a

dialectic between all sides. The hope is that both student and teacher will emerge with deeper, richer understandings of the whole conversation and become better equipped to articulate one’s convictions. Let us now employ these three guiding principles for the issue of contraception.

## Teaching the Conversation of Contraception

*(1) Teach clearly and faithfully the official church teachings on the issue.*

The first step is to unearth Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, since that document’s aim was to state the Roman Catholic Church’s position on the regulation of reproductive birth, the sexual roles of men and women, and other issues concerning moral conscience amid a rapidly changing and diversified world. It is the magisterial teaching document that historically sits at the head of the table in the discussion and, at that time, amid the recently FDA approved birth control pill which began getting amazing notoriety and usage. This encyclical also acknowledges the recent increases in human population and the competition for natural and economic resources worldwide – important related issues to unpack. No issue stands alone. Inter-relationships occur and need to be carefully unpacked, in order to be critically challenged.

A seminal issue is the body’s “natural rhythms” (a.k.a. “rhythm method”). This is a method condoned by

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the church's teachings as canonically consistent with the natural moral law rubric endowed by God above and maintained by the church below. It is viewed as not interfering with the transmission of life, since the woman's fertile period is not in effect at the time. The document, *Persona Humana*, can also be studied in tandem at this point, since it discusses the young man's rational capacities *vis a vis* the magisterial judgments on sexual matters considered within the church's domain regarding matters of faith and morals.

It is important to analyze another interrelated assertion made by the magisterium: the natural moral law is a direct divine mandate by God alone. This point has direct bearing on the church's intolerance for artificial contraception, not to mention related discussions about interpretive models and espoused theory. The ecclesial status of immutable, unequivocal, objective moral truth is asserted. At this point, the interlocutor teaching the conversation should highlight that many people disagree with this ecclesial assertion, arguing that it does not seem to admit the relevance of historical consciousness and contemporary views of a church that claims to hear

the cries of the poor, value faith and reason, and encourage ecumenical dialogue.

Next, the interlocutor explains the church's understanding of human procreation and its "natural, earthly aspects and its supernatural, eternal aspects" as highlighted in *Humanae Vitae* and in concert with the position expressed in *Gaudium et spes* and the Book of Genesis (1:28). In this vein, marriage is viewed as an institution of God as Creator and is to be exercised, above all, for procreative and unitive finality in the Aristotelian, Thomistic sense. While articulating, fairly, that the "rhythm method" is permitted by the church as an accepted form of natural family planning, the interlocutor also highlights the church's stance that a married "couple may never, by direct means (i.e. contraceptives), suppress the procreative possibility of sexual intercourse" or intentionally sterilize oneself unless for medical necessity. At this point, other magisterial documents are studied to explore the richness of the above themes (e.g., USCCB's *Human Sexuality, Educational Guidance in Human Love, Veritatis Splendor*, and *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*).

Next, the good teacher unpacks the magisterial position that procreation outside of man and woman heterosexual marriage is viewed as an illicit act of immorality and in direct opposition to the natural moral law. This pronouncement clearly disapproves of any and all premarital and/or extra-marital sexual genital acts (even if procreative ambitions are present). It also disapproves of all intentional abortions and contraceptive acts (while permitting the "rhythm method") regardless of therapeutic measures. These positions are held by the church because they are seen to defy the unyielding prescription to the objective nature of divine moral law inherent in the marriage act itself. Regarding the faithfulness to God's design, any deviation from this law, according to *Humanae Vitae*, "frustrates His design which constitutes the norm of marriage, and contradicts the will of the Author of life."

The interlocutor then reviews three key methodological understandings privileged by the magisterial view: (1) a clear juridical framework pertaining to natural moral law, its administration, and limits under which the framework operates; (2) the theological foundation upon which the principles are laid; (3) a hierarchical, patriarchal structure moving from God to ecclesia to laity.

(2) *Teach clearly and faithfully other strands of wisdom, including the historical genesis and contemporary developments on the issue.*

As one can imagine, there are numerous viewpoints contributing to the discussion of contraception. I think some important ones consist of perspectives that carefully gravitate away from the magisterial teachings themselves, though always maintaining a creative discursive

dialectic with them. These are the best examples of progressive theological perspectives to investigate for two reasons: their methodology is consistent with the value of an interlocutor pedagogical process; the intention is to constructively criticize, rather than unanimously demolish.

**T**he interlocutor outlines the thirteen common methods for contraceptive purposes (abstinence, natural body rhythms, birth control, intrauterine devices, condoms, sterilization, et al.), while articulating the only two methods that the magisterium permits, namely abstinence and natural body rhythms. Highlighting *Gaudium et spes* regarding the pedagogically shifted emphasis from 'genital acts' to 'human personhood' models would be the next fair and faithful step. In addition, the good teacher articulates the positions and shows how many progressive theologians creatively draw from the church's tradition itself, rather than simply arguing a dissenting viewpoint from an outside source, when discussing the magisterium's incorporation of 'act and human personhood.' Also, explaining the background reasoning is important: that the intention is constructive internal critique, rather than debilitating external theological sabotage to the tradition; that this warranted shift has been introduced by the church itself and is one in which they hope to transform to fuller breadth and meaning for contemporary theological life. In showing how, the interlocutor presents the historical shift that occurred from biological and precautionary analytic concepts of morality *acts* to those of more expansive contextual ways of *being* and *doing* united (as highlighted by Nelson, Curran, McCormick, and others).

The *total well-being* understanding, as presented by Anthony Kosnik et al., could also be examined regarding the arguments for permissibility of contraception. Linked to these arguments is the magisterial understanding that the "laws of generative process" and the "laws and rhythms" take precedence over contemporary moral understandings when addressing contraception. As one can imagine, certain progressive theological perspectives disagree with this magisterial position, arguing, among others, that it is based on an outdated, unsophisticated, and factually incorrect understanding of biology, anatomy, and physiology. Certain progressive theological perspectives consider the theological and scriptural support of not permitting contraception to be inadequate, citing examples to make their counter positions clear. The good teacher also surfaces and engages her students with the scholarship about the relationship between the unitive and procreative dimensions of human sexuality and an expansive understanding of *creative* love.

Among others, scientific and medical advances concerning reproductive technology, developments in behavioral and psychological sciences, and a revived

sense of the connection between conjugal love and procreative love in marriage are interrelated issues that bear further thought upon what is understood as the totality of human personhood. Changes in global and community resources, economic considerations, and educational opportunities (or the lack thereof) warrant serious grappling. For instance, a methodological understanding of Christian living that consists of a sacrificial adherence to divine law is considered an unfortunate journey for progressive theological perspectives, not because it is a difficult task, but rather because they think it is a task not rooted in fuller understandings of human personhood made manifest in the gospel teachings. It is *ends* focused, not *process* focused. Recognizing the difficulties in the daily human struggle of true Christian discipleship, the fair teacher explores these conflicting perspectives and varied understandings of love and growth used on all sides of the discussion.

(3) *Facilitate a creative interplay, a dialectic between all sides.*

The dissonance grows louder and more profound for young adult Roman Catholics and how they understand the fullness of their emergent sexuality. The currents of disagreement are in full swing and meaningfully so. Responsive thought and action will help them continue sailing with renewed purpose, strength, vision, and practicality. The good teacher helps these young adults move forward while adding new variables to consider in a developing discussion. The interlocutor does her noble work by encouraging constructive criticism only after a fair and faithful treatment is given, and she models this pedagogical lesson herself.

Some possible routes to take from here would be the following: (1) making use of current articles and scholarship in the field of science, medicine, technology, religion, and the arts; (2) investigating the socio-cultural relationships with the ways young adult males are portrayed and juxtaposing this with females; (3) encouraging students to follow the medieval lesson of first articulating your opponent's view to her satisfaction before arguing your own; (4) and unpacking how others have historically linked or deviated from certain understandings of sexual intimacy, sensuality, and proscriptive social behavior regarding the *language* of contraception and the psycho-social aspects involved.

The good interlocutor fairly and faithfully helps to peel back such important layers, in order to surface their depth meaning. Placing multiple sides in conversation allows for a richer meaning to emerge on the respective issue. In the final analysis, the student can now take ownership in his choices, having critically wrestled with multiple perspectives along the way. The centrality of *informed* and *formed* choice now emerges. ■