

CULTURE

What the Pill Has Wrought . . . The Truth of Catholic Teaching on Contraception Begins to Register

By MARK REGNERUS | September 18, 2015 8:13 PM



(Melissa King/Dreamstime)

My wife and I elected to pursue a tubal ligation for her immediately following the birth of our third child, in 2008. We regretted it within three months. We thought it would make sex freer and more spontaneous. But it accomplished neither of those things. Instead, it reduced sex to satiation — a utilitarian means to an end. It still bonds, but it is different now

from what it was when new life was possible. Unfortunately, untying fallopian tubes is not easily or cheaply accomplished. Sterilization left us with unanticipated regret about empty chairs around the table that will never be filled with laughter (and yes, some aggravation). We didn't come to those conclusions after we joined the Catholic Church. No, the Church looked increasingly appealing because she was the only one who explained what we felt.

Maybe our experience is unusual. Maybe what has enabled so many women to have the family size they wish, to escape poor entanglements with nothing more than bad memories, and to "lean in" to their careers isn't as bad as Catholic doctrine purports. Former *New York Times* religion correspondent Peter Steinfels certainly thinks so in his September 11 [lament in the *Washington Post*](#). In it he begs the Church, or rather Pope Francis, to resolve the Church's embarrassing "credibility gap" by pressing the bishops at the upcoming ordinary synod on the family to "speak honestly about contraception," implying that they've been avoiding the matter — or have been dishonest or inconsistent about it — until now.

John Paul II, who updated Catholic thought on all things sexual, cannot be accused — or at least convicted — of avoiding the matter. Indeed, the man was nearly censured as a bishop for speaking so frankly about sexual function and pleasure. The samechutzpah that led him to stare down Soviet-bloc Communism inspired him to contest the sexual revolution's crowning achievement — the separation of sexual expression from the generation of life. He held that they were two sides of the same coin — that the crisis of modernity was about the degradation of the human person. Whenever a person is reduced to an object to use — whether by a boss, a nation, a boyfriend, or a spouse — the unique dignity of that person is being eroded, even if it's with his or her own consent. This doesn't make much sense to moderns, who believe that consent is the only criterion of decision-making. But even desirable ends don't justify dubious means to get there, says the Church.

Wide uptake of contraception changes people and communities. It alters the meaning of sex, fosters ambivalence about having children, and reinforces (though doesn't cause) a consumptive rather than productive view of humanity — that we're here to enjoy ourselves, to consume what life, work, and others have to offer us. It undermines the notion that we were made to love and be a gift to others, not to use and be used. Collectively, it splits the mating market into two parts — those looking for commitment and those just looking for sex — making the road to marriage notably longer and more confusing.

Unfortunately, the contraceptive mentality now saturates relationship preferences. It doesn't take a pope to see it. It doesn't even take faith. Anthony Giddens, former director of the London School of Economics and one of the most famous sociologists alive today, saw it coming in his 1992 book *The Transformation of Intimacy*, where he highlighted how contraception paved the way for the emergence of the “pure relationship,” one

where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only insofar as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it.

Moreover, “now that conception can be artificially produced, rather than only artificially inhibited, sexuality is at last fully autonomous,” Giddens asserted.

Fully autonomous. That is, sexuality is not only separated from its longstanding association with marriage and baby-making but free from being embedded in relationships (even short ones). What Giddens predicted is that in an era wherein childbearing is an afterthought — thereby making possible an extensive and diverse sex life — what would result is what in fact has materialized, now almost 25 years later:

-Expectations of paired sexual activity emerge quickly in budding relationships.

- Sexual exclusivity is no longer assumed but rather subject to negotiation.
- Strong demands are made for both emotional and physical satisfaction in relationships.
- Plastic sexuality — sexual interests and directions are shaped and remodeled.
- In turn, diverse sexual expressions and identities flourish.

To most young Americans, these are all self-obvious realities — the way things are. Writing them down here seems an unnecessary exercise to them. And yet each is a byproduct of contraceptive technology, not the result of some sort of “evolution” or the “right side of history.” This is the relational world that contraception gave birth to. Some like it. Some are ambivalent. What we can’t do, however, is pick and choose among its fruits. They’re a package deal.

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Some, like Pope Francis, perceive it all as consistent with our entrenched penchant for exploitation. Progressives rightly lauded *Laudato Si'* and its anxiety about the physical environment but stopped well short of delving more deeply into Francis’s concern for what menaces our *social* environment. If they did, they would recognize why the Church is concerned about artificial contraception. Just as we are manipulating the earth’s resources — a game that will soon bite us back — we are also manipulating women’s bodies, even if at their own invitation. And it’s harmed us even sooner than rising temperatures have, with receding marriage rates, growing dependence on the state, and fertility declines so profound that nations are importing immigrant workforces just to maintain the good times. And we’re only just now beginning to realize that the hookup culture is a sibling to rape culture, because dignity ignored will become dignity denied.

This is the world that effective contraception has made. We're investing in orgasms, not persons. Even environmental activist and cultural critic **Wendell Berry** gets it:

Like any other industrial enterprise, industrial sexuality seeks to conquer nature by exploiting it and ignoring the consequences, by denying any connection between nature and spirit or body and soul, and by evading social responsibility. The spiritual, physical, and economic costs of this "freedom" are immense, and are characteristically belittled or ignored.

As an outsider looking in at the Church, I long thought — like Mr. Steinfelds — that her concern about birth control was backwards and uncool. Then the Church's claims began to register in my own life — as noted above — and in my research. I remember reading Nobel laureate George Akerlof's 1996 argument that the uptake of the pill led, ironically, to a **leap in nonmarital fertility**. He wrote that paper with his wife — and now our Fed chair, Janet Yellen — and Michael Katz, concluding that the only sensible strategy moving forward was to flood the market with more and cheaper birth control. We're nearly 20 years out from that advice. **How's that working out?** It's pretty difficult to say with confidence that the relational world today is better, kinder, and more loving than it was before the pill. No, it's lonelier.

Contraception renders women more like men, too. (It doesn't work the other way around.) We're increasingly interchangeable. As a result, "men and women become, quite simply, less interesting to one another. Sameness begets ennui, which begets divorce," **wrote economist Tim Reichert**. And, in the near future, expect a very wide failure to launch owing to plain disinterest in the idea of lifelong marriage. We're almost there already, having witnessed a **flip-flop** of the ratio of married-to-unmarried young adults since the year 2000. This is the "cultural lag" effect of contraception on marriage. The longer the former is around, the less the latter appeals. Contraception didn't train men to want cheap sex. (They've always wanted that.) What it did, however, is prove to them **that**

they could get it, with few strings attached. Relations between the sexes haven't been the same since.

Yes, Mr. Steinfels, the Church may shrink. Her position on contraception is not easy to abide, and her popular credibility may further erode. So be it. Paul VI didn't issue *Humanae Vitae* because it was convenient. It sure as hell was not. He did it because he foresaw the world that would come to be if he didn't do something.
