

Marriage: A Communion of Life and Love

A Pastoral Letter by Bishop Victor Galeone

My brothers and sisters in the Lord,

1. Some state legislatures are presently considering bills that would redefine marriage as the stable union of any two adults regardless of gender. Such legislation would equate same-sex unions with traditional marriage. Furthermore, divorces continue to escalate to the point where couples may now get a bona fide divorce online for fees ranging from \$50 to \$300. These latest developments are mere symptoms of a vastly more serious disorder. Until the taproot of that disorder is cut, I fear that we will continue to reap the fruit of failed marriages and worsening sexual behavior at every level of society. The disorder? Contraception. The practice is so widespread that it involves 90% of married couples at some point of their marriage, cutting across all denominational lines. Since one of the chief roles of the bishop is to teach, I invite you to revisit what the Church affirms in this area, and more importantly, why.

I God's Plan for Marriage

2. The vast majority of people today consider contraception a non-issue. So much so that to label it a disorder sounds like a gross exaggeration. And to revisit it seems analogous to studying a treatise from the Flat Earth Society. But contraception is an issue, an absolutely vital issue. To comprehend why it is wrong, it's first necessary to understand what God originally intended marriage to be. In the opening chapters of Genesis we learn that God himself designed marriage for a twofold purpose: to communicate life and love.

3. There are two accounts of creation in the book of Genesis. The first account occurs in chapter one: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them." (Gen. 1:27) The next verse contains the very first command given by God: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." We thus see that God's first purpose for marriage is that it be life-giving. Without the love embrace between husband and wife, human life would cease to exist on this earth. In the second account of creation in Genesis 2, we learn that the other purpose God has for marriage is that it be love-giving: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helpmate as his partner." (Gen. 2:18) Yes, God meant husband and wife to be intimate friends, supporting each other in mutual and lasting love. Accordingly, marriage exists to communicate both life and love.

4. The two purposes of marriage are so mutually interconnected as to be inseparable. First, recall that Jesus ruled out the possibility of divorce by applying these words to the union of husband and wife: "They are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one ever separate." (Mk 10:8,9) In other words, spouses form an organic entity, like head and heart—not a mechanical one, like lock and key. So the separation of the head or heart from the body—unlike the removal of a key from its lock—entails the death of the organism. So too, with divorce. Likewise, it was God who also combined the love-giving and the life-giving aspects of marriage in one and the same act. Therefore, we can no more separate through contraception what God joined together in the marital act than we can separate through divorce what God joined together in the marriage union itself.

II. The Body Language of Marital Love

5. Before examining what the Church teaches about contraception, I would like to digress for a moment. According to Pope John Paul II, God designed married love to be expressed in a special language—the body language of the sexual act. In fact, sexual communication often uses the same terms that verbal communication does: intercourse (originally, "to exchange ideas"); to know (a euphemism for "sexual relations" Lk.1:34) to conceive ("I can't conceive how that happened.") With this in mind, let's pose some questions:

Is it normal for a wife to insert ear-plugs, while listening to her husband?

Is it normal for a husband to muffle his mouth, while speaking to his wife?

These examples are so abnormal as to appear absurd. Yet if such behavior is abnormal for verbal communication, why do we tolerate a wife using a diaphragm or the Pill, or a husband employing a condom during sexual communication?

6. Worse still, how can one justify a husband having a surgeon clip his robust vocal cords, or a wife having her healthy eardrums surgically removed? Yet in the area of sexual communication, how do such horrific examples differ from a vasectomy or a tubal ligation? Isn't it the task of a surgeon to remove an organ only when it is diseased and threatens human life? If the testes or ovaries are not diseased, on what grounds are we frustrating their purpose? Could it be that we now consider babies a disease, from which we must immunize ourselves through sterilization?

7. Yes, we have been created in the image and likeness of God! Jesus revealed God's inner life to us as a Trinity of persons. Accordingly, the body language of the marital union between husband and wife must reflect God's own inner life, namely, the mutual love between the Father and the Son, which is the person of the Holy Spirit. From the first page to the last, the Bible is a love story. It begins in Genesis with the marriage of Adam and Eve and it ends in the Book of Revelation with the wedding feast of the Lamb—the marriage of Christ and his Bride, the Church. From all eternity God craves to give himself to us in marriage. No one expressed that fact more graphically than the prophet Isaiah:

“As a young man marries a maiden,
so will your Maker marry you.
As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you.” (Is. 62:5)

St. Paul embellished this theme when he wrote, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.” (Eph. 5:25) How did Christ give himself up for the Church? Totally—to the last drop of his blood! He held nothing back. If husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved, can they hold anything back? Not even their fertility?

III. Contraception: Telling Lies with Our Bodies

8. Since God fashioned our bodies male and female to communicate both life and love, every time that husband and wife deliberately frustrate this twofold purpose through contraception, they are acting out a lie. The body language of the marital act says, “I'm all yours,” but the contraceptive device adds, “except for my fertility.” So in actual fact, they are lying to each other with their bodies. Even worse, they are tacitly usurping the role of God. By thwarting the purpose of the marital love embrace, they are telling God, “You may have designed our bodies to help you transmit life to an immortal soul, but you made a mistake—a mistake we intend to correct. You may be Lord of our lives—but not of our fertility.”

9. In 1968, Pope Paul VI said essentially the same thing when he issued his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*: “There is an inseparable link between the two meanings of the marriage act: the unitive meaning (love-giving) and the procreative meaning (life-giving). This connection was established by God himself, and man is not permitted to break it on his own initiative.” (H.V, no. 12) Pope Paul went on to condemn every form of contraception as being unworthy of the dignity of the human person. A tidal wave of angry dissent erupted over this teaching. Catholics and non-Catholics alike berated “the celibate old man in the Vatican” for failing to read the signs of the times and thus hindering the Church's full entry into the modern era. But the Holy Father was merely restating the unbroken teaching of the Church from the beginning, upheld by all Christian denominations until the Anglican Church made the first break at the Lambeth Conference of 1930. In substance—though not expressed in these exact words—he was declaring: “It is not right for man to separate what God has joined together. Attempting to do so would enshrine man in the place of God, and unleash a series of unspeakable evils on society.”

10. Many scoffed at the dire consequences that Pope Paul predicted if the use of contraception

escalated. Among his predictions were: 1) increased marital infidelity; 2) a general lowering of morality, especially among the young; 3) husbands viewing their wives as mere sex objects; and 4) governments forcing massive birth control programs on their people. Thirty-five years later the moral landscape is strewn with the following stark reality: 1) The divorce rate has more than tripled. 2) The number of sexually transmitted diseases has expanded from six to fifty. 3) Pornography grosses more than all the receipts from professional sports and legitimate entertainment combined. 4) Sterilization is forced on unsuspecting women in third world countries, with China's one-child-per-couple policy in the vanguard. Today, even critics of *Humanae Vitae* admit that its teaching was prophetic.

11. Many Catholics who make use of contraceptives claim that they are doing nothing wrong since they are merely obeying the dictates of their conscience. After all, doesn't the Church teach that we must follow our conscience to decide if a behavior is right or wrong? Yes, that's true—provided that it's a properly formed conscience. Specifically, we must all conform our individual consciences to the natural law and the Ten Commandments, just as we have to adjust our clocks to sun time (Greenwich Mean Time). If a clock goes too fast or too slow, it will soon tell us that it's bedtime at dawn. And to say that we must accommodate our individual conscience to behavior that clearly contradicts God's law is to say that we must rule our lives by the clock, even when it tells us that night is day.

IV. NFP: Speaking the Truth with Our Bodies

12. I fear that much of what I have said seems harshly critical of couples using contraceptives. In reality, I am not blaming them for what has occurred during the past four decades. It was not their fault. With rare exceptions, because of our silence we bishops and priests are to blame. A letter I received from a young father last year is characteristic of many others: "Early in our marriage, Jan and I used artificial contraception like everybody else. Today's culture was telling us that this was the normal thing to do. We knew the 'official' Church teaching was against it, but we were not taught why. We even had priests tell us that it was a personal decision; so if we felt the need to use contraception, it was okay. But couples need to be taught why contraception is wrong. We were never taught that the Pill is an abortifacient, that can possibly abort a (newly conceived) child without us knowing it. We were not taught that artificial birth control is a hindrance to building a healthy marriage. We did not know that there is a healthier, Church-approved alternative to artificial birth control."

13. While contraception is always wrong, there is a morally acceptable way for married couples to space their children—Natural Family Planning (NFP). Couples, when properly motivated, may regulate births by abstaining from the marital act during the wife's fertile period. NFP instructors teach couples how to identify the fertile days, which can last from seven to ten days per cycle. NFP has a number of benefits: It is scientifically sound, it involves no harmful side effects, and it entails no cost after the initial fee for materials. Studies have shown that NFP, when accurately followed, can be 99% effective in postponing pregnancy. That's equivalent to the Pill and better than all the barrier methods. Best of all, while complying with God's will, husband and wife discover the beautifully designed functions of their fertility, enhance their intimacy, and deepen their love for each other.

14. But how does Natural Family Planning differ from contraception? And why bother, if their objective is the same? To understand the difference, one must realize that having a right intention for an action does not always justify the means. For example, two separate couples want to support their families. The first couple does it through legitimate employment, while the other couple does it by trafficking in illegal drugs. Or two persons want to lose weight. The first accomplishes the objective through a strict diet; the other, by binging and purging. Or to return to our analogy of the language of the body: To say that NFP is no different from contraception is to say that maintaining silence is the equivalent of telling a lie. Paul VI expressed the same idea more poetically: "To experience the gift of married love while respecting the laws of conception is to acknowledge that one is not master of the sources of life, but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator." (H.V. no.13)

15. What would you think of a scientist who discovered the cure for cancer but refused to divulge it? Confronted with the spiritual cancer attacking the family today, how can one explain the reluctance of

us bishops and priests in spreading the good news of the Church's full teaching on married love and life? Consider this statistic: Today at least 30% of all marriages end in divorce, compared with only 3% of NFP users. Since the use of contraception burgeoned in the early 1960s to the present, there has been a corresponding increase in the incidence of divorce. Why such a dramatic increase in failed marriages? As we saw in paragraph # 4, to separate what God joined together in the marital act through contraception is bound to have repercussions on what God joined together in the marriage union—namely, divorce. The solution is clear. What's needed is courage.

16. In order to counter the silence surrounding the Church's teaching in this area, as your bishop, I ask that the following guidelines be implemented in our diocese:

- All pastoral ministers should study the liberating message of John Paul II's Theology of the Body in order to share it with others.
- When appropriate, priests and deacons should present in their homilies the Church's teaching dealing with marriage, including why contraceptive behavior is wrong.
- Adequate instruction in NFP is to become a part of all marriage preparation programs.
- Instruction in our high schools, the upper grades of Religious Education classes, and RCIA classes should clearly teach the immorality of those forms of sexual behavior condemned by the Church, including contraception.

17. In closing, I would like to quote from an article by Roberta Roane that appeared in the National Catholic Reporter. (Oct. 31, 1986)

She began by asserting: "Yes, I was alive and fertile in 1968. I was 19 and I knew the Pill was a gift from God and *Humanae Vitae* was a real crock. The Pill was going to eliminate teenage pregnancy, marital disharmony and world population problems..." After recounting her odyssey of bearing three children while switching from the Pill, to the IUD, to condoms, she continues:

"Finally, my husband and I reached a turning point. At a very low point in our marriage, we met some great people who urged us to really give our lives to the Lord and be chaste in our marriage.

"That blew our minds. We thought it meant 'give up sex.' That's not what it means. It means respecting bodily union as a sacred act. It meant acting like a couple in love, a couple in awe, not a couple of cats in heat. For my husband and me, it meant NFP...and I won't kid you, it was a difficult discipleship. NFP and a chaste attitude toward sex in marriage opened up a new world for us. It bonded my husband and me in a way that is so deep, so strong, that it's hard to describe. Sometimes it's difficult, but that makes us even closer. We revere each other. And when we do come together, we're like honeymooners.

"Sad to say, I was past 35 when I finally realized that the Church was right after all. Not the grab-your-sincerity-and-slide Church of Charlie Curran, but the real Church, the Church we encountered in the Couple to Couple League, the Catholic Church. The Church is right about contraception (it stinks), right about marriage (it's a sacrament), right about human happiness (it flows—no, it floods when you embrace the will of God). It gave us depth. It opened our hearts to love."

Roberta Roane is merely echoing what St. Paul said many centuries ago: "Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own. You were bought at a great price. Therefore, glorify God with your body!" (1 Cor. 6:19,20)