

Marriage, Sacramental Grace, and Contraception¹

KEVIN RAEDY
Hillsborough, NC

THE TEACHING OF the Catholic Church on the matter of contraception is deeply controversial. Or, at second glance, perhaps it is not. Pope Francis, in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), unequivocally affirms the ancient, uninterrupted, and unyielding stance of the Church in opposition to contraception.² But the anticipation, and hence the subsequent reaction, surrounding the issuance of *Amoris Laetitia* was heavily focused on what have become the hot-button issues of the day: concerns related to same-sex attraction and the reception of the Eucharist by divorced and civilly remarried couples. In turn, Francis's affirmation of the Church's condemnation of contraception seems to have attracted relatively little attention. There may, however, be a second reason for this comparatively muted response: the Church's teaching on contraception is now so routinely and comfortably ignored that it has simply lost its ability to stir up controversy.

There is, it should be acknowledged, a remnant, a small minority of the faithful who have held firm to two millennia of Christian thought on contraception. Is there a course to be charted that might

1 I am grateful to Paul Griffiths for both discussions and comments that have benefited this paper.

2 Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (2016). Contraception per se is not a major theme of *Amoris Laetitia*. Nonetheless, the explicit references therein to contraception, or the regulation of births, unambiguously speak against it. Further, the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* is referenced or quoted six times, always in an approving manner and in a fashion that clearly affirms the Church's teaching against contraception (see *Amoris Laetitia* §§68, 80n86, 82, 154n156, and 222).

lead others back into the teaching of the Church? Pope Saint John Paul II, with his instruction on marriage, forged an intellectual framework that may well be conducive to this very end—to helping us think *with* the Church regarding the problematic nature of contraception. Focusing on the notion of marriage as a *sacrament*, we can find in John Paul’s teaching a line of argument that might resonate particularly well with those who are actively living out a sacramental life of faith—an argument that might lead them to rethink the very plausibility of contraception within a Catholic marriage.

Before considering the theological deliberations of John Paul II, however, I will provide a brief historical sketch of the events surrounding the issuance of the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*.³ This background information will be helpful in setting the stage for the remainder of this essay, but it may also be instructive in its own right, in part because many of the Roman Catholics who currently reject the Church’s teaching on contraception have likely been influenced, whether consciously or not, in important ways by the immediate and explosive reaction to *Humanae Vitae* and the aftershocks set into motion by that reaction.

The Reception of *Humanae Vitae*—Then and Now

The encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI in July of 1968, offered a steadfast affirmation of two millennia of Church teaching on the issue of contraception. It also gave birth to a vociferous outcry of cantankerous dissent. Among the more visible objectors was Charles Curran, a Catholic priest and, at the time, a member of the theology faculty at The Catholic University of America. Curran guided a coordinated rebuttal to *Humanae Vitae* that included a written statement of protest—signed by eighty-seven theologians and accompanied by a press conference in Washington, DC—a mere one day after the official release of the encyclical in Rome. Two days later, Curran held a second press conference, by which time he had presided over the mailing of more than 1,200 letters—return postcards included—in a continuing effort to garner signatures for his statement of opposition.

Curran’s statement plainly stipulates that the Church’s teaching on contraception is fallible and then proceeds to set forth a laundry list of claims in opposition to the encyclical (only partially enumerated here): it arose out of a highly centralized and insular Church hierarchy that

³ Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* (1968).

overstepped the bounds of its authority; its conclusions follow from an overly narrow theological analysis; it is inattentive to an impending overpopulation problem; and its dire predictions regarding the widespread use of artificial birth control are simply unfounded. On the basis of these shortcomings, the statement concludes by advising that compliance with the Church's teaching on contraception is properly relegated to the dictates of one's conscience.⁴

Another highly visible dissenter was Bernard Häring, a German theologian who served on a commission established by Pope Paul VI to study the matter of birth control. Häring, a teacher and mentor of Curran and a signatory to his statement of opposition, authored a lengthy article of protest against *Humanae Vitae*. Häring echoes several of Curran's claims, characterizing the encyclical as the ill-conceived offspring of a poorly advised pope and a Church hierarchy engaged in an imperious exercise of curial overreach. He matter-of-factly labels the document as a case of fallible teaching, indicates that the arguments provided therein are "unacceptable," and advises that adherence by individual Catholics is a matter of conscience. In turn, acts of disregard by Catholics who discern that the teaching of the encyclical does not apply to them need not be broached in the confessional.⁵

Häring's article was not published until six weeks after the formal

⁴ The text of the statement referred to here was taken from *The Catholic Case for Contraception*, ed. Daniel Callahan (London: Macmillan, 1969), 67–70. The attribution therein indicates that it was originally published in a variety of outlets, including the August 7, 1968, issue of *The National Catholic Reporter*. Callahan attributes the statement to "Catholic theologians" and does not mention Curran by name. Curran, however, takes full credit for his leading role in producing the statement. For his first-hand account of the coordinated protest against *Humanae Vitae* discussed here, see Charles E. Curran, *Loyal Dissent: Memoir of a Catholic Theologian* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 49–56.

⁵ Bernard Häring, "The Encyclical Crisis," *Commonweal* 88, no. 20 (September 6, 1968): 588–94. The article militates against *Humanae Vitae*, but more generally, it is a polemic against a papal and magisterial authority that the author finds disagreeable. One of Häring's numerous claims is that *Gaudium et Spes* evidenced a shift in thinking at the Second Vatican Council regarding contraception, and thus *Humanae Vitae* is self-evidently out of sync with conciliar teaching. This claim stands in contrast to *Amoris Laetitia*, wherein Pope Francis appears to signal with approval the continuity of thought between *Humanae Vitae* and *Gaudium et Spes* (as well as the 1930 encyclical letter on Christian marriage, *Casti Connubii*). See *Amoris Laetitia* §§67–68, 80, 154, and 222.

issuance of *Humanae Vitae*, but the fallout from Curran's highly publicized, morning-after jeremiad would have still permeated the air when, just a few weeks subsequent to the release of the encyclical, a Gallup poll found that only 28 percent of surveyed Catholics who were aware of the stance expressed in *Humanae Vitae* (93 percent knew the encyclical's position) indicated that they were in favor of the Church's ban on contraception, with 54 percent expressing opposition. (The remaining 18 percent were of "no opinion"). Nearly two thirds were of the view that one could practice artificial birth control and retain his or her standing as a "good Catholic."⁶

A poll conducted by Gallup three years later in conjunction with an October 1971 *Newsweek* cover story—authored by Kenneth L. Woodward and entitled "Has the Church Lost Its Soul?"—yielded a similar result on the latter question: 58 percent said a "good Catholic" could ignore Church teaching on birth control. Perhaps more telling is that 75 percent of respondents in the eighteen-to-thirty-five age bracket (intended to capture those of child-bearing age) indicated that the practice of birth control is of no consequence to one's standing as a good Catholic.⁷

Woodward's article documents that these polls were administered at a time that was tumultuous for the Catholic Church in the United States, and one wonders whether those who assented to *Humanae Vitae* may have believed that the Church's teaching on contraception would simply take some time to settle. If recent polls are to be believed, however, the soil on which the seeds of *Humanae Vitae* were sown has proven not fertile, but barren.

Two separate polls conducted in 2012, one by Gallup and the other by the Pew Research Center, yield the identical result that only 15 percent of Catholics view birth control as morally wrong. The decline that has taken place over the last several decades is acutely visible in the Gallup poll, wherein 82 percent of respondents indicated that contraception is morally acceptable.⁸ The more stunning result, however, is found in the Pew poll. Although only 41 percent of Catholics polled by Pew indicated that birth control is morally

⁶ Dr. George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935–1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), 2157.

⁷ Kenneth L. Woodward, "Has the Church Lost Its Soul?" *Newsweek*, October 4, 1971, 80–89.

⁸ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 2012*, ed. Frank Newport (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 227.

acceptable, that comparatively low figure likely attains because Pew offered its respondents a third alternative: 36 percent of Catholics indicated that the use of birth control is *not a moral issue at all*.⁹

What Went Wrong?

There is no shortage of speculation and explanation as to why, decades removed from its issuance, widespread rejection of *Humanae Vitae* is so stubbornly persistent. A partial answer to this question may lie within the province of catechesis. Consider, for example, that the statement of opposition birthed by Curran, which began with eighty-seven signatories, ultimately accumulated the signatures of over 600 Catholic theologians and philosophers.¹⁰ Many of these individuals would have held faculty positions at Catholic seminaries, colleges, and universities, and many would have been priests delivering homilies on a regular basis. Collectively, they likely had a wide audience at their disposal (think 1960s college students and young married couples) that may have been quite receptive to an alternative magisterium offering a permissive, guilt-free decree on the matter of contraception.

Stated another way, the immediate reaction to *Humanae Vitae* and the subsequent proliferation of that reaction may well have functioned as its own potent form of catechesis, legitimating a doctrinal position that was faithfully handed down to subsequent generations, eventually producing a wide swath of Catholics who were (and still are) casually dismissive, if not entirely benighted, regarding the Church's actual teaching on contraception. It places little strain on the imagination to envision the immediate and highly contentious reaction to *Humanae Vitae* as a phenomenon so deeply and widely rooted that its shadow continues to darken the Church to this very day.¹¹

⁹ "Public Divided over Birth Control Insurance Mandate," *Pew Research Center*, February 14, 2012, www.people-press.org/2012/02/14/public-divided-over-birth-control-insurance-mandate/.

¹⁰ Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 538.

¹¹ For an account of the broad and sustained climate of dissent precipitated by the release of *Humanae Vitae*, see Ralph M. McInerney, *What Went Wrong with Vatican II: The Catholic Crisis Explained* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1998). Janet Smith paints a grim picture of this phenomenon in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, and particularly following the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae*: "Dissenting theologians rightly boasted that they had won: they had control of the episcopacy, the major Catholic universities and most of the colleges, professional organizations, and journals. . . . Those preparing for marriage were told that they were free to use contraception; even those

In some sense, a widespread, emotionally charged, and deeply entrenched counteroffensive in response to a papal encyclical that did nothing more than reaffirm Church teaching is of little surprise. Not only do the theological currents that bear the truths entrusted to the Church move forward through time—they also run deep. And the official texts in which the Church unfolds the deposit of faith—in which it proposes these truths—are intrinsically profound, sometimes even elusive.

This latter notion leads to a second consideration: in the case of *Humanae Vitae*, the seeming inability of the Church's teaching to gain much traction among the faithful may partially reside in the fact that its arguments are generally formulated in terms of natural law. The elevated status accorded to natural law is somewhat unique to Catholic theology, such that its claims and implications may resonate only faintly, if at all, with those who stand apart from Roman Catholicism. Within Catholicism, however, one expects a more agreeable reception. And yet, as the polls discussed above suggest, it seems that the natural law arguments of *Humanae Vitae* have, to put it gently, largely failed to gain traction even among the Catholic faithful.¹²

J. Budziszewski argues that the problem is one of exposition: “[*Humanae Vitae*] is both diffuse and elliptical; its premises are scattered and, to non-Catholics, obscure. . . . It seems to lack the sense, which any discussion of natural law requires, of what must be done to make the self-evident evident, to make the intuitive available to intuition, to make what is plain in itself plain to us.”¹³ The polling

who confessed to using contraception were told there was no sin involved if they were following their consciences. . . . It was next to impossible for a theologian who was faithful to Church teaching to get a job in most Catholic universities and colleges and even many dioceses no matter how distinguished their degrees, no matter how sophisticated their research and writing” (“What Comes After the Synod,” *First Things*, November 5, 2015, www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/11/what-comes-after-the-synod).

¹² Some dissenters based their objections in part on the claim that the conclusions of *Humanae Vitae* follow from a deficient treatment of natural law. For an extensive rebuttal to that claim, see Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 161–93.

¹³ J. Budziszewski, contribution to “Contraception: A Symposium,” *First Things* (December, 1998): 18–19. There may, in fact, be a historical circumstance that lends credence to Budziszewski's criticisms. Frank Sheed, in observing what he considers to be certain curious omissions from the text of *Humanae Vitae* (e.g., almost no explicit reference to sin, no explicit command prohibiting contraception, no mention of exclusion from the Eucharist for those who continue to contracept), finds it unlikely that such omissions can be attributed

data discussed above suggests that these claims apply with equal force to Catholics.

Quite apart from expositional concerns, others have raised questions about the continuing efficacy of arguments grounded in natural law, even when those arguments are coherently formulated and clearly expressed. David Bentley Hart asserts that society at large has acceded to a modernist, neo-Darwinist worldview in which nature is nothing more than the aggregation and confluence of entirely impersonal and purposeless forces, the outcomes of which are purely arbitrary and accidental. Such an outlook is fully removed from a Christian understanding in which human morality and the created order both subsist within a single unified and harmonious whole—necessarily so because both were established by the same providential and loving God and both find their ultimate end in him. Natural law arguments may well retain their cogency in this latter setting, but the formulation of moral doctrine that rests in part on inferences drawn from nature is fully incompatible with the modernist view of things that Hart argues has become thoroughly ingrained and ubiquitous in our contemporary setting.¹⁴

to mere chance. He states: “All the same there *is* something, not exactly chancy but unfinished, about the whole document. A Cardinal . . . told me that as it was prepared for publication, it was held by the Pope’s advisers to be too long for the public’s reading habits: a document half as long would be more likely to be read. But instead of being rewritten at the new length, it was chopped about till it was short enough” (*The Church and I* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974], 243; emphasis original).

¹⁴ Hart expresses his views, tersely summarized here, in a series of three articles. The gist of his argument, as it pertains to this essay, can be found in the third article: David Bentley Hart, “Purpose and Function,” *First Things* (August 2013): 71–72. It should be noted that Hart is primarily inveighing against an approach whereby natural law arguments are utilized in a contemporary setting to, for example, resolve public policy debates. His primary concern is not to argue against recourse to natural law in theological matters. To the extent, however, that Christians have themselves been assimilated into the modernist worldview that he describes, the efficacy of natural law arguments in a theological context will be similarly compromised. Even in 1968, the Church seemed to understand itself as competing with such a mindset, as Paul VI states in *Humanae Vitae* that marriage, “far from being the effect of chance or the result of the blind evolution of natural forces, . . . is in reality the wise and provident institution of God the Creator, whose purpose was to effect in man his loving design” (§8). Although Hart sparked a good deal of debate with his provocations, and not all are in agreement with him, others quite quickly and readily endorsed his views. Rod Dreher, to provide one example, cites Hart in explaining why natural law arguments gain no traction in discussions

Whatever the case, there is no need here to bring to closure the debate over the causes underlying *Humanae Vitae*'s inability to take hold among the faithful. The fact of failure is itself sufficient motivation for highlighting and exploring—without in any way subverting or departing from the natural-law foundations of the Church's stance on contraception—an already existing and potentially compelling path of entry into the matter: marriage as sacrament.

John Paul II and the Totality of Self-Gift

Viewed from a doctrinal perspective, the stance regarding contraception expressed in *Humanae Vitae* is relatively tame—nothing more than a reaffirmation of what the Church had always taught. The shock to the doctrinal system came rather from one particular outcome of the 1930 Lambeth Conference, where the Anglican Church, breaking with deeply entrenched Christian belief, passed a resolution permitting the use of contraception for “morally sound” reasons that are consonant with “Christian principles.”¹⁵

Whatever the currents of thought and opinion that led the Anglican Church to break ranks, the Catholic Church held firm. On December 31 of 1930—a scant five months after Lambeth—Pope Pius XI reasserted the Church's enduring condemnation of contraception in *Casti Connubii*, his encyclical on Christian marriage.¹⁶ The Second Vatican Council's pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, in its discussion of marriage and the family, unequivocally confirmed this stance, but it held off on a comprehensive discussion in deference to an existing papal commission that was actively deliberating on the matter.¹⁷ Less than three years later, with the commission having completed its work, Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*.¹⁸

on same-sex marriage. See Rod Dreher, “Why Natural Law Arguments Fail,” *The American Conservative*, February 20, 2013, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/why-natural-law-arguments-fail/>.

¹⁵ *The Lambeth Conferences (1867–1948): The Reports of the 1920, 1930, and 1948 Conferences, with Selected Resolutions from the Conferences of 1867, 1878, 1888, 1897 and 1908* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1948), 166.

¹⁶ Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii* (1930).

¹⁷ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965).

¹⁸ John Finnis explains that the deliberation described here did not entail any kind of reconsideration regarding the Church's constant teaching on contraception. Rather, given the newness of the birth control pill, there was at that time a lack of clarity as to whether the pill actually constituted a form of

In keeping with the Church's long-standing theological premise for its position, all three of these documents set forth the problematic nature of contraception on the basis of natural law. They also speak to varying degrees about marriage as a sacrament—*Casti Connubii* and *Gaudium et Spes* a great deal, *Humanae Vitae* very little. But they seem largely unconcerned with specifying a link between contraception and a sacramental view of marriage.

Pope John Paul II, in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* [hereafter, FC] is less diffident about the connection.¹⁹ The manner in which he relates the two can best be seen by first considering his denunciation of contraception:

When couples, by means of recourse to contraception, separate these two meanings [the unitive and the procreative] that God the Creator has inscribed in the being of man and woman and in the dynamism of their sexual communion, they act as “arbiters” of the divine plan and they “manipulate” and degrade human sexuality—and with it themselves and their married partner—by altering its value of “total” self-giving. Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality. (FC §32)

In conveying the moral gravity of the act of contraception, John Paul does not mince words. But what is critical to emphasize here is that the notion of the *totality* of self-gift—exerted in heavy-handed

contraception in line with what the Church had already declared morally impermissible. The papal commission ultimately concluded that there is, in fact, no moral distinction between the pill and other forms of contraception that had already been banned; see John Finnis, *Religion and Public Reasons: Collected Essays Volume V* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 346–48. Finnis relies here in part on a published interview with Catholic philosopher Germain Grisez (“Germain Grisez on *Humanae Vitae*, Then and Now,” *Zenit.org*, July 14, 2003, <https://zenit.org/articles/germain-grisez-on-humanae-vitae-then-and-now/>).

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981).

fashion in this censure of contraception—is also intrinsic to his characterization of marriage as sacrament. Consider, for example, this statement regarding sacramentally married persons:

The content of [their] participation in Christ's life is also specific: conjugal love involves a *totality*, in which all the elements of the person enter—appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, the unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands indissolubility and faithfulness in definitive mutual giving; *and it is open to fertility*. (FC §13; emphasis added)²⁰

In other words, a true manifestation of sacramental marriage and of the mutual self-giving that is free of the restraints of contraception find their origins in one and the same *totality*.

John Paul's characterization of sacramental marriage is based in part on the notion that Christian marriage "represents the mystery of Christ's Incarnation and the mystery of His covenant" (FC §13). That, of course, is not new. But in explicating the sacramental nature of marriage, *Familiaris Consortio* helpfully rehearses scriptural and Church teaching whereby the Incarnation of Christ and his subsequent death on the Cross entailed nothing less than a totality of self-giving in which he submitted himself entirely to the Father's will. And in establishing the new and eternal covenant in the shedding of his blood on the Cross, Christ as bridegroom gave of himself without reserve—a totality of self-gift—for his bride, the Church.

The sacramental character of marriage is inextricably bound up with this understanding of covenantal relationship, a relationship predicated on a totality of self-gift. As contraception represents an act of the will in which the marriage partners withhold something from one another—thus refraining from the totality of mutual self-giving that is the basis of the covenant established by Christ—it strikes at the very foundation of sacramental marriage.

To be clear, there is no departure from previous Church teaching in *Familiaris Consortio*. The relationship between Christ and his Church as the model for Christian marriage is paradigmatic to *Casti*

²⁰ John Paul is actually quoting himself here, taking this text from a speech he gave to the delegates of the Centre de Liaison des Equipes de Recherche on November 3, 1979.

Connubii, and *Gaudium et Spes* narrates this ideal within the context of covenant. Further, John Paul unequivocally affirms the long-established proscription of contraception based on natural law: “Husbands and wives should first of all recognize clearly the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* as indicating the norm for the exercise of their sexuality” (FC §34). But his way of conceptualizing matters in *Familiaris Consortio*—a conceptualization that issues forth in part from the influence of personalism on the way that he envisages and explicates Church teaching—also provides us with a basis for thinking about how the act of contraception is deeply problematic within the context of a *sacramental* understanding of marriage.²¹

The Sacramental Life

Why does any of this matter? Perhaps, ultimately, it will make no difference. But I will offer one reason as to why we should at least be thinking about it. The Pew poll discussed earlier contains one result not mentioned above—responses given by a sub-sample of Catholics who attend Mass on a weekly basis. The results for this cohort were slightly better than for the full sample: 33 percent indicated that birth control is morally acceptable (vs. 41 percent for the full sample), 27 percent that it is morally wrong (vs. 15 percent), and 30 percent that it is not a moral issue at all (vs. 36 percent). One can take a bit of solace in these numbers, particularly in the “morally wrong” category, and simultaneously see compelling evidence that the Church’s teaching has largely failed to take hold.

One can also see opportunity. Buried in *Casti Connubii*, in its discussion of marriage as sacrament, Pope Pius XI states that, “besides the . . . indissolubility [of sacramental marriage], there are also much higher emoluments as the word ‘sacrament’ itself very aptly indicates; for to Christians this is not a meaningless and empty name” (§38). It is a compelling claim—that there are those for whom the notion of “sacrament” is of deep import. And what Pius XI said of Christians in 1930 is almost certainly true of weekly Mass attendees in 2018. Even if they cannot all express with theological precision and depth the meaning of “sacrament,” they live out their lives under the influ-

²¹ Smith indicates that “John Paul’s understanding of natural law and of personalist values permits no conflict between them” (*Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, 231). For a more extensive treatment of the relationship between natural law and personalism in John Paul’s theology, see Janet E. Smith, “The Universality of Natural Law and the Irreducibility of Personalism,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 1229–47.

ence of a deep-seated, visceral sense of the efficacy and power of the sacraments.

They are, after all, people who, at least once per week, lapse into a hushed reverence during the liturgy of the Eucharist, readying themselves to receive the body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ their savior. When they get married, they get married *in* the Church, and when they are blessed with children, they ask that same Church to wash their newborn in the regenerative waters of Baptism. When they stray into sin, they seek out God's mercy and grace in the sacrament of Penance. And when they find themselves in the hospital, they ask for a priest who, through the Anointing of the Sick, brings to them the healing touch of the Holy Spirit and enables them to unite their own suffering to Christ's suffering on the Cross. The ebb and flow of their lives is imbued with sacramental grace.

It seems, in turn, a modest proposal to suggest that such individuals might find Church teaching on contraception more compelling—or at least more accessible—if viewed through a sacramental lens. The opening of that lens might begin with a consideration of the Church's recognition that the union between man and woman cannot escape the consequences of sin and, in turn, that this union is inherently vulnerable to difficulties and trials—"discord, a spirit of domination, infidelity, jealousy, and conflicts that can escalate into hatred and separation" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] §1606).²²

A remedy for this strife exists within Christian marriage, which is "the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church" (CCC §1617). This covenant, entered into by husband and wife, is "integrated into God's covenant with man" (CCC §1639), and in the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, "authentic married love is caught up into divine love" (§48). And it is precisely by virtue of marriage's status as a sacrament that the grace that issues forth from the wounds of Christ brings to husband and wife "the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, to 'be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ' [Eph 5:21], and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love" (CCC §1642).

All of the sacraments are unfailingly efficacious—they communicate grace *ex opere operato*—because they were instituted by Christ and it is he himself who acts when they are administered "worthily in faith" (CCC §1127). But, as is also the case with each of the other

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997).

sacraments, the fruit borne by the sacrament of marriage depends on the interior disposition of its recipients. And it is at this point that one must wonder how much room God's grace has to operate—to strengthen the bond between husband and wife and to perfect their mutual love—when spouses, through the act of contraception, willfully depart from a genuinely sacramental embodiment of marriage.

Some might object that a purely physical or biological act such as contraception hardly has the capacity to militate against the spiritual reality that is God's grace. I doubt, however, that such objectors—at least those who are actively living out a sacramental life of faith—would advocate baptizing without water or seek to deny the occurrence of miracles that involve physical healing. In any case, John Paul reminds us: “As an incarnate spirit, that is a soul which expresses itself in a body and a body informed by an immortal spirit, man is called to love in his unified totality. Love includes the human body, and the body is made a sharer in spiritual love. . . . Sexuality . . . is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such” (FC §11).

For husbands and wives who attend Mass at least once per week—as a manifestation of the deliberate pursuit of a sacramental life of faith—this way of putting things might well carry some freight. Such couples may, in other words, find credible the notion that the willful act of contraception mitigates the fullness of grace that comes to us from Christ through the sacrament of marriage, and that it is only by this grace that the disorder—in some cases the devastating disorder—to which marriage is always vulnerable can be overcome.

Of course, the elucidation of this connection between sacramental marriage and (the absence of) contraception is not to function as an end in itself. Rather, it should serve as a portal of entry into the Church's long-standing teaching on contraception as it has developed and been formulated via natural law, even if, for some, that entry ultimately amounts to nothing more than a sympathetic hearing for the conclusions of that teaching and not an immersion into the technical arguments that lead to those conclusions.

Reversing the Tide

The use of contraception among self-identifying Catholics is widespread and pervasive. In the face of an unwavering stance against contraception that stretches out over two millennia, the vast majority of today's Catholics are apparently of the opinion, even if they do not consciously formulate the matter in this fashion, that the Church, for

the entirety of its existence, has misapprehended the issue of contraception to the point that it is pronouncing on a matter entirely devoid of moral valence or, even more confusedly, is mistaking perfectly moral behavior for sin.

With his encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI reaffirmed what the Church has always taught about contraception. Perhaps in anticipation of a less than enthusiastic reception of this reaffirmation, he stipulates that “responsible men can become more deeply convinced of the truth of the doctrine laid down by the Church on this issue if they reflect on the consequences of methods and plans for artificial birth control” (§17). Specifically, Pope Paul predicted an increase in adulterous behavior, a deterioration of the mores that guide and regulate societal behavior, a reduction of the male estimation of women to one of mere instrumentality, and an imposition of contraceptives upon the general populace by governmental entities.

Fifty years later, both casual observation and scholarly investigation offer ample evidence that the predictions of *Humanae Vitae* have largely come to fruition.²³ Catholics, by willingly allowing themselves to be assimilated into the contraceptive mentality that now pervades society, have participated in making those predictions a reality. In so doing, they have brought harm on themselves and the Church, the latter in no small measure by mitigating the Church’s ability to provide the world with a witness it so desperately needs.

The precise causes of the assimilation that has taken place are likely complex, but there does seem to be something of a consensus that the Church is now populated by several generations of Catholics whose worldview is the product of, among other things, an abject failure of catechesis. Such a failure, having taken place within the context of an increasingly aggressive evangelization by an increasingly secular society, might help explain a laity that finds its own Church’s teaching on contraception all but incomprehensible. The issue, after all, is not *whether* the faithful will be catechized, but rather by whom.

Roman Catholicism offers a deep, expansive, and rich theological articulation of the sacramental economy in which we live out our lives, and the modest suggestion offered in this essay is that the

²³ Charles Curran’s statement of dissent summarily dismissed these consequences as “unfounded assumptions.” For a survey of the evidence regarding the deleterious effects of widespread artificial contraception, including the ways in which the predictions of *Humanae Vitae* have been fulfilled, see Mary Eberstadt, “The Vindication of *Humanae Vitae*,” *First Things* (August 2008): 35–42.

authentic and sincere pursuit of a sacramental life of faith might itself nurture a receptivity to the Church's teaching on contraception. More specifically, the theology of Pope Saint John Paul II on sacramental marriage has created an opening that could well be exploited to offer "sacramental Catholics" a potentially accessible and compelling path of return to a genuinely Catholic apprehension of the harmful and sinful nature of contraception.

There are formal mechanisms already in place that could be leveraged to reach those who are likely to be responsive to the connections John Paul draws between sacramental marriage and a freedom from the constraints of contraception. Most dioceses in the United States have formal offices or ministries in place that are specifically focused on marriage and family life. In addition to Pre-Cana courses and marriage enrichment programs, they sometimes offer talks, presentations and retreats for the laity, as well as training programs for those who provide formal instruction at the parish level.

More generally, those Catholics who are actively partaking of the sacraments of the Church are those who are listening to their priests' homilies on a weekly basis. They are also more likely to be among those Catholics who seek out their priests for counseling or spiritual direction and who avail themselves of adult catechetical opportunities. They are at the least accessible, and perhaps even well-disposed to receiving the truth entrusted to the Church. They might be a good place to start. There is much at stake, and, if recent polls are to be believed, little to lose.