

The Catholic Church's Teaching on Marriage and Family

The Catholic Church encourages couples to intelligently and freely decide how many children they can responsibly care for. The Church teaches couples must take into consideration very serious factors, such as: physical health, psychological health, economic ability, and social conditions. Based on these factors a couple may decide how many children to have (a large or smaller family), whether to space their children or to not have any more children. Moral methods must be used to achieve these ends, which are chaste continence and reserving conjugal relations for the natural fertile or infertile cycles of the woman. The couple must always trust in God's providence and maintain the proper interior attitude toward new life.

The Church teaches that there are certain actions which are immoral and must never be practiced, such as: direct interruption of conjugal relations, sterilization (temporary or permanent), artificial contraceptives, abortifacients, and surgical abortion. The Church so forcefully rejects these acts, that they are categorized as "intrinsically evil."¹ This means that each one of these acts -- every time they are performed -- can never be ordered to God or the good of humanity, regardless of intention or circumstance. (This article does not address the issue of medically necessary procedures, such as hysterectomies.)

What are the Church's theological and philosophical foundations for these teachings? The Church's teachings are grounded in God's revelation, the constant Tradition of the Church and human reason. Based on these sources of knowledge, the Church has a clear understanding of Christian marriage and accepts some actions for being moral and rejects other actions for being immoral.

God Created Humanity as Man and Woman and Instituted Marriage

"For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and earth is named" (Ephesians 3:14). Our existence as male and female, as man and woman, as husband and wife, and as father and mother originates in God's wisdom and almighty power. God created us and did so with a purpose.

God created every human being with an immortal spirit and a body. God gave humans three powerful gifts: reason or a thinking ability, free-will to choose to act or not act, and the senses. He gave us these abilities so we can intelligently, freely, and richly participate in creation. The author of Genesis articulated this when he taught God made us in his image and likeness, he made us fertile, and he gave us our mission: "Be fertile and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:26-28).

Leo XIII wrote about the work God gave to man and woman: "God thus, in His most far-reaching foresight, decreed that husband and wife should be the natural beginning of the human race, from whom it might be propagated and preserved by an unending fruitfulness throughout all time."² God also gave man and woman the work to "subdue" the Earth, which means they are to govern the Earth, make the Earth a more fitting place for human life, use its resources for the good of humanity and offer everything to the glory of God (Ephesians 1:12).³

Jesus called man and woman to live together in marriage as God had originally intended "from the beginning of creation" (Mark 10:1-12). Leo XIII wrote about Jesus' renewal of marriage: "In truth, Christ our Lord, setting himself to fulfill the commandment his Father had given him, straightway imparted a new form and fresh beauty to all things, taking away the effects of their time-worn age."⁴ In addition to this, Jesus raised the union of a man and woman in marriage to a sacrament. Pius XI wrote: "He raised it to the rank of a truly great sacrament of the New Law, restored it to the original purity of its divine institution, and accordingly entrusted all of its discipline and care to His spouse the Church."⁵

To guard and strengthen married couples in their love and important work, Jesus raised marriage to a sacrament.⁶ A sacrament is a sign instituted by Jesus, that confers grace or the power of God, giving people the power to obey God's will and live Jesus' Gospel. The loving and caring union of a man and woman in marriage is a sign of the union between Jesus and the Church. The sacrament of marriage confers divine grace to the couple, to sanctify and strengthen them.

¹ Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Arcanum Divinae*, (10 February 1880), 5; Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii*, (3 May 1932), 53-58; Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*, (25 July 1968), 14; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 2366.

² Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Arcanum Divinae*, 5.

³ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, (14 September 1981), 1.

⁴ Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Arcanum Divinae*, 2.

⁵ Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii*, 1.

⁶ Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Arcanum Divinae*, 9.

Pius XI, continuing the Tradition of the Church, taught that the union of a man and woman in marriage is ordered to three primary goods. Quoting St. Augustine, Pius XI wrote: "'These,' says St. Augustine, 'are all the blessings of matrimony; on account of which matrimony itself is a blessing: offspring, conjugal faith and the sacrament.'"⁷

With a better understanding of Christian marriage and the mission God gave to man and woman; knowing Jesus renewed marriage and raised it to a sacrament, married Christians will more intelligently and freely live their vocation. This knowledge also makes it easier to understand why the Church rejects immoral actions as detrimental to marriage.

1. Contrary to Christian love.

For Christians, the model of love between husband and wife is the love Jesus has for the Church. Jesus' love for the Church is total, sacrificial, and salvific (Ephesians 5:25). As Jesus unites the Church to himself in faith, hope, love and sacrament, Christian marriage is two people united in mind, heart, will and body. It is a relationship of authentic love and care for each other, helping each other to reach fulfillment as man and woman and in love of God and neighbor.

Christian love is a complete offering of oneself to the other, including offering one's fertility. Using contraceptives or other unnatural acts to prevent conception is contrary to love. It is saying: "I give myself, but not all of myself." It is holding back a fundamental aspect of who one is and injures the union of husband and wife.⁸

In addition, John Paul II, Paul VI, and Leo XIII taught that because of the tendency to sin within human nature, there is a great risk for the man or woman to isolate the pleasure that comes with conjugal relations, at the expense of the dignity of the persons and the true meaning of human sexuality.⁹

Given that every human being is a person with an intellect, freedom and the ability for self-determination, a person must never be used solely as a means to an end. A person is of such high dignity, he or she must be the end of one's actions and never used as a means to an end, such as used solely for physical gratification.

To use a person simply as a means to an end is especially contrary to the dignity of women as wives and mothers.

⁷ Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii*, 10.

⁸ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), 16.

When discussing the abuses women and children have endured by men, due to men's deviations from God's love, Leo XIII wrote: "When the licentiousness of a husband thus showed itself, nothing could be more piteous than the wife, sunk so low as to be all but **reckoned as a means** for gratification of passion or the production of offspring."¹⁰

2. Contrary to the blessing of fertility and children.

Marriage is the loving and caring union of a man and woman and it is naturally ordered to having children: "A child does not come from outside as something added onto the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment."¹¹

The Christian teaching that fertility and children are blessings from God are contrary to the modern contraceptive and abortion mentalities, which view fertility and pregnancy as burdens or disease states to be prevented or eliminated. These false ideas are contrary to God's wisdom and plan.

Contraceptives or immoral acts done to prevent conception creates very negative and evil attitudes toward new human life. Human beings conceived when they are not desired are often given the pejorative labels of accidents, burdens, mistakes, obstacles to success, biological waste, blobs of tissue and so forth. These are very false and evil attitudes to have toward human beings, especially toward one's children.

It is easy to recognize when human sexuality is manipulated to achieve ends contrary to its true purpose, a mentality develops within the couple and toward their children that is completely contrary to Jesus' call to love. Justice to God and justice between man and woman, requires deep respect and love for each other and for the transmission of human life.

Summary

The Church's teachings about Christian love and her rejection of certain actions are rooted in her proclamation of the goodness of God's creation, especially the union of man and woman in marriage and the creation of new life. The Church's teachings come from Jesus, his renewal of marriage and his call for people to conform to God's wisdom, justice, and love.

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⁹ John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), pg. 30; Pius VI, Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, 17; Leo XIII, Encyclical *Arcanum Divinae*, 7.

¹⁰ Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Arcanum Divinae*, 7.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2366.