

Contraception and Abortion: the Paradox of the Catholic Church and Government Health Care

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I just returned from one of my frequent bike rides to Holy Cross cemetery in Pensacola, Florida. Pedaling up and down the lanes, I feel at peace, knowing that, before too many years, I will join those whose bodies rest below the grass. Each time I ride through the cemetery, I see a tombstone or an arrangement of personal items on the graves that piques my curiosity. I get off my bike and stand a moment at the grave, saying a prayer. What I didn't expect to find today were two rows of graves for babies and toddlers. The small stone markers bid goodbye to the grieving parents' tiny "angels." One little boy's stone had several rusted little cars on it. Another had broken plastic dolls. The saddest one had a dirty, soggy, stuffed dog. Who were these little ones? Some had died the day their mothers delivered them, "gave them to the light," to use a phrase translated from the Spanish. Some lived one or two days; others a year or more. All of these babies were loved by their parents, or, at least, by their mothers. I can't imagine their grief.

It's expected that, as a Democrat, I should be "pro-choice." Some women have expressed their disappointment with me, and even their outrage, when they find out that I believe that abortion is the termination of human life. I hate the term, "pro-choice." It's too casual, nonchalant, as if one were choosing a flavor of ice cream. What I'm for is education and responsible sexual activity that will make any abortion rare, as in cases of incest or rape or the threat of serious harm to the mother, but even then, I'm torn, knowing that in those cases, too, we're still talking about the taking of human life. I am in the perilous middle, between those who would only concern themselves with a woman's "right to choose" and those who would always condemn the mother who has an abortion, as well as the provider. Of further concern to me, is the prospect of government control over such a personal matter. (In China, mothers who have had more than one child may undergo forced abortions.)

Even though it is not their intent, those who refuse to admit that human life is at stake in abortion appear cavalier. What separates those babies in their graves from those whose mothers chose to abort, or, for that matter, from full-term babies? Months? Those aborted were comprised of the same matter, except that the deceased and living babies were more developed. Given technological advances, we know that babies can now survive after six months of gestation, so the yardstick that determines the viability of a fetus, and when, therefore, abortion in our society is considered more acceptable, is growing shorter. Three months earlier, that fetus can be aborted, although it has all the genetic material as the baby at six months. Scientifically, a fertilized human embryo is the earliest stage of human life. To deny that fact is to avoid cognitive discomfort, similar to those who say the earth is only 6,000 years old.

Here is the paradox: The Roman Catholic Church, my church, is adamantly opposed to abortion, while, at the same time, it is opposed to birth control because, like abortion, it's against natural law. According to teaching and tradition, the use of condoms becomes a repudiation of God's plan for the propagation of children through the act of love between a husband and wife. Anything that would thwart the sperm's journey to the egg is inherently evil. Frequently you will also hear that the use of condoms cheapens the sex act, lowers it to its physical properties rather

than keeping it open to God's divine purposes for husband and wife.

Speaking now as a mother, wife, grandmother, retired university professor, who cut her social justice teeth as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Peru, it's also against natural law for a family member to rape or abuse a young girl or boy. It's against natural law to use rape as a terrorist tactic of war, a practice rife during the Bosnian/Serbian crisis and used most recently and extensively in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Rape was also used by the Peruvian military and National Guard during their dirty war of the 1980s, and Peru is considered a Catholic country. Furthermore, in my opinion, it's against natural law for impoverished, illiterate, undernourished women to give birth to baby after baby when they have insufficient breast milk to keep those babies alive. It's against natural law for those babies to languish, to die a slow, agonizing death while their mothers look on. It's against natural law for husbands to return home drunk, sometimes violently insisting on their "rights."

It is against natural law for a young girl, some as young as ten, to be forced to give birth when her reproductive organs are too immature to deliver a baby without developing a fistula, a brutal tear between the vagina and the bladder or rectum that causes women to constantly leak the contents, becoming "unclean," rejected by their communities. To fully grasp the ramifications surrounding the issue of abortion, one must acknowledge that there are sexually violent acts against natural law perpetrated against girls and women for which the victims should not be forced to assume responsibility. Poor unfortunate girl and baby. Miserable, low-life, deprived man. Who is more to blame? Who will cast the first stone?

The hierarchy of my church, comprised of not one individual who has given birth, will argue that, yes, what I have described is evil, but that humans have the capacity to right these wrongs. The first law—Thou shalt not kill—must be obeyed. Related to that commandment, is the premise that the marital act must always be open to conception, unless it is undertaken during a woman's infertile time of the month. So, the purpose of sexual intercourse between a husband and a wife must be that of propagation. Not reconciliation, not comfort, not reassurance, not compassion, and, certainly not, pleasure

The Catholic Church's condemnation of both contraception and an increasingly secular society comes at a time when its own moral authority has faded because of the hundreds of priests, in the United States alone, who have satisfied their sexual drives with young boys. When the abuse became public, these priests were merely chastised and passed along to another parish, their bishops shamelessly concealing their behavior. The statistics regarding clerical pedophilia in Europe has been even more alarming, causing droves of previously faithful Catholics to leave the Church because of their sense of betrayal, outrage, and misplaced trust.

While most Catholics still line up with Rome in regard to abortion, there's ample disagreement on the issue of contraception, not only among Catholics, but among the clergy, and most married Catholics practice, or have practiced, birth control. Still, the Catholic Church does not bend to majority rule, and herein lies a lesson for those who challenge it. Although I hope the Church will revisit its stand against contraception while I live, I also know that its position won't change as a result of raucous talk-show exhibitions and hostile exchanges among politicians. The 2,000

year-old Catholic Church won't change its theological, philosophical, and moral positions because of new Health and Human Services (HHS) Department provisions that call for all private health plans to include coverage for all FDA-approved prescription contraceptive drugs and devices. For President Obama, this means that any "accommodation" that would shift the burden of providing contraceptive health care from the Catholic Church to their insurance providers won't fly. That accommodation, in the Church's thinking, is only a matter of semantics.

In the March, 2012 issue of *The Catholic Compass*, the magazine of the Catholic Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Archbishop of Miami Thomas Wenski, who is also serving as the Apostolic Administrator of Pensacola-Tallahassee, responded to the new requirement that would force Catholic institutions to offer their employees coverage that "includes sterilization, abortion-inducing drugs and contraception."

In so ruling, the administration has cast aside the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, denying to Catholics our nation's first and most fundamental freedom, that of religious liberty. As a result, unless the rule is overturned, we Catholics will be compelled either to violate our consciences, or to drop health coverage for our employees (and suffer the penalties for doing so.)

A lot is at stake, given the number of Catholic institutions in this country. According to an article by Doug Culp in the same issue of *The Catholic Compass*, in the United States there are 17,782 Catholic parishes; 5,774 elementary schools; 1,206 secondary schools; 244 Catholic colleges and universities, and 629 Catholic hospitals. These figures don't include the 1,500 local agencies that are affiliated with the Church and the 400 Catholic health care facilities. The United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has asserted that "The only complete solution to this religious liberty problem is for HHS to rescind the mandate of these objectionable services."

There are serious ethical considerations in regard to abortion. For most of us, however, those considerations pale with contraception, an effective means of diminishing unwanted abortions and much human misery in the world. What is glaringly absent, in the shallow punditry surrounding the issue of contraception, is the voice of women in consequential positions in the Roman Catholic Church, in government, and in society. To be heeded too, are the voices of all woman who do not accept that priests and politicians control the door to their most private and sacred places.

What is needed is another conclave of Catholic bishops, like the one that Pope John Paul XXIII called in 1962. In Vatican II, the majority of bishops in a special commission approved a resolution asking that the Pope use his authority to at least approve some form of contraception for married couples, leaving the decision a personal one between husband and wife. John Paul, however, died before the conclave ended, and the new Pope, Pius the VI, upheld the minority report, and so the Church re-affirmed its traditional teaching on the matter.

Without an understanding of the roots of the issue of contraception, as seen from the Catholic

perspective, the Obama administration sets itself up for a battle between those who support a modern, pragmatic approach to women's health care that includes contraceptives, and those who view the issue as one of religious freedom. What is needed is a policy that will enable Catholic institutions to serve people of all faiths while adhering to its principles, even as it recovers from its own failures to uphold them.