



The Catholic Church understands and preaches that sexuality is ordered to procreation and that it is, also, a channel of true love-something much richer than a pure physical act-essentially self-giving. Within the framework of the love of totality, sexuality is inscribed, which is realized in a truly human way only when it is an integral part of the love with which the man and the woman commit themselves to each other until death (1).

Here lies the high value attributed to the carnal Union as an expression of love, for the acts with which the spouses unite intimately and chastely each other are honest and dignified and, made in a truly human way, signify and encourage reciprocal donation, with which they enrich each other (2).

This conception of sexuality makes illegitimate unethical the use of sex outside the context of conjugal love since full donation can only be given in the scope of a stable and permanent commitment for life, which excludes all behavior hedonistic. For this reason, from now on, when using the term couple, I will refer to the union of two persons in lawful marriage.

It is advisable to warn about the expression "in a truly human way", that for the moral goodness of the intimate relationship it is not enough that it takes place within marriage, but that full respect is required, on both sides, for the person of the other. It also demands to attend to their legitimate wishes.

That's why Catholic doctrine rejects any instrument sex with the selfish purpose of seeking exclusive mind the pleasure, which also entails a reductive view of sexuality. What the Catholic Church radically and categorically rejects is all use of sex as a toy, violently or without it, with or without contraceptives, outside and also within marriage.

It is therefore excluded the premarital use of sexual intercourse, not for lack of love between those who intend to join in marriage but have not yet done so, but because the full bodily donation of itself only makes sense from this perspective within the logic of a love of totality, which implies and commits the whole life within the stable and permanent framework of a sealed commitment for life.

Another aspect of Catholic doctrine regarding sexuality, which acquires a moral principle for the discerning of the kindness or malice of some attitudes, is the

opening to the life of the conjugal union founded on the inseparable connection that God has wanted and that man cannot break on his initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning (3).

A theological reason we can contribute in this regard: at the origin of each human person there is a creative act of God, for the spiritual soul is not biologically transmissible. Procreative ability, inserted into human sexuality, is in its deepest truth cooperation with the creative power of God. Therefore, the voluntary fracture of the unit between both meanings of the intimate relationship between husbands is to attribute a power that only to God belongs (4).

But there is also an anthropological reason: the body is a constituent part of the person, something that belongs to the person's being and not to have. The love of the spouses leads them to make of themselves a total donation of each other so that nothing that belongs to the self of the person can be excluded from that donation. In this way, contraception introduces a limit in the reciprocal donation, which, when it ceases to be total, expresses an objective refusal to give the other, respectively, the entire content of one's femininity or masculinity [5].

The "natural methods" in the dynamics of love

However, what has been said so far does not mean that the only important thing about marital intimate relationship is the possible offspring, but precisely because of the great value of the conjugal act as an important vehicle and to a large extent necessary to manifest and preserving mutual love, the Catholic Church argues that, when there are serious enough circumstances to avoid a new pregnancy, such as physical or psychic health reasons, economic situation, etc., is possible to safeguard that important dimension of the love that is the carnal union resorting to the infertile periods that the own physiology imposes (6).

The Church does not habitually propose total abstinence to marriages that are in a difficult situation in the face of a possible new pregnancy, although it is logical to respect the decision to live it. In this sense, although our cultural environment is now configured by the acceptance that regular sexual satisfaction is a couple's right, it is necessary to affirm that marriage is not a license to make intimate unions, but a "community of life", within which is possible to express the love through the donation of the whole body also of the person.

For this reason, although it is often referred to as "the right to marital debt", this expression can only be understood in the sense of mutual donation, never as the right to "impose" a certain manifestation of love, for then such an attitude would entail counterfeiting of love and, in short, an instrumentalization of a human person, who would not be fully respected.

What Catholic doctrine excludes, then, is the "contraceptive mentality," that is, the "I avoid begetting because I want" position. After all, "it is another child" (or simply one); because it "breaks my plans", professionals, vacations, etc. The

"contraceptive mentality" is radically different from the position of the couple who resort to natural methods because there is a sufficient cause to justify it. For them, the approach would be: "What a pity that cannot face a new child because a reasonable cause (we do not enter now in its nature) makes it prohibitive."

Criticisms directed against the Magisterium of the Church regarding birth control can be summed up in three objections:

The first deny that there is a substantial anthropological and ethical difference between natural methods of regulation of fertility and contraceptives: if there are reasons say not to want more children, the method is indifferent, it is the same as natural or artificial. The opinion states that there is an ethical difference between natural and artificial methods, would reveal a bioecology that confuses physiologic laws and moral laws.

Contraceptive methods except for fully justified hormonal therapies, whose side effect is the loss of fertility (7), are intended two to eliminate the reproductive capacity of a conjugal act that is to be carried out at all costs. With contraception, the spouses try to make use of their sexuality as if it were not procreative as if it were only genitality, something that does not happen in periodic continence.

It has, therefore, no sense to assimilate contraception to periodic continence by just causes: continence, as a virtue, cannot be considered a contraceptive medium. Husbands can practice it even for other reasons, for example, for religious reasons (8).

Natural methods are fertility diagnosis procedures. This diagnosis can be used to regulate birth by continence infertile periods or to look for a child who does not arrive. The moral problem is here in knowing when there are just reasons for recourse to periodic continence. However, contraceptives have the exclusive purpose of contraception; its moral connotation is, therefore, implicit from the outset in the method itself.

Consequently, from the ethical point of view, the difference is not between two types of "methods," which have the same purpose, but between two types of "behavior": contraception and periodic continence. for just reasons. The moral problem is also not placed in the type of procedure: nothing is morally good simply because it is natural, nor morally bad only because of its artificial character.

The second objection attempts to highlight the difficulty in the application of natural methods when the woman's cycle is irregular they affirm that they are not safe enough to avoid pregnancy, or that "they can not be used when there are reasons that discourage their use".

In the face of this objection, the answer is not moral, but technical: the choice of the right procedure and its correct use solve the problem. As for security, the World Health Organization (WHO) in a study conducted in five countries obtained final reliability, for natural methods, of 97,8% (9), similar to the index found with oral contraceptives. The last point of the objection cannot be answered if the

reasons for discouragement are not specified. Also, the total absence of side effects should be added in favor of natural methods.

The third objection, which is at the base of the foregoing, argues that it cannot be said that contraception or any other human act is always bad: it is necessary to take into account the various circumstances in which a certain action is carried out, since it depends on them in the last instance, its moral value. This thesis denies the existence of "moral absolutes", that is, universal moral norms and permanently valid.

At this point, given the impossibility of addressing the issue with the necessary breadth in this work (10), I will limit myself to remembering that the Catholic Church, from its beginning and constantly, has proposed the existence of "moral absolutes": the tradition of the Church has lived and lives in the conviction that there are acts that, per se and in themselves, independently of the circumstances, are always seriously wrong because of their objects (11); this doctrine has been recalled again in the encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (12).

In particular, referring to the contraception, John Paul II addressed in his address to moralistic theologians on 12-XI-1988 in these terms: when he wrote the act of contraception as intrinsically illicit, Paul VI wanted to teach that the moral norm is such that it admits no exceptions. No social or personal circumstance could, now or can ever turn it into a lawful act. The existence of special rules concerning the performance of a man in the world, endowed with a constrictive force that always excludes and in any situation the possibility of exceptions, is a constant teaching of the tradition and the magisterium of the Church that does not can be put in question by Catholic theologians.

Of course, when issuing a moral judgment on a certain act, the circumstances must be taken into account; they can even change the morality of that act. However, from an ethical standpoint, the first essential element in free human and dynamic action, mind the most defining is the inner act of the will, the intention: because of the inside of the heart of the men proceed the bad actions (13).

Together with this element, there is another, equally essential, determined by the works. They are subordinate acts to the internal act, but which condition it structurally, since the intention is expressed through the external works: by its fruits you will know them (14).

In this way, the ethical difference between periodic continence for just reasons and contraception can be better clarified. In contraception, there is always an act which, by its object, opposes the order of God: contraceptives are destined to deprive the conjugal act of its procreative ability by separating the meaning of the procreator meaning of the conjugal union, for what they suppose a falsification of the true love of totality.

Indeed, one cannot forget that in its deepest reality, love is essentially a donation; and the conjugal love makes the husbands capable of the maximum possible

donation, by which they become cooperators of God in the gift of the life to a new human person (15). It is now understood how to the natural language that expresses the reciprocal total donation of the spouses, contraception imposes an objectively contradictory language (16).

So the Church maintains that contraception is an inherently disordered act, that by its object -by good and noble that the intentions of the spouses- can never be ordained to God: in itself denatures the conjugal love and degrades the sexuality of the human being, denying the person their dignity.

In periodic continence, on the contrary, the external act now leaving the sidelines the intention is lawful: in itself, it does not harm the order of the transmission of the human life, and takes into account the desires of the other spouse; periodic continence is always a shared decision.

Two anthropological visions found

The two forms of behavior that we are considering -contraception and periodic continence-, they answer, in the last term, to two opposite conceptions of the person and, consequently, of the sexuality.

One, the periodic continence, has present anthropology attentive to the dignity of the person, in which sexuality is inscribed: the sacred character of the origin of each person is recognized and, also, of the personal love that engenders it, and has lively consider the dignity of conjugal love and its demands for communion; in such a way that sexuality is respected and promoted in its true and fully human dimension, not "used" as an "object" (17).

On the contrary, the contraception does not respect sexuality in its dimension, because by its very structure the contraceptive acts subordinate the personal values -the conjugal love, the paternity and motherhood, the new life- to the attainment of the pleasure. The person of the spouse gives an instrumental value given gaining pleasure, so the purported "sexual liberation" becomes a subtle, nothing form of slavery.

Among the dangers of contraception are marital infidelity, degradation of morality, and no less important of the instrumental consideration of the "other": the reduction to the "object" category of a human person; this risk is particularly intense for women (18), also when it is the male who uses a contraceptive method. The contraception is, therefore, a sexist posture, although, often, consensual or sought by the woman.

Importance of the righteous motives

As has already been pointed out, the goodness of an act does not depend only on the object, but on the intention of the subject, the root of the moral performance. Therefore, if there were no justifiable reasons to delay births, that is, if the spouses practiced periodic continence with purely contraceptive intention, their behavior, although lawful for its purpose, would be, for its purpose, analogous to contraception and, so much, illicit.

Chastity, although refers to the body, is a virtue, and thus sinks its roots first in the spirit: the will of the spouses to arbitrarily separate love and procreation, even if it is carried out through the continent can never be chaste, for virtue must be born from love, never from selfishness.

On this ethical foundation anthropological support was given to Humane vitae, by specifying what the Christian notion of responsible parenthood is all about: responsible parenthood is put into practice either with the weighted and generous deliberation of having a large family, either with the decision, taken for serious reasons and in the respect of the moral law, to avoid a new birth for some time or indefinite time (19); what moves away from the far, reaching unidirectional vision of responsible parenthood, which is only polarized towards "limiting the number of children" and other aspects are misunderstood.

That is why it is not possible to understand well the difference between contraception and periodic continence when the need for just motives is silenced. The virtue of chastity is not only moderation in pleasure, but, rather, orderly use of sex in the light of the inseparable vocation of the spouses to love and to procreation. Only in this way can we understand why the spouses can not arbitrarily decide the number of children through recourse to periodic continence.

In any case, there is always a moral difference between the latter and the contraceptive media. In periodic continence, spouses accept the natural consequences of their sexual conduct, while in contraception they do not. This explains why when some couples decide to abandon contraception and resort to periodic continence they often discover the true meaning of love and, if they did not have just causes to not procreate, they fully open up to life.

It's not just a question of methods

In the practice of the natural methods of regulation of the fertility, the science must always go together with the self-control, because when resorting to them necessarily intervenes that characteristic perfection of the person, that is the virtue (20).

In this application of scientific knowledge, the technique does not substitute in any way the commitment of the people, nor intervenes to manipulate the nature of the relationship; as we have already pointed out in the case of contraception, which deliberately separates the unitive and procreator meanings of the conjugal act.

Often the Church's doctrine of this problem is misunderstood and rejected, as it is presented unilaterally. Many times it tends to remain only the judgment that contraception is illicit, but rarely does the effort to understand this rule in the light of the holistic vision of man and his natural and supernatural vocation. In reality, only by deepening the Christian conception of responsibility for love and before life is it possible to realize fully the anthropological and moral difference between contraception and the recourse to "natural methods".

Responsibility for love is inseparable from responsibility for procreation. Thus, the opening to life in marital relations protects its very authentic relationships of love, saving the danger of falling into mere utilitarian enjoyment.

The diffusion of natural methods cannot become a simple instruction, disconnected from the moral values inherent in education for love. Well, it is not possible to practice natural methods as a lawful variant of an option against life, which it would be substantially analogous to the one that inspires contraception: only if there is a fundamental availability of paternity and motherhood, understood as collaborating with the Creator, the recourse to natural methods becomes an integral part of the Responsibility for love and before life (21).