



Part One:
The cultural
contraceptive
revolution and its
consequences

In the summer of 1968 Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and sparked a tumultuous debate about the morality of contraception. Forty-five years later this brief document is at the heart of the great threat to religious liberty in the United States as the Department of Health and Human Services proposes to force Catholic institutions and individuals to disobey the continuous Catholic teaching which Paul VI affirmed. The services the government wants to insure—contraception, sterilization, and abortion—all say “no” to human life. *Humanae Vitae* insists we must say “yes.” The difference between the two positions is as great as the issue is significant.

For American Catholics, now is the time to *think* with the Church. That does not mean blindly accepting the party line. Rather, it means taking to heart *both* serious objections to Catholic teaching *and* the answers that can be given to them—answers that may in turn raise serious questions about the thinking of those who object to Catholic teaching.

With this column I want to help you think with the Church about contraception. I invite you first to consider why contraception became culturally acceptable and then to evaluate critically the consequences of its acceptance.

The public campaign for contraception began in the 1820s in England and continues to this day. For nearly two centuries now its advocates have promoted a distinctive contraceptive mentality that rests on three foundational pillars. The first is the cornerstone of the whole movement: a morality that separates sex from reproduction. No child is meant to come forth from a contraceptive sexual union; it is a union designed for pleasure, not for procreation. But it turns out that if sex can be separated from reproduction, so can reproduction be separated from sex. In-vitro fertilization separates procreation from pleasure and makes it possible to generate children without sexual union. “It was an ideal situation,” one sperm donor said. “Where else could I find a way where I could have a child and not have child support?”

The second pillar of the contraceptive mentality holds that it is useless and undesirable to prescribe self-restraint for the sake of spacing children. In other words, the virtue of chastity has no part to play at the heart of a relationship of sexual intimacy. Instead, men and women should simply give themselves over to sexual desire with no thought that it might make itself master. They need not learn how to control this powerful force and integrate it into their lives; they have only to release it from limitation and all will be well. To the proponents of contraception what counts is the expression, not the mastery, of desire.

The third pillar of the contraceptive mentality assigns the primary responsibility for contraception to the woman. Since it is her body which will bear the

children, it is for her to determine when to separate sex from reproduction.

With these three pillars in mind, we can see the contraceptive revolution at the root of the culture of promiscuity that engulfs us. From an early age the young are instructed in clinical detail how to avoid pregnancy—that is, how to separate sex from reproduction—and every movie they see will teach them to go from one sexual relationship to another with no thought of making their own the liberating self-mastery of chastity. No need to prepare for commitment to marriage when contraception protects pleasure from the risk of a new life to care for. Alternatively, those who opt to separate reproduction from sex have brought into being untold numbers of frozen embryos to be developed or discarded as their handlers may determine. In-vitro fertilization has also delivered “designer babies” who may one day view their father’s picture in a website catalog and read about his desirable genetic qualities but will never know his guiding presence in their lives.

Deriding the struggle for self-mastery as repressive, the contraceptive revolution has dissolved societal expectations for chastity. Since values cannot be “imposed” and chastity cannot be expected, parents are left defenseless in the face of ubiquitous, aggressively invasive pornography that degrades women and enslaves men at ever younger ages.

Finally, leaving the decision to have a child solely in the hands of the woman—the third pillar of the

contraceptive revolution—has had particularly bitter consequences. Nowadays when an unmarried woman informs a man that he has made her pregnant, very often she is told that a child was not part of their equation: “That’s your problem. Take care of it yourself. Get an abortion.”

Taken together these three pillars of the contraceptive revolution provide a perfect formula for widespread sexual irresponsibility: separation of sex from reproduction, no training of the young in self-mastery, and the onus of responsibility on the woman alone. Nowhere in this prescription do we find the slightest incentive for men to treat women right. To the contrary, the social acceptance of contraception effectively absolves men of responsibility for their sexual behavior and leaves the burden of its consequences on the women it was supposed to free from oppression.

Notice that you do not have to be Catholic or even Christian to make these arguments against contraception. Any citizen concerned about the course of our country could make them, based as they are on history, sociology, and psychology. So the case against contraception need not depend on the Bible or Church teaching. But we can certainly turn to those sources for deeper insight. And in my next *Chronicle* column that is what we will do.