



Part Two:  
Countering the  
cultural “no”  
with the marital “yes”

In my last *Chronicle* column I offered a defense of Catholic teaching on contraception without any reference to the Bible or Catholic teaching. Today I invite you to seek insight with me in these traditional sources of moral guidance.

The contraceptive revolution of the last 200 years, I argued, rests on three pillars: separation of sex from reproduction, no training for the young in the self-mastery of chastity, and the onus of responsibility for contraceptive practice on the woman alone.

Catholic teaching directly contradicts these three contentions. To the first we can apply our Lord’s words prohibiting divorce: “What God has joined together, man must not divide.” Man must not separate sex from reproduction. In God’s twofold design for marriage a man and a woman become one flesh to express their mutual love and to increase and multiply the human family. The “yes” of love is meant to embrace both pleasure and procreation.

On their wedding day spouses publicly say “yes” to each other; they accept each other totally. And that totality of life includes fertility, the wondrous capacity to reproduce. In the words of the *Catechism*, “A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from

the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment.” A child is a gift which a man and a woman give to each other in a uniquely intimate way and thereby express confidence that the love they profess for each other will endure. For they will need to take strength from each other’s “yes” if they are to nurture and educate the visible fruit of their fertility that will be dependent on their care far into the future. So their marital “yes” to each other’s fertility does not cease on the day they generate new life. They will repeat the “yes” of their intimate union a thousand times over in the mundane daily and nightly tasks of mothering and fathering the child of that union. Saying “yes” to their children, they say “yes” to each other—over and over again—in ways that deepen their love and make it ever more real.

In sharp contrast, contraception says “no” and cannot say “yes.” It consciously withholds or excludes the procreative possibility from the marital embrace. The deliberate separation of sex from reproduction says “no” to the gift of one’s spouse’s fertility. A woman says “no” by refusing to open her God-given fertility to her husband; a man says “no” by refusing to enter his wife with his God-given fertility. In effect, both say “no” to God: “You shall not create new life here.”

Such a tendency toward selfishness is encouraged by the second pillar of the contraceptive mentality, which deprecates the importance of chastity. In contrast, Catholic teaching proposes it as essential for personal, marital, and social happiness. “Chastity,” the *Catechism* says, “means the successful integration of sexuality

within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.” But this integration does not come automatically or easily: “Chastity includes an apprenticeship in self-mastery, which is a training in human freedom.” A young person who sets out to become chaste learns to say “no” to overreaching desire in order to be able to say “yes” to friendship. In time he or she discovers that “chastity blossoms in friendship”; it sets us free to befriend and be befriended. And the friendship of spouses is the foundation of their marriage.

As the Church’s endorsement of Natural Family Planning makes clear, openness to life in marriage does not mean that couples must generate as many children as possible. Rather, they are obliged to have as many children as God wills to give them. How are they to know His will for the size of their family? By prayerfully and honestly considering all the significant circumstances that affect their ability to raise children as God would have them do. For as St. Augustine put it centuries ago, “By offspring is meant not merely their begetting, but the raising of them lovingly, the nourishing of them humanely, and the educating of them religiously.”

In carrying out this parental responsibility, however, they must take care not to separate sex from reproduction; they must not say “no” to each other’s fertility. A couple schooled in Natural Family Planning learns to recognize with precision the signs of the woman’s fertile period and to order the timing of their sexual relations accordingly: to come together in hopes of conceiving or to refrain until the fertile period has

passed in order to avoid pregnancy (with the clear understanding that a baby will be welcomed if conception occurs unexpectedly). In neither case does the couple deliberately place a contraceptive obstacle in the path of complete bodily self-giving. They do not say “no” to the gift of life.

How many children to have and when to have them are decisions for the couple to take before the God who brought them together, blessed their marriage, and promised to be with them. It is a joint decision of husband and wife; no one else should make it for them or take it away from them (as the Chinese one-child policy does). But in thus respecting the liberty of couples, Catholic teaching differs sharply from the third pillar of the contraceptive mentality, which makes the woman responsible for the separation of sex from reproduction and effectively leaves it to her to decide the size of the family and the spacing of children. Since this decision need not be one in which her husband takes part, the contraceptive option would allow him to veto any choice of hers for more children more frequently than he desires. Alternatively, she could exercise that option herself to frustrate his desire for a larger family. In either case, the choice for contraception augments the power of “no.”

The 200-year-old campaign for contraception has firmly erected its three pillars at the base of modern culture, but it is far from clear that they undergird greater happiness than before. Evidence of deep and widespread sexual disappointment abounds. The blame for our sad condition can hardly be cast upon the teachings of the Church, for we are told that very few respect them or

follow them. Perhaps that is precisely the problem. Though Christ's Church is weighed down on all sides by pressure to conform to the world, I have tried to show that this is no time to be ashamed of the Gospel. It is time to take our Redeemer at His word: "You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free."