

In Obedience to Christ

A Pastoral Letter To Catholic Couples and Physicians on the Issue of Contraception by Bishop Glennon P. Flavin

As a bishop of the Catholic Church and as a successor to the Apostles, my first duty is to teach "the Catholic faith that comes to us from the Apostles." As bishop of the diocese of Lincoln, my responsibility to you and to God is, in the words of St. Paul to Timothy, "To preach the word, to stay with this task whether convenient or inconvenient; correcting, reproving, appealing; constantly teaching and never losing patience" (2 Tim. 4:2).

Today we live in what could be accurately called "a contraceptive culture." The use of contraception is widely practiced. Even some Catholic couples use this method to prevent conception and some Catholic physicians do not hesitate to recommend the use of this means of birth control and even to prescribe contraceptives. That I may not fail in my duty to God and to you, I am compelled to write this pastoral letter to you, the Catholic couples and Catholic physicians of the diocese of Lincoln, and to remind you that birth prevention by any artificial means is gravely contrary to the teaching of God and His Church, of which you are members.

To have certitude of faith in regard to use of marriage, and indeed in regard to all teachings of the Catholic Church, we must understand the nature of the Church. Our Blessed Lord, the Incarnate Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, came to earth almost twenty centuries ago not only to redeem us by His passion, death and resurrection, but also to teach us how we must live our lives in order to spend eternity with Him in heaven.

Before He ascended into Heaven, he founded His Church as the means through which he would remain with us until the end of time, and through which He would continue to teach and guide and sanctify mankind until the end of the world. He chose Peter as the visible head of His Church. To Peter He said, "You are 'Rock' and on this rock I will build My Church" (Mt. 16:18). To Peter He, the Good Shepherd, entrusted His flock: "Feed My sheep" (Jn. 21:17). To Peter and the other Apostles He gave the mandate: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always to the end of time" (Mt. 28:8-20).

Christ, Who cannot be deceived and cannot deceive us because He is God, is still in the world today as He promised, teaching us through His Church what we must believe and how we must live; and the voice of His Church is the successor of Peter, now Pope John Paul II. This is our Catholic faith: We believe that when Pope John Paul II teaches in matters of faith and morals, the Church teaches; and when the Church teaches, Christ the God-man teaches.

Therefore, we who have been blessed by God with the gift of the Catholic faith can have no doubt about the immorality of contraception. The Catholic Church clearly teaches that the use of

contraception in all its forms, including direct sterilization, is gravely immoral, is intrinsically evil, is contrary to the law of nature and nature's God. This is and always has been the uninterrupted teaching of the Catholic Church from the beginning.

The ban on contraception is not a disciplinary law of the Church, like abstinence of Friday, which the Church can enact and which the Church can dispense for good reasons. Rather, it is a divine law which the Church cannot change any more than it can change the law of God forbidding murder. Contraception is wrong, not because the Church says it is wrong (it was wrong before Christ established the Church); it is wrong because God Himself, through the revelation of His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, has declared it to be wrong. Because contraception is intrinsically evil, it may never be practiced for any reason, no matter how good and urgent. A good end never justifies the use of an evil means.

Catholic physicians and others who prescribe contraceptives or recommend their use are cooperators with those who use them. Such cooperation is gravely sinful. The same is true for physicians who advise contraceptive sterilization, or perform this procedure or refer a person to another physician for this purpose. In doing so they, too, commit grave sin.

It should be obvious that Catholics who practice birth control and those who cooperate with them in their immoral actions may not receive Holy Communion without committing sacrilege. Only the worthy reception of the Sacrament of Penance, which requires genuine sorrow for sin and the sincere intention to discontinue the sinful practice, will bring God's forgiveness, restore grace to the soul and make one worthy to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion.

Four years ago, Pope John Paul II, in his address to the bishops of the United States gathered in Los Angeles, very pointedly declared: "It has also been noted that there is a tendency on the part of some Catholics to be selective in their adherence to the Church's moral teachings. It is sometimes claimed that dissent from the Magisterium is totally compatible with being a 'good Catholic' and poses no obstacle to the reception of the Sacraments. This is a grave error...."

While contraception is always immoral, there is a morally acceptable way by which married couples may space the births of their children. For good and sufficient reasons, spouses may regulate births by abstaining from the marital act during the wife's easily identified fertile periods. This practice is known as Natural Family Planning. Recent scientific research has so refined the methods of Natural Family Planning that today, couples may space their children in ways that are altogether reliable, medically safe, and morally acceptable.

Across our diocese, eight Natural Family Planning centers for teaching our Catholic couples have been established; and plans are underway for establishing additional centers. Trained teachers staff each of these centers. Our diocesan newspaper, The Southern Nebraska Register, regularly carries a list of the NFP in our diocese together with telephone numbers and time schedules.

Dear Catholic spouses, there can be no true happiness in your lives unless God is very much a part of your marriage covenant. To expect to find happiness in sin is to look for good in evil. Sin is a bane to married life, as it is to all life. Like a cancer, it destroys everything that is good and joyful in your marriage relationship. On the other hand, to keep God in Your married life, to trust in His and love and to obey His laws in the use of the marriage privilege will merit His special

graces for you during the difficult times in married life, will deepen your love for each other and will bring to you that inner peace of mind and heart which is the reward of a good conscience. You will find the desire and the strength to follow God's law through the frequent and worthy reception of Holy Communion, the regular reception of the Sacrament of Penance and daily prayer.

Dear Catholic physicians, by reason of your baptism and confirmation you are called by God to witness to the Catholic faith which you profess. As members of a noble profession, you are in a position to be God's instruments in manifesting His truth and His love. This you can do by dissuading your patients from the practice of sinful contraception and by introducing to them the moral methods of Natural Family Planning. Then you will be the object of God's promise: "The person who brings a sinner back from his way will save his soul from death and cancel a multitude of sins" (Jas. 5:20). Thus, you will contribute to the spiritual welfare of your patients; and, like the Divine Physician, you will care for the whole person, body and soul.

It is my fervent prayer that Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, the patroness of the diocese of Lincoln, through Her powerful intercession obtain for all God's people in our diocese, especially our Catholic spouses and our Catholic physicians, the grace to accept all the doctrines which God teaches us through His Church and to live them. For it is only in obedience to the divine will that a human heart may experience the peace of union with God, both in this life and in eternity.

Glennon P. Flavin is bishop of the diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska. This article originally appeared in "The Southern Nebraska Register," 11 October 1991.