



Conundrum with Condoms

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The “popular” wisdom these days insists that because we can't stop our children from engaging in premarital sex, and because such sex can be dangerous and have bad effects, we should do everything we can to protect our youngsters by giving them condoms. Condoms, we are assured, help decrease pregnancies and decrease sexually transmitted diseases in a simple, straightforward way. If parents love their children, they will surely see to it that they have “protection”. This argument, widely accepted in all strata of our society, relies on a seriously flawed understanding of what love *really* means. We need only consider a related example to see this flaw clearly. If our children decide that they are going to play hopscotch on the asphalt of a busy interstate highway, in the midst of high-speed traffic, would we be manifesting our love for them by giving them helmets to place over their heads for “protection”, or would real love involve pulling them off the roadway and insisting they learn abstinence from freeway hopscotch? Which of these actions *genuinely* manifests a parent's love for their children? True love often demands a higher and a more committed path, in place of an easier or more permissive one. Whether for ourselves or for our children, con-

doms, in the guise of a loving solution, involve us in a grave moral compromise, tempt us to yield to a damaging permissiveness, and invariably fail the demands of true love.

Indeed, true love is violated right at its core in marriage any time we choose to use condoms, even for “good reasons.” By making such a choice, we end up saying to our spouse, “I love you, except for your fertility and fruitfulness. I will not embrace that part of you. I will put it aside, and use my sexuality and the rest of you in a way that addresses my own need for satisfactions.” But marital sexual intercourse is a special personal language that always means surrendering ourselves totally. On the other hand, couples close off a part of themselves to the other, and deny access to the deepest and most life-giving center of who they are whenever they engage in contraceptive sex. Contraception is thus a kind of lie that a man and a woman speak to each other through their bodies, feigning the total gift of themselves to each other, but always actually holding back that gift.

Some argue that the use of a condom by a married couple, one of whom has contracted AIDS,

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should be permissible during marital relations. Otherwise, unprotected sex might well be the equivalent of a death sentence for the uninfected spouse. The popular wisdom here again assures us that condoms are the loving answer to a difficult situation. But true spousal love, in these sad circumstances, beckons us to a higher and harder path – the path of marital abstinence. A husband who has AIDS would never subject the wife he loves to a potentially death-dealing act on his part, which is what sexual intercourse could become for them (even while using a condom, which has a failure rate). Would it be a loving act to subject her to the risk of a possibly fatal encounter, even for something as beautiful as conjugal intimacy in marriage? Sexual activity is not, in fact, absolutely essential for us as individual human beings, distinct from the case of eating or sleeping. We tend to lose sight of that basic fact in a relentlessly sex-permeated society.

Perpetual marital abstinence represents a difficult proposal, but grave circumstances like AIDS can constitute a strong call to this particular kind of sacrificial love and sexual self-mastery. It is similar to the situation of a married couple, one of whom is

called to long-term military deployment overseas, so that both must practice sexual continence when they are separated, even perhaps for years. Many married couples do live as brother and sister for a host of reasons, and until AIDS can be effectively treated and eradicated in patients, the disease certainly affords a grave reason to justify such a choice when one spouse is infected. Learning to love each other in different and non-genital ways is, in fact, an integral component of every successful and enduring marriage, and an AIDS infection merely brings greater urgency and immediacy to the task.

Respecting the God-given designs for our sexuality and struggling towards sexual self-mastery is one of the great challenges of our age, and probably of every age. Arguments in favor of widespread condom availability are emblematic of a collective loss of nerve in the face of powerful libertine pressures within our culture. God opens up a higher and more authentic path to us every time his grace and mercy empower us to love each other as we genuinely ought to.

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