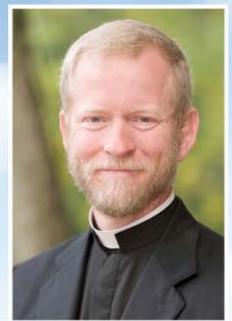


Making Sense of Bioethics

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Father Tad Pacholczyk
Director of Education
The National Catholic Bioethics Center



Contraceptive Contradictions

“... marital sexuality is all about loving someone totally and unreservedly, giving and receiving totally, and not holding back who we are for ourselves. It involves a unique language of total self-giving.”



Because sex is a deeply interpersonal form of communication, we can consider some related examples of personal communication to help clarify how we end up speaking a false language with our own bodies whenever we engage in contraceptive sex. Basic insights of reason can help us appreciate how contraception forces us to speak a clearly contradictory language to our spouse.

If we look at the case of a wife who decides to insert earplugs, we discern a problem if she then tries to listen attentively to, or carry on a conversation with her husband. The earplugs bespeak the view that, “I don’t really want to hear you and be with you,” disrupting their mutual communication.

If a woman inserts a cervical diaphragm or a vaginal sponge while having intercourse, she is likewise employing a language that says she doesn’t really want to communicate openly and fully with her husband. She wants to keep part of who he is at a distance, at arm’s length; that is to say, she shuns his fertility and fruitfulness. In that choice, she is rejecting the paternal aspect of his masculinity, and refusing to share with him the deep maternal meaning of her femininity.

We can further inquire

whether it would be normal to surgically excise healthy vocal cords, and then attempt to carry on a conversation with our spouse. Opting for a vasectomy and then pursuing sex involves a similar contradictory language of the body.

When a husband puts on a condom during intercourse, he disrupts that intimate communication that is written right into the language of his body, much as if he had wrapped his mouth in cellophane before trying to have a verbal conversation with his wife. As Professor Bill May puts it,

A person does not put on gloves to touch a beloved one tenderly, unless one thinks that some disease may be communicated. But is pregnancy a disease? And is not the use of condoms, diaphragms, spermicidal jellies, and the like similar to putting on gloves? Do husband and wife really become ‘one flesh’ if they must arm themselves with protective gear before ‘giving’ themselves to one another genetically?

The problem here is clear: marital sexuality is all about lov-

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ing someone totally and unreservedly, giving and receiving totally, and not holding back who we are for ourselves. It involves a unique language of total self-giving.

Contraception, meanwhile, allows marital sexuality to devolve to the point where each pursues erotic satisfaction apart from the total gift of self, and apart from any openness to life. Because of contraception, marital sexual activity slips into a subtle mode of mutual exploitation — a lifeless, self-focused, needs-centered apparatus.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the famous BBC correspondent who converted to Catholicism late in life, instinctively appreciated how the Church was resisting this trivializing of the gift of sexuality by its strong stance against contraception:

It was the Catholic Church's firm stand against contraception and abortion which finally made me decide to become a Catholic . . . As the Romans treated eating as an end in itself, making themselves sick in a vomitorium so as to enable them to return to the table and stuff themselves with more delicacies, so people now end up in a sort of sexual

vomitorium. The Church's stand is absolutely correct. It is to its eternal honor that it opposed contraception, even if the opposition failed. I think, historically, people will say it was a very gallant effort to prevent a moral disaster.

The idea of serially eating and purging, in order to be able to eat and purge yet more, is a striking example of misusing our body in its most integral design. The one who dines in this way is seeking in a sense both to eat and not eat at the same time. Objectively speaking, he is engaging in damaging and contradictory behavior, violating the inner order and meaning of his own body.

Contraception involves this same sort of destructive and contradictory behavior. Unlike the case of the vomitorium, however, sex is an inherently *relational* activity involving two people. For that reason, the damage done by contraceptive sex will extend beyond their individual persons and trigger damage at the heart of that delicate relationship which is their marriage. Contraception, thus, involves an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the

other in the face of that inherent language of sex which calls for complete self-giving.

The reasons behind the Church's teaching thus flow from profound considerations regarding the integral design of human sexuality. Pope John Paul II put it well when he stressed how couples who use contraception in their marriage presume to, "act as 'arbiters' of the divine plan and they 'manipulate' and degrade human sexuality and with it themselves and their married partner by altering its value of 'total' self-giving."

Rev. Tadeusz Pacholezyk, Ph.D. earned his doctorate in neuroscience from Yale and did post-doctoral work at Harvard. He is a priest of the diocese of Fall River, MA, and serves as the Director of Education at The National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia. Father Tad writes a monthly column on timely life issues. From stem cell research to organ donation, abortion to euthanasia, he offers a clear and compelling analysis of modern bioethical questions, addressing issues we may confront at one time or another in our daily living. His column, entitled "Making Sense of Bioethics" is nationally syndicated in the U.S. to numerous diocesan newspapers, and has been reprinted by newspapers in England, Canada, Poland and Australia.

