

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER



ABORTION, CONTRACEPTION, AND RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD

PREPARED BY THE ETHICISTS OF THE NCBC
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“Catholic health institutions may not promote or condone contraceptive practices but should provide, for married couples and the medical staff who counsel them, instruction both about the Church’s teaching on responsible parenthood and in methods of natural family planning.”—USCCB, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 5th ed. (2009), n. 52.

❖ SUMMARY ❖

Abortion

- A *direct or voluntary abortion* is the directly intended termination of pregnancy before the fetus is viable, or the directly intended destruction of a viable fetus. Catholic health care institutions are not to provide abortion services or cooperate in them.
- An *indirect or involuntary abortion* takes place when an operation, treatment, or medication—that has as its direct purpose the cure of a proportionately serious pathological condition of a pregnant woman and that cannot be safely postponed until the unborn child is viable—results in the death of the unborn child. It may be licit to undergo such a procedure so long as the principle of double effect is respected.

Contraception

- *Contraception* is any action that is specifically intended, whether as an end or as a means, to prevent procreation either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse. Contraception is never to be directly intended.
- The use of therapeutic means needed to cure diseases is not illicit, even if it results in a foreseeable impediment to procreation—provided the impediment is not directly intended for any motive whatsoever.

Fruits of the Same Tree

- It is frequently affirmed that contraception, if made safe and available to all, is the most effective remedy against abortion, but this assertion is unfounded. The negative values inherent in the “contraceptive mentality” in fact strengthen the temptation to abortion when an unwanted life is conceived. Indeed, the “pro-abortion culture” is especially strong precisely where the Church’s teaching on contraception is rejected. The contraceptive mentality is very different from that of responsible parenthood, which is lived in respect for the full truth of the conjugal act.
- Abortion and contraception are also linked by the fact that often, in the juridical world, the elimination of the embryo before its implantation is called “contraception.”
- So-called contraceptives may sometimes act to prevent implantation of the embryo.

Responsible Parenthood

- To be morally good, a married couple’s decision to use natural family planning, and therefore their decision to welcome a child or not, depends on their circumstances and their intentions.

❖ FAQ ❖

Question 1. Is it always illicit to cause the death of the fetus, even when the life of the mother is at stake?

Reply: No intervention is licit that constitutes a direct abortion, either as an end or as a means to an end. This includes “therapeutic” abortions, which some incorrectly justify in cases of extrauterine pregnancy or when the mother has a disease that could worsen if the pregnancy continues.

Question 2. Why are means that eliminate the embryo before implantation considered “contraceptives”?

Reply: This is a legal issue. In the mid 1970s, the World Health Organization, following the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, changed the definition of pregnancy. Instead of the period between fertilization and birth, they defined it as the period between implantation and birth. Thus, products that destroy an embryo before implantation could no longer be said to cause abortion.

Question 3. Which devices and drugs may have anti-implantation effects?

Reply: Three kinds of products may have anti-implantation effects:

- The IUD, which always works by preventing implantation (ParaGard or Mirena)
- Emergency contraception (Norlevo or *ella*)
- Some progestogen-only hormonal contraceptives (Depo-Provera, Norplant, or Ovrette)

Emergency contraceptives and some progestogen-only contraceptives may also act as proper contraceptives, preventing fertilization, so it is not appropriate to say that they are only abortifacient drugs. However, it is certain that they can have early abortifacient effects in some circumstances.

Question 4. A typical argument against natural methods is that they are not “effective” for planning pregnancies. What can be said about this?

Reply: If taught and applied properly, natural methods are as effective as any contraceptive method. The problem is that there is often lack of well-prepared instructors. As a result, natural family planning is often seen as an impossible goal. Spouses with feeble faith thus get discouraged and sometimes start using contraceptives.

❖ RESOURCES ❖

Elliott Louis Bedford, “Reframing the Contraception Debate: A Teachable Moment for the Church,” *Ethics & Medics* 37.9 (September 2012): 1–4. Reproduced by permission.

Thomas J. Davis Jr., “Plan B Agonistics: Doubt, Debate, and Denial,” *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 10.4 (Winter 2010): 741–772. Reproduced by permission.

James McTavish, “Family Planning as Nature Intended: The Urgent Need for Education,” *Ethics & Medics* 37.12 (December 2012): 1–2. Reproduced by permission.