



Catholics and Acceptable Uses of Contraceptives

"...while the Church has always taught that marital acts of contraception are morally wrong, the use of contraceptives can sometimes be acceptable within certain other contexts outside of consensual conjugal acts."



Contraceptives include drugs and devices like condoms, the Pill, and spermicides. It might come as a surprise to some to learn that the Catholic Church does not always oppose the “use of contraceptives.” A couple of trivial examples can help explain this point. The Church would not oppose the use of a contraceptive spermicidal gel to lubricate the axle of a bicycle tire to improve its rotation, nor would it specifically oppose the use of inflated condoms as party balloons. The particular context is important. More serious examples of acceptable contexts and uses for contraceptives would include using the Pill medically to treat serious gynecological problems, or using the Pill to block the release of an egg from a woman’s ovary in a situation of rape to protect her from becoming pregnant from the attack. Contrary to popular confusion, as we can see, the Church does not always oppose the “use of contraceptives.”

What the Church does always oppose, however, are *acts of contraception*. An *act of contraception* is a very particular type of disordered human action that involves the decision freely to engage in marital intercourse, while pursuing countermeasures in anticipation of, contemporaneously with, or after the completion of the sexual act, to try inten-

tionally to block it from achieving its proper finality, namely, the engendering of new human life. These countermeasures can include, to borrow the words of Pope Paul VI, “any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means” (*Humanae Vitae*, n. 14).

Pope Francis, in a recent interview, pointed out that Pope Paul VI, in a difficult situation in Africa, “permitted nuns to use contraceptives in cases of rape.” This use of contraceptives by a group of nuns occurred during an exceptional wartime situation in the Belgian Congo. Although no document has ever been found in the Vatican indicating that permission was actually given by the Pope, these women were given the Pill by their physicians because they appeared to be in imminent danger of sexual assault during the uprisings of 1960. The Pill was provided to prevent their ovaries from releasing an egg, so that if they were raped during the chaos, the attacker’s sperm would not be able to fertilize any of their eggs, and a pregnancy would not occur. This “use of contraceptives” would clearly not be an *act*

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of contraception, because there would be no consensual sexual act, but only an *act of violence and brutality* forcibly directed against the women. Hence, this use of contraceptives constituted, in its essence, an act of self-defense, not an *act of contraception*. A rapist, of course, has absolutely no right to forced sexual intimacy with his victim, nor does he have any right to bring about her impregnation, and the woman has absolutely no moral duty to make her eggs available to an attacker's sperm. Hence the use of contraceptives in an emergency situation like this would be morally permissible precisely because it would *not* constitute, morally speaking, *an act of contraception*, but would rather represent a defensive and self-protective maneuver in a situation of grave and imminent danger.

The use of contraceptives can be morally acceptable in other contexts as well, again, because such uses do not constitute *acts of contraception*. For example, when a woman has severe menstrual bleeding, or pain from ovarian cysts, the hormonal regimen contained in the Pill may sometimes provide a directly therapeutic medical treatment for the bleeding or the pain. This use of contraceptives is an *act of medical therapy* to address a pathological situation, not an *act of*

contraception. The secondary effect from the treatment, namely, marital infertility, is only tolerated, and should not be willed, desired, or intended in any way by the couple. It is worth noting that it would not be acceptable to make use of contraceptives like the Pill for these medical cases if other pharmacological agents or treatments were available which would offer the same therapeutic benefits and effects *without* impeding fertility.

In sum, while the Church has always taught that marital *acts of contraception* are morally wrong, the use of contraceptives can sometimes be acceptable within certain other contexts outside of consensual conjugal acts. Janet Smith has succinctly summarized the issue this way:

“The Church teaches that acts of contraception are always against the plan of God for human sexuality, since God intended that each and every act of spousal intercourse express both the intention to make a complete, unitive gift of one's self to one's spouse and the willingness to be a parent with one's spouse. These meanings of the spousal act are, as *Humanae Vitae* stated, inseparable.”

Rev. Tadeusz Pacholczyk, 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.

