



## “To Give or Not to Give” – That is the Marital Question

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In a recent column, David O'Brien, the Associate Director of Religious Education for Lay Ministry in the Archdiocese of Mobile, Alabama recounts the story of Agnes and Jake, devout Catholics who conceived and delivered four children during the first 5 years of their marriage.

Agnes described how Jake, “wanted to be a good father and husband, and he couldn't see how that could happen if we continued to have more children. In short, he was getting a vasectomy.”

Agnes had a strong Catholic formation, and understood that married couples should not engage in sexual acts that have been intentionally blocked or “rendered infertile.” She struggled with Jake's new stance, and dug her heels in.

She wondered how she could possibly be an authentic witness to the Gospel “if within my marriage, I was no longer open to life? How could I minister to other women and encourage them to be bold in their faith if I wasn't living it myself? And what do I teach my children about marriage and sex when their father and I weren't aligned?”

She went through an emotional roller-coaster:

“At first, I cried. Then I yelled. Then I argued, calmly and in-

telligently. Then I cried some more. I shared with my husband excerpts from *Kippley's Sex and the Marriage Covenant* and the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. We listened to Christopher West and Scott Hahn in the car.”

Nonetheless, her husband was unchanging. As it became clear that Jake would go ahead with the vasectomy notwithstanding her protests, Agnes confronted a question that many serious Catholics have had to contend with in their marriages. She wondered whether it would still be allowable for her to engage in marital relations with her husband after the vasectomy.

When one spouse is involved in this so-called “abuse of matrimony,” the other is placed in an awkward situation. A husband can struggle with a similar problem when his wife refuses to get off the Pill and stop contracepting. While the contracepting spouse is clearly doing something morally wrong, doesn't the non-contracepting spouse also sin by cooperating in an act that the other spouse has made infertile?

Pope Pius XI addressed this issue as far back as 1930, but the clearest teaching of the Church

# Making Sense of Bioethics

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came in a 1997 Vatican document called the *Vademecum for Confessors*. It notes that cooperation in the sin of one's spouse, by continuing to engage in the marital act when the spouse has taken recourse to contraception, can be permissible when "proportionally grave reasons" exist for doing so, and when one is earnestly "seeking to help the other spouse to desist from such sinful conduct (patiently, with prayer, charity and dialogue; although not necessarily in that moment, nor on every single occasion)." The *Vademecum* and sound counselors say that participation in such an act would not be in and of itself immoral on the part of the non-contracepting spouse, but these counselors would also say that the one trying to lead the Christian life ought not to initiate sexual relations with the contracepting spouse.

Thus, while Agnes would not be obliged to facilitate her husband's sin, she could herself, without sin, engage in marital relations with him if she thought refusal to do so might lead to other sins, such as temptations to infidelity or divorce, as long as she continued to seek and encourage a change of heart and a change of perspective in him.

While Agnes came to under-

stand this point in her head, she hesitated in her heart. After battling with Jake for over a year, she found herself burned out and exhausted. One night, after crying through the night, a sudden and unexpected thunderstorm came through. As she heard the intense raindrops falling, she reflected on how the raindrops were like God's tears. She realized that God, too, is in a kind of broken marriage, a difficult marriage with the humanity he loves. She considered how the Church, while being his spotless mystical bride, has members who are often unfaithful, hurting the Lord and blocking his life-giving love. "And yet," she reflected, "He never holds back. He comes to us, over and over again." Indeed, God continues to give his body to the Church on her altars, ever beckoning us to conversion and perfection.

Agnes decided that for the time being, if her husband sought marital relations, she would consent, while patiently seeking to convince him that his unilateral decision about the vasectomy was a mistake. She hoped to bring him to consider a reversal of the vasectomy. She sought to keep communication on the matter open and active, entrusting this painful trial in their marriage to God: "I lift up

our marriage, our intimacy, and our continued conversion to God who knows our hearts."

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