

May 2008

Pope Paul VI and the Pill

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Recommended Citation

White, Sara (2008) "Pope Paul VI and the Pill," *CedarEthics: A Journal of Critical Thinking in Bioethics*: Vol. 7 : No. 2 , Article 3.
DOI: 10.15385/jce.2008.7.2.3
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarethics/vol7/iss2/3>

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Abstract

The Roman Catholic Church has strong moral rules opposing the use of oral contraceptives. The Church still holds the view that a “sexual union must always allow for the possibility of procreation” (Sullivan, 2006, p.1). Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, stated that that the use of contraceptives was a sin against God. In this paper, I will present the views of Pope Paul VI from this encyclical, then present arguments against his claim that using them violates God’s law.

Keywords

Ethics, oral contraceptives, Roman Catholic Church

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The Roman Catholic Church has strong moral rules opposing the use of oral contraceptives. The Church still holds the view that a “sexual union must always allow for the possibility of procreation” (Sullivan, 2006, p.1). Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, stated that the use of contraceptives was a sin against God. In this paper, I will present the views of Pope Paul VI from this encyclical, then present arguments against his claim that using them violates God’s law.

Humanae Vitae stressed a number of traditional Catholic views, and thereby was the opposite of what many Catholics hoped it would say. Liberal Catholics were hoping that the church would change her views on contraceptives and allow them as a method of birth control within marriage. The encyclical also affirmed that the church had the right to define morality (Montini,

1968). Some have called the statement prophetic, because it predicted the further decline in societal morality which has now occurred in recent years (Smith, 1988). *Humanae Vitae* also discusses abortion and other issues pertaining to human life, but this paper will only discuss its position on contraceptives.

Pope Paul first makes a natural law argument, when he points out that “sexual activity, in which husband and wife are intimately and chastely united with one another, through which human life is transmitted, is “noble and worthy” (*Humanae Vitae*, 1968, p.5). He then goes on to say that conjugal sex is still noble and worthy even when it does not produce a new life. A woman does not become pregnant every time she has a sexual union with a man. For this reason, the church can say that birth control methods such as the rhythm method are allowable in the sight of God. Generally, however, he concludes that God has already made a way to naturally space out the time between pregnancies and man should not artificially alter what God has ordained. He states that “each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life” (Montini, 1968, p.5).

An argument that stems from the first is that artificial contraceptives violate natural law. Natural law regarding humane life means that the purpose of sexual union between a man and his woman is procreation. This argument claims that procreation is the “intrinsic” value of sexual union. For this reason, artificial contraceptives deliberately infringe upon God’s design. Pope Paul VI says that “generating a new life is written into the actual nature of a man and of a woman” (Montini, 1968, p.5). The church believes that this view is in harmony with modern reasoning. They believe that people in the modern era will agree that men and women are designed to create new life with each other. This appears to be a strong argument, because society is not likely to say sex is not for having children (Montini, 1968).

The third argument against using of contraceptives is that God, not man, has dominion over the body. On this view, contraceptives undermine God's sovereignty. Paul VI builds this argument by first stating that contraceptives remove or partially remove the meaning and purpose of a sexual act. He says that by "respecting the laws of conception," a man and woman concede that God is the creator and source of life. The encyclical goes on to say that man does not have unlimited dominion over his body and should not practice unlimited dominion over his sexual capacities. Sexual faculties are by nature designed to make human life (Montini, 1968, p. 5). Some Catholics also say that contraceptives degrade sexual union. They say that sexual union should be a total giving of oneself and contraceptives take away from the totality of that giving (Pacholczyk, 2007).

The conclusion of the section predicts the consequences of allowing people to think that contraceptives are morally permitted in the sight of God. He states, "How easily this course of action could open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards" (Montini, 1968, p.7). He says that men and women are open to many temptations and they need motivation to maintain their morals. He also believes that men would lose respect and reverence for women.

Finally, Paul VI says that government authorities would abuse the power of artificial contraceptives and could even make them mandatory for some reason or another (Montini, 1968). Many Catholics believe these predictions have come true since the encyclical was written and released. Others believe moral decline would have happened anyway (Smith, 1988).

There are several problems with the arguments in *Humanae Vitae*. First, they lack biblical support and depth. Paul VI starts his encyclical by affirming the competency of the Magisterium. He states that the Church is permitted by God to dictate moral laws and that he has closely studied the issue and prayed to God for guidance. Yet many Protestant Christians believe that we can go straight to God and His words for the answer. The Bible says that there is one mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). We need not believe that any man, even one who holds the most prominent high church position, is more capable of knowing God's law, since it is the Holy Spirit who helps us to understand Scripture (John 16:13).

Humanae Vitae does not give scriptural support for the claims it presents. This is not to say that Paul VI did not study the Scriptures before he wrote his views, or even that he does not have good biblical support for them. The point is that presenting the views of our almighty Creator requires backing from His word. One should not be compelled to believe just because of the authority of the Church or her leadership.

Another problem is that the natural law argument is weak. Paul VI is stating that the purpose of sexual union is to procreate. However, this does not take into account the other purposes of sexual intimacy. One of these is companionship. God designed Eve to be a companion and partner for Adam (Genesis 2). Also, God made sex as a union between humans and paralleled it to the love of Christ for his church (Ephesians 5:22). God gave Eve to Adam as a different being, yet also made in the image of God (Budziszewski, 1999).

Marital union can also be seen as a way to avoid sinful desires (Sullivan, public presentation, February 27, 2008). 1 Corinthians 7:9 reads, “But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

The encyclical’s final argument lacks cogency as well. It claims that man does not have dominion over his own body, that allowing for procreation is acknowledging God as the maker of human life (Montini, 1968). Yet Bible also states that God has given us free will. He has given us the ability to choose and make decisions. I believe that God has given us the ability to make decisions about our bodies, but in everything we are to honor Him. As His followers we are to offer our bodies as sacrifices to Him (Romans 12:1). How can we take initiative to offer our bodies as sacrifices if we do not have some control over them?

In conclusion, the views expressed by Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* are not without merit, but controversy still surrounds this encyclical. This document remains as the governing stance for on procreation and contraceptives remains to the present day. The Roman Catholic Church has some strong reasons for its claim one should not use artificial contraceptives, but in the end a Christian must look to God and His word for the answers.

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