

# **Contraception**

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## Historical background

The fiftieth anniversary of the approval of the birth control pill in the United States (by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960) provided many newspapers with an opportunity to celebrate one of the ‘great inventions’ of the modern world. *Time* magazine, for example, ran a cover story on 3 May 2010, pointing out that the Pill was ‘the most convenient and reliable form of birth control ever invented – but it quickly became much more. Arriving at a moment of social and political upheaval, the Pill became a handy proxy for wider trends: the rejection of tradition, the challenge to institutions, the redefinition of women’s roles.’

Couples in all times and cultures have attempted at times to enjoy sex while lessening the risk of an inconvenient pregnancy. A variety of concoctions and mechanical devices were tried, some more effective than others. By the twentieth century the some fairly effective barrier methods (intra-uterine devices and the male condom) had been developed to prevent sperm reaching the egg. Attempts might also be made to flush out the sperm after intercourse and before fertilization, to prevent the newly fertilized egg from implanting in the womb, and in the event of a pregnancy to induce an early miscarriage.

The Catholic Church, which had consistently rejected abortion and infanticide, also rejected the use of barrier methods of contraception. In response to the Seventh Lambeth Conference at which the Anglican Communion accepted the use of these methods within marriage, Pope Pius XI in his 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii* affirmed the sanctity of ‘chaste wedlock’ and of sexual intercourse within marriage as linked to the blessing of offspring. He warned against attempts to subvert the divine plan for marriage, which is a means of sanctifying the couple and establishing a suitable environment for the growth of children. The Pope condemned divorce and eugenics along with most methods of contraception, arguing that:

‘private individuals have no other power over the members of their bodies than that which pertains to their natural ends; and they are not free to destroy or mutilate their members, or in any other way render themselves unfit for their natural functions, except when no other provision can be made for the good of the whole body.’

Thus ‘any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin.’ On the other hand, the Pope also spoke of secondary ends or purposes of marriage and of the sexual act other than reproduction:

‘Nor are those considered as acting against nature who in the married state use their right in the proper manner although on account of natural reasons either of time or of certain defects, new life cannot be brought forth. For in matrimony as well as in the use of the matrimonial rights there are also secondary ends, such as mutual aid, the cultivating of mutual love, and the quieting of concupiscence

which husband and wife are not forbidden to consider so long as they are subordinated to the primary end and so long as the intrinsic nature of the act is preserved.’

This clearly left the door open for the Church to approve of sex not only during pregnancy and menopause but also during the monthly infertile period, and encouraged many to have recourse to the ‘rhythm method’.

The mother of the modern birth control movement was the Catholic feminist Margaret Sanger, founder of what became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Its father was devout Catholic Dr John Rock, whose work with Dr Gregory Pincus in the 1950s was originally designed to help infertile women conceive but turned out to be a way of extending the safe period for couples wanting to avoid conception. The ‘combined oral contraceptive pill’ used a combination of hormones which, ingested every day, had the effect of inhibiting female fertility. Dr Rock believed that because it extended the naturally infertile period, it would fall outside the Church’s definition of contraception, and promoted it as such.

So the Pill was a Catholic invention, and Catholic couples who took to it in droves during the 1960s were shocked when Pope Paul VI finally condemned its use in his 1968 encyclical, *Humane Vitae*. His reasons for doing so were well argued, and took account of the opinions of the experts who had advised him. Yet his arguments and conclusions seem to have failed to persuade, leading to a rejection of papal authority on a scale unprecedented in modern times. It took a later Pope, John Paul II, to explain many of the anthropological reasons behind Paul VI’s decision, but even now many Catholics remain uninterested or unmoved.

Today the Pill is used by around 100 million women worldwide, and it is, of course, not just conservative Christians who are concerned with the effects on society, on marriage and on women themselves. Testimonies from women who have stopped taking the Pill because of social, physical and psychological side effects are commonplace. Film star Raquel Welch, at 69 a veteran of three failed marriages, wrote an article on the Pill’s anniversary for CNN arguing that it was largely to blame for undermining marriage, which is the “cornerstone of civilization, an essential institution that stabilizes society, provides a sanctuary for children and saves us from anarchy”. She added: ‘Seriously folks, if an ageing sex symbol like me starts waving the red flag of caution over how low moral standards have plummeted, you know it’s gotta be pretty bad.’

### **The heart of the matter**

In Western society at large, sexual experience is increasingly regarded as a basic human right irrespective of marriage. The ready availability of effective contraception has undoubtedly contributed to the development of this mentality. But if human society is founded on marriage, as the Church teaches and most civilizations have believed, the promotion of promiscuity and the dissolution of marriage threatens our way of life and possibly our very survival. This is enough to explain why the Church has been so concerned to hold the line on sexual mores. It is not a matter of being ‘obsessed with sex’ – or even of regarding sexual sins as more serious than other types of sin – but of

knowing that a vital element of the common good is under attack.

In an address to the Presidents of the European Doctrinal Commissions in May 1989, reprinted in *L'Osservatore Romano* on 24 July of that year, Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) put his finger on the profound issues underlining the Church's stand on artificial contraception in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the Catholic understanding, the human body, though affected by the Fall, is an essential aspect of the person. But this understanding has been undermined in the modern world. The human body, he said, is increasingly regarded as something that one *has* rather than something one is, and that one *uses* rather than respects.

‘No longer does man expect to receive a message from his bodiliness as to who he is and what he should do, but definitely, on the basis of his reasonable deliberations and with complete independence, he expects to do with it as he wishes. In consequence, there is indeed no difference whether the body be of the masculine or the feminine sex, the body no longer expresses being at all, on the contrary, it has become a piece of property.’

But if my body is merely the ‘property’ of a soul or mind that inhabits it, I can do whatever I like with it.

‘This way of thinking first became an actual possibility through the fundamental separation—not a theoretical but a practical and constantly practised separation—of sexuality and procreation. This separation was introduced with the Pill and has been brought to its culmination by genetic engineers so that man can now [at least in theory] "make" human beings in the laboratory. The material for doing this has to be procured by actions deliberately carried out for the sake of the planned results which no longer involve interpersonal human bonds and decisions in any way.’

In other words, the dualistic conception of the body and mind may have been developed by philosophers, but its general acceptance has been made possible recently by new technology. This has enabled the manipulation of the bodily processes that lie at the very origin of the human person. The implications are enormous, connecting the question of contraception with many others where the nature of the person and human love is concerned.

Indeed, where this kind of thinking has been completely adopted, the difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality as well as that between sexual relations within or outside marriage have become unimportant. Likewise divested of every metaphysical symbolism is the distinction between man and woman, which is to be regarded as the product of reinforced role expectations.

You notice here that the future Pope speaks of ‘metaphysical symbolism’. This may seem a bit esoteric, but it is a vital clue to why the Church's teaching on

sexuality is so often not understood today. Modern men and women tend not to realize that there is more to nature than meets the eye. They are, the future Pope tells us, 'prisoners of the empirical'; that is, of what they can see and touch. But a Christian – indeed anyone who believed in God – must know that nature is more than this. It has a purpose and a design. We reduce our own humanity if we regard ourselves as less than the 'image of God'. Thus man is the greater the more he is capable of hearing the profound message of creation, the message of the Creator.

'And then it will be apparent how harmony with creation, whose wisdom becomes our norm, does not mean a limitation upon our freedom but is rather an expression of our reason and our dignity. Then the body also is given its due honour: it is no longer something "used", but is the temple of authentic human dignity because it is God's handiwork in the world. Then is the equal dignity of man and woman made manifest precisely in the fact that they are different. One will then begin to understand once again that their bodiliness reaches the metaphysical depths and is the basis of a symbolic metaphysics whose denial or neglect does not ennoble man but destroys him.'

This is what is at stake in the teaching on contraception: the very *existence of man as man*. And this is evident also in an important change in the popular understanding of conscience.

'No longer is conscience understood as that knowledge which derives from a higher form of knowing. It is instead the individual's self-determination which may not be directed by someone else, a determination by which each person decides for himself what is moral in a given situation.'

Conscience is no longer a type of 'knowing', then, but a type of 'willing'. For that reason it cannot be informed or advised or enlightened by any external authority. It is purely active, self-determining. It is whatever we judge to be desirable and right, based entirely on what we want to be true.

The Church asks us to look, not at what we happen to want, but at what is true about our own nature and the nature of love, because only if we live in accordance with the truth will we be able to become truly happy. The purpose of this essay is to take a look at that teaching, find out what it is, and see if it is as unreasonable as so many people seem to think.

## What is *Humanae Vitae* and what did it say?

As we have seen, the development of the contraceptive pill seemed to many Catholics not to fall under earlier strictures against artificial contraception, but the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s left the question of its legitimacy open, to be determined by the Pope in due course. After carefully consulting with a commission of experts and his own conscience, in 1968 Pope Paul VI published an encyclical – *Humanae Vitae* – specifically on this topic. His judgment that recourse to the Pill was *not* a licit means of birth regulation for Catholics came as a shock to those who had assumed otherwise, especially as it overturned the majority opinion of the group with whom the Pope had consulted. Some were not prepared to accept the Pope’s decision, arguing that it was not in any case framed so as to be protected by the Church’s charism of infallibility. I will consider these arguments and related issues in the next chapter. For now, let us consider exactly what it was that the encyclical contained and affirmed.

The Pope begins in section 2 by referring to the widespread fear of a *population explosion* on the one hand, and the well-known economic difficulties of supporting a *large family* on the other. He refers to the ‘new understanding of the *dignity of woman* and her place in society’, and of love and sex in marriage. And he speaks of *scientific progress* that now enables us to exert greater rational control over the forces of nature.

Then he poses the question (section 3): ‘Granted the conditions of life today and taking into account the relevance of married love to the harmony and mutual fidelity of husband and wife, would it not be right to review the moral norms in force till now, especially when it is felt that these can be observed only with the gravest difficulty, sometimes only by heroic effort?’ Using technical language (which I will paraphrase) he asks what is wrong with making *individual sexual acts* infertile, as long as the couple are still open to having children together *at some time*? Such people are not ‘anti-life’; they may actually *want* children. But there may be very good reasons for wanting to delay conception.

You see from this that, right from the outset, the Pope was by no means ignorant of the issues at stake, or the strength of the arguments being made in favour of permitting contraception within marriage. (He is not talking, of course, about non-married couples.)

He then goes on to speak about why he feels as Pope he is called upon to make a pronouncement in this area (4-6).

In Part II he begins by referring to a key document of Vatican II called *Gaudium et Spes*. The reason he does this is that he is going to try to base himself on the ‘spiritual anthropology’ outlined in that document. He thinks it would be too limiting to base himself on biology, psychology or sociology - important though these are - without taking into account also the supernatural dimension of life (7). Marriage, as he defines

it, is not just a result of ‘the blind evolution of natural forces’, but the design of God: ‘husband and wife, through that mutual gift of themselves which is specific and exclusive to them alone, seek to develop that kind of personal union in which they complement one another in order to co-operate with God in the generation and education of new lives.’

(Interestingly, the Pope does not talk much about marriage as a sacrament, perhaps because this is not intended to be a *theological* encyclical but more of a philosophical one. More has been written on the sacramental side of the question since 1968, and I will be saying something about later on. In section 8, however, he does say that in the case of *baptized* Christians the union called marriage becomes a sacrament, because then it represents or participates in the union of Christ and the Church. In such a case the Holy Spirit becomes the bond between the couple, just as he is also the bond uniting the Church. It is this which makes the union indissoluble.)

The next section (9) spells out in more detail the nature of married love as a special form of *friendship*, with a vital spiritual dimension. This love overflows the couple into the creation of new life. But parenthood must always be *responsible*. The Pope goes on to explain the different senses of ‘responsible parenthood’.

The couple must be *aware* of the biological and psychological processes involved.

They must be *intelligent*, exerting their reason and will.

They must *decide* for themselves what size of family they should be aiming at.

But in all of this they must carry out their responsibilities with *respect for the moral law* that corresponds to the will of the Creator (10).

The Pope adds that sex is ‘honourable and good’ *even when it is foreseen to be infertile*. In other words, it is not good only because it may lead to children (11). The ‘marriage act’ (as the Pope delicately calls it) has a *unitive* quality; which means that it unites the couple ‘in the closest intimacy’, into a single organism, ‘one flesh’. That is a good and a holy thing, whether or not children happen to result from it. The pleasure of sex is part of the gift that each can give the other.

In the plan of God, sexual intercourse is sometimes (but not always) fertile. In fact normally the woman is fertile for only two or three days per month. On those occasions, the Pope says, sex does not just have a *unitive* meaning; it has also a *procreative* meaning (12). The Pope argues against the separation of those two meanings. This is the core of his argument in the encyclical, so it is worth paying close attention to it here.

Every reasonable person surely agrees that one partner cannot force sex on the other (rape her, for example) without committing a *sin against love*. What happens then is that the capacity of sex to nourish the spiritual unity of the couple is damaged or

destroyed. Thus in marital rape the 'unitive' dimension of sex is under attack. It no longer serves to unite the couple: in fact it may then start to divide them. In the same way, the Pope says, one partner cannot deliberately impair or damage the *capacity to conceive life* without committing a sin against the procreative dimension of love (13). To do something (like take a pill) in order to sterilize the act would be to try to have the unitive aspect of sex while at the same time suppressing the procreative. These two dimensions God has bound together in a single sacred act, and *he has not given man the authority to change them*. In a famous phrase, the Pope says that man 'is not the master of the sources of life but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator' (13).

The Pope goes on at this point to explain that in Catholic moral philosophy it may sometimes be morally right to tolerate something bad in order to bring about something good - or in order to avoid something worse. But it can never be right to deliberately *do wrong* so that good may come of it (14). The end does not justify the means. In the short term it may seem like a good idea (for all sorts of reasons) to lie, or cheat on a test, or even to kill, but in the long run one has always damaged something very important, very deep. One has 'gained the world and lost one's soul'.

*Humanae Vitae* also suggests four specific ways in which the use of contraception - as part of what is called a movement of 'sexual liberation' - might damage not just the soul of the individual, but society at large (17).

It might lead to an increase in marital infidelity and a general lowering of morality, by making promiscuity much easier. That is in fact exactly what has happened.

It might damage the dignity of women, by making possible their sexual exploitation by men. That too has happened, as many feminists admit.

It might lead to the use of forced contraception or sterilization as an instrument of government policy. In fact the Pope was quite right, and we find (not just in China) a new eugenics movement like that of the Nazis gathering strength around the world.

Fourthly, Paul VI speaks of the 'reverence' due to the whole human organism, especially in the generation of life, and the danger of exceeding the limits of our own authority over it.

The encyclical ends with a section called 'Pastoral Directives'. This includes one particularly important point, which should not be neglected. It is the point about the positive *benefit* to be obtained from trying to follow the Church's teaching. It is easy to concentrate on the negative things being said about contraception, and to lose sight of the much more important thing about the alternative. Natural Family Planning is not just an approved way of limiting reproduction. Properly practised, it is a *spiritual path for families*. It is a way to integrate sexuality into love: a way to humanize and civilize the energies of the body and soul. It requires us to grow in sensitivity and respect for our own bodies, for each other and for God's presence in marriage. It enables us to

cultivate what used to be called the virtue of chastity. The 'self-mastery' which makes possible periodic continence is essential for the development of full human freedom, and therefore for the growth in our ability to love.

The encyclical was therefore a restatement of the traditional teaching of the Church on the sacredness of the body, a defence of human reproduction as a co-creation with God, and an affirmation of the dignity of women. It argued that there may well be reasons - whether personal or ecological - for limiting the size of one's family, and of having fewer children. But it said that this limitation should be brought about by the development of more reliable forms of NFP practised voluntarily by couples, rather than through the technological manipulation of fertility, particularly as an instrument of government policy.

## Objections to Catholic teaching on NFP

Many people are confused by the Church's distinction between artificial and natural methods of family planning. So-called 'artificial' methods involve having sex but *rendering it infertile* when it would naturally be fertile. 'Natural' methods involve *not* having sex at those times when sex is naturally fertile (less than one week in four). It matters not at all to this distinction whether the natural occurring times of infertility are ascertained 'naturally' (by the development of the woman's interior sensitivity to the exact moment of ovulation) or by some relatively high-tech means involving thermometers and other paraphernalia.

The distinction may therefore be confusing, but it is perfectly coherent. NFP (Natural Family Planning) will always be more *in harmony with nature* than contraception is, because it does not aim to hinder the normal functioning of human biology – just as a medical technique aimed at restoring health is more 'natural' than one that aimed at damaging or temporarily impairing it. With sufficient investment in scientific research, some form of 'natural' method can be made as simple and easy for an uneducated couple to use as any pill or implant.

The crucial thing is whether a person is attempting to sterilize a given act of intercourse. This does *not* happen when the couple is using NFP, as Pope Paul VI emphasizes very clearly in section 16 of HV. NFP only involves becoming aware of exactly when sex would be fertile, and *avoiding* intercourse on those few days every month. He is not talking here about the old 'Vatican roulette'. NFP can be extremely scientific, and as reliable as the pill in regulating the size of a family. The intention may still be to avoid conceiving a child, but there is a big difference in what is actually done. The *nature of the act* is not being deliberately changed on a given occasion from one that would create life to one that would not.

This is the point that most people do not grasp. They think that because the intention may be in both cases to avoid conceiving a child, the two things are morally the same. But there is an important distinction, even in the intention in these two cases. Let's take a couple who are using contraceptives. There would obviously be no point in their using a contraceptive if they did not think a child might otherwise be conceived. Why take all those chemicals into your body if you didn't have to? Therefore the act of taking or using the contraceptive has to have a point. It is directed *against the existence of the specific child who would otherwise be conceived*. For whatever set of motives (whether good or bad) an act is being done directly against life, or the possibility of life. The couple may still be 'open to life' in a general sort of way - eventually, somewhere, sometime - but they are definitely *not* open to life on this particular occasion.

There would be nothing wrong with all this, in my view, if God did not exist, or if the act of conceiving a child were merely a biological process and nothing else. But if there *is* a God, then everything that human beings do is more than merely biological, and if God is personally involved in the creation and conception of a child, then a rather disconcerting fact follows, which I will put rather crudely like this. The couple is *not*

*actually alone in the bed when they make love*: God is in there with them. So the act of contraception - whatever form it takes - is a way of trying to have sex without God, to 'push God out of the bed'. The couple are effectively saying, 'God might be going to create a child: so we have to prevent him doing so!' You could say that it is therefore God, and not just the child he might otherwise create, who is the actual target of the contraceptive.

The act of love made physically sterile by contraception may still be pleasurable, comforting, or in some other way psychologically beneficial. It may even be entirely unselfish (done for the sake of the other, to give comfort or consolation, rather than for one's own pleasure), but it can no longer be a channel of the specific grace that is characteristic of marriage. Contraception works against the essence and nature of the sacrament. Furthermore, since in human beings the natural and the supernatural are always closely intertwined, the supernatural damage wrought by contraception may eventually have consequences at the psychological level too.

NFP is psychologically and spiritually (if not also physically) *better for us* than any of the artificial methods. Of course, a wife whose husband will not cooperate with her by abstaining from sex at certain times is not to be blamed for resorting to artificial methods, if she has good reason for doing so. But the point is that human fulfilment in love is always frustrated in some degree when both members of a couple are not at least *trying* to be in control of their own sexual (or indeed other) desires, so as to become more capable of consideration for the feelings and needs of the other person. Artificial methods (barrier, pill, sterilization), on the other hand, hamper us from growing to that stage in marriage where self-control, sensitivity and loving consideration become all-important. Indeed, the spiritual dangers associated with self-indulgence in this area are so great that, if there were no natural cycle of fertility permitting us to have sex three weeks out of four without conceiving a child, it would be better to do without sex altogether than to use artificial contraception.

Experience surely confirms that it is the nature of love, however pleasurable, to be more to do with the giving of self than the giving of pleasure. It also confirms that married love can involve a lifetime's growth in giving, in openness, in transparency of each spouse to the other. Experience teaches us that the sexual act has a kind of 'unitive' power, a power to foster the unity of the couple. But a couple cannot be fully open to each other, and therefore continue to grow in love to the maximum extent, without remaining open to the action of God in their relationship – and this implies being open to new life.

Progress has been made since 1968 in two main areas. Firstly, there have been enormous advances in the *technology and techniques* of NFP, and in the development of *training programmes* suitable for Third World situations. (Of course more could have been done more quickly if the same money had been invested in it that had been put into the technology of contraception.) I believe it can truly be claimed now that if a population problem exists in any given part of the world, that problem could be solved by grass-roots education in NFP. (It has also become fairly widely admitted that the dangers of population explosion have been in any case greatly exaggerated, although my argument does not depend on that being the case.)

Secondly, progress has been made under Pope John Paul II in understanding and explaining the doctrine of *Humanae Vitae* in moral and theological terms (the “theology of the body”). In the Christian anthropology developed by John Paul II, biology as a dimension of personhood becomes a *language for expressing love* - a language rooted in the Trinity and in the divine likeness in man and woman. According to *Gaudium et Spes* (24), ‘man can only find himself by making a sincere gift of himself’. This gift echoes the loving exchange that goes on eternally between the Persons of the Trinity. Contraception can then be understood in terms of the language of the body as the moral equivalent of a lie: for it falsifies the statement which the body makes every time the couple give themselves to each other in the act of love.

### **More objections**

The early Church opposed the Gnostics who wanted to escape the body altogether, and the medieval Church opposed the Manichaeans who thought the body was evil. (More recently she opposed the Calvinists, Puritans and Jansenists.) Now the modern Church opposes materialists who think God has nothing to do with the physical act of making love. This modern heresy is the direct result of the process of secularization, namely the splitting of nature from grace, depriving it of a supernatural dimension. In her teaching about sex and marriage, the Church is trying to overcome this dualism in one of its most dangerous forms.

We have seen since 1968 the spread of the idea that the human body is something that can not only be interfered with, but genetically altered and eventually redesigned at will. We have seen human fertility not merely treated with lack of respect, but actually treated like a disease, and this is often linked to the even worse idea that new life that may have been conceived in the womb may be treated as an infection and killed, if for some reason it is not wanted by the mother. I think it is pretty clear why many people regard *Humanae Vitae* as a prophetic document.

However, certain objections are commonly raised, and it is important to consider these. The obvious objection has always been that the Church is speaking about an *ideal of marriage* that only a handful will ever attain. The first answer to that is that the same objection also applies to Christianity itself (the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, etc.). Besides, some people do manage, by and large, to attain that ideal. But the more important point is that if you abolish the ideal *no one will even try*. The Church has to teach the truth about *what God wants us to do*. At the same time, though, she has to be understanding and forgiving when we fail and fall short.

Another common objection concerns the spread of AIDS in many parts of the world, such as parts of Africa where promiscuity is common. It is argued that by discouraging the use of condoms, which would help protect against the disease, the Church is not doing everything she could to eradicate it and has become responsible for many deaths as a result.

This argument is extremely perverse. The most effective way to prevent the spread of

AIDS is by encouraging chastity within marriage, which is what the Church is doing. She cannot do this at the same time as promoting the use of condoms. In any case, someone who is flouting the Church's teaching by sleeping around promiscuously is hardly likely to be failing to use a condom merely because the Church is against contraception. Other factors are involved, and it is these that need to be dealt with. Naturally, if you are breaking the moral law by having promiscuous sex, it would be better to avoid spreading AIDS among your partners and therefore preferable to break the law while using a condom – but the Church cannot say that without seeming to condone the activity. (It would be like saying, if you are going to beat your wife, do so in such a way that you do not cause excessive damage to her brain or her womb.)

The most difficult case is that of a married couple where one partner has AIDS and does not want to risk infecting the other. Can the husband use a condom in such a case, not to prevent conception but simply to avoid transmitting the disease? Some Catholic moralists would say that the 'principle of double effect' comes into play here. The contraceptive effect of the condom is foreseen but not intended, since the intention is to prevent transmission of the disease and the condom would not be used if this were not thought to be a danger. Others would say that even in this case the nature of the sexual act would be changed into one incompatible with the full meaning of marriage.

What of the other common objection – that the world's population must be controlled or reduced if the human race or the biosphere is to survive? One might ask in response – how far are you willing to go? Would you execute whole populations in order to keep the numbers down, if that happened to be the only way to do it? The Catholic Church would argue that you cannot do something that is intrinsically wrong even so that 'good' might come from it – even to ensure the survival of the species.

In his statements to the Cairo Conference in 1994 and his reflections around that time, Pope John Paul II affirmed that 'a programme for demographic regulation *can be considered reasonable*, but only on precise ethical conditions, and if it respects the values and fundamental rights which politics can never subvert' (see *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 7 September 1994, p. 1, my italics). He emphasized that 'it is essential to resist the temptation of a dangerous shortcut, which would be to direct every effort to reducing the birthrate, regardless of method.' Meanwhile, 'The greatest commitment should be made instead to the international community's support of the economic and social development of the less well-off peoples, through a *fairer and more rational distribution of resources*.'

A lot depends on what the facts are, and in this area – as in the case of global warming or climate change – facts are less easy to obtain, even among scientists, than opinions. Where the Church has something to contribute to this whole debate is in its understanding of what human life is for, what gives it meaning, and conversely what takes meaning away from it. What the Church labels *immoral* is simply what it has reason to believe will profoundly damage the possibility of human fulfilment.