

CONTRACEPTION: A WORLDWIDE CALAMITY?

Patrick G.D. Riley

The author discusses the effects of contraception, which have borne out the predictions of Pope Paul VI's encyclical Humanae Vitae: the explosion of out-of-wedlock births, lack of respect for women, STD's, HIV/AIDS, etc. The overpopulation claims that fed the acceptance and promotion of contraception have been discredited by demographers; now the social costs of underpopulation are increasingly apparent. Acceptance of contraception has now also led to an embracing of morally objectionable technologies like cloning. This is the latest consequence of the separation of sex and reproduction signaled by the acceptance of contraception.

A third of a century ago, Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the traditional teaching that the most intimate union of husband and wife must never be deprived of its power to beget children. This solemn veto of contraception dismayed or even outraged many both within and without the Catholic Church. Entire national hierarchies of the Church rebuffed the Pope, not in so many words but by telling Catholics they could judge for themselves if contraception was right for them.

The American bishops stood behind the fateful papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. But after their public letter of support they lapsed into an ominous silence. Other national hierarchies that had supported the encyclical also failed to follow up. Silence from pulpits was decisive, and contraception became the rule among Catholics.

Politically, Catholic opposition to state-supported contraception collapsed. In the United States and abroad, contraception became embedded in law and public policy, funded by taxpayers. By the turn of the century, more than a dozen states had ordered health insurance companies to provide contraceptive drugs, at least some of them considered abortifacients. Cardinal Edward Egan of New York traveled to the state capital to oppose enactment of such a law, only to be met with a stern reminder from Governor George Pataki, a Catholic, that contraception provides "very important health benefits to women."

To oppose contraception had become faintly ridiculous, like being against air-conditioning. Yet from the moment the Pope published *Humanae Vitae*, voices of support for the ancient prohibition were heard from outside the Catholic fold. In Germany, the Lutheran physician Siegfried Ernst, who had been jailed as an anti-Nazi, wrote that in

condemning contraception Pope Paul was “more ‘Lutheran’ than many Lutherans.” In England, E.F. Schumacher, then starting work on *Small Is Beautiful*, told friends and family the Pope had done the right thing.

In 1998, Irving Kristol said the same at a *Sex Is Better than Gender* conference. The Catholic Church “was absolutely right,” he declared, to hold “that once you cut the link between sex and reproduction and permit sexual activity to become a pleasurable end in itself, all sorts of ghastly things will happen to your society.” This echoed John Chrysostom's dictum: To mistake means for ends is the root of all evil.

Michael Novak, one of the leaders of Catholic opposition to *Humanae Vitae*, now writes: “By almost any objective measure, the path of devastation left in the wake of the ‘sexual revolution’ since 1968 shows that I was wrong.”

The social pathologies that plague us today may not be traceable to contraception and the sexual liberation of the '60s with apodictic certainty. Profound changes in behavior depend on changes in attitudes, themselves impossible to calibrate. But at the height of the sexual revolution, Pope Paul VI did something riskier than tracing back: he prophesied.

In *Humanae Vitae*, the Pope warned that taking children out of sex would “open wide the way to marital infidelity and general lowering of moral standards.” Many a man would “forget the reverence due to a woman” and would “reduce her to a mere means of satisfying his desires.” Despotism could even impose contraception on unwilling citizens.

And so it happened. Singapore imposed sanctions on families that exceeded the regime-prescribed limit on children. Some governments were even crueller. By the '70s, India was forcibly sterilizing lower-caste citizens by the truckload. In China, women were dragged to clinics and strapped down for abortion.

Even at this late date, there is no empirical way of verifying the Pope's claim that men would “forget the reverence due to a woman,” but we might see evidence of such disrespect in pornography, now an industry infesting the media, and widely patronized on the Internet. Other social pathologies can plausibly be traced to ignoring the prohibition of contraception, universal among Christian denominations a century ago, and taught by many Jewish rabbis.

At the very least, the promises of contraception have proven empty. Illegitimacy, abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases, far from falling, have skyrocketed. There are millions of teenage victims.

1. In the United States alone, “more than 65 million people are currently living with an incurable sexually transmitted disease,” according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Throughout the world, sexually transmitted diseases, STDs, account for four out of five cases of the ten most common reportable communicable diseases. During the ‘90s, an STD called chlamydia, practically unknown when the Pope spoke, climbed to the very top of the ten most common communicable diseases in the United States. This disease, often symptomless, strikes young women especially, and can make them sterile.

2. Beyond the cost in human suffering, dollar costs of STDs in the United States stand at \$16.6 billion annually, according to estimates published by the Centers for Disease Control. AIDS and its virus, HIV, top the list at \$6.6 billion. Like chlamydia, AIDS was an unknown when the Pope spoke.

3. The United Nations predicts that within two decades AIDS will claim another 65 million lives, triple the number who died in the first two decades of the pandemic. The population of sub-Saharan Africa is being decimated, so that President Bush calls AIDS “the deadliest enemy Africa has ever faced.”

Ironically, much of the criticism against Pope Paul and the age-old prohibition of contraception was based on the so-called “Population Explosion.” Today demographers, economists, and especially statesmen are most concerned about threats *to* population, not threats *from* population.

1. National economies are threatened. The European Union estimates that its member-countries will need 35 million immigrants in the next quarter-century to replace workers in its aging population. Birthrates in Western Europe have fallen below replacement level, and demographers call contraception and abortion “White Death,” comparing it to the Black Death that devastated populations in the Fourteenth Century.

2. Pensions are threatened. Developed nations worry that lagging population growth is undermining their ability to support the elderly. In France and Italy, relatively mild measures to shore up pensions provoked nationwide rioting. In

the U.S., Social Security funds may not outlast mid-century, while some states are trying to stabilize their pension systems by floating bonds. In the face of demographic decline, that smacks of swindle.

3. National cultures are threatened. In order to maintain traditional culture, the government of Japan has rejected a United Nations recommendation that it admit 600,000 foreign workers every year to sustain its economy, second largest in the world, and prevent collapse of its pension system.

Veteran sociologist Peter Drucker has warned that Japan and all of Southern Europe “are drifting toward collective national suicide by the end of the 21st century.” For Professor Drucker, the “most important single important new certainty—if only because there is no precedent for it in all history—is the *collapsing birthrate in the developed world.*” The emphasis is his.

Also unprecedented in history, according to the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, himself a sociologist as well as a senator and ambassador, is the rate of out-of-wedlock births in the United States. Counterintuitively, widespread contraception has not prevented it, and could well have encouraged it. Moynihan saw it as a societal earthquake that could shake the foundations of the West.

At the same time, societies that take children out of sex have not proven able to hold the line against abortion. Nor can such societies coherently explain why fornication and homosexual acts are wrong. The Supreme Court, reflecting what it thinks is the judgment of our society, now has declared that the state cannot outlaw sodomy. Few expect the Court to withhold approval of same-sex marriage.

Emerging from the shadows are the cloners and others who would make babies for spare parts. The title of a 1997 novel, *Manmade for Murder*, capsulizes the threat. If sex and the love of husband and wife are no longer for children, technology and animal husbandry are ready to take their place. The futuristic novelists Aldous Huxley and George Orwell look more realistic every day.

Orwell and Huxley, like Pope Paul, had to look forward into prophecy, while we can look back into history. True, the lessons of history are merely cumulative and converging, yet a time comes when they become convincing . . . but only if we face them. Then, common sense and simple practicality demand that we act. Has that time come for contraception?

Of contraception we can say, echoing Christopher Wren's epitaph in St. Paul's Cathedral, *If you seek a monument, look around you.*

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A journalist by trade, the writer has reported and broadcast from two dozen countries around the globe. He has taught philosophy at the Catholic University of America and elsewhere. His latest published book is Civilizing Sex: On Chastity and the Common Good (T&T Clark/Continuum). A forthcoming memoir of John Cardinal Wright is entitled "A Whole Hell to Fight."

