

Contraception and Eve

by Jane Furlong Cahill

‘ . . . and one of them, a lawyer, put a question to try him: Master, which commandment in the law is the greatest? Jesus said to him: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and thy whole soul and thy whole mind. This is the greatest of the commandments and the first. And the second, its like, is this: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments, all the law and the prophets depend.’ (Matt. 22, 35–41)

With these words Jesus pointed out the Way for man to come to God and the essence of that Way is a continuing love affair between each man and God, each man with himself for the love of God, and each with his neighbour whom he is commanded to love as he loves himself. Christianity is not only an intensely personal religion, binding each human person man and woman, directly to God in the love of friendship which we call charity, it is also an intensely social religion, because it commands that we love all of our neighbours as we love ourselves. As Christ clearly states, all of the commandments of the Law may be reduced to these two, because all of the commandments pertain to the ordering of self-love and love of neighbour to the love of God.

The love of God is both the means to the end and the end itself of human life, insofar as we must continually be in love with God in this life, and ultimately be personally united with Him in life eternal. This is true for every human person, male or female, They were created ‘in the image of God’, that is, like God each is capable of knowing and loving all things including himself, and therefore no one less than God can be any man’s or woman’s final Love. Their ultimate joy must consist in knowing and loving God in a way similar to the way He knows and loves Himself.

How we will best direct our lives toward God depends on our choice of a way within the ‘Way of Life’; that is, whether we choose the single life, the married life or the celibate life. The last two ways involve a further voluntary personal dedication. The celibate embraces God in a total dedication of himself, body and soul, for the purpose of being more completely at the loving disposal of God and God’s people. This voluntary gift of self automatically forbids the complete giving of himself to any other person. It demands that all of his powers of mind and will as well as his very sexual powers be freely given over to God.

In marriage too there is a similar consecration before God and in God of two persons, a man and a woman who love each other with a great and holy, human and divine love, coming from a truly personal depth – the mind and heart of each. They freely and lovingly give themselves body and soul to each other because they love God and themselves and they see in this mutual self-giving a means to their own perfection and the perfection of their spouse. It is especially here in marriage that the command to love our neighbour as we love ourselves is fulfilled. For the married man and woman in virtue of their sexual union are compared by Jesus to the union of a man's body with man himself. They constitute almost a physical entity in their marital union . . . 'they are no longer two, but one flesh.' So close is this union that Christ warns, 'What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.' Therefore the integrity of marriage demands that the partners, having once given their person in love to the other and having consummated this giving by its external act, sexual intercourse, must jealously guard this great love and exclude any other from their union so long as they live.

True marital love needs no further justification than itself, and it is for this reason that there can be a real marriage even when no children come from the union, as, for example, in the marriage of Mary and Joseph. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the Holy Family which is upheld as the ideal family to Christians was most certainly a planned family. The conception of Christ was voluntary, insofar as any conception can be said to be humanly voluntary, since we do not control the physiological processes which govern it except indirectly.

The same reasoning supports the validity of marriage for the childless couple who are naturally sterile. Otherwise such marriages could never be permitted. Thus marriage and human sexuality are, first of all, in the temporal order and in the nature of things for the perfection of the spouses themselves, though they have the further end of producing children to make up the family, the basic unit of society.

Both these ends of marriage and human sexuality are set forth in Genesis. When God created Eve it was as an *equal* human companion and wife for Adam, because, like him, she was the image of God. Genesis points out, the inadequacy of Adam by himself: 'for it is not good for man to be alone.' Adam's love for his newly-formed spouse is cited as the reason why a man is destined to leave father and mother and cleave to his wife with the result that they become one flesh. The only scriptural motive for their sexual union is love, not childbearing, though this is obviously not excluded. Their sexual union is the external sign of their marital love and the external act of the virtue of marital chastity whereby the human spouses express their interior oneness with each other. To this sexual union is attached a great natural delight, for lovers naturally long to be one with each

other, to be literally in each other. Such real union cannot help but produce delight that is as much spiritual as it is physical. (This holds true for spiritual marriage as well, hence Paul can say because of his love of Christ, 'I live, no longer I, but Christ *in* me.')

This unity, great and noble as it was in itself, was further ennobled by the command 'increase and multiply and fill the earth.' The sexual expression of their love was to be capable of producing other human beings, created not only in God's likeness but also in their parents' physical likeness.

That the ability to procreate was originally intended as a blessing for man and woman is explicitly stated in Genesis. It was intended as a good in keeping with their human nature. However, that the human reproductive power can and does get out of the control of reason in point of too-frequent or too numerous conceptions is well documented in obstetrical case histories.

The average woman is biologically capable of conceiving and bearing children twelve times during a normal marriage span. The number of possible pregnancies could be (and has been) far higher with earlier marriages. Yet it is clear that the average woman and family is equipped neither physically and psychologically nor economically to care for and develop in truly human fashion such a large number of children. Yet up until the last century there was no scientific means for controlling a woman's biological hyperfertility on a large scale. Since the beginning, women have been literally at the mercy of their own hyperactive fertility, conceiving at the most unreasonable times, as when chronically ill or exhausted from too frequent or too close pregnancies from which their bodies and minds never had a chance to recover.

There is, I believe, far more than a hint in the Scripture that this hyperactive and irrational fertility is indeed the punishment of Eve. 'I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception . . .' This stepping up of the number of Eve's conceptions by God makes sense, since the original and universal punishment for their sin was death and its natural preludes disease and illness, in the face of which Adam and Eve were left relatively helpless. In view of the normal rates of infant, child and maternal mortality today in underdeveloped areas where doctors and medicine are practically unheard of, it is not hard to see how this could be seen as an appropriate, if terribly grim, punishment for Eve. In order for such descendants of Eve to produce a family of four or five surviving children, they may have to undergo ten or twelve pregnancies. The very closeness and multiplicity of pregnancies then, considering the difficulties normally experienced in pregnancy, labour and childbirth without medical aid, and the absolute dependence of a human infant on its mother for so long, can indeed make the number and frequency of conceptions a real punishment. (It is important to note that the child is not the punishment, for Eve was to have been a mother even before the Fall.

Rather the punishment is the number and frequency of her pregnancies, leaving her literally at the mercy of a biological power. Because it subjected a higher to a lower power, this punishment was of its nature contrary to the human will. Perhaps not unrelated is the following verse – ‘All thy desire shall be for thy husband though he shall rule over thee.’ A woman who is continuously pregnant or threatened with unreasonable pregnancies is a very dependent woman, torn between her natural desire to express her love for her husband by marital union and her inability to do so without the real threat of another ill-timed or possibly fatal pregnancy. However, since we have never hesitated to remedy Adam’s specific punishment ‘working by the sweat of his brow’ by labour saving devices, why should we hesitate to put reasonable control back into woman’s role as a *human* wife and mother by scientifically slowing down her obviously hyperactive fertility? This is all the more reasonable since we hold that women as well as men have been redeemed by Christ from the effects of Original Sin and marriage raised to the dignity of a sacrament for the obvious purpose of sanctifying the recipients.

May not contraception then be considered a kind of restoration of Eve and her daughters—a real form of redemption? Is it not a kind of blotting out as St. Paul says ‘of the handwriting of the decree that was against us, which was contrary to us . . .’ (Col. 2, 14f)

It was foretold in the messianic prophecies that with the coming of the Christ, the evil consequences of sin, disease and suffering and the untimely death of infants (Is. 65, 20), would disappear and be replaced by love and peace (Is. 9, 7). The amazing strides in science to the point where suffering and so many diseases are either overcome or controlled, may be in part the redemptive fulfilment of these prophecies. If by the love and obedience of Christ the disorder and suffering resultant from man’s sin and God’s punishment of Eve in marriage was truly set right again, may not the reasonable use of contraception be viewed as part of the restoration of woman and man and marriage itself in Christ?

Moreover, the disorder produced in marriage was not one that could be remedied by voluntary control alone on the part of the spouses, no matter how virtuous or chaste they might be, for woman’s hidden biological makeup was affected by this punishment. Therefore the complete remedy needed was not only the interior grace to control sexual activity reasonably, but also an external grace, as it were, a medical remedy whereby woman’s biologically hyperactive fertility patterns could be reasonably controlled. Any control of the generative faculty would almost certainly have to be medical, for this faculty never was nor could be in itself the subject of a voluntary habit, because the time of ovulation and consequently the time of conception, is both unknown and, generally speaking, unknowable in the sexual act itself. The all too frequent failures of the rhythm

method indicate this quite clearly, for ovulation in the human female can be affected by many factors, psychic as well as physical, and these factors rightly contribute to the doubtfulness of rhythm as a safe and universally effective method of contraception. Hence, the most reasonable way to close the marital act to conception is by medically safe means that are non-abortifacient, in short by contraception.

The above mentioned physical likeness of the child to its parents is not the end of procreation. These same human beings were commanded not only to increase and multiply and fill the earth, they were also commanded to rule over it, to make it theirs in virtue of their reasoned control over it, an ironic kind of Divine challenge in view of their subsequent punishments. Adam and Eve were to use their minds and will and bodily executive powers to rule over themselves and then over their children and all things less than themselves. But the most important dominion or rule is that which men and women exercise over themselves, for the virtuous and reasonable self-dominion in all their actions is the pattern for their control over their children who are brought from the animal level to the human level by learning just such habitual self-control.

As for a man's and woman's reasonable dominion over themselves, including their very sexual organs, there is no question that this right exists. Christ himself says 'Greater love than this no man has then that a man lay down his life for his friend.' St. Paul urges men in Ephesians 5, 25 to love their wives in the same way: for did not Christ lay down his life for his spouse the Church? If a man may lay down his life for this closest of friends, his wife (and certainly she may do so for him), may he not lay down some other part of his being out of charity for her also? Pius XII reasoned, employing the principle of totality, that God readily permits a person to sacrifice a part of his body in order to benefit the whole when this is necessary for the preservation or healing of the entire body. The explicit presumption here is that all the parts including the sexual organs of the human body are intended by God for the good of the whole man. If we admit that the entire sexual organs exist for the perfection of the human being, how can we consistently deny that the use or act of the organ exists also first of all for the perfection of the human being who possesses it?

Let us apply this line of reasoning to contraception. In the first case a man may lay down his life for love of his friend, a spiritual good. In the second, he may do so for the preservation of his own life and health, a physical good. This interpretation of the fifth commandment would apply equally in the matter of contraception it seems to me. For, unlike the Fathers, we know how the conception of a human being takes place, that is, only when and if one of hundreds of millions of sperm manages to meet and fertilize a receptive and existing ovum, a process determined not by reason, nor by

God directly, but by the natural physiological processes of the body. Furthermore, contrary to the Fathers' belief that the sperm was somehow the human being in miniature (they seemed to attribute to the sperm alone all the characteristics of the fertilized ovum) there is no human life in the womb until this meeting and fertilization takes place. Hence in my opinion merely to prevent the meeting of the sperm and the ovum by a spatial or temporal block for the sake of the preservation of the life, health, or the economic or moral well-being of the mother, the father or the family, constitutes an almost miniscule physical evil. The same cannot be said of rhythm. The so-called 'natural' method of birth prevention is admitted by almost all theologians to be dangerous morally for the couple. Furthermore, despite its proponents' claim that it is the 'natural' way to prevent conception, which leaves the act open to generation biologically, rhythm is in fact, the most unnatural way that could be employed to prevent births. It attacks the specifically human nature of the marriage itself (a loving union of a man and woman, which love has as its most perfect external act, sexual intercourse) by placing serious obstacles in the path of the natural expression of conjugal love.

According to theologians, the married man and woman are fulfilling their marriage vows by uniting in the marriage act which for them is at once an act of the virtues of chastity, justice, friendship and above all charity, which demands in this case that they love each other in such a way that they are no longer two, but one flesh.

Whether the sexual act is open to generation or not in a given act is actually beside the point in determining the virtuousness of the marital act. For every virtue requires that its act be directly subject to the control of the will. And this very point which is the hub of the controversy as I see it (that is, the openness of the marital act to generation), is something that in any given act of intercourse is not directly subject to voluntary control precisely because it is unknown to us. We simply do not know and cannot control by an act of the will alone the state of our biological makeup. We cannot and do not know or control such factors as the presence or absence of the sperm or the mature ovum, the motility of the sperm, the acidity or alkalinity of the vaginal tract, etc., all of which are dependent for their performance or non-performance on what a Thomist would call their natural appetite. We do not control these factors except indirectly, that is, insofar as we perform an act of sexual intercourse which is 'apt' or 'not apt' for generation, dependent on the state of these biological factors which is unknown to us.

We further know from the Ogino-Knaus discovery of rhythm that conception is possible during only roughly one forty-eight hour period in a monthly cycle. It seems that this discovery then has emphasised the fact that since sexual desire in human beings, unlike the animals, can and does reasonably arise at any time during their

marriage (since the love of the spouses is presumably ever present) it may at any reasonable time be expressed by its external act. And since this act is open to generation by nature only once a month, it seems reasonable to say that nature herself never intended generation to be the primary purpose of the act. Otherwise the reverse would have been true, that is, the act would have been open to generation for all *but* one forty-eight hour period as in the lower animals, and when generation became impossible after the menopause, sexual desire should cease altogether. This does not happen, for as psychologists and marriage experts point out, sexual intercourse in man is as different from sexual intercourse in animals as building a home is different from building a nest. Reason and a loving human will direct it insofar as it is voluntary and they are the only reason it can be said to be virtuous at all, not because of an unknown biological factor beyond the control of the human will.

Sexual intercourse can have as many aspects as reason itself. It is the external sign of marital love, and is creative in its expression, for the art of loving is a learned art like any other; it is sometimes serious and procreative in intent as when the couple are consciously striving to have a child. It can be playful and therefore recreative. It can be a merciful and even a sad act of ministering to a stricken spouse, a healing act that ministers to the soul through the medium of the body. It can be an exultant act of rejoicing at the success of some common marital project. In short, like every other faculty subject to rational control it partakes of the universality of the person who directs it.

Human offspring are dependent on their parents for years after birth and hence to ensure their human care and development the marriage of the parents must endure even when their procreative duty ceases by reason of ill-health, poverty, age, etc. This is not true of animal offspring who are dependent on the parent animals for the briefest of times by comparison. There is no need therefore for the parent animals to remain together for their lifetime. It therefore again seems reasonable to say that sexual relations were clearly intended by nature as a natural inducement and delightful incentive for the human parents to remain together throughout their life. Furthermore, there are many times when reason demands that though the love relationship continue to be fostered by its external act, the procreative aspect of the act be effectively closed either temporarily or permanently by scientifically effective means. If reason demands this then, in view of the fact that there are two purposes of the sexual act, why cannot this be considered a case of the double effect, if the act be closed scientifically to generation by contraception for the over-all wellbeing of the marriage.

Another theological principle may be employed here to advantage. When a choice must be made between two goods (all other things being equal) we should not forsake the higher good of the excellence

of human virtue for the sake of the lower physical good. In this important matter of family limitation, so crucial in an age of over-population and its consequent evils for society, the family and the individual, if we can attain the end – the reasonable limitation of family size through the use of contraceptives, admittedly a physical evil – this method should definitely be preferred to the use of rhythm which even its stoutest defenders recognize as a serious threat to marital charity as well as marital chastity.

Rhythm may become a moral evil, in that it denies the marital right for insufficient reason, that is, for the supposed preservation of the biological nature of the act, while denying its virtuous and sacramental character as the external sign of marital love.

If we analyse the situation, rhythm may be immoral in itself, as our Protestant brethren suggested long ago! For the married couple in the state of grace presumably have the virtue of marital chastity, that is, a good habit which regulates both the desire for sexual union and the actual use of the sexual powers in accordance with reason. A habit, by its very nature is *difficult* to change precisely because it becomes a kind of second nature to us through frequent repetition and long use. Yet for practically one-half of the cycle married couples may use all their legitimate rights, but for the period of ‘abstinence’ as it is called, to guarantee rhythm’s effectiveness, they must either refrain completely from those natural external demonstrations of love which may and naturally would lead to intercourse (which pattern of action is completely *contrary* to the habit they *must* use during the infertile part of the cycle): or they are urged by well-intentioned but very naive men to employ what are called ‘imperfect sexual acts’ the natural and psychological effect of which, in view of their habit of marital chastity, is sexual relations. In brief they are urged to express their love externally to each other, and then told to stop the whole process short of its natural, habitual and psychological end, intercourse. This is psychologically and theologically unsound and can only lead to serious guilt feelings and deep frustration in the spouses.

Rhythm, as a legislated means of preventing conception is in my opinion an offence against the spouses’ rational and redeemed nature and the responsible Christian virtue of marital chastity. It needlessly places stumbling blocks in the path of marital chastity for up to half of the monthly cycle in order to ‘control’ biologically hyperactive factors which have never been under rational control, precisely because they were not known. In fact it is our human ignorance of the time of ovulation and its erraticness in many women which makes the rhythm method so ‘highly inefficient’ as one theologian so accurately put it.

It is a serious inconsistency of theologians to argue that the sexual act must be left open to generation, because to prevent this possibility would be against the Natural Law, and then argue that it is

licit to suppress the function of a much higher bodily organ, the pituitary gland, to prevent ovulation altogether on the ground that this does nothing in the sexual act itself to prevent conception. This gland regulates the entire complex hormonal balance of the human body along with a dozen or more equally important functions, yet we presumably have dominion over this organ (apparently because there is no suspect pleasure attached to this dominion!) Yet we are told by the same theologians (who are loath to even suggest that a non-infallible teaching of a Pope can be wrong) that we do not have the same dominion over the sexual organs for the reasonable good of the individual? As anyone who knows any human biology recognizes, we can blind, deafen or cripple a man just as effectively by attacking the visual, auditory or ambulatory centres of his brain, as by poking out his eyes, piercing his eardrums or breaking his legs. The pituitary gland controls biological fertility in the woman by triggering the release of the ovum each month. When we set out to prevent contraception the pill method is just as contraceptive as rhythm or any other artificial form and possibly more dangerous in that we do not yet know its far-reaching effects. Therefore by the same reasoning the 'pill' should be considered contrary to the Natural Law.

The preceding arguments point up what have been called the 'fatal inconsistencies' of the present Catholic position on contraception. The current teaching as I see it stems from a serious, though understandable, ignorance of the Fathers of the nature of woman and of human sexuality which has unfortunately been transmitted to the present day. But just as a man's role in life cannot be completely summed up in his role as a father, so neither can woman's role in life be designated solely by her role as a mother. Men and women are both, first of all the rational images of God and their specifically human perfection must come from the perfection of their rational powers, the intellect and will by the acquisition and use of the intellectual, moral and theological virtues, but above all as Christ says, by charity. All human actions must be judged good or bad insofar as they are reducible or non-reducible to the love of God, ourselves and our neighbours as ourselves. Every human power including the generative, is there for the total good and ultimate perfection of its possessor and must be exercised prudently and charitably in accordance with reason and revelation.

No man or woman was created by an all-wise God to be at the mercy of any of their powers.