

FR. CLIFF'S NOTES

by Fr. Clifford Smith

What does the Catholic Church teach about birth control?

One of the primary sources for the Church's teaching on birth control is *Humanae Vitae*, a 1968 encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI. All Catholics ought to read and pray over this teaching. We often think of birth control as a procreation issue. The Church invites us to see it as a love issue. Several points are made about the marital love between a husband and wife. First, it is a human love, a product primarily of God's gift of free will. Second, marital love is meant to be the total and complete giving of one's whole self to another person. Third, it is meant to be both faithful and exclusive. Fourth, it is meant to be fruitful ... it looks beyond itself and seeks to raise up new lives.

The highest expression of marital love between a husband and wife is the conjugal act. The conjugal act is, first, unitive. It unites husband and wife with the closest of bonds. Second, the conjugal act must be open to procreation. It may or may not be procreative, not every conjugal act results in a new life, but it should always be open to that possibility.

These two meanings of the conjugal act, unitive and open to new life, are inseparable. Therefore, the Church teaches that artificial birth control is contrary to God's plan for married love. Natural forms of birth control are generally allowed because, even during infertile times, the conjugal act remains both unitive and open to procreation. NFP or Natural Family Planning has been proven to be as effective as any artificial means, and without the harmful side effects.

There is still considerable academic debate on whether the encyclical is fallible or infallible. There are those theologians and members of the Church hierarchy who teach that *Humanae Vitae* is an infallible teaching of the Catholic Church, but when given the opportunity to declare it officially fallible or infallible, John Paul II elected not to respond directly. However, it is an official teaching from the Pope on the Church's understanding of God's revelation to all of us, and a part of the ordinary Magisterium, the teaching office of the Church, that is binding on all Catholics.

Catholics are obliged to believe the non-infallible teachings of the Magisterium, but with a different type or degree of assent, called religious assent or religious submission (*obsequium religiosum*): *“Bishops, teaching in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to divine and Catholic truth. In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent. This religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking ex cathedra; that is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will.” [Lumen Gentium, 25a]*