

## Natural Family Planning Is Not Contraception

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Germain Grisez

**I**N 1950, Pope Pius XII responded to petitions which had been pouring into the Vatican ever since the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was defined almost a century previously, in 1854, by Pope Pius IX. The petitions asked for a definition of the doctrine of the Assumption. Pius XII's response was to define infallibly as an essential truth of Catholic faith the dogma

that the immaculate mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, when the course of her earthly life was run, was assumed in body and in soul to heavenly glory.

It may be wondered why a moral philosopher should begin a discussion with psychiatrists on the subject of birth control by recalling what might seem to many the quite irrelevant—and even slightly embarrassing—infallible dogmatic definition of the Assumption. My starting point would indeed be unjustified except for one fact, that I and those to whom this paper is addressed are united—at least, such is my hope—in Catholic faith. Thus this truth of Catholic faith clearly can never be embarrassing for us. But equally true, though less obvious, I think, is that this truth is quite relevant to my topic.

The definition of the Assumption directly challenges a number of important beliefs and attitudes.

In the first place, the fact that Pius XII defined this truth challenges attitudes now becoming widespread among Catholics regarding the possible subject matter, conditions, limits, and intelligible purposes of the exercise of the papal teaching authority. I shall not go into this aspect of the matter here, except to note that some who in 1968 rejected Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* are now going on—quite understandably, it seems to me—to challenge as well the teaching authority by which Pius XII defined the dogma of the Assumption.

Yet it is interesting to recall that in 1950 the Catholic faithful seemed in practically unanimous agreement that the dogma of the Assumption could and should be defined, a poll by the Vatican of the Catholic bishops of the world

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revealed their moral unanimity in favor of defining the doctrine, and the definition was received throughout the Catholic world with almost universal satisfaction and joy.

But if we set aside the theological questions about papal teaching authority, it seems to me that we will learn a great deal by considering briefly the contemporary relevance of the doctrine of the Assumption. The Catholic world had believed this dogma explicitly for centuries. Surely, God in His providence did not lead the Church to define this dogma in 1950 merely so that some could regard it as a bad joke in 1971. What was God trying to tell us by causing this dogma to be solemnly proclaimed to our generation? Against what was God trying to protect us Catholics by securing this truth with the formality of an infallible definition?

I do not presume to try to read the divine mind. But we can say one thing immediately: The point had nothing to do with death, since the definition carefully prescinded from whether Mary had ever died or not. At the same time, the dogma of the Assumption is clearly related to the resurrection dogmas: that Jesus rose from the dead and lives now, and that we shall rise from the dead and live with Him forever. If Mary was assumed bodily into glory, then we are assured anew that Christ's resurrection was only the first fruits of His redemptive act, to be followed by the harvest in immortality of our now-mortal bodies which are to be sown in corruption.

Yet the dogma's prescinding from the issue of death in the case of Mary's Assumption brings out a facet of our resurrection that we might otherwise ignore. Fascinated with the promise that we may hope to live forever, we perhaps ignore or underemphasize a point brought into sharp focus by the dogma of the Assumption. This point is that our eternal life will not be angelic or ghostly. Our bodies will be assumed into heavenly glory, as Mary's body has been. If we have been promised that we shall see God, we also have been promised that we ourselves, not others, shall see Him, that we in our flesh shall see Him, that our eyes shall behold Him.

In short, as we now receive Christ in a real and bodily though sacramental way in the Eucharist, we hope to be united with Him in glory, not merely spiritually but in a fully human way, including familiar conversation and bodily touch. And as we are now inspired with hope by the example of the bodily Assumption into glory of Mary our Mother, we hope one day to be welcomed into heaven by her motherly embrace—a real embrace by a real mother—whose arms will be tender, whose lips will be moist, whose breast will be warm and palpitating.

This point leads directly to a principle which will have great implications. Even now, we are not minds using bodies. We are our bodies. Explicitly and implicitly, modern thought rejects this truth. But still the truth is that we are our bodies.

There are two important reasons, I think, why this fact is called into question.

One reason is that as modern men have lost faith in God, they have both located the source of all meaning and value in human consciousness and located the ultimate satisfaction or purpose of human life in conscious states, such as pleasure, enjoyment, or even intellectual satisfaction.

The other reason why the bodily reality of our persons is questioned is the prevalence of masturbatory sex. Masturbatory sex, which we might call "pseudosex," is a displacement activity not integrated into the personality, which permits frustrated energy to be used in a manner that yields easy and certain gratification. Masturbatory sex sharply distinguishes the self from the body, which becomes an object regarded as an instrument outside the self, an object to be used and abused as the self chooses, for the amusement and gratification of the self.

Pseudosex is so prevalent today that genuine sex is almost unknown. Ours is a masturbatory culture. Women revolt at being reduced to the status of sex objects but continue to present themselves in a way that invites—at times demands—such reduction. And men continue to pursue the "bunny" of their dreams.

In the outlook that regards the body as an object and reduces sexuality to pseudosexual function, the pattern of arousal, behavior, and relaxation becomes quasi-mechanical and seems to its victim almost a matter of physiological necessity. (I shall use some vulgar expressions here, not to shock the reader but to call attention to the implications of ordinary language.) Jerking off and pissing, fucking and taking a crap—all are grouped together. Notice how all these expressions reveal that the body is despised, is regarded with contempt as an object beneath the dignity of the "person"—the conscious self—who is nevertheless victim and slave of physiological mechanism beyond conscious control.

The assumption that sexual behavior is mechanical underlies the major premise of the contraceptive outlook: The ordinary couple cannot do without regular orgasms. Take away this necessity of life and their relationship will deteriorate, love will wither, and the marriage will break down.

If this premise is once granted, contraception becomes inevitable, for no one in his right mind can maintain today that the average couple of normal fertility should (or even would be morally justified in trying to) have all the children that might be expected to result from regular, "unprotected" coitus. Grant the necessity for "spontaneity"—which is a euphemism for obedience to the masturbatory imperative—and the whole case for contraception follows.

Pseudosexual activity, which presupposes the dualistic alienation of the body-object from the consciousness-subject, can hardly achieve communica-

tion. A man might try to use his body to make contact with the body of his wife, but since both as conscious selves are separated from their bodies, the tightest embrace cannot succeed in bringing about community.

It may be worth suggesting, in passing, that this frustration of communication may be one explanation of the sado-masochistic impulse which appears in so much pseudosex. If consciousness cannot unite with consciousness in pleasure, perhaps pain can penetrate the bodily-instrument-become-bodily-barrier—so might the unconscious premise be expressed.

Not only is pseudosex doomed to failure as communication, it also is doomed to meaninglessness as expression. Nothing that is merely a physiological response to a physiological stimulus can have a human meaning. If I had a brain disorder such that at any moment I might erupt with a vehement yes, people would soon learn that my utterance of that vocable could not be taken as having the slightest meaning. So if orgasm is mechanical and indispensable, it is powerless to communicate love.

I do not wish to suggest that the ecstasy of marital coitus should be any less; other things being equal, the more pleasure the better the act of love. Moreover, it seems reasonable to me to say, as Norman Mailer said in a recent article (again, I ask the reader's indulgence), that good fucks make good babies.

There is that word "fuck" again. We cannot hear it, no matter how experienced we may be, without noticing its negative connotation. Only a D. H. Lawrence can write of something truly lovely as "fucking pretty" without the expression's seeming ironic, and I think Lawrence's naturalism can be accepted easily only because he wrote fiction. If the dogma of the Assumption and the body of faith in which it is included were presented as mere fiction, I do not suppose anyone would be overly concerned about its implications either.

But if we take seriously the real identity of person with body, then we should have little difficulty recognizing that as human life is a continuous process biologically, so is it a continuous process personally. Human life does not begin; a new individual begins as the elements contributed by two existing individuals unite to form a new one. Thus, if we are our bodies, human life as a personal good does not begin but is transmitted from parents to offspring.

Sexuality is not *merely* reproductive. Asexual reproduction is possible. Sexuality is a capacity to hand on life, to extend community to new persons, on the basis of a prior communication of life, a prior sharing of community among already-existing persons.

Thus contraception can be seen as an intervention in the transmission of life, an interruption of the continuum of community not by the destruction of an existing individual but by the disruption of the extension of community to one who might otherwise be. The morality of contraception must be gauged not

by the consequences of the preventive behavior but by the implicit attitude of rejection of the new person who might otherwise come to be. This merely possible person is a psychological reality, and the moral stance of the user of contraceptives is settled by this psychological meaning, not in the realm of actual consequences.

I realize full well that many of you will differ with me on this point. If I note that some who said in 1963–1968 that the acceptance of contraception would not lead them to accept abortion have now moved on to abortion, I shall be reminded that others have not done so. I respect their integrity, but I beg to differ with their belief that the moral (as against the legal) approval of acts aimed at preventing unwanted babies before conception is consistent with a firm exclusion of acts disposing of such babies after conception.

Of course, it will be argued that natural family planning also prevents babies and that insistence on one method rather than another is biologicistic. An eminent Catholic obstetrician-gynecologist once remarked that he could not see how the difference between hell and heaven could be determined by the difference between a bit of rubber and a thermometer.

I grant that periodic sexual abstinence *can* be used with the contraceptive outlook I have so far outlined in this paper. The use of the perverted-faculty argument against contraception, rather than a better argument for the traditional teaching, almost invited Catholics to focus on the method and to ignore the all-important question of fundamental moral stance. The result is that the contraceptive stance has been widely accepted among Catholics. Periodic abstinence was chosen as a method of contraception acceptable among Catholics, while for some absurd reason other methods were not acceptable. In this context, not surprisingly, rhythm not only did not make sense morally but also did not “work” as a technique.

If Catholics accepted the implication of the dogma of Mary’s Assumption—that *we are our bodies*—and therefore rejected the mechanistic understanding of sex which I have called pseudosex, then I think Catholic couples could take an attitude toward periodic abstinence quite different from the attitude implicit in contraception. There are, after all, various good reasons for engaging in marital coitus, if all the circumstances are appropriate. There are also many reasons for not engaging in this act because of peculiar circumstances—e.g., lack of adequate privacy, the excessive fatigue or illness of one party or both, the demands of other more pressing duties, a necessary separation, or the fact that intercourse would entail a morally unacceptable probability of pregnancy, that is, a risk of pregnancy too great for the couple to be morally justified in running.

Now if a couple engage in coitus when they have any good reason for doing so, provided that none of the reasons for abstaining is present (including the last-mentioned), this pattern of behavior need not imply the pseudosexual

attitude presupposed by the major premise of the contraceptive mentality. On the contrary, the moderation I am now describing, which includes what might be called "creative restraint as erotic expression," is what in former times was understood by "marital chastity."

Thus the proper theological name for natural family planning is "Christian chastity." If periodic abstinence is just another method of contraception, it is a poor technique, and it ceases to carry with it any moral advantage over methods of contraception based on the premise that regular orgasm is a physiological necessity.

Adoption of the dualistic concept of man implicit in pseudosex makes impossible any real distinction between periodic abstinence and contraception. The physical consequences of both are nonpregnancy, and the intention of both is pregnancy avoidance. Thus the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was attacked as "biologism." (But notice that this attack often was made by those who also argued the necessity of coitus to build up the spiritual community of the marital relationship.)

Rejection of the dualistic concept also implies that the personal and communal reality cannot be isolated from the physical impact of the contraceptive act. Our salvation may hang on a bit of rubber just as easily as it may hang on a bit of water and a few vibrations in the air: "I baptize thee . . ."

Finally, I would suggest that the Catholic psychiatrist, of all people, should be in a position rightly to appreciate the dangerous implications of pseudosex and of the dualistic outlook associated with it. For if I am not mistaken, Freud and the Catholic faith agree in appreciating the inseparability of the values of man's conscious self from the biological reality of organic life and also agree in rejecting the notion that all meaning and value has its locus and consummation within consciousness. Of course, there are also great points of disagreement. Nevertheless, these two points represent a significant area of consensus from which a more human appreciation of sexuality can begin to develop.