

CONTRACEPTIVE CATHOLICS:  
RATIONALIZING FAMILY PLANNING,  
AGENCY, AND RELIGION ITSELF

by

Zoey Murzyn

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Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Nadia Lahutsky, Ph.D.

Department of Religion

Supervising Professor: Morrison Wong, Ph.D.

Department of Sociology

Darren Middleton, Ph.D.

John V. Roach Honors College; Department of Religion

## ABSTRACT

The Catholic Church prohibits the use of artificial contraceptive methods, a teaching it clarified with the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. However, almost the same proportion of sexually active Catholic women uses contraception as compared with the rest of the population—about 98 percent. To delve into this disconnect, I have inquired into eight practicing Catholic women’s lives to learn whether their rational approaches (informed by Max Weber’s rationality typology) to this issue inform their judgment of the question and its application in their personal lives. Their perceived control of their fertility, their circumstances, and their relationships with their husbands and God all factored into their individualized combinations and applications of these rationality types and the diverse reasons for selecting the family planning method that they do. Each constructs a morality and a Catholicism according to her individual experience, belief, and needs.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background: Mother Church and the Approach to Controversy

The Church says you cannot take the Pill.

Sociologically speaking, the Church is the assembled body of Roman Catholics the world over. It is religiously viewed as a Mother, an instructor of its members whose hierarchy of ordained leadership convenes to rule on particular teachings to clarify their established tradition and what flows naturally and reasonably from that tradition. Its doctrines are solidified and communicated by humans but trusted by the faithful to have been guided with the intention and grace of the Holy Spirit of God. Acceptance of Church doctrine by modern Catholics spans from faith in the institution's divinely-inspired wisdom to the opinion that senile men in vestments have dreamt up new ways to stifle their parishioners' freedoms.

As today's Catholics measure the extent of the influence of Church teachings' in their daily lives and interpret the theological treatises that emerge from the Vatican and its lead thinkers, they conceptualize their own theological rationalities of moral behavior. They justify their actions through their uniquely developed thought processes of weighed faith, moral action, practical needs and constraints, and the freedoms and values they seek to enjoy and pursue. In the case of contemporary married Catholic women and the Catholic Church's prohibition of artificial contraceptive methods, these women must make intimate decisions of enormously significant consequence in their daily lives—and, according to the Church—in their spiritual lives as well.

The Church, in the tradition of the Apostolic See of Peter, has seen itself as Jesus Christ's representative on earth, with the mission to guide his flock in his stead. Its

teachings are not guidelines, and its encyclicals,<sup>1</sup> the formal publications of doctrine by the pope, are nonnegotiable. Even without the official label of infallibility, definitive decrees by the pope or conciliar body merit that “his supreme teaching authority [be] respectfully acknowledged”<sup>2</sup> and no longer debatable among theologians concerning truth<sup>3</sup> or among the laity concerning practice. The Church communicates the united truth<sup>4</sup> revealed to humankind by the Holy Spirit; in this way it “turn[s] counsels into commandments.”<sup>5</sup> The official doctrine cited in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls for *obsequium*, which is literally translated from Latin as “submission” and “respect” and practically translated for Catholics as the call to be open and willing toward the teaching with an effort to see its truth and implement it.<sup>6</sup> Not every teaching carries this weight, but the whole of the Church’s moral authority because of these principles stretches into all facets of Catholic life.

This includes Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, released in 1968, which supported the minority opinion of a special conciliar committee. It stated that under no circumstance is the use of any artificial contraception permissible within marriage. This effort of formal Magisterial ruling came in response to the increasing availability and widespread acceptance of the birth control pill by women in the Western world, to the shock of conservative members of the faith. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was not the beginning of

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclicals and other declarations by the pontiff, however, it must be noted, are not officially infallible. Only two specific teachings of the popes have been declared secure under papal infallibility and their subject is not pertinent here. Despite this, Church teaching and ruling are meant to hold serious authority for Catholics.

<sup>2</sup> Paul VI, *Lumen gentium*, Dogmatic constitution on the Church, Vatican Web site, November 21, 1964, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vatii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph A. Komochak, “Ordinary Papal Magisterium and Religious Assent,” *Contraception: Authority and Dissent*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 101.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel C. Maguire, “Moral Inquiry and Religious Assent,” *Contraception: Authority and Dissent*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 142.

<sup>5</sup> F. H. Drinkwater, *Birth Control and Natural Law* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965), 36.

<sup>6</sup> “Magisterium,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 806.

women's or couples' strategies to control fertility; it then became public discourse for the first time because of the new chemical product so easily available for purchase. This sudden accessibility of birth control emerged before the backdrop of second wave feminism that pulled for women to have more rights and privileges equal with men beyond merely suffrage. The new contraceptive also arose in the cultural environment of a rebuilding and flourishing post-war Western world in which the rising labor economies opened for working mothers, for possibly the first time, the potential to bear too many children for the good of the family.<sup>7</sup> "Too many children" was a new concept. In agricultural and small-scale market economies, feeding more mouths (assuming and praying those babies survive childhood and the infant mortality rates our modern medicine largely eradicated) was less of a financial burden than it became for wage-earning, urban jobs of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A quintessential Antebellum family in the United States may never have been able to have too many children to help run their farm effectively, much less burden it, but an urban family bearing Baby Boomers would probably only logistically be able to support up to a certain number of children, and the enormous health advancements would (thankfully) make protecting the lives of those children they already had much more assured.<sup>8</sup>

Some saw *Humanae Vitae's* contraception prohibition as strongly holding fast to faith and morals in a world steadily declining in those areas—contraception had rarely been spoken about in public forum, much less commodified in association with the feminist and sexual liberation movements as a means for women to take control of their

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<sup>7</sup> Sydney Callahan, "Procreation and Control," *The Catholic Case for Contraception*, ed. Daniel Callahan (London: the Macmillan Company, 1969), 45.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Novak, "Frequent, Even Daily, Communion," *The Catholic Case for Contraception*, ed. Daniel Callahan (London: the Macmillan Company, 1969), 96.

bodies and their futures through radically self-determining means. Others viewed the document as a contradiction of the recently completed Second Vatican Council (1960-1964), which placed more emphasis on spirituality and conscience over such strict legalism in the Church, and they felt that such personal decisions should be left to each individual or each couple.<sup>9</sup> That controversy continues today with implications for not only contraceptive use but also the role of conscience in light of the teaching authority of the Church, the moral compass and rationality paradigms of Catholic sexual ethics, and other issues that will emerge throughout this paper.

Forty-five years after the release of *Humanae Vitae*, over 90 percent of Catholic women say they use some form of contraception,<sup>10</sup> statistically no different from the rest of the population. There is a decisive disconnect in the minds of many women between the Church's doctrine and their personal preferences and beliefs on this issue. In current politics, certain Catholic organizations are refusing to participate in health care reform measures that will mandate funding birth control prescriptions for their members, evidence of their strength of conviction and weighty "sincerely held religious beliefs." In contrast, many women who identify themselves as practicing Catholics choose to take such prescriptions. They may do so knowingly in opposition to the Church and not deem it relevant, or with some personal justification they believe excuses them, or they may not fully realize the Church's teaching or its reasons concerning openness to life and proper means of avoiding, rather than preventing, pregnancy. Others, however, devotedly adhere to the method the Church suggests as an alternative: Natural Family Planning (NFP), the

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<sup>9</sup> Charles E. Curran, "Natural Law and Contemporary Moral Theology," *Contraception: Authority and Dissent*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 171.

<sup>10</sup> *Guttmacher Institute*. "Guttmacher Statistic on Catholic Women's Contraceptive Use." *Guttmacher Institute Media Center*, Guttmacher Institute, February 15, 2012, accessed November 5, 2012, <http://www.guttmacher.org/media/inthenews/2012/02/15/index.html>.

purposeful timing of sex around a woman's fertility pattern to prevent or aim for conception, depending on what the couple has discerned as God's will for their family. Even in the short descriptions introduced here, it is clear that individual Catholics approach this intimate issue in drastically different fashions with distinct attitudes towards morality and value judgment.

The expansive variety of attitudes from within the same religion that see the same moral issue so divisively should be explored. Religiously speaking, there is a strong disconnect between the leadership entity of the faith and many of its members' beliefs and practices. Sociologically, the dynamic of an individual's perceived relationship to the uniting—though not necessarily ruling—group engenders the discussion of justification of moral principles and actions in cases such as these. Whatever the word of the Church, each of its members internalizes a perspective from the Church as he or she deems fit. The Catholic Church's officially stated rationality is what is offered them as explanation, imperative, and justification for a course of action. The Church and every religious community throughout history, however, has been composed of a fluid group of people interpreting, reinterpreting, emphasizing, discerning, and changing focus of the explanations and imperatives they have received from the leading hierarchy. The people who compose the institution reflect themselves back upon it.

### Methodology and Intent

I have compiled in this work an anthology of married<sup>11</sup> Catholic women's interpretations of and reactions to the Church's moral stance against contraception. During our intensive, one-on-one, qualitative interviews, they voiced perspectives about

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<sup>11</sup> The Catholic Church, in its high regard for the sanctity of sex, prohibits sex outside of marriage. Therefore, the discussion of this paper will assume that the couple involved is married, unless otherwise noted.

which scholars have been debating for decades. I have sought to capture their circumstances and methods of understanding that influenced their decisions regarding this element of the Catholic faith.

I have intended to use this collection of segments, built from my personal interviews with the women described, to analyze the differences in understanding and application of Church teaching in this matter that stem from the individuals' maintaining different rationality type for their decisions. One of the discipline's founding minds, sociologist Max Weber described the following four types of rationality, four methods of approaching and making ethical decisions.<sup>12</sup>

- Practical rationality involves assessment of one's circumstances to determine the best course of action for gain. Ends justify means. If we use the opening plot line of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* as an example, practical rationality justifies stealing food to feed one's family, seeing that necessity as a moral obligation to fill. It could also support the reasoning to not harm a local small business by stealing its profit-making inventory.
- Theoretical rationality attaches meaning and abstract concepts to daily life and the resulting, appropriate action. Continuing our example, if one conceptualizes stealing bread as an act of love and mercy, he or she might do so, but if one sees the situation through a lens of fairness or justice, he or she would be inclined not to steal.

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<sup>12</sup> Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," and "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions," *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford UP, Galaxy, 1958.

Rogers Brubaker, *The Limits of Rationality: An Essay on the Social and Moral Thought of Max Weber*, (Allen & Unwin, 1984).

- Substantive rationality demands complete compatibility of action with valued concepts, striving for consistency in its approach to moral dilemmas. Building off of theoretical rationality, every moral action must be congruent with the theoretical values important to the individual. A moral agent would experience cognitive dissonance after violating those guiding, interlocking principles. It would be difficult for a substantively rational person to steal the bread if his or her guiding principles included justice and fairness, but he or she could justify stealing if those principles were charity and mercy.
- Formal rationality universally applies rules, laws, and regulations to all individuals and situations. In weighing options, it usually inquires about the results of extreme application. If everyone stole bread, one may think, the market system could not function. He or she could also reason, however, that all people should be kept from starving, and this would encourage stealing the bread for this purpose.

Diversity in held rationalities or rationality combinations creates the significant variety in these Catholic women's thinking concerning contraceptive methods. As mentioned above, the contexts and conclusions of these rationalities have changed in the Western world during the last century. In the following chapters I will attempt to accurately convey the reasons as well as the rationality types of each woman with whom I spoke. I asked each of them a variety of questions formulated according to each rationality structure to discern their evaluative moral thought processes. I sought to

identify whether there is a correlation between rationality type and choice as regards the use of contraceptives, even when the types are combined or layered upon each other.

From the standpoint of both the sociologist and the scholar of religion, theology cannot be discussed in such details as absolute truth or the will of God, but only in the interpretation and enactment by the faithful. Theology is not solely an academic endeavor—it is interpreted; it is lived. Its nuances are deciphered, fulfilled, and formed in the reactions and personal decisions of the believers who consider themselves faithful to that theology. Those who form the body of believers shape the belief and the reality of the religious community, however conscientiously they adhere to the doctrinal, ritual, and legal aspects of their faith.

The work that follows was not completed to evaluate or seek judgment on the Roman Catholic Church's prohibition of artificial contraception. It was conducted to delve into the lived experience of modern Catholic women who have confronted this issue throughout their lives

#### THE PIVOTAL *HUMANAE VITAE*

*Each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life... And if each of these essential qualities, the unitive and the procreative, is preserved, the use of marriage fully retains its sense of true mutual love and its ordination to the supreme responsibility of parenthood to which man is called.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, On the regulation of birth, Vatican Web site, July 25, 1968, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_pvi\\_enc\\_25071968\\_humanae-vitae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_pvi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html), 11-12.

Such is the primary call and message of Pope Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae*, and therein lies the complexity and complementarity of what a marriage is supposed to accomplish and in which it exists. The prevailing argument against contraceptive use is that in inhibiting the procreative function of sex, a function naturally designed by God, the contracepting couple cannot fully and genuinely express that "mutual love." Anything held back during the marital act degrades the sanctity of the act and of the couple's relationship itself. Further, as stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and building off of this conceptualization of marriage and sex,

*Fecundity is a gift, an end of marriage, for conjugal love naturally tends to be fruitful. A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment.*

*This particular doctrine...is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.*<sup>14</sup>

The issues therefore at stake with reception and integration of this document into family life include not merely potential parents' discernment of children and the emerging shape of their families, but the most significant aspects of their intimate relationship with each other. The available and preferred manners of fostering love, communication, faith, trust in God, and their roles as responsible stewards of their families and the Church of God all hinge on one's interpretation of this doctrine and the meshing of these powerful, eloquent quotations with daily life.

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<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2366.

AN INVITATION TO FULLNESS: THE DEEP WISDOM OF THE CHURCH

I met with Teresa<sup>15</sup> at her home right before the nightly rosary was prayed with the six of her eight children who were either still living there or were home for Christmas. There was some rambunctious shuffling and giggling here and there, but everyone knew all the words and the timing of each gesture. Then the youngest ones were shuffled off to bed and the older ones out of the room while their mother and I sat down to talk about this shade of Catholic identity she and her family had fully embraced and, frankly, to discuss the deeper answer to the question I know she has received often: “Why do you have so many kids?”

She herself grew up with seven siblings in a traditionally conservative Catholic family, so previous to any moral questions of how to space them, she entered marriage with the expectation of a large family, which her husband shared because of a similar background. It was not until after bearing two children in 21 months that they confronted the more exact decision-making and reasoning surrounding future planning.

Teresa described growing up in Catholic schools in the transitional period immediately following Vatican II. The Church was renegotiating itself, reinterpreting its teachings and guiding approaches in a newly liberal fashion. “There was a lot of confusion,” she said. Teresa feels her faith formation or understanding of the heart of the Church suffered because of this faulted understanding. The Church “has never changed,” she told me. “The teaching would never change.” The wisdom and the Spirit of God that guides its leaders and the Magisterium to proclaim those teachings has always come from the same place.

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<sup>15</sup> To protect the privacy of my informants, all names are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been changed or omitted.

This is her understanding now. Her theological and moral development to reach this point matured in adulthood. Over time, Teresa realized the deep wisdom and universal teaching of the words of the Church, which includes its pro-life stance and sexual ethics. In explaining this, she does not mention *Humanae Vitae*, the *Catechism*, or other Church documents that speak on these matters directly, but she clearly employs their vocabulary and logic structures of argument. Teresa details the importance of honoring the God-given purposes of sex for the benefit of the couple and the very institution of marriage: “When you take out the life-giving [possibility of sex], you become selfish and the unitive can’t happen. Not in the way designed by God, and let’s face it—marriage is tough. Take that out of the picture, and yeah, I can see why marriages [undergo] strain.” Separating the unitive—love and relationship building—and procreative—uninhibited openness to conception—aspects of sex permits spouses to use each other as objects, even if unintentionally, ignoring their God-given dignity and the dignity of the sacred act of marriage they are sharing.<sup>16</sup>

God, his will revealed through Church teaching according to Teresa, designed sex with both of these functions which each relationship must honor for the good of both individuals, the relationship, and broader society. Teresa places utmost trust in the deep wisdom of the Church, a theme we spoke of several times, and she identifies the effects of the two polar approaches to the correlations among marriage, sex, and children. “In my experience in seeing other couples, the fruits of [NFP] are very obvious,” she told me. “The people that live the faith according to what the Church teaches are 99 percent non-divorced [and] have really good, strong foundations for their families. It’s not 100

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<sup>16</sup> John Paul II, “On Love and Responsibility: The Challenge of Human Sexuality,” *Love and Responsibility Foundation*, last modified Summer 2002, [http://www.catholicculture.com/jp2\\_on\\_l&r.pdf](http://www.catholicculture.com/jp2_on_l&r.pdf), 228-230.

percent, but... I do believe that the teachings—there’s wisdom behind them in my opinion.” In Teresa’s eyes, the best way to nurture a loving, communicative relationship between spouses is to avoid “contraceptive separation,” as it is described by Mary Rosera Joyce,<sup>17</sup> and rather to practice NFP. The couple thereby faithfully surrenders the future of their family to God’s will, not to the “need for control” by grasping at artificial contraception. This echoes the explanation for the growing “contraceptive mentality” in the last century in that, “Man feels now that he is the master of nature and of the self, the nearly absolute legislator who governs the laws of life.”<sup>18</sup>

Teresa, instead, told me strongly, “We don’t have any control. And I see that everywhere... They’re controlling their fertility, they’re controlling their marriages, they’re controlling [the] children they have. There’s just, there’s this need to control everything.” She spoke of a unified life of devotion to God and the utter lack of control we have in so many aspects of life that unquestionably bleed into this area as well. The faith-filled act of “discern[ing] as a couple with God as your center... what his will for you is” with a renewed conversation about whether to conceive “every month” keeps that divine will in the midst of the family’s reality. Being ever-open to his plan entails avoiding man-made interventions to conception, and it honors the image and sanctity of marriage to which we as humans are called by preserving our unity with God’s co-creative power in procreation. An important distinction relevant here is the meaning of openness. “‘Open’ does not mean wanting a child now; it means having done nothing to

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Rosera Joyce, “The Meaning of Contraception,” *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 108.

<sup>18</sup> Elzbieta Wójcik, “Natural Regulation of Conception and Contraception,” *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 423, 438.

close out the possibility of having children.”<sup>19</sup> Teresa finds fullness and unity in such a mentality as the Catholic Church’s model for living as a couple and as a family.

As an individual, as a woman, God’s plan comes to fulfillment in this method for Teresa by encouraging her and other women to celebrate living by their bodies’ natural functions and God’s fullest intent for them. They are not altered or stifled with chemical or barrier means of “fixing fertility” which is not something “broken” or by literally physically cutting women off from their husbands. Teresa, rather, considers NFP “empower[ing to] women... We’re not slaves to a synthetic drug and all the side effects of it. And we’re empowered to be women and mothers, and there’s nothing wrong with—it’s a good thing to be a mom. It’s a beautiful thing.” A beautiful thing from which she does not want women to deprive themselves. “A child is a gift... It’s an eternal soul... [to] be welcomed and treasured,” and marriage is the hallowed locus for that gift. She stated that God’s plan for a fruitful marriage does not necessitate masses of children for each couple or a pregnancy every year or two, but it does entail deliberate valuing of children and the uninterrupted process by which they come. Therefore to close the possibility of conception for long periods of time, such as with the Pill, IUD, or other long term methods, forces an essential element from the institution—the *sacrament*—of marriage. This is about the nature of marriage and its purpose for Teresa. “When you engage in the marital act you know that the outcome could be a child, so you don’t go into it thinking if the outcome is a child I have to get rid of it... This is not just about contraception. This is about the effects of contraception.” This is about what Teresa sees as an unavoidable

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<sup>19</sup> Janet E. Smith, “Pope John Paul II and *Humanae Vitae*,” *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 245.

change in mentality toward sex and children when the natural connection between the two is intentionally, artificially thwarted.

While Teresa finds unfortunate changes in outlook and marital relationship to be the results of contraceptive use, the foundational prevailing argument against the morality of contraception resides in the natural law and the Catholic Church's particular understanding and framing of its elements. Natural law is the character of the world directly related to God's design; here, "natural" does not refer to spontaneous or easy.<sup>20</sup> Far from abstract, proponents argue, it is "the law of living itself" as divinely ordered.<sup>21</sup> This "theoretical knowledge concerning human nature" leads to "moral obligation governing human actions"<sup>22</sup> according to that created, inevitable nature. This keeps individuals in harmony not only with God but also with the very selves he created them to be.

The theory of natural law, also referred to as "order in creation,"<sup>23</sup> is the crux of the anti-contraception argument. *Humanae Vitae* does not refer to divine revelation as founding for its premises but to natural law;<sup>24</sup> human nature is reason enough for its teaching to be apparent. Sex results in procreation, and the "positive and deliberate intervention"<sup>25</sup> in this process is an affront to a biological truth. Natural Family Planning, however, which avoids pregnancy through inaction rather than action, works within the natural order of the marital relationship without offending its dignity and thereby

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<sup>20</sup> Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum laboris*, The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization, Vatican Web site, June 26, 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20140626\\_instrumentum-laboris-familia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20140626_instrumentum-laboris-familia_en.html), sec. 30.

<sup>21</sup> F. H. Drinkwater, *Birth Control and Natural Law* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965), 17.

<sup>22</sup> Germain G. Grisez, *Contraception and the Natural Law* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing, 1964), 50.

<sup>23</sup> Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris*, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Maguire, 129.

<sup>25</sup> Drinkwater, 32.

“collaborat[es] with God’s creative power.”<sup>26</sup> The principles of natural law hold, “To prevent any human act from attaining its natural end is intrinsically immoral,”<sup>27</sup> and so the possibility of conception must be preserved in every instance of sex. Contrary to what the term “natural law” suggests, the actual artificiality of contraceptive interference such as condoms or the Pill does not deem it immoral, but the very interference itself, a “free volition against the procreative good.”<sup>28</sup> Again, the incredible occurrence of new life that takes place is protected as the purpose of this form of intimacy in marriage.

Teresa lauded discipline, such as that advocated through the natural law argument, as necessary though sadly undervalued in our society for both personal development and the success of a marriage relationship. She advises that people, even couples deeply in love with each other, benefit from the periods of abstinence that NFP prescribes if they are not seeking to have children at that time. They learn not only to value and express their love for each other in means other than sexual, but they also enjoy the frequent opportunity to work on what Teresa calls “a good self-discipline,” in similar wording to the teaching of Pope John Paul II. Sex is not supposed to be the “outcome of ungovernable passions.”<sup>29</sup> To Teresa, it is maybe because of our lack of control of greater things that we should learn to control ourselves and our own impulses and therefore be more fully open to the will of God.

The discipline of monthly periods of abstinence by a couple who has decided they are not ready for another child in their family builds their marriage, so she does see a practical application grounded in a tangible advantage for her relationship with her

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<sup>26</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Grisez, 20.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, “Pope John Paul II and *Humanae Vitae*,” 246.

husband. The practical end to the means applied here, however, yields abstract outcomes. This conversation about conception or avoidance must take place every month, as do several points of communication about specific timing. Janet Smith<sup>30</sup> and other Catholic apologists have cited the increased depth of a couple's relationship when they are prompted monthly to converse about not only their timing of intimate acts but also of the future of their marriage, their overall state, and where changes may be made in coming months.

Teresa adds that this communication and the impetus of abstinence when they are avoiding pregnancy also safeguards both husband and wife from becoming objects to each other. In Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* collection of addresses,<sup>31</sup> he stresses the probability of the couple's using each other as objects for pleasure if they are always available for sex, which is a foreboding also expressed in *Humanae Vitae*<sup>32</sup> and its family of documents.<sup>33</sup> Contraception takes away from the full function of the human body, a body made in the image and likeness of God,<sup>34</sup> so a pause of several days preserves the complete humanity and pure love between them, and it encourages its expression in supplementary ways. Teresa told me twice that "marriage is hard enough," even a marriage whose members give their all to centering their relationship around God. Thus anything they could do to improve their relationship by deepening their love for each other and better communicating that love would be worth it.

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<sup>30</sup> Janet E. Smith, "The Moral Use of Natural Family Planning," *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, *The Redemption of the Body and Sacramentality of Marriage (Theology of the Body)*, *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, 2005, [http://www.catholicprimer.org/papal/theology\\_of\\_the\\_body.pdf](http://www.catholicprimer.org/papal/theology_of_the_body.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> See John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981); Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (1930); Pope Pius XII, "Allocution to the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives," 1951.

<sup>34</sup> Genesis 1:27, NAV, a foundational verse for moral theory.

I asked every woman I interviewed whether she felt the Church “should have command over the bedroom,” in those exact words. Often, I received a sharp reaction to the word “command,” whatever her answer was. Teresa, as adamant as she was about the wisdom of the Church and its rightful pervasiveness in the moral lives of its members, disliked the word “command.” Instead, she feels that the Church offers “guideposts” out of love for its flock, “an invitation to a fullness that you would not encounter...in a secular world.” She sees God as a parent lovingly imposing rules on a child for their benefit. This guide is what is healthiest spiritually, emotionally, and physically for us, and it merits following with faithful exactness. “It’s a beautiful, beautiful way to look at life.”

Teresa’s perspective on contraception is consistent with her reverence for the sanctity of life from the moment of conception until natural death. This respect for life begins before the life even begins, encouraging a loving and appreciative attitude toward the miracle of life, which is viewed a co-creation between the couple and God. Every sexual act must therefore be left open to the possibility of conception. This honors God, his design for human physiology, the marital union of the couple, and sex itself. These pieces of moral theory fit together tightly for Teresa, evidencing a substantive basis of rationality for her thinking. She described marriage and its fruits or ends to me in heavily abstract or theoretical terms. Her belief that this theoretical, substantive rationality structure for approaching marriage as part of God’s plan for all people—written into the very natural law that governs human life—also reveals formal (universally applied) rational thinking.

No individual can be simplified to represent an institution by any means, but in her clear understanding and explanation of almost exact Church teaching in our conversation, I found traditional Catholicism exemplified fairly directly in Teresa. The Catholic Church also employs an integrated, interlocking substantive rationality that unites its theological and moral teachings based on theoretical concepts and meanings beyond the tangible world. Because it proclaims the truth for all nations and every situation, it also holds a formal rationality. These interwoven realities and reasonings are meant for all individuals. Dissent arises, however, among those who find holes in those reasons, or those who feel the need to determine their own realities.

#### HITTING THE CAFETERIA: WHAT JESUS REALLY CARED ABOUT

“I definitely have an opinion about the Catholic Church, and about contraception,” Hannah wrote me in an email. Referred to me by a friend who went to her parish and had contacted several women on my behalf to gauge interest, Hannah then insinuated that she might have an opinion different from most Catholic women about this matter, though she identifies as Catholic herself. Considering the variety of opinions I already knew there to be, her assumed unique opinion intrigued me.

Over lunch in her medical practice office, Hannah described to me a Church she sees as a group of individuals who have fixed laws for its followers and at times changed the focus of Jesus Christ’s teachings. “I agree with the social justice teachings and how to treat people,” she said. “I don’t agree with the teachings that get harped on to minutiae, details that I don’t really think Christ cares about... things that somebody decided by

committee rather than by [saying], ‘Jesus said this.’” Most of these problematic, minutely-focused teachings, for Hannah, it turns out, deal with sexual ethics.

She has consciously made Catholicism a part of her two children’s lives, sending them to Catholic schools, though she feels “you can overdo it on religion.” I sensed her personal grappling with the standards of the Church’s viewpoints that she found too restricting. Hannah exerted an individualism in her decisions and outlooks with a proud affect.

Hannah told me she is a “Cafeteria Catholic,” a term she now embraces, joking that she has used the label as reinforcement for what she chooses to adopt or release in Church theological, practical, and specifically moral teaching. In her fifties now, she has always been a member of the Catholic Church, educated by nuns she characterized as liberal in their questioning both of details of Christ’s life and of sexual ethics. For example, she remembers discussing in class whether Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a romantic relationship and their critically questioning why the Gospels of Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and Judas were excluded from the Biblical Canon. She remembers hearing about priests granting families permission to use birth control once they had “enough” children. Hannah identified these years as forming her outlook of critique toward the Church’s mandates. She emphatically described the necessity of things like taking care of the poor and homeless being far more important than what people do in their bedrooms.

Hannah therefore disagrees with the Church’s prohibition of artificial contraceptive methods, and she espouses a practical, pragmatic rationality towards moral codes that allow her to arrive at this conclusion. When our conversation treated contraception issues directly, her medical degree clearly framed her arguments. Women’s

health and women's agency in protecting their health and controlling their bodies were important focuses for her. She told me that if her teenaged daughter were sexually active, she would prefer her to be on the Pill rather than "secretly running out for the morning-after pill". Shortly before I met with Hannah in May 2013, a federal court ordered emergency contraception available over the counter to minors, overturning the past requirement of a prescription for those not yet 16 years old.<sup>35</sup> Hannah listed several medical procedures that are less traumatic and have less risk in her estimate that she cannot perform on patients without parental consent, so she wondered about the wisdom of letting such "young girls" seek this kind of medical treatment on their own.

For Hannah, then, contraception and family planning greatly involve the medical health and the well-being of the potential parent. The vital element of personal control of her, or any woman's, own body also stems from this, much like it does for Teresa. Hannah told me she was more comfortable herself and would encourage other women as well to use birth control methods they could employ entirely by themselves, without dependence on anyone. Natural Family Planning and condoms, for example, both require male cooperation. While Teresa had appreciated the united responsibility of planning that she and her husband took on together through NFP, Hannah would prefer her own complete self-determination by means of the Pill or other methods she could control herself. Interestingly, both women felt empowered in their femininity and relationships with their husbands through their respective and vastly different arrangements of planning, preventing, and spacing births.

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<sup>35</sup> Pam Belluck, "Judge Strikes Down Age Limits on Morning-After Pill," *The New York Times*, April 5, 2013. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/06/health/judge-orders-fda-to-make-morning-after-pill-available-over-the-counter-for-all-ages.html?smid=pl-share&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/06/health/judge-orders-fda-to-make-morning-after-pill-available-over-the-counter-for-all-ages.html?smid=pl-share&_r=0)

The dynamic perspectives on agency for both mindsets these two women hold utilize control to enable their full femininity and sexuality. One critique of *Humanae Vitae* states that it overcorrects too far, passing beyond stating that humans do not have total dominion over their bodies to actually subjecting them to those bodies.<sup>36</sup> Hannah was able to delay her children until after medical school while still fulfilling all elements of a physical relationship with her husband when he was home from his frequent business trips. Contraception made that possible and allowed her to achieve her goals. Teresa, however, feels freed from the constraint of any device or medication to prevent children and block her relationship with her husband and rather has embraced motherhood—eight times—with openness throughout her marriage. Natural Family Planning made that possible. These women experience an agency over their bodies and their developing families due to “not being a slave to her body,” whether in controlling her fertility or in using a discipline that works around it.

Throughout Hannah’s and my discussion, health and safety overrode morality as constant factors for decision-making. Practicality and ease both also held substantial weight for Hannah when comparing her options. She acknowledged that NFP, with which she was familiar in theory, is difficult and requires cooperative patience and planning by both parties. She told me that she had used a variety of artificial contraceptive methods, including the Pill, condoms, IUDs, and others, and she described their advantages and disadvantages in terms of simplicity of use and effectiveness rather than by moral gravity—they are all permissible in her eyes. While she recognized that these practices contradict the Church, she did not feel they contradict God or Christ, whom she

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<sup>36</sup> Bernard Häring, “The Inseparability of the Unitive-Procreative Functions of the Marital Act,” *The Catholic Case for Contraception*, ed. Daniel Callahan (London: the Macmillan Company, 1969), 181.

personally identifies as sources of accountability. Disagreement between the divine and its earthly institution would pose a fundamental problem to the religious person, and their dissonance calls for a clarifying of the individual's own belief.

Blunt, unapologetic, and at times irreverent, Hannah did not lightly dismiss her spiritual life or the Church. However, its composition of people is more problematic for her. She sees many of the rules that govern Catholic sexual ethics as arbitrary decisions made by “asexual or men who are in secret sexual relationships and in denial” of the realities of sex and the relationships that surround it, both inside and exterior to marriage. Hannah pointed out that she has never heard of a denomination with married clergy that promotes programs like NFP with such long periods of abstinence and such meticulous measurement required, so she feels the decision makers in the Church are removed from and naïve about the nature of marital relationships. She had long thought her disagreement with the Church on such policies as this made her a radical Catholic. When her home city of Denver, Colorado, hosted Pope John Paul II's World Youth Day in 1993, however, and the gaze of the Church from around the world was on Denver, she read more material than she had ever encountered before on liberal Catholic views, written by people who appreciated the Church but found many of its ethics and requirements outdated. So she was not alone, she realized, in her mistrust of a human institution's subjective policies.

It is a tragically flawed human institution, Hannah decided. Though she describes most priests in general as having good hearts, after the child abuse scandals began surfacing in the early 2000s, Hannah says she felt freed from the authority of this institution. Taking a pill or using a condom, she said, holds no great sinful weight next to

the stacked layers of institutional cover-ups that protected the abusers of the most vulnerable. Instead, she described reading and studying the Gospels on her own to learn about Christ's words and priorities. On many sexual morality issues, such as homosexuality, she says, "Jesus didn't go there...He didn't say, 'Love one another but make sure the law says two men can't...live together.' That just wasn't part of the scheme at all." She feels Christ is more concerned about welcoming and loving our neighbors rather than judging what those who love each other do in their own bedrooms.

She names one who follows all of the Church's "regulations" an "idealistic Catholic." For Hannah, using NFP and avoiding artificial contraception were not ideals that fit in her life. Her husband was out of town on business trips more often than he was home, and he could often stay only for short windows of time. Hannah feels their marriage would have suffered if her cycle prevented them from being able to have sex before they wanted to have children on the relatively rare occasions that he was home. While she was finishing medical school and before she and her husband felt individually that they were ready to be parents, she chose to contracept. She is against abortion and maintains that it is the taking of an unborn life. Hannah claimed that it is better for pregnancy to be altogether reliably prevented by sexually active couples rather than their risking having children they did not plan to have. Her matter-of-fact discussion of this scenario was balanced with deep compassion for the individuals affected: "I know enough about the social problems of women who have kids...they just can't afford to keep, [to] take good care of." Hannah therefore examines contraception responsibly done through its far-reaching future implications, complementing her practicality of personal readiness and even convenience to have a child. The good of a child's life—intended to

be conceived or not—is in the balance, and Hannah prefers a broad social caution and intention over lack of readiness and ability regarding the new child’s life.

After reaching this conclusion that the Church is human with so many broken facets, she sought a trusted priest’s opinion in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Realizing with his help that she would not feel at home in any other Christian community that treats the sacraments in the same manner as the Catholic Church, which form a crucial aspect of her personal spiritual life, she decided to stay. Again applying a practical rational perspective to her situation, she examined the end results of staying in the Church or finding another, and she decided to stay because, “Where else would I really go?”

Hannah is not the only modern Catholic who has found herself in this position. *Humanae Vitae* has spurred the rise of this phenomenon with which Hannah so readily identified, the “Cafeteria Catholic.” The tension *Humanae Vitae* caused, with the myriad reactions to not only its tenets but also to the changing character of the Church after the Second Vatican Council, was unique. According to one study, nearly four times as many Catholics moved towards disagreement with the contraception prohibition than came to agree with it after the release of *Humanae Vitae*;<sup>37</sup> this was not how the Catholic faithful usually reacted to new moral ruling—this was not assent or acceptance. And the encyclical did not even bring new doctrine but a reiteration of tradition. Rather than leave en masse, a growing number of Catholics, in their practical assessment of what they, their spouses, and their families needed, decided to stay in the Church but to only practice *most* of its instructions. Many, however, did find the prescribed methods of family planning practically applicable in their lives, and they followed its teachings in full.

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<sup>37</sup> Maurice J. Moore, *Death of a Dogma?* (Chicago: Community and Family Study Center—University of Chicago, 1973), 16, 19.

It was now possible to be a Cafeteria Catholic, and it was not rare. Hannah is not and has not been as solitary as she assumed in her questions and disagreements about Church doctrine. She has carefully selected the overriding themes, rules, and attitudes of Catholicism to incorporate in her personal faith, and contraception is a poignant example. The following chapters will explore further dynamics of contraceptive use or avoidance as a means of either embodying the faith fully or molding the faith to the individual Catholic as she makes it her own. Is total adherence necessary to be a Catholic, or a member of any religion for that matter? Is the appropriation of key teachings at the discretion of one's practicality an act of taking ownership of one's religion or of compromising that religion? How one acts out his or her religion may determine just what one's religion is, or it may even impact the religion.

### UNIVERSAL RULES AND THEIR EXCEPTIONS

How much of Catholicism, of any religious affiliation, is optional? Is there a qualifying amount that one must reach to be considered Catholic, *fully Catholic*?

Holly would probably tell you that none is optional under normal circumstances, and full practice is necessary. She sees her religion as an identity that she acts out, and she describes this in blatantly stark terms.

Holly and I talked on a Sunday afternoon after she came home from Mass and brunch. She and her family have always identified as staunchly Catholic, a characterization that was apparent as she traced for me over 70 years of life, starting with Catholic school, the early years of her marriage to her husband, the births and childhood of their four children, and their relationship with their many grandchildren. She included

in her recounting many sacraments and miracles of saints' intercession for her family. Most of all, she exuded a passionate faithfulness to the Church and its teachings.

Holly and her husband married and started their family before Vatican II and *Humanae Vitae*, unlike Teresa and Hannah. She seemed to take Church teaching as matter of fact and part of her identity. When a number of moral questions came up in our conversation, she straightforwardly explained her position multiple times with such phrases as, "I'm Catholic, so I believe" or "so that's why I disagree with" whatever issue along the lines of Canon Law. That identity of Catholicism so integral to who she is and how she lives causes me to ask what exactly is essential to that identity. Holly considers Catholicism necessarily all-encompassing of one's life. Every action, such as promising God she would give up cigarettes if her severely ill child would be healed or hanging saint medallions over his hospital crib, contributes to that identity. She expresses her faith heavily in her actions.

Because of her love and excitement for children and her Catholic identity embodied in this way, Holly had four children in five and a half years, beginning shortly after she got married. She told me she did not use any method of family planning at that time, not even the rhythm method, which was the (often less accurate) precursor to NFP.<sup>38</sup> Holly acknowledged that after having that number of children so quickly, she and her husband probably would have begun using the rhythm method. The severe health issues their fourth child, Eddie, underwent during his first months of life changed their plan for their family, however. While the first three children had been fairly small at

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<sup>38</sup> The rhythm method, like NFP, involves timing sex based on ovulation to either avoid or attempt conceiving. It assumed a constant, regular fertility cycle, however, which decreased its reliability for many couples. Natural Family Planning methods today greatly increase accuracy by tracking signs of ovulation to allow the woman to know with much less error whether or not she would likely conceive that particular day.

birth, which suggests that they were born early, newborn Eddie struggled with pneumonia and heart and lung conditions for months. Holly described to me in heartfelt detail, with tears welling in her voice at times, the diagnoses, the terminal prognoses, and their praying family's constant devotion to St. Jude, the patron saint of hopeless causes, for intercession.

After living with family to help care for their other children while Holly administered hourly treatments and therapy to Eddie, one day x-rays finally showed little Eddie to be healthy, as he continues to be today. Holly calls this a miracle, attributing her son's healing to St. Jude's intercession. "If I would've lost that baby, I could never have gone on," she told me. Because of how close they came to losing Eddie, she and her husband decided not to have any more children.

They invited a priest friend they had known well since before he entered seminary to their house for dinner and explained their situation. Holly reiterated to him that she did not and does not believe in using condoms or chemical birth control, but they asked for his "permission" to use contraceptives, which the understanding priest granted. For Holly, the point was not that she was breaking a rule or making an exception, or even, frankly, the rule itself. It was her relationship to the law of the Church that was most important. She thought it paramount to submit to priestly authority, though here it granted a different judgment than the supposed universal belief of the Church. Coming from a priest, a man *in persona Christi*, he represented Church authority applied to her specific, serious case. She believes strongly in the justice of the Church's teaching and its broad application, suggesting a formal rationality grounded in Church authority, but she allows for exceptions for severe cases such as hers or others that protect the health of the mother

and future children. Holly explained, “There wasn’t anything wrong with what we did I don’t think, but we had the priest’s permission.” She remains otherwise against contraceptive use, associating its function for the majority of people as preventing pregnancy in unmarried relationships. “Sex is for marriage,” she told me, and “you [get] married to have children.”

Children are a sacred gift. It was out of fear of future children’s illness that Holly decided not to have any more. Similar to Hannah’s concern for the welfare of young women unable to care for children from unplanned pregnancies, Holly was protecting prospective children and her current family. The Church doctrines prohibiting contraception partially do so out of appreciation for children. “Children are a gift of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth,”<sup>39</sup> is frequently cited as reason to remain open in one’s marriage to God’s blessings. Children as the purpose and focal point of marriage is a perspective both held and confronted by many of the women with whom I spoke, and their varied opinions will soon be added to Holly’s.

The phenomenon of the exception to the rule, the exception granted by the priest, bishop, or even pope, has been a difficult subject to weigh. Much of Catholic moral teaching focuses on stringent definitions of right and wrong for universal application. This definitively employs formal rationality. Right, wrong, just, unjust, righteous, and sinful are absolutes. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* outlines moral issues according to criteria. For example, evaluation of moral action rests on three factors:

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<sup>39</sup> Psalm 127:3-4, NAV.

object, intention, and circumstance.<sup>40</sup> In this case, the Church considers the very object of the contraceptive act to be wrong and therefore not subject to influence by intention and circumstance. Regarding contraception and family planning, the Church speaks in polarities:

*When it is a question of harmonizing married love with the responsible transmission of life, the morality of the behavior does not depend on sincere intention and evaluation of motives alone; but it must be determined by objective criteria, criteria drawn from the nature of the person and his acts, criteria that respect the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love.*<sup>41</sup>

And, citing *Humanae Vitae* a few lines later:

*“Periodic continence, that is, the methods of birth regulation based on self-observation and the use of infertile periods, is in conformity with the objective criteria of morality. These methods respect the bodies of the spouses, encourage tenderness between them, and favor the education of an authentic freedom. In contrast, ‘every action which, whether in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible’ is intrinsically evil.”*<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1750-1754. In short summary, the inherent morality of whether an action, or the object considered, is inherently right or wrong offers chief pronouncement of something’s moral value. Next, right intention does not justify a wrong object (Ends do not justify the means as they would under the gaze of Weber’s practical rationality type.), but a wrong intention nullifies the goodness of a right object. Third, circumstance weighs not the action but the culpability of the actor, taking into account freedom of choice, alternative options, and other considerations.

<sup>41</sup> Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*, Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, (December 7, 1965), 51, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2368.

<sup>42</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, 14, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2370.

In his encyclical, *Familiaris Consortio: On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, in 1981, Pope John Paul II called the use of artificial contraception “objectively contradictory language” to marital love.<sup>43</sup> Yet within this Church of objectives, exceptions have been necessary. Holly felt she needed pastoral input to receive an exception. Hannah sees the Church’s moral guidelines as subject to her own judgment. The difference between their responses to their identified needs might be generational, as they grew up in the Church before and after not only the pivotal document *Humanae Vitae* but the revolutionary change in Catholic thinking spawned by Vatican II. It may also be a difference in personality or personal background separate from demographic data on these women. Teresa, a member of Hannah’s generation, cited Church authority to me in several instances as her justification for her actions, though she typically followed those with a closer explanation of why the Church “in her wisdom” teaches and has always taught what it does. Teresa, like the Catholic Church, ostensibly does not find room for exception even at the risk of extreme attrition.

I must pose a bold question, one some of my interviewees would be shocked to hear and for which others would be grateful. How does a moral platform based on stark opposites, inherent good or evil, serve a Church comprised of individuals with myriad diverse needs, backgrounds, and perspectives—or does it at all? Yet too much variety might teeter towards the slippery slope of relativism, which is often feared as a consequence of loosened regulation, of too many exceptions to the rules. It also provides a recurring argument against the allowance of contraceptive use. Administering and

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<sup>43</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, Apostolic exhortation on the role of the Christian family in the modern world, Vatican web site, November 22, 1981, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html), 32.

guiding any group of people requires universal statements of morality or conduct.

However, concerning some issues at least, is there, or should there be, room for a middle ground? Maybe the Church should not expect all families to operate under one ethical paradigm. Or maybe its guiding principles, at their roots, are universally applicable to each person. Dealing with contraception, the Church upholds as foremost the sanctity of marriage, respect of each spouse, openness to life, and love of children. These provide the theoretical platforms that compose a rationality structure defining its more detailed teachings. Is there a limit to the universally intended rulings under those principles? Integral to the answer is not only the relationship between Church teaching and the individual conscience's discernment but also the reach and role of Church authority in individual lives and exceptional situations.

#### NATURALLY OPEN

“Before, I thought, ‘Those are good ideas the Catholic Church has, but I don’t know if they apply to me or [if] they apply to everyone.’”

Karina shared with me her early acceptance of the Catholic faith she learned from her Central American family. This included many of its moral tenets on the basis of trust in its authority, its tradition of wisdom and theological examination. She viewed Catholicism as “an option,” the option she and her family chose, for how to view and respond to the world.

I met with Karina over coffee in her home during naptime for one child and between day camp and swim practice for the other, who is about to start middle school. At one point she thanked me for the opportunity of the convenient conversation starter

with her older daughter my coming had provided, to bring up just why Church teaching matters to us and why we follow it even when it is hard. Building from the initial perspective she had voiced above, I learned that what appeared to be a stance of straightforwardly accepting Church authority was a trust more fully earned by the institution, in Karina's eyes, when she identified and related to the practical wisdom behind its imperatives.

Regarding Weber's rationality types, I had expected to hear several women's stories and ideologies that fell in line with the decision-making processes of either Teresa or Hannah. Those like Teresa with substantive rational inclinations of complete compatibility of values with actions would align their lives with the Church's words universally, and their theoretical rationality would grant credence to the abstract arguments from which the Church draws its teaching. Openness to life, the essential preservation of both unitive and procreative functions of sex, and God's intending this for every married couple are aspects included in this "category" of perspective that I had envisioned. I had predicted the archetype Hannah represents emerging from my interviews as one who would fervently espouse practical rationality and be incredibly more likely to disagree with the Church about contraception. In tangible, ends-based terms, artificial contraceptive methods are often simpler for many and consume less time than NFP, and they negate the need for monthly phases of abstinence for the couple not prepared to conceive at that time. In these ways, I was prepared to see individuals grouped predictably.

People, however, are not categorical. Individuals acting on their sexuality, planning their families, defining their marriages in light of their faith, and negotiating that

faith and what it means to them and palpably in their lives, are not to be categorized so plainly. Holly already demonstrated her example of an exception to expectation. Karina, in a distinct fashion, offers an intricacy of thought, faith, and morality also well outside this ordering. It was practical rationalizing that explained and justified for her, not only the Church's prohibition of contraception, but thereafter its wisdom and authority even in such intimate matters. The following is how *Humanae Vitae* made Karina feel a more faithful Catholic and a more empowered woman.

Karina's father was a gynecologist, so it was a simple matter for her to start taking birth control pills to ease menstrual cramps, and it was just as simple to remain on the Pill after she got married, when she and her husband knew they wanted to wait a while before having any children. After a couple years, however, Karina read a nonreligious health book about the benefits of using "natural birth control," or tracking a woman's cycles to plan sex according to whether or not she wished to conceive, rather than the variety of chemical methods typically used. Focused on her health, she decided to try the book's methods. She remembers thinking at the beginning, "I'm doing this because I'm taking care of my body... This actually feels right, like I feel awkward taking these pills everyday."

A subpoint of the book's argument that also resonated with Karina was that, in her words, "as a woman, you should [value] your body and you shouldn't be putting these things into you to change you." Karina never expressed to me that she thought the Pill altogether unhealthy or dangerous, and her gynecologist father surely felt comfortable with her using the product, but she acknowledged that she felt it would be

better to try to work with her body rather than control it unnaturally using foreign chemicals. Her body deserves that.

In weighing the best method of preventing conception when she and her husband deemed necessary and how to do so most healthfully, Karina compared various means to accomplish her desired ends. These means gained more credence from, as well as granted credence to, the Church's teaching about the treatment of married couples' sexuality and their bodies. While the health risk pushed Karina away from chemical methods, the Church's doctrine rendered condoms and other barrier methods also largely unacceptable for her. She first encountered it when she studied *Humanae Vitae* in a parish group for women focused on fellowship, spiritual development, and apologetics education. For Karina, *Humanae Vitae* not only supported what she had come to believe was best for her own body and marital relationship but it theologically built upon those stances. It introduced a formative concept for her moral thinking: openness to life. This particular openness to life characterizes NFP as more than just "Catholic birth control." Beyond avoiding contraception, a couple must foster an active openness to life in their relationship. The Church's theoretical rationality here that focused on this openness as the *object* amplified and supplemented Karina's practical considerations.

According to the Catholic Church, this fundamental difference in attitude towards life validates Natural Family Planning with the right intention as morally good and artificial contraception as always morally evil. They have an "obligation not to choose against life,"<sup>44</sup> not to directly block its conception or to live so "tied in their selfish

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<sup>44</sup> John Finnis, "Personal Integrity, Sexual Morality and Responsible Parenthood," *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 181-182.

mutuality as to wish no children.”<sup>45</sup> A couple may faithfully discern that they should not have a child at that time or have no more children at all, but they still have the duty of continued respect to the potential of life from their shared love. Sex need not always result in conception, but it cannot completely negate the creating capability of God, who co-creates with us through sex.

Openness to children—to life—in a married couple’s sexual relationship, as defined by the Church, requires a commitment to preserving their natural fertility every time they choose to have sex. A “contraceptive mentality,”<sup>46</sup> as coined by Pope John Paul II, describes the direct human intervention in natural bodily processes that creates a negative environment for an unintentionally conceived child; the parents may then be more inclined toward an abortion, which Pope John Paul II stated cycles into the “Culture of Death.”<sup>47</sup> A couple open to life, however, works with the woman’s natural cycle of fertility and trusts God’s will for their family, even while they may seek to prevent birth for a time.

According to the Church, and Karina would now largely agree I think, it is a misappropriation of sex to contracept. This reorders this intimacy, potentially focusing what is meant to be an opportunity to image God’s life-giving love, or willingness towards creating life out of love, on the couple themselves and their physical relationship and pleasure. To deny the true nature and covenant implied in their sexuality would “irreverence God” in his mode of creation<sup>48</sup> and distort their relationship involving the

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<sup>45</sup> Paul M. Quay, S.J., “Contraception and Conjugal Love,” *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 30.

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* 6.

<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, *The Redemption of the Body and Sacramentality of Marriage (Theology of the Body)*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, [http://www.catholicprimer.org/papal/theology\\_of\\_the\\_body.pdf](http://www.catholicprimer.org/papal/theology_of_the_body.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Dietrich Von Hildebrand, “The Encyclical HV: A Sign of Contradiction,” *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 77.

falsified complete surrender of self. The seriousness of this transformation of the couple's relationship when closed to life is demonstrated in apologists' descriptions such as, "disfigured body-language [that]...expresses a rejection of the other,"<sup>49</sup> "a fictitious symbol of love,"<sup>50</sup> and even as analogous to the distribution of unconsecrated hosts at Mass as if they were actual Eucharist.<sup>51</sup> Jesus Christ himself is present in the consecrated host to Catholics, so there are few sharper denunciations possible. Contraception nullifies the sacrament.

Another element crucial to Karina and in Church teaching proving the immorality of contraceptive use is chemical methods' frequent abortifacient "fail-safes." Many forms of the Pill and other chemical means create a "hostile environment" for conception within the uterus, in which an egg, in the event that it is somehow fertilized, cannot implant on the uterine wall and is lost. As the Catholic Church holds that life begins at conception, this is an abortion, even though it is unknown to the mother. I gathered that as Karina became more convinced of and invested in these principles of not only safeguarding life but remaining open to it, her estimation of "degrees of serious" of various contraceptive methods increased across all categories until she arrived at the conclusion that, "Any of them just count" as wrong. She credits learning about how each method interacts with the conception process in conjunction with her study of *Humanae Vitae* to expand her view to believe that "not even barriers are worth it."

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<sup>49</sup> Cormac Burke, "Marriage and Contraception," *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 163.

<sup>50</sup> Quay, 45.

<sup>51</sup> Janet E. Smith, "The Importance of the Concept of 'Munus' to Understanding *Humanae Vitae*," *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 317.

In the “spirit of being open to God’s plan” that she and her husband decided to intentionally cultivate, this time not only for her health but in discernment of God’s will for their family, they began to practice NFP almost exclusively. Especially when her father became a fertility specialist and she “lived with daily reminders of how people are infertile,” Karina wanted to appreciate her fertility as a gift and leave the option for more children open in the future. She shared that she is “sad” she did not come sooner to this realization of the treasure of life as the Church teaches it, because she would like to have another child, though she feels she now is past the age.

She and her husband have experienced difficulties practicing NFP. As also arose with other women I interviewed, communication about when they wanted children or wanted to wait, and therefore when they could or should have sex, is pivotal yet difficult. Karina told me with a trace of incredulity that some husbands track their wives’ cycles, which is not the case in her marriage. Especially when she adds another day or two to their time of abstinence for the month, “just to be safe,” because of an irregular cycle as she has gotten older, she finds it difficult to decide and announce “when [they] can and when [they] can’t.” Karina told me she was almost completely unable to track her fertility after both her daughters’ births for about two years. She did not want to have another child immediately during either period, so they put on hold that “mentality” of preferring to practice NFP and used condoms until her cycles regulated. She feels that such extended abstinence for those postpartum years is “not realistic for marriage.” Sociologist and theologian Fr. Andrew Greeley has insisted on the prime importance of the married couple themselves and trust in their decisions in this area. Greeley insinuates that healing and bonding of the couple’s relationship should be the primary use for sex, or at least

could morally be such, and procreation secondary. He places trust in the instinct of the couple to discern not only God's plan for their family but for how to time any births.<sup>52</sup> In the words of another theologian on couples' need to balance times of abstinence with physical intimacy, "If a couple thinks it helps their interpersonal relationship, who can fault them?"<sup>53</sup>

Karina often used language describing concepts such as "what we're meant to do" related to what is natural, best, and God's design for our bodies. "His loving plan" is a central and cherished element of what Karina seeks to follow in her life, especially concerning such an intimate issue. When I asked her whether she thought the Church should have command over the bedroom, she answered, "I think God should have command over all parts of your life. The bedroom in terms of intimacy is supposed to be...such a reflection of God's intimacy and love with you." She went on, "and the Church has a role in defining how that works...[It's] supposed to be a voice for how to interpret God in our lives." She feels that an individual's Catholic faith acted out even in the bedroom adds a fullness to that faith, though she does not think something like NFP could practically be mandated for all. She does, however, "think it could be for everyone, and for everyone it would benefit," citing a beauty that ideally arises from that lifestyle and that dynamic of a couple's relationship.

Karina described the ease today of becoming "numb to these deeper meanings of life by feel[ing] like you can control it," and, like Teresa, she believes, "We're not really meant to completely control it ourselves." She calls NFP and the mentality it promotes a gift from God to remedy this lust for control. It necessitates a degree of surrender.

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<sup>52</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Myth*, (New York: Scribner, 1990).

<sup>53</sup> John F. Kippley, *Covenant, Christ and Contraception* (New York: Pauline Fathers and Brothers of the Society of St. Paul, 1970), 93.

Though she has encountered some difficulty with application in abnormal circumstances, Karina has reconciled how she differentiates discernment and control, open trust and planning, when it comes to her family's future. Other women, however, while fervent in their Catholic faith, struggle with these aspects of its moral action.

#### DOWN TO EARTH PRACTICALITY AND HEAVEN-SENT LAWS

Mara's story represents the competing purposes of marriage and calls into question the nuances of the requirements of responsible family planning. She was informed by Church doctrine and acted with relationship-based faith in God and discretion according to her situation. She made the decision to use contraceptives for the good of her family in light of her personal relationship with Jesus and confidence in his understanding her heart's intention. This decision and rationality, she shared with me, she feels the "Super Catholics" would condemn, but the reality she perceives mandates reaction to her circumstances. Her "unfortunately earthly" reasons and necessary practicality confront her faith's divinity-infused focus on family life.

Mara is a life-long practicing Catholic who spent her senior year in college in the late 1980s with a new engagement ring and a new regimen of tracking her cycle and "symptoms of ovulation" in preparation for a marriage practicing NFP the summer after graduation. With her fiancé still finishing graduate school, they had decided not to have children right away in the interests of gaining maturity and financial stability. Mara shared with me that she realized that as she transitioned from college student to spouse, she wanted to learn how to be a wife well and treasure that time in their relationship before she took on the challenge of learning how to be a mother. As she charted her

ovulation indicators, however, some values never changed and some flew all over the chart—in either case, there was no discernable pattern, even in the eyes of a medical professional. Her fiancé, now husband, who is a Protestant, had been supportive of her fulfilling her faith in this way though it is unique to his beliefs. When she was unable to find any semblance of a pattern to predict her fertility cycle, they prayerfully considered alternatives and decided, somewhat regretfully, to use the birth control pill until they were ready to be parents. She explains, “I still think it was right for us and I think God knew our hearts that we weren’t trying to prevent welcoming his gift in our lives. We were trying to make sure our lives were a lot [more]...built together before we had a child.”

*Child as gift* was a concept that ran through our dialogue, similar to Holly and Karina. Mara espoused this concept in her own life by emphasizing waiting for relational, financial, and personal readiness before deciding to conceive their first child and by her and her husband’s waiting over four years to have a second. They wanted to cherish that special time of their daughter’s young years before adding another individual to their family, whom they would also treasure equally. Mara’s words and tone evoked the responsibility, however, that came with each wonderful gift of a child, and she conveyed a burden of worry about having a child they could not afford to properly nurture. When I asked her directly about the Church’s teaching on contraception, her answer balanced upon the blessed child and upon the parents’ faith: “[The Church says] not to use it at all, not to prevent God’s creation from entering your family, and be so faithful that a baby at any time is God’s gift.”

This aspect of that faith, of such an amount of surrender, seemed to be difficult for her, especially given the necessity she and her husband felt to delay childbirth. She mentioned finding herself with “only two children, and so far apart” contrasting with many large families at her parish and her children’s Catholic schools. “They believe life is a gift, which I certainly agree with, but because a baby can come often and any time throughout a marriage, I find it a little hard to take. You know, you could have children, a child every year, and still look at it as a gift from God—and it certainly would be—but is that gift the right timing? Do you have any say? I think that’s the question.”

It is an important question. That *say* is not wholly reserved for the couple, according to Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, portions of which fed into principles drawn out in *Humanae Vitae* a few years later. On timing and whether to prevent births, it reads, “Let them thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which the future may bring...The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God.”<sup>54</sup> In answer to Mara’s question, the couple is meant to consider their “family group,...temporal society, and...the Church herself”<sup>55</sup> as they discern the future shape of their developing family; though their decision and their family, the emphasis lies in their responsibility to entities beyond themselves. They are trusted to rely on their consciences, which they are responsible for forming and informing adequately.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*, Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, Vatican Web site, December 7, 1965, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vatii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html), 50.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 16.

The statement above, however, while granting the potential parents freedom to discern whether they should conceive another child, is immediately modified by: “But in their manner of acting, spouses should be aware that they cannot proceed arbitrarily, but must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive towards the Church’s teaching office, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel. That divine law reveals and protects the integral meaning of conjugal love, and impels it toward a truly human fulfillment.”<sup>57</sup> The husband and wife may choose the ends in this case, but the only appropriate means to use will safeguard the sanctity and very meaning of their sexual relationship. This showcases the theoretical rational focus of Church teaching based in applying meaning to action, typical of a religious institution. Sex, marriage, and children all carry sacred meaning in the plan of God, evidenced by the natural law and safeguarded by Canon Law,<sup>58</sup> which are both assignments of meaning to the world themselves. Moral commands and structures then flow from their constructed understanding.

Mara does rationalize her decisions and life theoretically. This comes not only in her faith in an intangible God and his laws but also in her desire to fulfill those as they are written when she is able. When she determines she is unable to do so, however, and she weighs the consequences of her actions, her rationality becomes strongly practical. She could roughly guess her times of fertility and abstain accordingly if not ready to have a child, but she would have little control, little *say*, in the shape and timing of her family. Or she could use chemical technology to attain predictability and, as she feels, more

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>58</sup> Curran, “Natural Law and Contemporary Moral Theology,” 154.

responsibly plan and provide for her present and future children. Theologian Janet E. Smith would likely counsel Mara, if she became pregnant after using NFP though she knew it was not a fully reliable method for her, to have faith that God would ease her situation.<sup>59</sup> As Mara reasons, however, “I know [others are] being faithful and God will provide, but I think God would want us to use the gifts he’s given us to think these things through and make good choices on our own.” Even here in her practicality, Mara’s thinking incorporates theoretical elements of God’s intention for responsible parenthood and family planning. She finds her actions’ justification in a personal, compassionate God who knows her situation: “I do believe God knows my heart..., and I’m not trying to undermine his rule.”

The interaction between conscience and edict feels like a nuanced tug of war contest, even within the same Church document. On one hand, the decision Mara made prayerfully that bent Church doctrine to her family’s needs rose from thoughtful study, introspection, and reaction to her and her husband’s discerned temporal and financial constraints. Echoing Mara’s sentiments on her relationship with Christ who is ever present in her moral decisions, *Gaudium et Spes* reads: “Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths” (*GS* 10).<sup>60</sup> Implicit in this statement is a trust in the actor. There is an opportunity to dialogue with God and hear his will concerning the action here. Later, however, this Church document from Vatican II, written to address the Church’s position in the changing modern world, continues, angling the nature of the discerning God’s will through the conscience:

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<sup>59</sup> Janet E. Smith, “The Moral Use of Natural Family Planning,” *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 463-464.

<sup>60</sup> Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*, 10.

*Yet these movements [of the conscience] must be penetrated by the spirit of the Gospel and protected against any kind of false autonomy... [Individuals] must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive towards the Church's teaching office, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel.*<sup>61</sup>

*But what if my conscience leads me differently than stringent Church teaching?*

one might wonder. Yes, one must follow his or her conscience, but conscience properly formed, the responsibility of every member of the Catholic Church, is believed to lead in the direction of the Magisterium's conclusions. It is "the place for listening to the divine voice," but in the contemporary moral world, it has in error become "itself the source that makes the *ultimate decision* as to what is morally licit,"<sup>62</sup> which is a denial of the truth of creation. The decider must listen and not form his or her own judgment of truth and goodness.

Laws are meant to apply universally, and this one is no exception in the Catholic Church's view, especially given the theoretical importance and resulting impetus to protect these sacred aspects of human life.<sup>63</sup> When I attempted to delve into this formal—universally applied—rationality type with Mara, she surprised me with her answer.

Not only did Mara use contraceptives to delay the births of her children, but she is also on the Pill now because of a medical condition. Her benign, uterine fibroid tumors, if left unchecked, would grow to fill her uterine cavity, necessitating a hysterectomy. Or she could take birth control to stop the growth of and even shrink the tumors, which will

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 41, 50.

<sup>62</sup> Carlo Caffarra, "Who is like the Lord, Our God?" *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 270.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 50.

dissipate after she finishes menopause. Mara was in her late 30s when she received this diagnosis and prognosis, and her decision, again considered prayerfully and with pastoral counsel, was simple. As the Church is concerned, the object of her action is taking medicine for a condition, though she admits this event relieved later decisions over how to proceed after they decided not to have any more children. With an impression of guilt in her voice, she confessed, “Maybe my faith isn’t strong enough to see it through, but I get to cop out because of my condition.”

I inquired whether she felt the Church should offer another option on the formal, universal level for women like her who for some reason do not have predictable enough bodies to effectively practice NFP or who use the Pill for medical reasons (e.g., endometriosis, various hormone balancing or deficiency treatments, severe menstrual cramps or unhealthy periods, etc.). She answered, “That’d be nice. I think they should, but...they can’t justify changing it just because social times are changing.” She thought and continued, “So, do I think they should? You know, probably not. This is the Catholic Church. They should probably stay with what they are.” In line with the high expectation of Church moral teaching, it has been said that bishops “have to believe that the laity are capable of answering Christ’s call to perfection.”<sup>64</sup> Difficult as this is, Mara commented that she wished there was another natural option along the lines of NFP that she could use effectively. Mara sees the Catholic Church as substantive in its rationality of its teachings—it will stay consistent—but she does not see its prescription of NFP as universally applicable. And she reserves that judgment of applicability to the couple involved through their intentions and circumstances rather than solely to the institution’s

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<sup>64</sup> Kippley, 153.

sweeping rule. The rule does remain, however, an important starting point for these decisions in Mara's experience.

Mara appears to want to embrace and live by substantive rationality. She told me she is pro-life and does not believe in abortion, and she hopes couples who do use contraception do so responsibly and with good intentions for their families rather than misusing it and each other in selfishness or avoidance. Of the moral issues of her faith and the practices she considers necessary to practice her faith and maintain that relationship with God, I left our conversation with the impression that she would rather be able to simply follow the Church on this one too. This is reasonable because the substantive rationality focuses on keeping beliefs, actions, and principles congruent. When Mara acted based on the consequences and intending to control them with the abilities she had at her disposal, however, her practical rationality tipped the balance.

Mara's steps and situations that led to her decisions throughout her marriage of when to contracept are easily found in her reasoning and her words that defend her position. *Defend*—because she acknowledges that she knows many Catholics do consider following the Church in this area necessary to “fully practice their faith.” She told me about an NFP instructor who spoke before pre-marital ministry counselling couples at her parish who described “not being able to imagine life without a little one in her arms.” To Mara, this felt “selfish” and like using children as means to the parent's own ends rather than considering the children's best interests first. She contrasted herself somewhat sharply with the mothers who have 11 children, as she knows at least one family who does.

I wondered after our interview whether Mara's thought pattern allowed her to take the Pill or even contemplate it as an option to achieve the results she saw as so important—preventing children until she and her husband were prepared for the responsibility—or whether she developed this rationality to justify her choices after the fact. “I think a lot of Catholic women like me are torn,” she said. “We want to do what the Church says is right and there are going to be, whether it's a priest or lay people, people who claim themselves very, very Catholic, and they'll think you're a sinner if you're taking contraception, and I don't think of myself that way.” She feels that there are plenty of women in her situation who have struggled over this issue like she has, but she “talk[ed] to God about it, and pray[ed] it was the right thing.” In conclusion, she said, “Of all the sins in the world, I can't imagine [about] this one, his being that angry.”

The structure of thought Mara has created about how to keep her body, her marriage, and her family healthy to the best of her understanding and ability has not been as simple as a bluntly practical selection of means to procure ends, disregarding the nature of the former. Even in her practical rationality-leaning answers, I find a heavy dose of the theoretical and a longing for the substantive rationality—the fully congruent Catholic lifestyle. For Mara, however, her Catholicism rings complete to her in her interpretation and application of her relationship with God in her moral life, specifically in her actions on behalf of her family and her health.

Examining what is necessary to fully claim “Catholic” as an identity calls to question again the conscience, the individual decision. According to the Catholic Church, following its teachings is necessary. According to identifying Catholics, at least some Catholics, however, it may not be, at least in full. The identity of being Catholic and the

practice of doing Catholicism are different endeavors to which we give the same title. Does the identity status depend upon how much Catholicism one *does*? This question arises with almost any group membership, especially as requirements of full belonging or practice eventually transform the institution or identity itself to fit members' lives. Is this a corruption of a pure starting point, or are new social contexts evolving and maturing the entity's standards? Social change and reinterpretation inherently affect any social or religious organization over time.<sup>65</sup> The *sensus fidei* has led the Church in change in the past; when around 98 percent of sexually active Catholic women have used birth control and only two percent rely on NFP,<sup>66</sup> might it here as well? Or is the Church holding its flock to a worthwhile standard? The consciences of a significant portion of the faithful might have the Church compromise its doctrines.

### PERSONALLY SPEAKING

Mara grew up fully aware of the teachings of the Catholic Church and encountered reasons in her adult life to differ from them in some matters. Stephanie was also born into a Catholic family, though in high school and college she largely left her faith, at least much of its practice, behind. In her early 30s now, she told me she considers herself to have been an actually practicing Catholic for the last five or six years, thanks to sacramental preparation that not only taught her about her faith but opened her eyes to the depth of Catholicism of which she was unaware.

Marriage in the Catholic Church requires marital preparation, including a Natural Family Planning class. Stephanie admits that at the time it felt like “jumping through

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<sup>65</sup> W.C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, (Fortress Press, 1963).

<sup>66</sup> *Guttmacher Institute Media Center*.

hoops” but with the knowledge she has now, it “was for my benefit—I just didn’t know it then.” This was an introduction followed less than two years later by her attending Baptismal preparation classes with her husband after their son was born. Until that point they had been “church shopping” based on convenience, but their renewed focus on the Catholic Church, which was a home for them, overwhelmed Stephanie when she realized how foreign it felt. “I had no idea what it meant to be Catholic, and...they ask you when you baptize them, ‘Are you ready to raise your child in the Catholic faith?’ And I was like, ‘I have no idea even though I was raised Catholic what that really means.’”

Stephanie started volunteering at her parish and was asked to assist with the Religious Education program. Eventually she filled the coordinating position when their deacon left, and she stumbled upon a relationship-based curriculum aimed at building a personal relationship with God rather than memorizing prayers. Incredibly impressed by this approach that “sent [her] off in the right direction” personally with its unique perspective on teaching the faith to children, Stephanie answered another vocalized need she had heard and helped establish a mom’s group that would have a similar focus of building participants’ spiritual relationships with God and would also reintroduce Church teaching, which many of them had missed or felt they lacked in clear knowledge.

It was through the ENDOW curriculum, Education on the Nature and Dignity of Women, that Stephanie found and incorporated into the women’s group meetings, that she first encountered *Humanae Vitae* and other similar documents on Catholic moral teaching and specifically sexual ethics. These issues were framed for her peers and her as vital to their living fully and faithfully as women of God. Their bodies, they learned, were good, instruments for God’s glory, and to be respected and used accordingly. Like Teresa

and Karina, Stephanie discovered an empowerment through her femininity that came through submission to the Church's laws ordered according to what would make her most free, happy in her marriage, and healthy. This would be received as a lack of necessary control to Hannah, as mentioned previously, and to Mara. Therefore source of agency—one's decision or enlightened Church teaching—provides the reason for these women's confidence in and ownership of how their bodies function, although through starkly different avenues.

“Right now I agree with just about everything” she was exposed to there, she told me, “but that wasn't true until just recently.” *Instrumentum Laboris* is the preliminary document leading to the coming Synod on Marriage and the Family that Pope Francis will convene in the fall of 2014; it reports the results of a worldwide survey of Catholics for their reactions to various Church teachings, seeking the strengths and weaknesses in its pastoral ministry and education. Its analysts found that the Church has fostered a renewal of the family, and it named education programs, such as Stephanie's ENDOW, as major components in their reorientation and reopening of Catholics' minds to the more difficult, nuanced, and controversial teachings the Church maintains.<sup>67</sup>

Similar to the root of her excitement about the children's religious education curriculum, the message and intention at the heart of *Humanae Vitae*, Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, and other documents and in-depth analyses of Church doctrines she has read seem to be what moves Stephanie. She spoke quite a bit about the importance of the differences in attitude and intention fostered by NFP and contraceptive methods as their important distinctions. Stephanie now sees NFP as crucial for setting the tone of a relationship and one's entire life. This self-giving, life-giving “love is drawn

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<sup>67</sup> Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum laboris*.

first to one's spouse, and then to one's children, and finally, through one's family, to the whole of human society."<sup>68</sup> The couple fosters openness to new life entering their relationship as they intimately allow God's plan to connect to their lives. Further, and at least equally as important to Stephanie, is the cooperative and relational focus practicing NFP brings to her relationship with her husband.

After learning more about *Humanae Vitae*, she began using the Creighton method, which specifically tracks cervical mucus viscosity to measure and predict times of fertility. Stephanie's husband has helped track her cycles. Stephanie shared with me the relief his involvement has brought because she is no longer "the decider" for when they can and cannot have sex if they are trying to prevent having a child at that time. Fulfilling this process together has strengthened their relationship in and out of the bedroom: "Marriages are breaking down because communication is not there and respect for the other person is not there. And the sexual intimacy of the relationship is tied to so many other things." Using the Creighton method has opened the door for more frequent and honest conversation between Stephanie and her husband about their future, their sexuality, and their day to day, deepening relationship. Putting the relationship in the perspective of "the other, nobler elements of love"<sup>69</sup> that includes every aspect of the other person, including uninhibited fertility (though naturally not present in that instance), keeps the emphasis on the relationship of the couple rather than allowing them to simply use each other as objects for physical gratification.

Stephanie's more fully learning about the prohibition of contraception among other teachings has also impacted her relationship with God and her opinion on how his

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<sup>68</sup> Paul Quay, 30.

<sup>69</sup> John Paul II, "On Love and Responsibility," 108.

will and laws should be shared with the Church. She acknowledged that the impressions she has of other Christian denominations seem to “cater so much more to where people are at,” but in the apparent strictness of *Humanae Vitae*, Stephanie discovered a relational, personable God who calls us to fullness in our relationships both with him and here on earth, and especially so in a marriage covenant. She sees him as offering a standard of disciplined living as a loving parent would. Yes, she told me, she believes in surrendering command to God even in the bedroom, in every aspect of life, because that command he holds comes from love and is in our best interest. Had she always heard it framed in this way, Stephanie believes she would have come to this conclusion sooner. “I really feel like the Catholic Church should say, ‘Here are the teachings. This is what will make your marriage happy. This is what will make you happy. This is what will give you dignity as a woman. This is what will give your marriage the right balance.’”

Stephanie appreciates and applies the theoretical and substantive rationality of the Church in its teachings in this area, using many of its lines of thought to explain the general immorality of contraception over natural methods of spacing births. The concepts of fully giving oneself to one’s spouse during sex, every time, and of openness to life as a means of cooperation and co-creation with God pervade her language. However, her reasons for why she agrees on a personal level, why this works for her specifically, employ practical rationality that organizes more abstract concepts. By practicing NFP, Stephanie achieves the ends of enhancing her relationship and communication with her husband and of timing sex effectively and without guilt because this is a joint practice between the two of them. It has increased her relationship with God by altering her view

of him and of the Church as loving parental authorities who want the best for her and for all.

Stephanie is a practical rational thinker and not formal in her understanding and appropriation of this teaching, however, because she does not always follow it. Thus she added to her statement about the Church's sharing its universal prescriptive wisdom that it should then "deal with people on a case by case basis." She did not agree that exceptions should be written into Canon Law or official teaching of the Catechism, but she did prefer room for leeway, as in her situation. Not simply to prevent conception after the birth of her two children but because of her personal preference and comfort, Stephanie and her husband choose to "pull out" during sex, or practice *coitus interruptus*. Therefore, though she recognizes that this also violates not merely the rules, but more importantly the spirit present in *Humanae Vitae* and other Church documents, she feels that it would be possible for "something to not go as planned" and for them to unintentionally conceive because this method is not as reliable as others. This possibility somewhat eases her discomfort because, after all, they are not closing out the chance for conception like they could be, and she says she would welcome an unplanned child into her family with only joy. She also feels this method is more natural than others as there are no physical barriers present and no chemicals in their bodies, though the Church considers it contraception because it is still a "directly willed, positive act"<sup>70</sup> that prevents pregnancy. Stephanie acknowledges that this does halt the full giving of themselves, their full intimacy, and their full openness to life that they are called to by the Church.

Realizing the immorality in the sight of the Church that this practice holds, Stephanie voiced, "It's not something that I've disregarded. I mean, I pray about it and

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<sup>70</sup> Grisez, 129.

[my husband and I] talk about it a lot.” She also sought the advice of the priest at her parish to explain her personal preference and learn his thoughts on whether it would be permissible. She did not get any answers because it was “too much information for him.” Stephanie understood that a celibate man might not feel comfortable discussing detailed intimacies of a married woman’s physical relationship with her husband, but concurrently she seemed to feel bewildered as to where to go from there. He simply instructed her to attend a Creighton method NFP class, which she already knew how to practice. If she could not talk to a priest in the privacy of the Sacrament of Reconciliation to receive spiritual guidance about whether something was a sin in her particular case, where should she go? *Humanae Vitae* and other literature in their generalizations could not address her specific questions when her actions were influenced more by her comfort than by a “contraceptive mentality” against children. This was a real scenario she wanted to work through with a guide beyond simply words on paper, however instructive and important to her they may be.

Consequently, Stephanie, a strong proponent and now an educator about the beauty and wisdom behind the Church’s teachings on contraception and related topics, is left to discern this matter for herself by means of her conscience. A struggle she cannot deny is her difficulty finding the line that distinguishes her decision of conscience to better her relationship and meet her preferences versus the threat of moral relativism. A moral absolutism would teach that because there is an objective truth, such as the immorality of contraceptive methods, opposition to it is inherently wrong. If every individual can decide what he or she prefers, as in moral relativism, every act could potentially be right, simply because one feels *it is right for him or her*. This paradigm is

incompatible in the presence of other objective statements of doctrine and commandments of action or action-avoidance, which characterize much Catholic thought—much religious thought in general for that matter. Leading people toward good, healthy, spiritually fulfilled, saved, or transcendent lives often requires moral absolutes.

However, yet again we encounter another woman of faith who feels at odds with what the Church expects of her, and she is looking for justification of her actions. Though she did not use these words, Stephanie gave me the impression that she thinks couples should be able to prayerfully consider alternatives to Catholic moral teaching and discern with the spirit of the Word of God ever in their hearts what is morally acceptable for them to do in situations like these and where the available options will not harm other individuals or themselves. The Church would likely counter to say that their relationship is actually suffering on some level because they have stepped beyond, as Stephanie says, its paternal lawmaking for the best for its children.

Stephanie, though she did not identify this directly, would appreciate a personalist approach to morality by the Catholic Church. Catholic theologians argue its use for delicate and complex situations such as many individuals like Stephanie and Mara confront with the contraception and family planning issue. Personalism tempers absolutist moral rulings with individual appropriation, taking the individual and his or her unique situation into consideration for ethical judgment.<sup>71</sup> It argues that humans and their circumstances do not exist in vacuums, so the morality of their actions depends on their particular situations. Personalism, much like Stephanie, remains guided by the primary rulings of standard doctrine, in this case, that of the Church, and does not extend its

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<sup>71</sup> Curran, “Natural Law and Contemporary Moral Theology,” 172-173.

permissions to whatever is deemed most convenient according to the individual involved, as strict situationism does. Logistically, advocating personalism poses difficulties for such a large institution as the Church in defining clear outlines of right, wrong, good, and evil. And as the individual conscience that discerns is supposed to be informed by those descriptions of various actions, specific labelling of deeds will remain exceedingly important from the Catholic Church's perspective. Stephanie, however, maintained the pivotal role of the individual's choice in deciding upon a moral action. For example, "I feel like you shouldn't rush into this [restarting the Creighton method with better attention to pregnancy prevention] because you have to. It should be [that] you want to do this and this is a step you and your husband want to take for the future of your family," she stated.

Stephanie embodies this conflict between personalist and universal teaching. She shared with me that the unfortunate moral tone of our society is linked to the disconnect among marriage, sex, and babies. This was shortly after we spoke on the subject above, of the need for exception and why she felt like she could practice pulling out. Then we revisited the impracticality and foolishness in her eyes of moral relativism. She is adamant that proper catechesis or education on the faith for both children and adults is crucial to understanding Church teaching, but she also feels the conversation does not stop and the decision is not solely made there. Natural Family Planning offers her faith, marriage, and potential of future children in co-creation with God a sacred fullness that she knows she is siphoning by interrupting the sexual act regularly. However, she also feels this is what she needs personally to feel most comfortable in that intimacy at this time in her life. Again, these issues evade polarity and easy categorization.

The *sensus fidei*, the “weight of the consent of the faithful in matters of doctrinal controversy,”<sup>72</sup> enters this discussion as a “two-edged sword.”<sup>73</sup> What should happen when not just a group of isolated individuals but an overwhelming majority of Catholics disagrees with the full extent of the prohibition of contraception? Stephanie, Mara, Holly, Karina, and even Hannah believe in the primary tenets of the Catholic faith, and most of them largely agree with its sexual ethics, at least in theoretical terms. Nevertheless, none of these women sees NFP and periodic abstinence as a fitting solution for all members of the Church, themselves included at times. Despite their deep ties to Catholicism, this particular doctrine has been compromised. “Refining” of the formulation of a teaching by those who would put it into concrete practice stems from the *sensus fidei*—the relevant moral actors can “see more precisely the value and limits of a given doctrine.”<sup>74</sup> Dissent from the Church that advocates a change must be more than a “gut reaction,” however, or an alignment with the surrounding culture. In contrast, there are a growing number of women who support and practice NFP or would if they had more instruction. Stephanie and Karina both encountered the teachings and reasons behind *Humanae Vitae* as adults, and it dramatically affected their lives. Were Karina more confident in her ovulation prediction, she would use it without recourse to any other method “just in case.” This begs whether the sense of the faithful is un- or misinformed, or whether the majority truly is ahead of the static institution proudly grounded on its centuries-old tradition. A divided faithful cannot well reflect their *de facto* principles, what they have made their

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<sup>72</sup> Kippley, 43.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>74</sup> International Theological Commission, *Sensus fidei*: In the life of the Church, Vatican Web site, June 10, 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html#Introduction](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html#Introduction), 59.

Catholicism to be, back onto the Church itself with any clarity for either reiteration or reconfiguration.

Stephanie, like Mara and several other women with whom I spoke, emphasized several times throughout our talk the individualized aspect of her faith, both in her prayer life with God and in her daily actions she hoped would make God happy. Having reclaimed and then promoted her faith as an adult along with almost all of its precepts, making this faith her own and living it genuinely as she sees is important to her. In following along the lines of her questions about the thin distinction between relativism and personal conscience in light of God's law revealed and taught by the Catholic Church, I wonder how united the *sensus fidelium* could be. The faithful, encompassing all Catholics of all cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds worldwide, are diverse, united chiefly by their humanity and their Catholicism, however those are lived out. Can nuance and subtlety of moral impetus be made relevant to individuals in every imaginable human situation, or is their diversity the sheer reason for the crucial thrust of this universal teaching and its counterparts? A religion most fundamentally is, after all, a social unification of people with a transcendent purpose. In this Church, a vital means for all to access that transcendence lies in adherence to the pervasive relationality formed by concrete ethical teaching.

#### WE COULDN'T THINK ANY OTHER WAY

Many of the women I interviewed grew up in a post-Vatican II Church, though some were so removed from it that they did not realize the implications of its teachings and those that flowed from it later in the decade, the most prominent example being

*Humanae Vitae*. Rosemary, however, like Holly, married and had all of her children before the introduction of that document, and she has witnessed the change in perspective and attitude of Church doctrine and atmosphere since that pivotal period. Rosemary herself exemplifies this transformation and represents the personal history and hindsight that several of her counterparts I interviewed—many of them younger than her own children—lack. She envisions and describes the Church in starkly “before” and “after” images. Though the teachings, specifically in our interest on contraception, have not changed but only been further detailed over the centuries,<sup>75</sup> Rosemary’s images of authority and the contexts of moral teachings have been drastically altered in the last several decades. For example she now places more importance on the individual conscience’s discernment, as opposed to the former near-“brainwash[ing]” she feels characterized previous incorporation of moral teaching.

Rosemary describes the state of Catholicism before Vatican II as, “Instead of mercy and love it was much more about rules and doing things by the book, and what Father said or what Sister said was the way things were handled then.” Looking back she says, “I can see now it was a very severe time...I certainly prefer many ways that we think about mercy and the love of God now.” She told me she thinks of her former self and her attitude in the legalism of the Church’s rules on all levels of personal life as Pharisee-like, “because we thought that was the way it had to be.” She contrasts this with a considerably deeper comfort she finds in her faith now, with openness and empathy meant to focus on the individual and not the transgression. She mentioned several practices she upheld simply because she was Catholic. That was just what one did. There

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<sup>75</sup> John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965).

was not really another choice. “You know this was pre-Vatican II, and that was the only way to think. I guess we were kind of brain washed.”

Honestly, these forceful words surprised me coming from a woman who had just finished telling me she was a “Cradle Catholic” who loves and finds deep meaning in her faith even with its institution’s difficulties. She reared her six children in the Church and she and her husband have been active members of their various parishes throughout their last sixty years of marriage.

Rosemary experienced a reorientation and redevelopment of the Catholic experience after Vatican II, even though the written moral precepts remained the same. The consistency, the substantive and unchanging nature of the Church’s rationality likely fed into *Humanae Vitae* and its moral teachings. The Catholic Church is founded on Scripture and Tradition, making what has always been taught and done largely indicative of the future. Vatican II was a significant move forward for the Church, “from the margins and into the modern world,”<sup>76</sup> and a reorientation of the atmosphere of the Church. The meaning of being Catholic changed in the 1960s. The priest turned to face the congregation during Mass, and he spoke to them in the vernacular rather than in Latin. One’s soul was fed by not only penance and prayers, mortifications and form, but by fervently renewed emphasis on love, mercy, grace, justice, and intention. Vatican II, in the minds of many Catholics today, in this sense boils down to an emphasis of intention over action. Therefore, Mara, for example, felt her heart was in the right place and God knew her situation, so she was justified in using birth control for multiple reasons at various times during her marriage. Holly, however, who began taking the Pill

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<sup>76</sup> John Coulson, “Living with Authority—The Nineteenth Century,” *Contraception: Authority and Dissent*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 38.

before Vatican II, found her actions to be justified by priestly permission in a grave situation, a rare exception to a normally unquestioned rule.

In the spiritual renewal and restatement of the goals and outlook of the Church, in the Holy Spirit, and amid the shifting cultural climate in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, many expected a revision of the Catholic teaching against contraception. Brought up at Vatican II, some expected an adjustment of the traditional prohibition because of the acknowledgment in *Gaudium et Spes* that “the faithful exercise of love and the full intimacy of [the couple’s] lives is hard to maintain,”<sup>77</sup> during the periods of abstinence necessary in NFP (or at that time, the rhythm method). *Gaudium et Spes* admitted, though the document continued to uphold the use of natural means and the imperative of ever-guarded, sacred openness to life. Pope Paul VI called a special Papal Commission on Birth Control to treat the issue of regulating birth, whose members included multiple married couples. Of the four papers the commission members would write, the majority report argued for the theological good of allowing married couples to practice artificial contraception with faithful discernment for responsible parenting. It identified a “fruitful married life...practiced with responsible, generous, and prudent parenthood”<sup>78</sup> and does not necessitate that every occurrence of sex remain open to conception. In the totality of their marriage, rather, a couple might live this open affirmation to life and to love as God intends. Social changes including increased women in the workforce and the decreased ability of urban families to support large numbers of children, as well as the “condemnation” of long periods of abstinence for couples in certain situations, were cited reasons for their decision.

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<sup>77</sup> Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, 51.

<sup>78</sup> Papal Birth Control Commission, “Schema for a Document on Responsible Parenthood,” *The Catholic Case for Contraception*, ed. Daniel Callahan (London: the Macmillan Company, 1969), 159.

The forthcoming *Humanae Vitae*, however, endorsed the oppositional minority report and heavily incorporated the Krakow Memorandum, written by Archbishop Karol Wojtyla, a member of the commission who could not be present for the final deliberations and instead held a smaller commission to form a document for Pope Paul VI.<sup>79</sup> Later in Wojtyla's career, when he became Pope John Paul II, he would continue to strongly advocate openness to life and the intense sanctity of marriage and sex which must be approached with reverence because of their reflection of the divine. A clear voice in several Vatican II documents,<sup>80</sup> the future John Paul II was highly influential in the formation of *Humanae Vitae*'s principles as well. "Pope Paul VI [was] convinced that nothing can better express the unitive and procreative meaning of marriage, can better check immorality, infidelity, and promiscuity, than the absolute sacredness of biological processes."<sup>81</sup> He rejected the majority opinion because "certain criteria of solutions had emerged which departed from the moral teaching on marriage proposed with constant firmness by the teaching authority of the Church."<sup>82</sup> That constant firmness certainly weighed heavily. While some held that the Church could and should develop in doctrine as a human organization,<sup>83</sup> others in the hierarchy found it immutable on these, or any, issues. *Humanae Vitae*'s motives have been questioned for reaffirming Church tradition and its unchanging authority rather than the matter at hand.<sup>84</sup> If this is the case, it is a brutal irony that the document written to establish authority led to a reappropriation of the body of Church moral teaching by its members. The personalist focus of the individual's

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<sup>79</sup> George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*, (New York: Cliff Street Books, an Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 208-209.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-176.

<sup>81</sup> Häring, 187.

<sup>82</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, 6

<sup>83</sup> Coulson, 21.

<sup>84</sup> Komochak, 101.

relationship with God so emphasized in the Second Vatican Council, combined with one teaching many faithful Catholics found too difficult to follow for whatever reason, encouraged them to make exceptions. This was a new phenomenon that led to the way Hannah now identifies herself, over forty years later: the Cafeteria Catholic. While true that they did not leave, individuals began to find the freedom to change what they felt they needed to amid Church mandates.

This is the changing landscape of her religion through which Rosemary has lived. Rosemary told me the logic against the use of contraceptives she and her husband heard at the time *Humanae Vitae* entered the Catholic conscience—or was intended to do so—rested on the argument of seeing contraception as unnatural distortion of human bodily functions as well as incentive for increased promiscuity outside of marriage because it removed the living consequences—children. She and her husband used the rhythm method after they had two children just over a year apart, and this worked fairly well for spacing the following four children they had, though at least one of those came when they were not expecting him.

Rosemary told me that both during her childbearing years and now, she did and does not perceive a strong qualitative difference between “natural and unnatural methods” of family planning and spacing births. Moreover, she is not certain she “would see that issue in the same light now,” especially had she grown up in the current cultural context. Actually, when juxtaposed with other medical interventions that are clearly not “natural,” she would agree with F. H. Drinkwater, who wrote, “About the only case in which Catholic writers invoke this principle is about sexual relationships, and one cannot

help wondering why.”<sup>85</sup> He goes on to suggest that the terms *natural* versus *intervention* call for deeper meaning and subtlety. Others have also pointed out that this medical intervention, in the case of the Pill specifically though applicable to other contraceptive methods, disrupts a fully and healthily functioning biological act. This is considered an act of medicating something healthy to keep it from its full powers.

Rosemary acknowledged that even when she did not feel she had another option at her disposal besides the rhythm method, it still brought some difficulty into their marriage, and she understands how women who are her daughters’ and granddaughters’ ages would have a more difficult time deciding to use the method she did as they orchestrate their families in today’s world. Her Catholic husband’s equal commitment to following Church teaching helped with the “sacrifice” that the rhythm method brought to their relationship, but she “can see where it would be a big problem,” even with both spouses’ dedication to the concept and to the Church’s wishes, as pointed out by the papal commission’s majority report.

Rosemary stayed home with her children until they were all in school, and then she returned to work as a teacher, a profession that allowed her to be home when her children were. When I asked her about what advice she would give to her daughters and granddaughters about family planning methods when they have more choices available today than she was aware of during her childbearing years, her realization that they would not necessarily be able to support six children like she had or to spend adequate time with them given their work schedules factored into her answer. She sees that her society today does not expect as many children as rapidly: “Back then, you thought, ‘Oh my gosh, I’ve been married a year or two and I don’t have two kids!’” she laughed. She

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<sup>85</sup> Drinkwater, 34.

told me she would encourage them to cultivate their relationship with the Lord and to listen to his voice in their lives so that they could follow what he put into their consciences as best for them as individuals, as wives, and as mothers. She hopes that couples who choose to avoid pregnancy for financial, health, and other circumstantial reasons would only intend to do so temporarily. At the same time, however, she believes it more compassionate to any future children for unintentional parents to altogether avoid bearing them if they will only neglect them, are not prepared for the responsibility, or will even abuse them. These decisions, she maintains, should be prayerfully made as well. “It could be a selfish thing” to postpone or altogether avoid having children, Rosemary acknowledged. “The people I have known weren’t that way, but, you know, I have seen...it, especially now I think. It, it seems as if this world is much more materialistic than the one I grew up in.” Personal and overall cultural attitudes are therefore prevailing factors for Rosemary’s understanding how individuals are looking at these scenarios as they plan the futures of their families.

Rosemary heavily exercises theoretical rationality. She has determined that the overarching universal rulings present in formal rationality are impractical for suggestion to all. She employs practicality in observing financial situations and parental readiness as significant factors when planning and spacing childbirths. She also mentioned women in developing regions such as certain in Africa needing whatever will be most practically and easily accessible to them for family planning, and she admitted NFP or rhythm would be difficult to teach on such a broad scale. However, this practical rationality in all instances, she continually repeated, should be filtered through one’s theory-based, abstract relationship with God. When I attempted to delve more deeply into her

distinction between pragmatic and abstract reasons and argument structures for considering these decisions in an individual family, Rosemary shared that she tends not to separate these reasons based on their worth over each other, but all of it is based on, “what God wants me to do. Can I really put my trust in his words and...pray for the wisdom to hear what he has for me? And then I know he’ll give me the strength to do it.” She does not “think there’s any other way to live.” This consistency of application of prayer, trust, and surrender to what she hears God telling her to do also incorporates some substantive rationality mechanisms.

Accentuating the need for selflessness and attention to God’s will and words in one’s life, Rosemary frankly stated, “I think if...your relationship with God, it tells you that it’s okay to use the other (use contraception over rhythm or NFP), I think that should be it.” When asked, she said she thought contraceptives should be widely available to anyone who wanted to use them and the decisions would lie with them.

Because of Rosemary’s reliance on her conscience, which strives for selflessness and openness to God in relationship with him, I asked her in closing if she would emphasize her relationship with God over her understanding of and relationship with the Church, the filter and interpreter of God for us on earth. “Yes,” she answered, “because I think the Church has not been the moral leaders the last few years we would have hoped.” Like Hannah, the moral direction of this institution for Rosemary has been tainted by the sex abuse scandals and exposed cover-ups of the last decade. I cannot imagine Rosemary ever going as far as Hannah in labelling herself a “Cafeteria Catholic” and using this situation in a way to excuse herself or anyone else so blatantly from adherence to Church statutes. She merely sees where the human organization errs in its

spiritual direction, and she would continue to emphasize the need for the spiritual clarity that comes from a personal relationship with God.

The Catholic Church may be an institution teaching a timeless truth it has held in its tradition since its inception. Rosemary, however, has seen it change, as the culture it exists in has changed. Holding fast to its foundational teachings and most of their iterations, she would promote attention to its object of devotion, God, in individual relationship of one's daily life for clarity. The spirit of the Church that has taken shape as Rosemary has reared her children, one of love and mercy in contrast to the severity she remembers learning related when she was young, seems to her to not match the stringent prohibition of contraception, especially when she examines the social climate facing young families today. Teresa, however, and others with whom I spoke find the Church's spirit even and especially in this document enlivening for life in this contemporary culture. The form of communication of the Church's teachings is undeniably important to whether they will be accepted. I must also ask whether the divided *sensus fidei* discussed above could be related to a distinction in communication of the spirit of the Church—the reasons, the ways its conclusions have been reached, the gentleness and love with which they are disseminated. The manner of dissemination could very well be relevant to adherence.

### CATHOLIC WITH THE GUILT

Every woman discussed thus far has grown up a member of the Catholic Church, whether her understanding of and commitment to Church doctrine and adherence have fluctuated over her lifetime thus far or not. Rita, however, a graphic designer and mother of two, came to the Catholic Church as an adult. She was drawn to it because of its

“moral conservatism.” Rita left her Episcopalian church, which she says she used to describe as “Catholic Lite—Catholic without the guilt,” because they were changing moral stances she felt were immutable, such as allowing same sex marriage. Rita therefore sought the stricter, unchanging, tradition-based moral standards and teachings of Catholicism. She soon completed RCIA, the Rite of Catholic Initiation for Adults, and officially entered the Church.

This was only the beginning of Rita’s discovering the tradition and laws of Catholicism. Today she identifies many sins she committed before she fully understood the ethics of the Church, some of which she feels stem from her family background. A child of a single mother, Rita shared with me that she began in her late teens to seek stability and love from unhealthy relationships with men. Then, in intended support for three different friends who had unexpectedly become pregnant during college, she accompanied them to their abortion appointments. Sickening regret filled her voice when she told me about these instances because she has adopted a staunchly pro-life stance since then. Rita now understands the Church’s prescribed higher means of supporting and loving people beyond supporting their choices. The Church, she said, gives each of us an implicit call to live in God’s law and love for our good and our happiness.

Rita later married a Catholic man and after several years of marriage they had two children. Both pregnancies were difficult—more uncomfortable than dangerous to her health—and involved intense daily morning sickness for all nine months and multiple periods of bed rest. After her second child weighing 10.5 pounds was born from her petite body, Rita decided to be content with the children she had and did not want to endure such pregnancies again. She is self-admittedly headstrong and approached her

husband with her already made decision not long after the birth of their son. It was important to her to have control over her body. Reflecting back, she says now, “My decision process was that I was extremely selfish in the matter. I was like, ‘This isn’t happening. I’m not doing it anymore--no more kids.’ And, now, I’m a Catholic at this point. And my husband [was] raised Catholic, born Catholic, [so] it became a big issue in our marriage.”

The decision was temporarily abated while Rita had to take a high blood pressure medication that would be dangerous for a developing embryo, so they avoided pregnancy for that time, but after the problem was corrected, they “were at an impasse.” Her husband asked that they at least seek a priest’s counsel before making this decision. Rita thinks that because of her stubbornness in having already made up her mind and in interest of “trying to save [their] marriage,” their parish priest told them during their first and only meeting on the matter, “You’ve done your duty as a parent, as a married couple. You’ve had children and now you’re fine.” He even recommended a specific, newly-released and minimally invasive tubal ligation procedure that would insert a block in her fallopian tubes to prevent future ovulation.

“It was convenient and I was happy. My husband was still not happy...After that, he mourned the future children he could’ve had, and that was heartbreaking for me, knowing I had hurt him so badly.”

Eventually Rita joined a women’s faith study group, which I gather is very similar to Stephanie’s ENDOW, at a new parish. When the group covered *Humanae Vitae*, a document Rita had never heard of before much less read, she was floored by the new understanding of the Church’s actual teachings she gained. Her history of using chemical

birth control before and at the beginning of her marriage was wrong. The abortions she had supported thinking she was a caring friend were wrong. Most crucially and grievously, the surgery that destroyed her fertility was tragically wrong. She describes now the serious personal shortcomings she has realized she had while making those decisions: “I found out how selfish I was, [what a] lack of faith I had in God, and how...I had no trust in God. I was [thinking], ‘Nope, not gonna do this!...That whole time I thought I had a lot of faith I found out that I didn’t.”

Rita emphasized the knowledge she acquired about true openness to life and how that was to be enacted and protected in every moment and act of her marriage, and she seriously approached her husband with proposal of annulment because of how gravely she had sinned against God, him, and their marriage. Inspired when he forgave her instead, she also forgave her priest who erred through his ease of permitting such a serious denial of God’s will. “I was furious at him for a while...Why didn’t—you’re supposed to be the leader! You’re supposed to be teaching me the faith.” Doubtful, however, that she could have been convinced in her set state of mind at that time, she still feels it was his duty to have at least presented *Humanae Vitae*’s arguments and the Church’s reasons for why her husband was so deeply against that procedure.

The priest at Rita’s new parish also became incensed when he heard about the advice he felt she should never have received. Clearly, clergymen have different pastoral techniques and goals. Fr. Allen, the first priest, privileged the state of their marriage and must have seen their overall relationship as “fruitful enough” to suggest the solution that he did. Fr. Bart, however, the second priest Rita encountered on this matter, holds the exact formal rationality that promotes the need for universal adherence to the Church’s

precepts. Rita now appreciates his frank leadership style, though she acknowledges that his uncompromising, universally-applied homiletics and personal counsel is off-putting for others—but that is exactly why she would say the Church needs fervent exposure to that message. “Is it easy? No, but as Christians, it’s not an easy walk anyway. It’s hard to be Catholic; it’s hard to be Christian. My gosh, look at everything that’s fighting us now. It’s not getting any easier.” She expects life in this religion to be distinctly counter-cultural.

Priestly authority has been a relevant topic, even a defining factor in the lives of several of the women I have interviewed. Holly needed a priest friend’s permission to justify protecting herself and her family from further near-tragic circumstances of unhealthy children. Hannah and Rosemary both hold leaders of the Church accountable for the sex abuse scandals and cover-ups, and they therefore incline more towards the autonomy of their own consciences in some matters, focusing on God’s wishes over those of his human institution on earth. Stephanie could not procure specific advice from her priest that directly met her where she felt she was concerning her nuanced question. Stephanie also told me about a friend she has who underwent a similar sterilization procedure to Rita’s and was informed by her priest that she could not receive the Eucharist until she surgically reversed it.<sup>86</sup> The was the same surgery Rita’s former priest recommended, although she and her husband still disagreed about not only its morality but also the future of their family.

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<sup>86</sup> Catholics are not to receive the Eucharist in a state of mortal sin (grave matter committed intentionally with full knowledge of its severity) until they have received the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In this woman’s case, her penance after making her confession was to undo her procedure before she could enter into full communion with the Church and receive the sacrament of Eucharist.

Just as each of the women we have encountered here have journeyed with their faith lives, rationality type paradigms, and resulting morals, so does each priest they have encountered, even with their standard seminary education and training. They also weigh their confiders' circumstances, intentions, and the objects of their actions as they dispel counsel on behalf of Christ and the Church, all of it filtered through their own understandings and experiences. This is another avenue of emerging variability in Catholicism—even plurality<sup>87</sup>—and in any religious or morally-based group in which interpretation is needed. Even from the administrative and shepherding role, Catholicism takes on the shape of the individual and how he or she receives and acts on the Church's propositions. They were meant to be laws, again, “counsels turned into commandments.”<sup>88</sup> What is more right then? Preserving the peace of a marriage or insisting on full observation of Church doctrines? As we have seen, opinions vary over which will give the couple true happiness and wholeness in their individual lives and whether they or God or the Church can be the judge of that. Beginning the decade after the release of *Humanae Vitae*, priests have become divided over how to treat these matters relating to contraception, and a large portion of American clergy have “adopted the position that the means of preventing conception is a matter for the individual's conscience,”<sup>89</sup> and thus often counsel parishioners seeking advice or in Confession accordingly.

Another pivotal concept that has been central in other women's understanding of this topic that arose in Rita's situation was the definition of openness to life in a marriage. Fr. Allen, Rita at one time, Stephanie to an extent, Holly, and Mara all concluded that the

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<sup>87</sup> Kippley, 151.

<sup>88</sup> Drinkwater, 36.

<sup>89</sup> Moore, 74.

aforementioned openness could be satiated after a given number of children. They have all suggested in one way or another that they have fulfilled their duties of openness to children, even by simply having had at least one child. That is life-affirming, right? Like the Papal Commission on Birth Control's majority report, this perspective argues from the principle of totality, which measures a series of actions by their overall intention and outcome.<sup>90</sup> In these situations, over the course of their marriage, the couples in question honored life and the meaning of sex by having had children at all. But only one instance of adultery mars a faithful marriage, for example, and to the Church, so does any form of contraception to a marriage's openness to life. The Church stresses preserving that openness every time the couple has sex to respect the fullness of sexuality and marriage in that unique and holy relationship. It also promotes wholly cooperating with God's will for the family with complete trust in his timing and the numbers of children granted. They are a gift not to be limited without serious reason. *Humanae Vitae* and similar documents all describe openness to children as a state of being in a relationship, a characteristic, rather than a demonstrable action performed. Rita was adamant that she did not understand how individuals who were fully aware of these Church teachings could deny their logic and promise of a fulfilling, healthy, and beautiful relationship with both one's spouse and one's God. The knowledge she received in her women's faith study group completely transformed her perspective of her body, her role in controlling it—which is to surrender it with faith to God—and the possibilities of building a stronger and more intimate relationship with her husband. She told me it was only after 10 to 13 years into their marriage, well after her tubal ligation, that she felt she would be ready to

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<sup>90</sup> Ralph McInerny, "Humanae Vitae and the Principle of Totality," *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 340-341.

overcome past familial relationship struggles to venture into that journey with her husband. She finally felt ready to share that intensely intimate side of her, both her fertility cycles and her agency over her body, with her husband. Now, she says, “I absolutely agree with the Church’s advocating [NFP]. Everything I’ve heard is so positive, but my own insecurities weren’t allowing it to happen in my world... It brings you and your husband so much closer from what I’m told by everybody that does this, that they know you sometimes better than you know yourself.”

She went on: “That means you have to have a sense of openness [with your husband] that is really amazing for people to do that..., but given my background—no father, bad relationships, all that—I still had a level of, ‘I don’t want you that close into my world and my life.’” Statements like this demonstrated Rita’s conviction that the issues of moral depravity of our society, especially concerning sexual ethics, are all intertwined. She is looking at the world around her with a substantive rational lens here. These sentiments and rulings build off of each other and stem from the same core of teachings. Rita thus has performed some drastic switches in her rationality types. She began her Christian life with theoretical and formal thinking, abstract meanings universally applied, which explains her supreme discomfort with the ease of moral code changes in her previous Christian denomination. Even after becoming Catholic, she leaned on a practical rationality in the face of such difficult pregnancies and as a means of protecting herself from uncertainty. Now, with theoretical and certainly formal roots, I would classify Rita’s rationality process as substantive. She sees the necessity of united, consistent principles, such as openness to life and faithfulness to the real meaning and purposes of marriage, and she feels threatened by Catholics and non-Catholics who

neglect the approach and laws the Church holds. She fears for her children growing up in this world's slippery moral slope that she feels has lost touch with intrinsic, (and natural law) values. "Blocking God's natural process," whether with contraception or sterilization methods—even for medicinal purposes—or in denying his other teachings, is the root of today's society's misalignment. Without the structure and wisdom of the Church, "you'd do what feels good when you want to. No consequences, more diseases, more...emotional issues. I mean, they're rampant. My God, again, I'm an example of that."

For Rita, the teachings of the Church disseminated through *Humanae Vitae* brought a clarity to her life and her relationships with God and her husband. Though she could not take back her previous choices she now finds to be in error, she experienced a renewal of spirit and attitude. Her complex and changing life and outlook reveal relative extremes of fervent views and extremes of turning one's moral appraisal in new directions. She, like every other woman introduced here, lives in a flux of life that involves discovery and education, discernment and conscience, faith and control, children and health, empowerment and agency, security and planning, and relationships heavenly and earthly. They also fluctuate among and recombine their rationality types, appropriating and molding to practical, theoretical, substantive, and formal standpoints when felt necessary. Forty-five years after *Humanae Vitae* came out, its impacts on Catholic wives and mothers, on Catholic thinking, and on the very state of Catholicism, may have changed, but they have not diminished.

DISCUSSION: RATIONALIZING REPRODUCTION

Teresa: “Doing [NFP] really made me respect the wisdom of the Church and how deep the Church is.”

Hannah: “I think [Jesus would] be more accepting...[It] just showed me how misguided and arrogant and hypocritical they are...,protecting the institution over everything else.”

Holly: “We went to the priest first because we were Catholic. We didn’t want to do it without permission.”

Karina: “There were these bigger things that...kind of built up to [help me] understand that being open to life is not a burden or a health issue, you know.”

Mara: “It wasn’t to be anti-God. It was to be stronger together.”

Stephanie: “*Humanae Vitae* is where we learned that pulling out is not the full teaching of the Church because it doesn’t allow you to be fully trusting. And, the idea that you’re preventing the—you’re not as open to life as you should be.”

Rosemary: “I can certainly see a family situation that...it might be used...for...a time maybe, or depending on what the couple pray about there would be times—because it’s very difficult now to raise children.”

Rita: “It prevents God from doing his natural work, so...basically...you’re taking control from God, which is what I did with the [surgery].”

These women I interviewed for their perspectives on and reactions to the Catholic Church’s moral teaching regarding artificial contraception represent only a portion of the variety possible in approaching this subject. Beyond their multiplicity of conclusions,

they think about the issue and other elements of their faith in vastly different ways, affecting how they arrive at their conclusions and at times what those conclusions are.

Practical rationality, pragmatic justification of means by the ends achieved, arose from necessity for Rita when she decided to be sterilized to protect herself from future difficult pregnancies. Karina also practically considered her health, and that rationality type was transformed later in light of Church teaching that recategorized the ends she should be working for through her chosen means. Rosemary and Mara's practicality applies to their organization of theoretical concepts, but for Mara it more directly determines her actions because of the greater need she feels. And Stephanie's theoretical conceptualization of the issue functioned practically for her.

Theoretical rationality, the assignment of unseen meaning to daily life and action, pervaded the conversations I had, the foremost reason being the necessarily abstract nature of religious principles. It held particular weight, however, for Teresa, Rosemary, and for Stephanie, Karina, and Rita after they received the education regarding *Humanae Vitae*. For them, therefore, there was an initial stretch in approaching these moral issues from this direction. Again, a theoretical rationality structure or series of concepts could also inform a practical overall scheme, as it did for Mara, Rosemary, and Stephanie.

Substantive rationality, interwoven principles necessarily congruent with each other, was most exhibited by Teresa and Rita, though every woman who referenced *Humanae Vitae* directly incorporated it because of the argument structure of the document. Natural law is a theory of the substantivity of the created world—it all carries a united, interlocking meaning. Mara strongly portrayed a desire to fulfill a substantive

moral outlook, and all individuals do strive for congruence in their actions. This is why justifying and rationalizing their actions is so imperative.

Formal rationality, universal or extreme application of regulations and their consequences, was most exhibited by Teresa and Rita, who saw no real exceptions necessary to the teaching of the Church on contraception. Holly's formal rationality emerges not in her lack of acknowledging extenuating circumstances but in her universal application of the Church's prominent judgment as fitting and necessary for every situation. Most of the other women (Hannah excepted) thought Church teaching to be broadly but not universally applicable, and many of them thought exceptions should be allowed by the Church, even if not officially.

Not only did these women employ more combinations of rationality types than I had expected them to, they remolded and recategorized these rationalities as they needed to for their own cognitive congruence. Someone using three different rationality types did not add them together or fraction them off, thinking with each in turns as if using a pie chart to represent her tendencies of decision making. Instead, she might fit them inside another, as when Stephanie made the theoretical principles of *Humanae Vitae* means to achieve her ends of increased, deepened communication with her husband. I had also thought when beginning this work that rationality type would likely indicate which conclusion each interviewee would reach. Karina and Mara are both practical, the former using NFP to protect her body's health and the latter using contraception to keep her family situation manageable. I did not expect the malleability of rationality structures, most poignantly altered during her adult life by Rita, who transitioned from theoretical, to practical, to substantive as she was exposed to a religious climate with which she was

uncomfortable, then difficult life circumstances, and then the eye-opening *Humanae Vitae*. Weber's rationality types appear, then, to be more tools than factors for decision making in some cases. I wonder if Rita would have developed a substantive world view of another kind, even if she had not read *Humanae Vitae*, and whether her near desperation forced a period of practical orientation that is otherwise atypical for her. Clearly the rationality type employed by an individual is not stagnant, it is not solitary, and it is not directly defining of her outcomes of action.

Is *Humanae Vitae* the key factor in this then? Stephanie, Karina, and Rita transformed their outlooks—and *their relationships with their husbands*—after reading that document from 1968. All women I interviewed were familiar with it, and Hannah was the only one who had read it for the first time in adulthood and not been impacted by its teaching. Mara, however, found it impractical to integrate into her life, though I might guess that in different circumstances, she would like to. She had intended to practice NFP as she prepared for marriage, and it was only after she found out her cycle was unreliable that she embraced practicality in this aspect of her life, and its breadth may have expanded since then.

Whatever *Humanae Vitae* meant at the beginning to Mara, whatever it means now, that meaning encountered the unavoidable issue of control for not only her but every other woman. Contraception and family planning are really only about control. Otherwise a couple would not be concerned with timing or spacing their children. Natural Family Planning summons the potential parent to submission, openness, and cooperation with God's will instead, though thoughtful planning often surely plays its part. Personal agency's interaction with faith took myriad forms as these women confronted these

issues, as is inherent with every instance of religious injunction. Mara's central question of how to balance the necessity of faith-filled trust with the tools of her own rationality and capability represent this conflict poignantly. Stephanie also controls how she feels most comfortable in her physical relationship with her husband. Teresa feels control should be given to God by exercising control of one's passions through monthly abstinence. A new way to control her body's health gave Karina a means of giving control to God in other aspects of her life. Rita, Hannah, and Holly all decisively prevented conception for reasons they deemed crucial. And each of these women feels powerful in her particular configuration or manufacture of control of her reproductive powers under God, with her husband, or through family planning methods.

Another overriding theme prevalent in almost every interview I conducted was that of the intense importance of building a loving relationship with one's spouse, and the chosen method of family planning played a pivotal role. As the two purposes of sex in marriage are the inseparable unitive and procreative, according to *Humanae Vitae* and surrounding Church teaching, preservation of both is necessary for the sake of either. The Papal Commission on Birth Control's majority report proponents, however, posited a slightly different execution of the honor afforded sex and marriage by the Church and for fostering love between the couple and in the family above all, as the Church would readily agree is the aim of every relevant doctrine to this issue.

The Catholic Church tends to revere sacredness by protecting holy things and putting them out of common reach. For example the pre-Vatican II church layout separated the congregation from the altar and the tabernacle behind it. Catholics received the Eucharist on the tongue while on their knees at the railing at the foot of the altar. As

touched on in Rita's chapter with Stephanie's friend, one cannot receive the sacrament of the Eucharist without proper education, conviction of belief of the miracle that is taking place, and absolution from any mortal sins. It is difficult to obtain because it is so sacred. The sanctity and dignity of sex, in which a couple collaborates with the creative power of God to form new life, is entrusted to the divinely-ordained sacrament of marriage. The married couple is called to honor this act by ever sustaining its necessarily joined unitive and procreative ends, as they were designed by God the Creator and evidenced in the natural law, which has been transmitted and pronounced with greater detail by the Catholic Church. The intense holiness of this undertaking demands a reverence that the Church institutes by preventing it from being made common, profane. Sex must always, therefore, be performed with its fullest meaning and potential, and it is better to not use it than to misuse it. Thus, contraception subtracts from the fullest potential and makes it too profane.

The writers of the majority report, however, saw this institution as a gift from God that would be most treasured and most benefited from with fewer obstacles to its enjoyment, though they preserved the reverence afforded sex and agreed on its place in monogamous, heterosexual marriages. They placed all the meaning of this relationship in the context of the love of the family, preferencing increased mutual love of the couple over the possibility of conception as the absolute necessity in every marital act.<sup>91</sup> "Love becomes very practical on occasion,"<sup>92</sup> and they determined the unitive to be a more

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<sup>91</sup> Papal Birth Control Commission, "Schema for a Document on Responsible Parenthood," 159.

<sup>92</sup> Charles E. Curran, "Personal Reflections on Birth Control," *The Catholic Case for Contraception*, ed. Daniel Callahan (London: the Macmillan Company, 1969), 28.

direct strengthening of a marriage during times of difficulty than always preserving the procreative element of sex.

If I could interview my informants again, I would ask them what they think of the concepts of a theology of full grasp for the Catholic Church rather than a theology of reverence. These are terms I have named, not seeking to change Church doctrine but clarify its potential perspectives of approaching something holy and good. A theology of reverence has been indicated by the examples above, separating the individual from the sacred, sometimes physically, until made ready and worthy or until an extraordinary occasion. The mentality of a theology of full grasp, however, in celebration of the sacred and good, does not separate but unites the individual to the holy for his or her fulfillment.

This would not be altogether foreign for Catholicism: some Protestant denominations seek to honor Holy Communion by only celebrating it occasionally, rather than at every Mass as Catholicism does, fully grasping the miraculous gift of the Sacrament as something not cheapened but even more sustaining by frequent reception. This theology of full grasp could be described to include either contraception or Natural Family Planning—the emphasis and decision would rest on the individual. Some would certainly feel that the strength of love is fully grasped in Church teaching and that NFP allows for this in the best way of formation for married couples and families, and I think some would be at the very least intrigued to ponder its possibilities and implications. I cannot say what a shift in language or lens of approach something like this would bring for the Catholic Church, and I cannot argue for or against it here. A redefinition of the meaning and purpose of sex, however, while keeping to Catholic beliefs, would alter its

principles and patterns of thought, possibly inviting a reappropriated scheme of rationality.

Religion is about control of one's life standing before the vast cosmos and defining meaning. The religious person employs agency in assimilating to one's chosen tradition and thus also assimilates that tradition to oneself. The individuality of the eight practicing Catholic women with whom I spoke evidences their constant remaking of their religion in their personal lives to fit what they need, what they find appropriately rational. There is an objective Catholic Church with which each of them interact, but they all make their own Catholicism with the pieces of it that they incorporate into their lives and their manners of doing this. This is not a unique characteristic of the Catholic faithful, but it pervades every religious community and every group. Membership and the relationship of member to institution, the agency and obedience, the freedom and trust of will, that characterize that relationship of part to whole, defines the fluctuating negotiation of *religiousness*. Is Teresa more Catholic than Hannah? Hannah told me she focuses on Jesus' teachings in the Gospel and regularly goes to Confession. Those are things Catholics do. Minimum requirements of religiosity, of what Catholics do and what Catholics are, are not available. Each of these women told me she is Catholic, so she practices Catholicism, one that is distinctively her own, no matter how closely she holds to orthodoxy. The contraception debate offers a reality of another form of variety in Catholicisms, and individual input and action all contribute to the amalgam of Catholicism, not as the entity of the hierarchy and its teaching, but in its sociological fact.

APPENDIX: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

**Texas Christian University  
Fort Worth, Texas**

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

**Title of Research:** Contraceptive Catholics

**Funding Agency/Sponsor:** n/a

**Study Investigators:** Zoey Murzyn and Morrison G. Wong

**What is the purpose of the research?**

This purpose of this research is to identify Catholic women's differing beliefs concerning the use or non-use of contraceptives and to understand their decision-making processes.

**How many people will participate in this study?**

Approximately 10 Catholic women will be interviewed.

**What is my involvement for participating in this study?**

You will be interviewed about your perspective on the Catholic Church's teachings on the use of artificial contraception and your reaction and level of adherence to it and how you came to make those decisions. This is expected to be a one-time interview, but you may be contacted at a later date if clarification is needed or further questions arise during the analysis of the interview.

**How long am I expected to be in this study for and how much of my time is required?**

This interview should take about an hour. Any follow up questioning at a later date be brief as well and probably only involve a few specific questions.

**What are the risks of participating in this study and how will they be minimized?**

If you know the interviewer personally, you may be uncomfortable answering some questions, embarrassed about sharing because of their personal nature, or concerned that your relationship with the interviewer will be affected based on your answer. This can be minimized by the interviewer approaching this interview objectively and with an academic lens, and her opinion of you will not change in response to any answer you give. If, however, you still feel uncomfortable answering any question, you may skip it, and no assumption about your answer will be made.

**What are the benefits for participating in this study?**

There is no direct benefit of this study to the participants. The goal of this study is to compile an anthology that identifies the various ways Catholic women understand and respond to the Catholic Church's prohibition of artificial contraceptives. Non-Catholics

will be able to understand this issue from multiple insiders' perspectives, and Catholics who hold particular views concerning this will be able to see other views and the reasoning processes that created them, hopefully in a way that will lead to increased understanding among them.

**Will I be compensated for participating in this study?**

No.

**What is an alternate procedure(s) that I can choose instead of participating in this study?**

You have no obligation to participate in this study.

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**

You will be asked personal questions about your relationship to and practice of certain tenets of Catholicism. To minimize any risk to your privacy, only the interviewer will have access to the audio recordings of this interview. Transcripts and labeling of tapes or digital records will not include actual names of participants. Your name and any other identifying information will be changed on all transcripts before publishing or sharing with faculty advisors for assistance with analysis, and only the interviewer will possess the master list denoting the actual participants' names and their corresponding pseudonyms. Physical files will be kept in a securely locked location, and digital files will be password protected, both of which will only be available for access by the interviewer.

**Is my participation voluntary?**

Yes.

**Can I stop taking part in this research?**

Yes. You may skip a particular question(s) or end the interview at any time.

**What are the procedures for withdrawal?**

Simply indicate to the interviewer that you would like to stop. You may also designate whether or not the interview conducted thus far may be used for the research project.

**Will I be given a copy of the consent document to keep?**

Yes.

**Who should I contact if I have questions regarding the study?**

Zoey Murzyn, Interviewer, Telephone 303-919-9397

Dr. Morrison Wong, TCU Sociology Department Chair, Telephone 817-257-7472

**Who should I contact if I have concerns regarding my rights as a study participant?**

Dr. David Cross, Chair, TCU Institutional Review Board, Telephone 817-257-6416.

Dr. Tim Barth, Director, Sponsored Research, Telephone 817-257-6412.

Your signature below indicates that you have read or been read the information provided above, you have received answers to all of your questions and have been told who to call if you have any more questions, you have freely decided to participate in this research, and you understand that you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

**Participant Name (please print):**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Participant Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator Name (please print):** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Please tell me a little about yourself and your background.
- What teachings of the Catholic Church do you particularly agree or disagree with? In what ways do you consider yourself devout or not? In what ways do you perceive yourself to be fully practicing, partially practicing, or not practicing the Catholic faith and the Church's tenets?
- What is the Catholic Church's teaching on the use of contraceptives? Why do you think the Church holds those teachings? Do you think it always will, or could it be subject to change in the future? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about the Catholic Church's prohibition of artificial contraceptives? Do you consider there to be any difference among the use condoms, IUDs, the Pill and other chemical means, or surgical procedures that prevent ability to conceive?
- Have you ever used any of these methods? Which and when/in what situation?
- How do you feel about the Catholic Church's advocating Natural Family Planning methods that utilize time of abstinence to avoid conception?
- Have you ever used this method? When/in what situation?
- Have your views about these methods [tailored to responses thus far] of regulating or avoiding birth changed? If so, what do you think brought this change(s) about?
- What do/did you take into consideration about whether or which forms of birth control to use?
- Practical Rationality: What are everyday advantages and disadvantages of the method you use? How does your life right now influence whether or which method you use? How have other circumstances influenced your choices in this matter in the past? What

foreseeable changes in circumstance, if any, in the future might alter your decision-making in this issue?

- Theoretical Rationality: Does your faith influence your decision about contraceptives? If so, how? Do the more abstract elements of the Church's teachings hold weight against pragmatic needs and circumstances regarding birth regulation? How do the two relate in your thinking as you consider this issue?

- Substantive Rationality: Is the bedroom a realm the Church should have command over? Is complying with the Church's method of Natural Family Planning rather than using an artificial contraceptive method necessary to fully practice the Catholic faith? To be a "good" Catholic? Does it have any impact on your personal faith-life or spiritual relationship with God?

- Formal Rationality: If you are a proponent of Natural Family Planning and against the use of artificial contraception, do you feel there are or should be exceptions to this mandate? For what reasons? If you are a proponent of artificial contraception methods, do you feel everyone should have access to or use them when not attempting to conceive, and why? How would universal application of whatever method(s) you agree with affect our society at large? What are/would be the consequences to our society if the opposing method were utilized universally?

- With all of this in mind, what matters to you when you consider how to deal with avoiding or preventing unwanted pregnancy? How did you make the decision to act as you do now in regards to this? If you have use different methods and/or thought processes in the past, how have they differed, and what influenced you during those periods and circumstances?

- Do you have any other comments or anything else you would like to add that you feel we did not cover but would be valuable for my research?

*These are starting, basic questions. They are bases for conversation with the interviewees that may have changed slightly to fit the participant and the conversation.*

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### Interviews

“Hannah” in discussion with the author, May 2013.

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“Karina” in discussion with the author, January 2013.

“Mara” in discussion with the author, December 2012.

“Stephanie” in discussion with the author, January 2013.

“Teresa” in discussion with the author, December 2013.

“Rita” in discussion with the author, January 2013.

“Rosemary” in discussion with the author, August 2013.