NATURAL OR ARTIFICIAL?
Re-examining the Morality of Birth Regulation Methods in Relation to SDM*

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When we deal with ethics, we enter the arena where questions on moral rightness or wrongness of the act and the moral culpability or inculpability of the moral agent are raised. When we enter this arena, we tread on quite precarious ground, like walking on a high wire.

I attempt to take a reasonable, balanced, and nuanced ethical stance, considering that ethical problems are human problems, and as such, they cannot be isolated from the actual human situations or circumstances where ordinary men and women are slugging it out everyday. There is always a total picture to see—the interplay of lights and shadows, of values and disvalues, of sin and grace. We have to keep the balance, lest we fall either on the side of ethical laxity or ethical rigorism. Ethical laxity is one extreme to avoid, as it negates basic human values and falls into a normless morality. The other extreme is ethical rigorism, blind to the complexity and many-sidedness of moral problems; it takes a rigid monolithic approach.

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SDM as Advocated by the Church

The Standard Days Method (SDM) increases a woman’s fertility consciousness, making it easier for her and her husband to regulate the birth of their children so they can meet the demands of responsible parenthood. Proven effective in practice, it is a method that is advocated for married couples who are seriously following the teaching of the Church on birth regulation.

The Church’s stance on the meaning and purpose of conjugal intercourse has evolved through history. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, due largely to the long shadow cast by Augustine’s views on the Church teaching on conjugal sex, it was held that loving couples committed a venial sin if they engaged in sexual intercourse without the intention of procreation. Procreation was the only legitimate purpose of the marital act; and thus, intercourse during the time of menstruation or during pregnancy was morally prohibited. This teaching has long been abandoned.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Church teaching evolved through three stages. In the first stage, it was taught that couples must positively seek a procreative intent in intercourse. In the second stage, other moral motives for the conjugal act may be morally acceptable for as long as the procreative intent is not excluded; and in the third stage, couples were allowed to engage in the conjugal act in certain situations without desiring or intending procreation, but they must not deliberately thwart or frustrate it.

In the context of the third stage, the Church teaching on periodic abstinence was accepted. Periodic abstinence allows a couple to limit their conjugal intercourse during periods of infertility, following the natural rhythm of fertility and infertility of the woman. SDM is premised on this basic teaching of the Church on periodic abstinence.

At this juncture, it is well to understand the mind of the Church on the reality and meaning of the conjugal act. Humanæ Vitæ declares the following as its basic teaching:
1. ...each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life (11) because God has willed the inseparable connection... between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning (12).

2. ...by virtue of its intimate structure, the conjugal act, while most closely uniting husband and wife, capacitates them for the generation of new lives according to laws inscribed in the very being of man and of woman (12).

3. The Church is coherent with herself when she considers recourse to the infecund periods to be licit, while at the same time condemning, as being always illicit, the use of means directly contrary to fecundation (16).

The primary contention of the Church teaching is that the inseparability of the unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act is divinely designed and willed. So inseparable are the two meanings, that any attempt to render the conjugal act sterile is also an attack on the self-giving love expressed through it. Excluding the child as the permanent fruit of the spousal love robs of that love its unitive meaning. The inseparability of the love-giving (unitive) and the life-giving (procreative) is such that any attempt to deliberately

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1Vincent J. Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996) 182-83. Pius XI in December 1930 issued the encyclical *Casti Connubii*, which goes beyond the teaching of Augustine. It clearly sees intercourse as having two purposes, one of which is primary, the other secondary: “The conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children... [but] in the use of the matrimonial rights there are also secondary ends, such as mutual aid, the cultivating of mutual love, and the quieting of concupiscence, which husband and wife are not forbidden to consider so long as they are subordinated to the primary end and so long as the intrinsic nature of the act is preserved” (80, 85). The full text of *Casti Connubii* is found in Odile M. Liebard, ed., *Official Catholic Teachings*, vol. 4, *Love and Sexuality* (Wilmington, NC: McGrath, 1978) 23-70.

thwart either one renders the whole act intrinsically dishonest and illicit. What is only licit is the recourse to the infecund period because this does not include any direct means to thwart procreation.

The Church teaching protects the most basic human values surrounding the meaning of the sexual act in marriage. The beauty and depth of the teaching preserves the fullest and richest expression of human sexuality. As a method that is consonant with the Church teaching, SDM promotes the positive human values of the natural method.

It is a couple method because the responsibility for birth regulation and family planning rests on both husband and wife, who must be mutually motivated, supportive, and cooperative. It is on the side of women empowerment as it enables them to be increasingly aware of and sensitive to their bodies and to their biological rhythms, coupled with an increasing sense of self-possession in relation to their reproductive choices. The practice of periodic abstinence, on which SDM is premised, encourages the spouses to explore and deepen the affective dimension of their conjugal intimacy, opening them to the depths and richness of their sexual life beyond its genital expression. It also nurtures the couple’s joyful anticipation of their conjugal union after periods of abstinence, thus bringing vibrancy to their expressions of love and protecting it from falling into a dull and boring routine.\(^3\) In the use of SDM, all these values are achieved by a method that is easy, with no pills, no drugs, no injections, and no side-effects.

**Ethical Questions and Issues**

Ethical discourse involves critical thought and inquiry, different from moral homiletics and exhortation. Ethical stances are results of discussions and deliberations on contrary positions, bringing to light

the depth and complexity of problems as they are seen in different contexts and under different circumstances. We raise various questions and issues surrounding the use of SDM in relation to birth regulation as natural or artificial. We cannot treat these issues in depth but a brief discussion may be sufficient to raise our ethical consciousness.

Since this ethical discourse will necessarily pose questions to the main teaching of the Church on birth regulation, it is best that we first establish the level of magisterial authority exercised by the Church in relation to this said teaching. The infallible magisterial authority was not exercised in the teaching on birth regulation and the prohibition of artificial contraception either by a solemn decree of the pope or by an ecumenical council or by virtue of the constant and repeated teaching of the ordinary universal Magisterium. This teaching on the said issues belongs to the authoritative fallible teaching of the Magisterium. Pope Paul VI gave evidence that this is the case in his address to the cardinals:

We say frankly that so far we do not have sufficient reason to consider the norms given by Pope Pius XII on this matter of contraception as out of date and therefore not as binding. They must be considered as valid, at least until we feel obliged in conscience to change them. In a matter of such seriousness, it seems well that Catholics should wish to follow one single law, that which the Church puts forward with authority. It therefore seems opportune to recommend that, for the present, no one take it upon himself to make pronouncements in terms which differ from the prevailing norm.

The teaching on birth regulation, as gleaned from this papal statement, is not absolute and irreformable. It is recommended as valid

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4Francis A. Sullivan says that the Church teaching cannot be taught infallibly unless that teaching is "necessarily" or 'strictly or intimately' connected with revelation, or is required for the defense or explanation of revealed truth." "The 'Secondary Object' of Infallibility," Theological Studies 54 (Sep 1993) 543.

5The Pope's address is found in Acta Apostolicae Sedis 56 (1964) 588-89.
for the present until change is demanded by conscience. Richard McCormick has suggested that when we are faced with the Church’s authoritative teaching, two extreme reactions are to be avoided. The first of these is to adopt the attitude that the teaching of the Church is only as good as its arguments. This reduces the role of pope and bishops to theologians-among-theologians, and denies them of their special charism as teachers of the Church. The other extreme reaction, however, is to maintain that any authoritative fallible teaching is to be accepted independent of its argumentation. This stance sees the Magisterium as issuing edicts and decrees from its position of authority, without truly teaching. It only dictates and legislates. If this is so, the very principle of dissent is eliminated.  

When the possibility of dissent is withdrawn, we must wonder what sense remains in referring to any teaching as noninfallible, since we would find ourselves constrained, in effect, to live with a notion of noninfallible teaching which demands that it be treated as practically infallible.  

While a teaching is defined as noninfallible, it does not mean in any sense that it is necessarily erroneous or to be taken lightly. It only means that it remains subject to re-evaluation and revision. It is thus, in the light of the nature of the noninfallible teaching of the Church, that we raise questions and issues surrounding SDM, in relation to the Church teaching on birth regulation. They are raised in the spirit of an earnest inquiry into the moral truth regarding realities that touch profoundly the lives of men and women, and in relation to which they are engaged in some of their deepest and darkest moral struggles.

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6"Notes on Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 29 (1968) 731. McCormick further remarks: “If the Spirit is assisting the Magisterium, we should expect this assistance to show up in the quality of the arguments.” “Theologians and the Magisterium,” in *Corrective Vision: Explorations in Moral Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1994) 90.

7Ibid., 731-32.
RETHINKING THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ARTIFICIAL AND NATURAL

We raise four issues which we pose in questions, the first of which is: How ethically decisive is the distinction between natural and artificial? In explaining the Church's teaching on periodic abstinence as a natural method, the distinction is made between non-procreative and anti-procreative. In the practice of periodic abstinence, couples refrain from the conjugal act during fertile periods but they do not execute any deliberate act that will prevent conception. They only make legitimate use of the natural disposition of the biological cycle of fertility. The act of intercourse in this case is only nonprocreative. The situation is different when spouses have recourse to artificial contraception, for they engage in intercourse at any time but they simultaneously, in a direct and positive way, prevent conception from happening. So as they seek to express the unitive dimension of their love, they thwart its procreative dimension. In this case, their intercourse is rendered antiprocreative.\(^8\)

Granted that the distinction between nonprocreative and antiprocreative is valid, we are still left with the question of whether it is ethically decisive. In other words, it remains to be proven that, just because some acts of sexual intercourse in marriage are antiprocreative, they are necessarily immoral and those that are nonprocreative are necessarily moral. Can it happen that, in a very difficult situation, a couple regretfully resorts to the use of artificial methods to protect their marriage and meet the serious demands of responsible parenthood? And likewise, could the use of SDM as a non-procreative natural method, which is good in itself, be used for selfish, dishonest, and unethical reasons?

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\(^8\)See Genovesi, 197. This line of reasoning is developed by Brian J. Shanley, "The Moral Difference Between Natural Family Planning and Contraception," Linacre Quarterly 54 (Feb 1987) 48-60. Shanley's argument shows the influence of German Grisez.
EXAMINING THE VIEW OF HUMAN SEXUALITY IN PERIODIC ABSTINENCE

What is the view of sex gleaned from the teaching of periodic abstinence on which it is premised? It seems that periodic abstinence is based on a physicalist view of sexuality that is limited to the endocrine rhythm of ovulation and menstruation. While sexuality has a biological dimension, there is much more to it as a human reality. There is a richness and depth in sexuality that includes psycho-emotional, affective, and spiritual dimensions.9

It has been shown that a great majority of women reach the peak of their sexual desire at the time of ovulation and immediately before and after the onset of their menstrual period. But if they are to follow the teaching on periodic abstinence, they have to refrain from sex precisely at the peak of their need. Does this not make natural methods like SDM unnatural, since it inhibits not only conception but also the natural expression of affection when couples intensely need and desire it?10 When sexuality is seen only in its biological rhythms, it neglects to see it as a total human reality that involves and engages the whole person.

ARTIFICIAL CONTRACEPTION AND LOSS OF LOVE AND RESPECT

Is there an intrinsic relation between the use of artificial contraception and the loss of the love, respect, and care of a husband for his wife? *Humanae Vitae* (17) states

...It is also to be feared that the man, growing used to the employment of anti-conceptive practices, may finally lose respect for the

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10See John R. Cavanagh, "Is Rhythm Better than We Think?" *Marriage* 47 (1965) 1-4.
woman and, no longer caring for her physical and psychological equilibrium, may come to the point of considering her as a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment, and no longer as his respected and beloved companion.

In reaction to this assertion that the use of artificial contraception leads to the diminishment of the relationship of a husband and wife, Lisa Cahill pointed out that couples would be incredulous at the proposition that the use of artificial birth control necessarily makes their sexual intimacy selfish, dishonest, and unfaithful. When the subjective intention that links the person to the act is neglected, and the focus is merely on the physical structure of the act, such propositions are understandably reached. The fact of the matter is that the use of either the natural method or artificial method may lead to the loss of love and respect between the husband and wife when they are engaged in it for selfish or self-seeking reasons.

**Natural Birth Regulation and Obligatory Ideals**

Does natural birth regulation represent obligatory ideals that are capable of being realized only when viewed in abstraction from real and concrete situations? Obligatory ideals have claims on us, but when confronted by concrete situations, their realizations limp. Reservations about natural methods of birth regulation like SDM come not from their lack of effectiveness, but from the many unpredictable occurrences in ordinary life that “limited abstinence” eventually become “limitless abstinence.” When the period of infertility arrives, couples may find intercourse impossible or unthinkable because of pressing needs and problems that take their focus. Then the time of infertility passes, the fertile period begins, and spouses must await the next safe period which might be challenged again by other unpredictable factors.12

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Most of our people live in poverty-stricken situations like those who live under bridges with only wooden planks to cover their back from the filthy waters underneath, there where they are packed like sardines with so little space. One wonders how one who lives in such a situation can have the time and leisure to think of periodic abstinence. When the husband arrives drunk and throws himself on his wife, in their poor tiny universe where conjugal sex is their only known pleasure and leisure, that is the end of SDM. Most of the time, it is not their ill will but their poverty that prevents our poor, who are many, from living according to the teaching of the Church.

In concrete situations, spouses face agonizing crises of conscience because of conflicting duties that make it difficult for them to harmonize the need to nurture their conjugal intimacy through sexual expression and the serious demand of providing decent life to every child they bring into the world. In conflict situations, they alone can make decisions of conscience, where they come to terms with the demands of their marriage and of their parental responsibility. They make difficult choices, and for as long as they do not act out of egoism, but out of great striving to do the good that they can possibly do in the not too perfect circumstances of their lives, they are acting in good conscience.

These four issues and questions are raised in an attempt to engage in an ethical discourse that brings to light the complexity and the many-sidedness of birth regulation. They are raised in the spirit of inquiry that elevates the ethical consciousness of questions and issues that surround birth regulation, particularly of natural methods as exemplified by SDM. It is imperative for the Church to continue its inquiry about these issues and questions that touch profoundly the lives of men and women; an inquiry that requires openness to honest and frank discussions and dialogue in an arduous search for the truth.
Conclusion

I uphold the validity and credibility of SDM as a natural method of birth regulation that is consonant with the basic human values in marriage upheld and protected by the Church. An easy and simple method—with no pills, no drugs, no injections and no side effects—is certainly what most couples are searching for in their striving to meet both the demands of their conjugal bonding and responsible parenthood.

Given this positive statement about SDM, I would, however, venture to hold that the difference traditionally held between what is a natural method and artificial method is based on a view which reduces the sexual union to its biological and physical dimension, not mindful of the psycho-emotional-spiritual ebbs and flows of a truly human encounter. And thus, what may be considered as an effective method may be so only from a physical and biological sense, but not from the perspective of a more total and holistic understanding of sex and sexuality.

I grant that the natural method is non-procreative and that the artificial method is anti-procreative, but the difference is not ethically decisive. That a method is anti-procreative is not necessarily immoral. A couple, with much regret, may resort to the use of artificial methods to protect the very demands of their marriage and of responsible parenthood under very difficult circumstances. They are certainly not acting out of an egoism influenced by a contraceptive mentality. On the other hand, a couple may opt to use a non-procreative natural method like SDM, a much easier and safer method to prevent conception, because they see children as hindrances to their social life and travels. The greater evil is not the use of artificial control, but selfishness, which places children on the lowest level of the couples’ list of priorities, relative to their pursuit of material affluence, leisure, or sheer vanity.

There are disvalues in all forms of birth regulation, including natural methods, because all fall short of the ideal of the insepara-
bility of the unitive and procreative, and all contain negative elements, be it psychological, emotional, medical, physical, etc. But such disvalues are not necessarily objective moral evil, and more so, not necessarily sinful.\textsuperscript{13} Sometimes certain disvalues may be allowed for very serious reasons, or for a greater good. In difficult conflict situations, not all values can be realized. Realizing one may be regrettfully at the cost of another value. The use of any method of birth regulation necessitates a serious moral reason.

In the end, spouses make the final decision of conscience insofar as protecting the most basic values of their marriage and of their responsible parenthood. Children are cherished, generously anticipated and graciously welcomed, and birth regulation is practiced only as the demands of responsible parenthood dictate. Spouses are called to genital intimacy as this strengthens their marital bond, the wellspring of their love for each other and for their children. When this bond is threatened, the family and children are put on the line, for just as their love is called to be generously open to life, procreation and education of their children is and should be the fruit of their deep conjugal love.

Lest I am misunderstood, I am definitely not promoting the use of artificial birth control and neither am I facilitating its use for couples. The only plea I am making here is that we do not put unnecessary burden on the consciences of people, especially our poor people, when life itself is burdensome enough. To say for instance that anyone who does not follow the Church teaching on birth regulation is sinning (e.g., “Ang hindi sumusunod sa turo ng Simbahan ay nagkakasala”) puts burden on people’s consciences and, much worse, obliterates the very meaning and reality of conscience as the ultimate subjective norm of morality.

\textsuperscript{13}Disvalues are used in the sense of ontic/premoral evil, which is distinguished from objective moral evil, the result of a moral judgment of the act when disvalues or ontic/premoral evil interact with the intention and circumstances of the moral agent in a concrete moral context. There is sin involved when the objective moral evil is done with sufficient freedom and consent.
I believe that what we are called to do is to bring our people in contact with the beauty, richness, and depth of the values enshrined in the Church teaching but at the same time help them discern the objective moral truth of their situations—the values and good that they are striving for and continue to strive for, in the face of what they can only possibly do for now, given the limitation of their situations—and help them make a true decision of conscience in the spirit of prayer.

There are abiding substantial values that we should all share and want to protect whatever position we take on the issues raised: the holiness of marriage, the fidelity of conjugal love, and generous and responsible openness to life. May these not get lost in the discourses and debates about the means of birth regulation.