

However, because the Church recognizes that if there are serious motive for spacing births derived from psychological or external circumstance it is, “permissible to take into account the natural rhythms immanent in the generative functions and to make use of marriage during the infertile times only, and in this way to regulate births without offending the moral principles that we have just recalled (Humane Vitae, 20).” The method of copulation during infertile periods of the woman is referred to as Natural Family Planning (NFP). NFP is condoned by the Church as long as the couple is open to the possibility of child birth and the couple has due reason to space or delay procreation. The couple may never use Natural Family Planning with the intention of avoiding child birth entirely or indefinitely because it violates the marriage covenant (CCC 2366).

Conclusion

These are the teachings of the Catholic Church which we ought to believe because she is the “pillar and foundation of truth (1 Timothy 3:15).” St. Paul has warned us that, “the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths (2 Timothy 4:3-4).” Heed the words of the Church! And may no one plead ignorance before God.

**THE ANSWERS YOU SEEK
NEVER COME WHEN THE
MIND IS BUSY, THEY COME
WHEN THE MIND IS STILL.**

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Articles on Catholic Theology and Teachings - Part 9 - Church Teachings on Controversial Topics



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The first Council of Nicea exercises its right and duty to define the faith and protect the Church from the Arian heresy (325 A.D)

When communicating with fellow Catholics I have become increasingly aware of the general lack of knowledge, interest and fidelity given to the Church's stance on moral, spiritual, and disciplinary teachings. Indeed, it is all too common to find confusion about Church teachings even among the ranks of regular mass-attending "cradle Catholics". Many reasons can be given for this widespread confusion and dissension. It maybe that catechesis and religious education is poor in many areas, or it could be that religious interest is at low ebb, or that people falsely believe the second Vatican Council changed the Church's teachings. Most likely, the reason behind growing dissension in the Church is that many Catholics believe the teaching authority of the Catholic Church is irrelevant in today's modern world. Irregardless of the reason, Catholics who fail to understand the Church's teaching through ignorance need to be informed. For this reason I have written this article to set the record straight. So that no one may accuse this author of voicing his own personal opinions and politics, I have provided references to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (abbreviated "CCC" in this document) and various church documents promulgated by Rome.

Before I address the Church's teaching on matter of faith and morals I'd like to explain the role of dogma in the Catholic faith. For anyone who professes to be Catholic, their faith requires them to believe certain teachings with "divine and Catholic faith". No amount of personal opinion, "conscientious objection", or personal desires can excuse them from acting contrary to a defined dogma of the Catholic Church. Certain dogmas such as Christ's resurrection, the Trinity of God, redemption of sin, belief in heaven and hell and other such dogmas are regarded as pillars of the faith. These teachings cannot be abandoned without simultaneously abandoning the Catholic faith. The church exists to teach men the truth and aid them in attaining salvation through the graces given by Christ's death and resurrection. Dogmatic teachings are absolutely needed by the faithful so that they can attain salvation. The need for dogmatic teachings is necessary because without them the faithful do not know what is required to gain everlasting life. That is why the Church has the right and the duty to define what we are required to believe in matters of faith and morals. In fact, faith is defined as "the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe in all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself (CCC 1814)." When faith is united with the gifts of hope and charity wrought by the redemption of Christ, faith enlivens our soul and gives us spiritual life. Make no mistake, Catholics "do not

Artificial Contraception

Of all the Church's moral teachings this is the one teaching that causes the most dissension, ridicule, and flagrant rebellion among modern Catholics. Such rampant heresy, dissension, and confusion have not been seen since the great Arian heresy of the fourth century.

Modern technology has improved the reliability and effectiveness of condoms, spermicides, diaphragms, sterilizations, and other devices and methods to such a level that birth can now be cheaply, easily, and artificially regulated. Many couples use birth control to avoid the hassles and obligations of child birth which they view as an obstacle to career motivations, rampant selfish sex, financial freedom and global population control.

The Church teaches nothing new on the regulation of birth and the prohibition against artificial contraception (Council of Nicea, Canon 1). It is her age old teaching that the procreative element cannot be removed from the act of sex without incurring grave sin and violating the sanctity of marriage. Condoms and other artificial birth control are illicit under all circumstances; even married couples are forbidden to use artificial birth control to limit or control pregnancy. Pope Paul VI attempted to clarify the Catholic Church's ancient teaching on artificial contraception following the Protestant church's reversal on the ancient prohibition of birth control (the Anglican church broke the floodgate by reversing their decision on birth control during the Lambeth conference of 1930). Pope Paul VI wrote in the encyclical letter *Humane Vitae*:

In conformity with these fundament elements of the human and Christian vision of marriage, we must once again declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun, and, above all, directly willed and procured abortion, even if for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of birth regulation. Also to be excluded, as the Magisterium of the Church has on a number of occasions declared, is direct sterilization, whether perpetual or temporary, whether of the man or of the woman. Similarly, excluded is every action that, either in anticipation of the conjugal act or in its accomplishment or in the development of its natural consequences, would have as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible (*Humane Vitae*, 14).

Celibate Priesthood

The celibate priesthood has drawn fire from many modern non-Catholics because they feel it trammels on the human need for sexuality and reproduction. Nothing in the human psyche seems more deep-seated (especially among men) than the urge to copulate. Contrary to the world, the Church teaches that the human urge for sexuality is incredibly disproportionate to the good of the goal (reproduction of the human race, and unifying love between spouses). Lust for sex is a result of original sin and the fall of mankind, as such the Church believes that all men and women are called to lives of chastity and must use human reason and will to restrain their weakness of the flesh. In short, all people are called to live chaste lives. Sex is to be reserved only for married couples who wish to express their love for each other by procreation.

Celibacy needs to be viewed in the light of chastity; priests freely choose celibacy so that they can concentrate all their efforts on the salvation of their parishioners rather than on the immediate needs and wants of a wife and children. St. Paul recognized the value of a celibate life when he wrote, “he who is unmarried is concerned with God’s claim, asking how he is to please God; whereas the married man is concerned with the world’s claim, asking how he is to please his wife (1 Cor 7:32-33). Since a priest chooses duty to God and his parishioners over duty to a wife and children, it follows that in the light of chastity a priest must be celibate.

Celibacy is not for all people. Christ said, “some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it (Matthew 19:12).” Thus, some are called to the vocations of marriage, others for the single life, and some for the celibate religious life. The Church teaches:

All the ordained ministers of the Latin Church, with the exception of permanent deacons, are normally chosen from among men of faith who live a celibate life and who intend to remain celibate “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” Called to consecrate themselves with undivided heart to the Lord and to the “affairs of the Lord,” they give themselves entirely to God and to men. Celibacy is a sign of this new life to the service of which the Church’s minister is consecrated; accepted with a joyous heart celibacy radiantly proclaims the Reign of God (CCC 1579).

Celibacy is not a dogma or doctrinal teaching of the Church; rather it is a disciplinary teaching that can be changed if the Church’s leadership feels it is necessary. Members of the Eastern rite of the Catholic Church are permitted to receive both the sacrament of Holy Orders and Holy Matrimony in accordance with their rite’s long and ancient history of married priests.

believe in formulas, but in those realities they express, which faith allows us to touch (CCC 170).” “Salvation comes from God alone; but because we receive the life of faith through the Church, she is our mother (CCC 168).” As our mother, we ought to respect and obey the Church.

There is one more fundamental point on Church teachings that confuse many Catholics. Many Catholics believe that some traditions such as the celibacy of the priesthood, use of liturgical vestments, Lenten requirements, and other disciplines are dogmas of the Church that cannot be changed. Such things are not dogmas but disciplines that can be changed by the Church to suite the needs of the faithful. Changing these things will not compromise the Faith because they are not of the faith by necessity. If the Catholic Church wanted, she could allow priests to marry (which does occur in the Eastern rite of the Church) or wear common clothes while saying mass or even eliminate the season of Lent. The fact that the Church rarely alters her disciplinary traditions shows us that these traditions are beneficial and have been proven to be proper and pious by the test of time. So how do we distinguish dogmas from disciplinary teachings? Dogmas and definitions of faith and morals are explicitly promulgated by a Church Ecumenical Council convened or endorsed by the pope (such as the Council of Trent, First Vatican Council, and Vatican Council II) or by a pope in an encyclical letter. Yet, not all statements given by a council or a pope are considered dogmatic decrees. Only those statements which fulfill the following three conditions:

- 1) The decree is intended for belief by all the Church’s faithful
- 2) The decree is related to a matter of faith and morals
- 3) The decree comes from the pope when exercising his teaching authority as head of the Church or by a general Church council endorsed by the pope

Dogmas are not new teachings added to the beliefs of the Church; rather they are refinements and clarifications of Church Traditions taught by Christ and the twelve apostles. Dogmas, Traditional teachings, and Sacred Scripture form the Deposit of Faith and constitute the faith of the Church. Explicit doctrines from the Deposit of Faith can be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

With a proper understanding of the role of Church teachings and practices, we can now properly address the Church’s stance on various matters of faith and morals.

Abortion

Under no circumstances does the Church condone the practice of surgical or pharmaceutical abortions (such as RU-486 or the morning-after-pill). Abortion is tantamount to murder in the womb and cannot be justified by appealing to convenience, hardships, or “a woman’s right to choose”. Here is what the Church officially teaches in the Catechism:

Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person—among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life (CCC 2270).

Scripture also indirectly attests to the person-hood and humanity of the fetus in Jeremiah 1:5:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.

The ancient Tradition of forbidding abortions is expressed in the Didache, a first century writing of the apostles:

You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall not cause the newborn to perish (Didache 2,2)

The reasoning and arguments of the pro-choice movement have been addressed numerous times by Church authorities (such as John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae*) who are much more eloquent and adept than the author, and I will not reiterate them here other than to say that a woman’s right to choose abortion is not moral or licit because it interferes with and extinguishes the child’s right to live. A child has a soul from the moment of conception and therefore is a person (who has certain unalienable rights) who cannot be killed by the mother or doctor without making the participating parties murderers. In fact, the Church feels so strongly on the matter that she has issued an automatic excommunication for all those who have procured an abortion and are aware of the excommunication penalty (CIC, canon 1398). The excommunication even extends to those who, “without whose help the crime would not have been committed (*Evangelium Vitae*, Paragraph 62, Pope John Paul II)”. Thus abortion doctors, the father of the baby, and even parents of children who encourage an abortion, are held accountable.

In order to prevent Catholics from deceiving themselves and arguing that the Church’s two thousand year condemnation of abortion is only an opinion and not a doctrinal teaching of the faith, Pope John Paul II formally defined the condemnation of abortion in *Evangelium Vitae*:

The problem with the desire for women priesthood is that proponents do not understand the difference between a career choice and a vocation. Some falsely believe that the Sacrament of Holy Orders is a god-given right to all who desire it. The Church clarifies the matter in the Catechism:

No one has a right to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. Indeed no one claims this office for himself; he is called to it by God. Anyone who thinks he recognizes the signs of God’s call to the ordained ministry must humbly submit his desire to the authority of the Church, who has the responsibility and right to call someone to receive orders. Like every grace this sacrament can be received only as an unmerited gift (CCC 1578).

The Church has always realized that it does not have the authority to ordain priestesses. Such a doctrinal teaching is not found in Scripture or Church Tradition. None of the Fathers of the Church ever advocated or ordained woman to the episcopate or presbyterate. Despite numerous women disciples including Christ’s mother and St. Mary of Magdalene, Jesus Christ never elevated a woman to the role of apostle. Christ was never one to conform to cultural expectations and he often corrected the Jewish high priests and Pharisees when they did something wrong, yet he never called his women disciples to the apostolate. Hence, the Church has no authority to ordain women to the priesthood. Because this debate has become so heated in modern times, Pope John Paul II put the issue to rest by declaring an *ex cathedra* proclamation of the faith on the matter:

"Although the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal tradition of the Church and firmly taught by the magisterium in its more recent documents, at the present time in some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate, or the Church’s judgment that women are not to be admitted to ordination is considered to have a merely disciplinary force. Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church’s divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Luke 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful" (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* 4).

Since the issue of women priesthood is a matter that touches the scope of Holy Orders it is a matter of dogma. After the pope’s solemn pronouncement, there can be no doubt on the matter. Rome has spoken; the case is closed.

Medical research must refrain from operations on live embryos, unless there is a moral certainty of not causing harm to the life or integrity of the unborn child and the mother, and on condition that the parents have given their free and informed consent to the procedure. It follows that all research, even when limited to the simple observation of the embryo, would become illicit were it to involve risk to the embryo's physical integrity or life by reason of the methods used or the effects induced (DV 1:4).

It is probable that the Church will issue an encyclical directly addressing the morality of human cloning if the current public debate continues to rage.

Homosexuality

Although it remains to be determined if homosexuality is a genetic, social or personal stigma, homosexual acts are condemned by God and can never be approved by the Church (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Genesis 19:1-29, Romans 1:24-27 and CCC 2357). If homosexuals are born with the condition, then they are called to live a life of Christian purity and chastity for the greater love of Christ. Such people can experience a life of trial, which all others must treat with compassion and sensitivity.

The act of homosexuality is a "sin that cries to heaven for vengeance (Gen 18:20)" because it separates the unity of sex between two spouses from the procreative element which is necessary to legitimize and bless a marriage. Homosexuality is unnatural because it embraces lust between same-sex partners over the purity of love in a Christian marriage. The Church teaches:

Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection (CCC 2359).

Women Priesthood

The teaching of an all-male priesthood is the one doctrine that draws the most ire from modern-day feminists. Feminists argue that an all-male priesthood is an example of a domineering, chauvinist Church hierarchy who wish to keep women in their place by denying them leadership roles in the Church. However, this is absolutely false: the Church recognizes the value and dignity of every human being and respects the fundamental rights of women:

Man and woman are both with one and the same dignity in the image of God. In their "being-man" and "being-woman" they reflect the Creator's wisdom and goodness (CCC 369).

Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his successors and in communion with the bishops . . . I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God, is transmitted by the Church's tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium. No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church" (Evangelium Vitae 62).

Euthanasia

Euthanasia or "mercy killing" is an unethical attempt to unnaturally terminate the life of an individual or hasten the onset of death in order to prevent that person from experiencing suffering and hardship. Sometimes euthanasia is advocated as a way to terminate the suffering of a severely depressed person or a person who has grown weary of the hardships of life (Dr. Kevoorkian is an advocate of this type of assisted suicide). Primarily, however, euthanasia is viewed as a means to an end to terminate the sufferings of terminally ill or chronically ill patients. Advocates of euthanasia believe that early death preserves the dignity of the suffering patient and prevents undue hardships. Unfortunately, euthanasia no matter how you paint it is nothing less than participation in murder: taking the life of an individual without recourse to just societal law.

Advocates of euthanasia fail to understand or appreciate the redemptive role of suffering in the individual. Christ desires for us to participate in his Passion, and thus suffering within the Body of Christ has a redemptive role. Because baptized Christians are part of the mystical Body of Christ, Jesus Christ the head of the body asks his members to participate not only in his resurrection and grace, but also in the suffering of his Passion. St. Paul firmly evinces this doctrine, "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for his body, which is the church (Colossians 1:24)." He also says, "And if sons, heirs also; heirs indeed of God, and joint heirs with Christ: yet so, if we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him (Romans 8:17)."

This does not mean that Christ's redemption is lacking, or that his suffering was not enough for the redemption of the world. It only means that we are chosen to offer up our sufferings for the expiation of the temporal punishment deserved by our sin and the free participation in the life of Christ. Christ merits our redemption and forgives our sins but the

punishment and penance for our selfish actions must still be. Paul's letter to the Colossians notes that by offering our own sufferings for the body of Christ, we can make up for those members of the body of Christ whose sufferings are lacking. Thus the body of Christ, the Catholic Church, offers the collective suffering of its members for the expiation of temporal punishment and follows in the Passion and sufferings of the Head of the body of Christ, Jesus Christ.

Nor does it mean that Catholics go out of their way to look for suffering and hardship. Suffering, in itself, is a result of sin and evil manifested by the fall of mankind. Such acts as fasting, prayer and the offering of hardships to the Lord are beneficial. However, purposeful undue suffering and pain can in fact be a sin. In fact, the Church does attempt to correct and alleviate the temporal suffering of mankind (such as natural disaster victims, the hungry, the persecuted etc.) What Paul is really talking about is the unavoidable suffering that is a part of temporal life. A good Christian will accept the hardships of life that can not be alleviated. With good Christian humility and charity a suffering person will offer their suffering for the Body of Christ and its head, Jesus Christ.

For these reasons, the Church has forbidden the use of euthanasia:

Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable. Thus an act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes the death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his creator. The error of judgment into which one can fall in good faith does not change the nature of this murderous act, which must always be forbidden and excluded. Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of "over-zealous" treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted. (CCC 2277-2278).

The Death Penalty and Capital Punishment

Interestingly, this is probably the one Church teaching that is the most confusing to Catholics. This is perhaps due to Pope John Paul II's seeming request for an end to capital punishment. However, it has always been the teaching of the Church that the death penalty can be used in matters of grave circumstances by a legitimate public authority:

"Preserving the common good of society requires rendering the aggressor unable to inflict harm. For this reason the traditional teaching of the Church has acknowledged as well-founded the right and duty of legitimate public authority to punish malefactors by means of penalties commensurate with the gravity of the crime, not excluding, in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty... (CCC 2266)."

Many Catholics who oppose the death penalty labor under the false assumption that the Church has absolutely condemned capital punishment. This is technically false, however Pope John Paul II has taught that in modern times the use of the death penalty is often motivated by the victim's (and societies) desire for revenge. The death penalty should be considered viable in only the most extreme circumstances because it removes or limits the offender's chance for conversion and penitence. Only when the public good is at immediate risk should the offender be removed entirely from society. The pope explains in *Evangelium Vitae*:

Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm - without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself - the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity "are very rare, if not practically non-existent (EV 56).

The Church's teaching has not changed, but rather modern society and technology has rendered the use of capital punishment an extremely rare measure.

Human Cloning

Human cloning is an example of a teaching that is not explicitly defined by either Church Tradition (teachings of Christ and the Apostles) or Holy Scripture. Rather, the current teachings are a matter of interpretation of Scripture's portrayal of humans as dignified sons and daughters of God. There is not yet an explicit *ex cathedra* declaration from the Church regarding the issue of cloning. However, that does not mean that Catholics are free to decide their moral position on the matter without consideration of the Church's statements and encyclicals.

The ancient teaching of the Church regarding sex is that it has two primary purposes that cannot be separated without incurring grave sin. Sex is ordered for the procreation of children between two married spouses and it is also intended to unify husband and wife in matrimonial love (CCC 2360 and *Humane Vitae*, 12). Cloning violates the marriage act by separating procreation of children from the unifying act of love between husband and wife. Additionally, cloning often involves the creation and subsequent destruction of large amounts of fertilized eggs. This is contrary to the dignity of the human person. Humans are not tools for science or a means to an end no matter how well intentioned the action (such as cloning people to create an organ donor of "spare parts"). The Church states in the encyclical letter *Donum Vitae*: