

## Conceiving a World Without Contraception

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Conservative Protestants are beginning to join faithful Catholics in recognizing the harm done to society by widespread contraception.

An article in Sunday's New York Times Magazine ("Contra-Contraception," by Russell Shorto) chronicled rumblings in the Christian (including Catholic) right that may have surprised not only non-Christians but also the tired old balding-pony-tailed Catholic left. A growing number in the Christian right are revisiting the 20th century contraceptive cave-in and reaching agreement with Pope Paul VI's assessment that a contraceptive society naturally moves down the path toward what Pope John Paul II would later identify as the culture of death. That is, a natural outcome of separating sex from babies is a society that permits abortion and euthanasia; undermines the family; tolerates wide-scale soft- and hard-core pornography, and colludes with the corruption of its young.

To the contracepting mainstream, such words may seem the bitter ranting of aging hopelessly marginalized Manichees, but as even the Times article shows, the current Christian anti-contraceptive boomlet is confident, unapologetic, and forthrightly non-Manichaeian about the goodness of the material world (correctly understood). And at least part of this psychological ease can be attributed to Pope John Paul's groundbreaking articulation of a Theology of the Body.

John Paul II recognized the place of a birth control mentality in the syndrome of attitudes and behaviors that mark the culture of death. But he made that connection chiefly because of his interest in what characterizes a true culture of life. Such a culture had to be based on cooperating with God's loving plan for his creation, including the God-imaging capacity of male and female to give themselves wholly to each other in a relationship open to love's awesome incarnation.

As early as the 1970s, some Protestants were drawn towards the Catholic Church precisely because they had connected the dots leading from contraceptive practices to the catastrophic effects of human freedom run amok — abortion, pornography, family breakdown and dysfunction, and euthanasia. Among these pioneering Protestants was Scott Hahn, who left the Presbyterian ministry for the Church about 25 years ago and has since had a wide impact through books, tapes and appearances. While still studying at the seminary, he first began noticing the puzzlingly wise judgment of the Catholic Church in areas where the culture was lurching into error. The first of these eye-opening issues to strike him was contraception.

Nowadays many younger converts also mention the anomalous stand of the Catholic magisterium on contraception (a stand unfortunately not reflected in the



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belief or practice of most Catholics, who fall scandalously short of the Church's vision) as something that made them take the Church's claims seriously. Many of these younger converts, like many loyal young cradle Catholics, count themselves as JP2 babies, who encountered the attraction of Christ and his Church through the late John Paul or his disciples. This is one sign that papal biographer George Weigel may be correct in describing John Paul's Theology of the Body as a kind of time bomb still awaiting full detonation.

Meanwhile, dispiritingly for those of us who uneasily coexist with them, there are the mass of Catholics still unconverted on this issue. Perhaps a higher proportion of this next generation of Catholic families — the JP2 babies come of age — will form dynamically traditional and non-contracepting families. For them, rejecting contraception is not part of a 1950s fortress Catholicism but a countercultural alternative to the prevailing culture of death. And certainly the many loyally orthodox Catholic subcultures (such as homeschoolers and members of the many lay movements in which Pope Benedict sees the fermenting hope of the future) will continue their countercultural witness. Outside of Catholicism, we will have to see how successfully segments of Protestantism manage to break free of a generations-old engagement with birth control and family planning. The great homosexual marriage debate may play a significant role in clarifying the connection between sex and babies.

So what is all this likely to lead to? Probably not a successful takeover of the culture, but perhaps an active and effective resistance movement. That also seems to be Pope Benedict's take on the short- and medium-term future of undiluted Christianity. Though we should wish (and work) for a true transformation of the culture, these first springtime shoots of the New Evangelization still offer greater hope than Paul VI may have entertained in 1968, when he dared to offend a sneering world with *Humanae Vitae*.

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