Could you explain the Church’s teaching on birth control?

In order to answer this question, there are issues we will first need to address. To begin with, it is important to understand the Church’s teaching on creation itself. As Catholics we are called to believe that, in the beginning, God created all things out of nothing. (This does not conflict with the scientific teaching of the big bang theory, nor of evolution. As Catholics we can believe those things as long as we understand that they are part of God’s plan and work in concert with those plans.) God, in creating the universe and all that exists within it, endowed all of his creation with a purpose. The purpose, or end, to which something exists is not only its reason for existing, but is essentially how that part of creation is intended to be used. If a person uses some part of creation in a way that God did not intend it to be used, then he or she commits a sin. We are bound to discern the true nature of all God’s creation and to use it only in the way God has designated it to be used. This teaching is essentially what we call the Natural Law. I will admit that there is a lot more to this teaching, but what I have said here sort of gives it to you in a nutshell.

In our modern world, many people believe that sexual intercourse is simply a physical act—that it is ultimately about the physical pleasure it brings to the people who engage in it. Many people believe that our sexual gratification has no real consequences and meaning beyond what the couple chooses to endow it. Therefore, issues such as sexual intercourse outside of marriage, or what birth control is used for, is fine and the Church has no right telling them what to do in the bedroom. It is a private matter that should be left to the individuals to decide for themselves. This train of thinking, of course, goes against the Natural Law. Rather, God has given us our gift of sexuality and has endowed it with a purpose. Human sexuality is not simply about pleasure, but rather, entails the whole person and is intended ultimately to express the meaning and purpose God has given it.

A good marriage, where the couple is truly open to sharing their lives together (that is, when the two become one), is expressed in a powerful way through sexual intercourse, and since our sexuality is a gift given to us by God, He intends it to be fully expressed only in the sacrament of marriage. In marriage a man and woman express the intimacy they share through this physical dimension of their personhood. It is necessary to recognize that this physical sharing is not to be seen only as a physical sharing. Rather, the giving of oneself—as a true expression of marital intimacy—should be a giving of oneself at all levels: physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Hence, sexual intercourse should be understood as the giving of oneself to the other person in a complete and unconditional way.

We should understand that this gift of self is not only physical, but rather, the complete giving of self that should lead us to another important conclusion. If we are entering into an intimate relationship where we are called to give ourselves wholly and completely without reservation, marriage is the only place where that is possible. If we can walk away from the person with whom we have engaged sexually, then we have essentially lied through that action. The act itself calls for the couple to be united as one. Its physical expression speaks to the truth that the two are intended to be united, not just in the moment, but forever. And, therefore, there are consequences every time that the couple engages in sexual intercourse.

Next week we will look directly at those consequences and the issue of birth control.