Could you explain the Church’s teaching on birth control? (Part 2 of 2)

Last week we looked at the issue of the physical act of sexual intercourse and what it means. We now need to address its overall purpose. Contrary to what many people think, the Church does not teach that sexual intercourse is only about having children. Rather, the Church’s teaching is that when two people engage in sexual intercourse, they remain open to the possibility of life. (We must remember that as Catholics we believe that life is never a biological accident, but rather all life comes about as a definitive choice of God.) The openness the couple is called to accept is that if a child is conceived as a consequence of this act, the child will be accepted lovingly as a gracious gift from God. The parents will raise the child in a loving, nurturing, and caring environment where they will come to know the love of God through the love of the parents.

The use of artificial birth control has several issues. The first is that certain forms of birth control do not inhibit conception, but rather, they prevent the implantation of a fertilized egg, which according to Church teaching is essentially an abortion. The other forms of artificial birth control that inhibit conception itself are problematic for they go against the very nature of the act. Remember that, for the Church, all we do must conform with Natural Law which is established by the will of God. Every action we take must conform with God’s decided purpose, and to act in any other way is, by definition, a sin because it contravenes God’s will. The Church believes that there is no form of artificial birth control that meets the standards required by God. For the Church, the only permissible way to avoid pregnancy is Natural Family Planning, which, by every study, if used correctly is 98% effective (the same effective rate as every other form of birth control).

The procreative aspect of marriage is part of how a couple cooperates with God’s plan of creation. They, in essence, become co-creators with God. They also share in God’s plan of salvation by sharing their faith with their children and forming them in a relationship with Christ. The procreative side of marriage reminds us that through our baptism—our fundamental vocation that grounds every aspect of our life—we must have one basic attitude: what is it that God wants me to do? How can I cooperate in God’s plan of salvation? It reminds us that every aspect of our lives must be regulated by how it leads to our salvation.

Pope Saint Paul VI wrote in *Humanae Vitae*, “Granted the conditions of life today and taking into account the relevance of married love to the harmony and mutual fidelity of husband and wife, would it not be right to review the moral norms in force till now, especially when it is felt that these can be observed only with the gravest difficulty, sometimes only by heroic effort?” In other words, this is a very difficult teaching and the Church recognizes that. It may take time for a couple to come to terms with how to live out this teaching in their marriage. It does not make someone a less faithful Catholic because they struggle with a teaching. We are called to faithfulness which means striving, to the best of our ability, to live our faith. No one of us lives out our faith perfectly; we are all in the same boat, seeking by the grace of God to live the life we are called to live.