



On CONTRACEPTION

according to the Holy Fathers of the Church



Romans 12:2 “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

Dear Reader,

This little booklet contains two chapters from a yet to be published book by the V. Rev. Fr. Josiah Trenham. Within these pages you will find the phronema (the worldview) of the Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church on a subject for which the secular world holds its own opposing and “most sacred” dogma. For the secular world human freedom means the removal of constraints to pleasure. For the Christian, human freedom means freedom from the tyranny of the Devil, the passions (unrestrained pursuit of pleasure) and death. The secular phronema sees obedience to God and His Holy Church as tyranny; the Christian sees it as freedom. H e r e I n I s t h e c o n f l i c t. Which phronema determines the formation of our life?

The “transformation of our Nous”, our rational mind, is no picnic. It is a mission for brave and courageous souls that desire to design their lives, by God’s grace, for the Kingdom of God.

The world around us will likely not respond kindly toward the information within this little booklet. What is our response?

[the Nativity Fast, November 23, 2011]

Chapter XX

The Evil of Contraception: Planned Barrenhood and Family Banning

I am bowing low before you, dear reader, as I pen this chapter. I am asking for you to open your heart to what you are about to read, despite its controversial nature. In this chapter, I will be addressing a subject that has been addressed by the Fathers of the Christian Church for centuries, but in the last generation, has gone into virtual oblivion in the consciousness of even faithful Christians. It is an area in which the Church is at extreme war with the secular culture. Unlike other areas, such as abortion, in which we war with the culture, in this area many Christians have formally capitulated to the ways of the world. I am speaking about the practice of contraception. All traditional Christians reject and abhor the heinous sin of abortion, but very few of these same Christians have cognitive awareness that contraception is the inseparable handmaiden of abortion, just as consistently opposed throughout the history of the Church, and equally to be abhorred. Most Christians today are practicing some form of contraception, despite universal patristic censure of contraception. That’s right. I am absolutely serious. No Holy Father has ever blessed the use of contraception. Ever. I will prove this assertion in what follows.

The History of Contraception

There are many modern notions concerning contraception that need to be debunked. The first is the notion that contraception is a

merely modern phenomenon, unknown to the Church Fathers of the earliest centuries, and not addressed by them since they knew little or nothing about the subject. Struck with the rapidity of change and the confusing array of new contraceptive technologies today, it is understandable to think this way. It is not unusual to hear, in ethical conversation concerning contraception, the notion posited that previous generations in the Church did not have to address this ethical issue because artificial contraception did not exist.

This is not true. While there are significant developments in the field of contraception that are unique to the modern age, the fundamental question of the moral legitimacy of artificial contraception is an ancient one. Artificial contraception is virtually as ancient as conception itself, and it has formed a specific field within medicine and ethics for millennia. There is virtually no form of artificial contraception commonly used today that did not have its forerunner in late antiquity.¹ Sterilization, coitus interruptus, pharmacological contraceptive applications, material and chemical barrier methods, and abortion, were all well known in their ancient forms, and were commonly practiced in the ancient world. Both ancient physicians and Church Fathers were quite educated in these

¹ The two most common forms of modern contraception are “the pill” and the condom. While the pill has been popularly used only since about 1950, there were many pharmacological forms of contraception used in the ancient world, and practitioners of contraception were used to obtaining their advice on contraception from physicians. While the condom as we know it derives from an invention of Dr. Condom, a physician at the court of Charles II (1660-1685), and did not become popular until the vulcanization of rubber in the mid-19th century, physical barrier methods were popular in the ancient world and were described in medical textbooks. Riddle (1992), p. 5.

methods, and often made abundantly clear distinctions between contraception and abortion.²

That’s right. Neither the concept of artificial contraception, nor the distinction between abortifacient³ and non-abortifacient methods of contraception, are novel concepts.⁴ *This is another myth that must go.* Many Christians today think that contraception is not sinful if it is not abortifacient, and wrongly assume that Church Fathers who opposed contraception did so because ‘back then’ contraception was assumed to be abortifacient. Not so. The Fathers employed a developed medical vocabulary that made clear-cut distinctions between abortifacient and non-abortifacient contraception, and the Fathers put *both* forms of contraception under the ban.

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The same could be said of state politicians.

“The second century Empire legislated against both abortifacient and contraceptive drinks where death resulted to the consumer. This kind of legislation is primarily a protection of existing adult life. Its secondary effect, however, in discouraging the sale of powerful drugs which might occasionally kill a woman, should not be overlooked. It made dealers in abortifacients and contraceptives act at their peril...almost as much as the widespread use of abortifacients, the use of contraceptive potions was officially recognized as a bad example in the state.” Noonan (1965), p. 27.

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An abortifacient is an ἐκβλιόν. Riddle (1992), pp. 78, 85.

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“Our distant ancestors could distinguish between a contraceptive and an abortifacient and...they knew more about reproduction than we credit them with...We too easily draw a hard line that separates us from the premodern period...our times are not as unique as we think they are.” Noonan (1965), pp. vii-ix.

The educated Roman Stoic, Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23-79), authored a famous encyclopedia entitled the *Natural History*. Though his Stoic philosophical commitments led him to oppose artificial contraceptives (procreation being the only justification for sexual intercourse), he nevertheless related a large, though not complete, amount of contraceptive information in his work.

Soranos, who practiced medicine during the reign of Emperor Trajan (AD. 98-117), wrote a definitive work on gynecology in Greek that would serve as a standard text on the subject for centuries to come. In this work he makes a clear distinction between contraception and abortion in these words,

“A contraceptive differs from an abortive, for the first does not let conception take place, while the latter destroys what has been conceived. Let us therefore call the one ‘abortive’ and the other ‘contraceptive’...it is safer to prevent conception from taking place than to destroy the fetus.”⁵

The great authority on pharmacology in late antiquity was Dioscorides, who wrote an authoritative five-volume text on the subject entitled, *Materials of Medicine*.⁶ This text expands, to an even greater degree than Soranos’ work, the subject of contraceptives, prescribing contraceptive vaginal suppositories, herbal oral contraceptives, “root” medicines and abortifacients, and even male

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⁶ Temkin (1956), p. 62; Noonan (1965), p. 24.

This book was a common text in Constantinopolitan libraries at the time of St. John Chrysostom. A well preserved Constantinople manuscript dates from about A.D. 512. Noonan (1965), p. 41. See Gunther (1934) for an English translation with Byzantine illustrations.

contraceptives.⁷ Dioscorides provided some twenty herbal contraceptive recipes in his work.⁸ By the end of the 2nd century A.D., there was a medical consensus about what were contraceptive plants and what were abortifacient drugs. Dioscorides’ Graeco-Roman pharmacology formed the basis for the drug lore of later Byzantine medicine, as is evident in the pharmaceutical lists of Aetios of Amida⁹ (A.D. 530-600), Paul of Aegina (d. A.D. 642), and Alexander of Tralles¹⁰ (A.D. 525-605).

The great physician of classical antiquity, and the most influential on Christian thought in late antiquity, was the Roman physician and philosopher, Galen (A.D. 129-210?). Galen synthesized the teachings of Hippocrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics into a coherent medical theory that was at the core of Greek medical pedagogy, and was embraced by early Byzantine physicians. One such physician, Oribasios¹¹ (A.D. 325-396), who was a

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Noonan (1965), p. 39.

⁸ *ODB*, Vol. 1, p. 527.

⁹ Aetios compiled a sixteen volume medical encyclopedia entitled *Tetrabiblion*. In this work he simplified both Galen and Oribasios. This work has significant sections on gynecology and obstetrics. The work as a whole awaits a modern edition. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 30.

¹⁰ Alexander was one of five sons of a prominent physician named Stephen. His most famous brother was Antheimos, the architect of Hagia Sophia. Alexander was distinguished by his great enthusiasm in the practical application of pharmaceuticals. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 58.

¹¹ He was the personal physician and librarian of the Emperor Julian the Apostate. *ODB*, Vol. 3, p. 1532.

contemporary of St. John Chrysostom,¹² made a synopsis of Galenic medicine, combining it with the most up-to-date medical knowledge, entitling the work *Medical Collection*.¹³ This version of Galen was relied upon by later Byzantine physicians such as Aetios of Amida, Paul of Aegina, and Alexander of Tralles and was the version of Galen known to St. Photios the Great.¹⁴ The evidence concerning early Christian medicine at the time of St. John Chrysostom demonstrates clearly that the Graeco-Roman medical tradition had been thoroughly embraced, and Byzantine physicians were in “full command of herbs and drugs.”¹⁵

Like our modern era, late antiquity was very familiar with contraception, and it was readily available to most persons. We should not be surprised therefore to find in the Church Fathers from the earliest centuries of the Church specific references to contraception in general, and to specific forms of contraception in particular. It was a subject upon which the Fathers spoke, often in

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He was driven into exile by emperors succeeding Julian, but returned to Constantinople where he lived until his death just prior to Chrysostom’s arrival in the city. Chrysostom, like many of the great Fathers of the Church, demonstrated a broad range of medical knowledge in his writings and often utilized medical analogies in his sermons.

ODB, Vol. 2, p. 816. The text was commissioned by Emperor Juilan, but unfortunately does not survive. *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 1533.

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A Latin translation of the text was made by the 5th century, and Arabic physicians used Oribasios in translation.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 1646. Dr. John Scarborough writes that Byzantine pharmacologists utilized over 700 simples, derived from plants, animals (including insects), and minerals. Byzantine drug lore became the model for later Arab medicine.

particulars, despite those who then, as now, tried to make the matters of the bedroom beyond the scope of priestly instruction.

The History of Christian Opposition to Contraception

For more than nineteen centuries, the entire Christian world knew better than to involve itself in the evils of contraception. But all that has changed. The change took definitive expression in the 1930s when certain Protestant churches, which had for so long rejected artificial contraception, began to endorse it.¹⁶ This was a complete reversal of Protestant tradition on the subject.¹⁷ Soon it became a Protestant distinctive, demonstrating that Protestants were not “Catholic.” Since there were no ecclesiastical precedents permitting contraception, such an embrace of contraception demonstrated as well the perils that a Protestant ethic, detached from Holy Tradition, could engender.

Pope Paul VI issued his papal encyclical against contraception, *Humanae Vitae*, in 1968 to reassert the Catholic

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It is noteworthy that it was the Episcopalians/Anglicans who began the embrace of contraception. Since that time, this Protestant Denomination has officially embraced virtually every moral perversion.

Protestants led the way in the 19th century in America in outlawing the manufacture and sale of artificial contraceptives via the Comstock law. This law, named after a young Protestant moral reformer named Anthony Comstock (1844-1915), the secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, was a comprehensive federal statute officially banning the distribution through the mail, importation, manufacture, sale or possession of any article whatever designed to prevent conception. In 1958 the Post Office Department announced that it would not ban the mailing of contraceptives that were not intended for “unlawful” uses. Noonan (1965), pp. 412-413.

position and stem the tide of rising contraceptive use. The encyclical made many predictions about what would happen to a culture that embraced contraception, and these predictions have proved to be prophetic. All the papal warnings have come to pass in the last forty years. *Humanae Vitae* warned that direct fruits of societal acceptance of contraception would be the following: increasing conjugal infidelity; lowering of moral standards; corruption of the youth; degradation of women as sexual objects; and the danger that government could require contraceptive and/or abortive practices in civil efforts to control population. The last warning has concretely materialized in the official state policies of China, and the unofficial but appears also in unofficial, yet socially coercive, contraceptive policies of other nations.

Orthodox Christian responses to the publication of *Humanae Vitae* were generally positive. The Ecumenical Patriarch at the time, His All-Holiness Athenagoras, said, “I agree absolutely with the Pope. Pope Paul VI could not have spoken otherwise. Holding the Gospel in his hand, he seeks to protect morals as well as the interests and the existence of nations...I am at the pope’s side, in all that he is doing and saying”¹⁸ Influential Orthodox hierarchs from Greece and Russia chimed in to support Pope Paul VI’s encyclical. The logic and methods of philosophical reasoning and the understanding of natural law were not ours, but the points concerning contraception were simply a restating of the patristic teaching and Christian common sense, which had so consistently been given for centuries by numerous Church Fathers.

¹⁸ *ECR, Orthodox Reactions to Humanae Vitae*, Vol. 2, 1968-69, p. 305.

The Universal Embrace of Contraception in the West

It has become apparent since the publication of *Humanae Vitae* that the encyclical’s teaching has fallen on deaf ears. Orthodox are contracepting in ignorance. Roman Catholics, who have the privilege of having the strongest contemporary affirmation by their Church of the traditional Christian standard, are contracepting more than anyone else. Protestants are contracepting and feeling good about it. Married Christians are living today in marriage, and engaging in practices of marital sexuality that all previous generations of Christians have abhorred, and many have no idea that this is the case. Like mute sheep, they have wandered astray, and like mindless swine they are rushing down the steep mountainside to perish in the waters below. They are not as responsible, however, as some priests and theologians of the Church, who have not faithfully passed on Holy Tradition but have foisted their own opinions upon the faithful. So far has the culture of death advanced into the Church that larger families, who accept the children God gives them, often must endure the scorn of their own brothers and sisters *in the Church*, let alone the mockery of the secular world. They must endure the comments about being “Catholic” or “Mormon”, or insinuations that all they do is have sexual intercourse all day. It is that bad for traditional families today, all because their contracepting brothers and sisters have unwittingly been influenced more by secular culture than by Holy Tradition, and cannot bear to see a family functioning and reproducing so differently from their own. It is too upsetting, too different, and too against the grain. Contracepting Christians are ignorant of how radical a bill of goods they have been sold by this modern culture of death.

And make no mistake. The rise of contraception is *inextricably* tied to the rise of abortion. Abortion is simply a form of contraception: the most violent kind. The foundation of the modern abortion holocaust since 1973 was the forty preceding years in which contraception was embraced, anti-contraceptive civil laws were struck down, and the new attitude toward sex took hold. Contraception changed sexual dynamics in such a way that sex became “recreational”, “free”, “casual”, and disassociated from the family and the possibility of procreation. Even with all forms of contraception available, the number of “unwanted” pregnancies increased exponentially, paralleling the number of illicit sexual practices and abortion, which is the magic potion that keeps the machine running.

Since the cultural and revolutionary success of the great antichrist, eugenicist, abortion advocate, fanatic, and contraceptor Margaret Sanger, contraception has become all-pervasive in the West.¹⁹ Modern man thinks no more seriously about using contraception than taking a Tylenol for a headache. Contraception today has become the unquestionable necessity for modern life to continue as it is.²⁰ Modern western culture is a *contraceptive culture*.

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For an insightful overview of the life and teachings of Margaret Sanger and her creation, *Planned Parenthood*, see George Grant (1991) *Grand Illusions*.

²⁰ I say “unquestionable” because society (and indeed many otherwise devout Christians) simply refuse to raise the question about the moral legitimacy of contraception. Take, for instance, the current debate in America about the failing Social Security fund. Have we not heard a multitude of potential fixes? Private investment accounts, reductions of benefits, increase of taxes, etc. But have we heard anything at all about the obvious and primary cause of the crisis? A shortage of younger workers to

Contraception is so central to contemporary life, that many moderns simply could not maintain their lifestyle without it. The *sacrament* of modern contraceptive culture is *the pill*.²¹

In some circles, it is more politically correct to question the validity and worth of the Church’s sacraments than to discuss that of society’s sacrament, the pill, and contraception in general.²² So thoroughly permeated is modernity with contraceptive ideas and assumptions,²³ that any teacher who ventures to discuss the subject

shoulder the financial for the older generation. No. Not a word. We have contracepted ourselves into a population decline, which has meant that our society is aging quickly. Couples today are not even having enough children to maintain our current population. Most European Christian nations and secular nations like Japan are on the fast track for population extinction, and only maintain their populations by massive immigration, which itself is radically upsetting the religious landscape of Europe.

The prevalence of the use of oral contraceptives such as the popular pill is doubly tragic, since it is sometimes an abortifacient. Depending on the amounts of estrogen in the pill, the oral contraceptive may be abortifacient. For those Christians who permit contraception, still the pill should be under ban. No contraceptive that has the possibility of being abortifacient should be used by a Christian, for no Christian even *possibly* wants to become a murderer.

²¹ See Smith (1991) for an excellent introduction to the history of the theological debate leading up to and following the publication of the Papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, as well as for a competent analysis of various pro/con arguments for contraception. She notes that this age “thinks no more of using contraception than of taking aspirin,” p. xv. This assertion has proved true in my pastoral experience where discussions concerning the frequency of the reception of holy communion with parishioners are more easily negotiated than discussions concerning the use of contraception.

²² Not only do these ideas thoroughly permeate American state educational curricula from the earliest through the latest grades, but they also lie at the base of many domestic social policies,

in any critical fashion will learn the meaning of the adjectives “provocative” and “incendiary”

This reality marks one of the greatest cultural and moral revolutions of modern times.²⁴ According to the United Nations, the last decade of the 20th century witnessed “substantial use increase” of contraception.²⁵ The UN Population Division monitors contraception use throughout the world (153 countries), as part of its vigorous promotion of contraception. According to their statistics, worldwide, 62% or 650 million of the more than 1 billion married or “in-union” women of reproductive age are using contraception. Even in the less developed nations, some 60% of women use contraception. Africa

foreign policy, and international monetary aid. No aspect of contemporary life is free from a commitment to contraception, aggressively promoted as a solution to human suffering. For more information on this subject, I refer the reader to the work of both *Human Life International* founded by Father Paul Marx, and the *Population Research Institute* directed by Dr. Steve Mosher.²⁴

²⁵*UN Chronicle* (Vol. XXXIX, Number 3, September-November, 2002).

Such was the case in the Roman Empire under Augustus, Treggiari (1991), pp. 60ff. Musonius Rufus taught that the Roman Empire at his time showed a great interest in its families having many children, rewarding those who had large families and punishing those who procured abortions. Rufus argues that it is better to leave siblings to our children than possessions, Lutz (1947), pp. 97-101. The absence of any UN documentation of abortion as a means of birth control is terribly unfortunate and deceiving. Perhaps the UN would argue that abortion is not birth control since the fetus exists. This argumentation, however, would exclude the IUD from UN documentation. As a priest, it has been my pastoral experience that the vast majority of abortions to which I have become privy have been for reasons of birth control. One example in which a woman procured 17 abortions comes to mind, and her example, sadly, is not rare these days.

has the lowest use figures, with only 25% using. Contraceptive use is highest in predominantly Roman Catholic (!) Latin America. Methods are also monitored: 9 of 10 contraceptors use modern methods. Of these, 20% utilize female sterilization, 15% utilize intrauterine devices (IUD, which are abortifacient), and 8% use oral pills. In developed countries there is greater dependence on oral pills (17%), and condoms (15%). Only 6% of married women in the world utilize the rhythm method.²⁶ As developed countries are literally dying, the UN is busy propagating death (abortion) and contraception throughout the world, funded by monies from developed lands. The consequences for the growth, or the lack thereof, of the Christian Church are immense, and many other concerns, such as the massive immigration of non-Christian peoples to Christian nations to fill the vacuum, have arisen as a byproduct. Such attitudes towards raising families, during particularly prosperous periods, have arisen at various times in the past, provoking government intervention to encourage marital procreation.

Contraception has transitioned from being officially condemned by every Christian denomination as late as 1930²⁷ (thus being used only sporadically and without sanction by the faithful of those Churches), to being officially endorsed by many Protestant bodies and being used as a norm by the preponderance of Christian people in every

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The UN Population Division lists the rhythm method as a form of contraception.

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Kippley (1985), pp. 4-9. This text documents not only the traditional opposition to abortion by the Roman Catholic Church, but the *consistent Protestant opposition* to artificial contraception in all major denominations right up until the 1930 revolution concerning the subject at the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church.

part of the world today. The medical effectiveness of artificial contraception has greatly increased in modern times, as well as its ease of procurement, its variety of form, and its financial feasibility for the average person. All of these realities, added to the new religious sanction (even if only by silence or pastoral tolerance), have helped produce a religious and sexual worldview amongst Christians that at least tolerates, and often openly promotes, the use of artificial contraception amongst married couples as well as singles.

Chapter XXI

Holy Tradition on Contraception

“The use of contraception was condemned by church fathers.” Such is the opening of the listing “Contraception” in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*.²⁸ This is a summary of the Greek Christian position of the first millennium. Now let us hear a summary of the Slavic tradition: “Any attempt to prevent conception was regarded as evil. From the medieval Slavic perspective, contraception, abortion, and infanticide were similar offenses.”²⁹ These statements are easy enough to demonstrate; however, they may be misunderstood. While there was universal opposition to contraception amongst the Fathers, there was not a single standard used to oppose it, nor a single perspective on the nature of its moral turpitude and ethical gravity. In what follows, I will highlight the teaching of St. John Chrysostom, one of the universal teachers of the Church, as illustrative and typical of the multi-tiered patristic opposition to contraception.

St. John Chrysostom placed *greater emphasis* upon the help that marital intercourse gives against the temptation to fornication and lasciviousness, than he did upon the procreative nature of the conjugal union. He did not, however, negate the obligatory nature of procreation, nor consider it optional for married couples. However,

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The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium., Volume 1, p. 526.

²⁹ Levin, Eve (1989) *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs 900-1700*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, p. 175. Levin documents how this universal opposition to contraception, and the heavy penances associated with its practice, passed from Byzantium to Slavic Orthodox lands, pp. 177ff.

he did clearly rank it second in importance to the use of marital relations as an antidote to lust. This emphasis is clear in a passage in his *On Virginity*, in which he is interpreting the Apostle Paul's teaching on marriage in 1 Cor. 7:

“So marriage was granted for the sake of procreation, but an *even greater reason* was to quench the fiery passion of our nature. Paul attests to this when he says: ‘But to avoid immorality, every man should have his own wife.’ He does not say: for the sake of procreation. Again, he asks us to engage in marriage not to father many children, but why? So ‘that Satan may not tempt you,’ he says. Later he does not say: if they desire children but ‘if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry.’³⁰

Chrysostom does not maintain this position inflexibly or in such a way that pastorally he would cast upon his parishioners an aversion to childbearing in marriage. At the end of his ministry, he still proclaimed the two-fold purpose of marriage as chastity and procreation.³¹ However, he always maintained the priority of the first purpose, and this emphasis, combined with other more minor, but ostensibly positive, emphases on marital intercourse,³² enabled Chrysostom to be free from a position more open to the charge of

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³¹ *On Virginity*, Shore (1983), p. 27.

³² *Homily XII on Colossians*, NPNF, Vol. 13, p. 317. Cf. *Comment. Galatians V*, NPNF, Vol. 13, p. 39.

Its unitive good and function as a marital adhesive, its miraculous production of a one-flesh child, its typological importance as a picture of the intimate union of the believer with Christ in the eucharist, etc.

reductionism that defended marital intercourse *only for the purpose of procreation*. This latter stance was taken up by many Fathers, and often led to a prohibition forbidding marital intercourse during pregnancy, prior to weaning, and in old age. No such prohibition is found in Chrysostom. In fact, he affirms just the opposite, stating that there is no sin in a married couple continuing in intercourse after fertility has passed and even into old age.³³

Western Christianity, following St. Augustine, largely adopted the view that the *primary* purpose of marital intercourse was procreation.³⁴ Procreative intent was necessary in the conjugal act in order to justify its use.³⁵ Despite such differences on the primary purposes of sexual union in marriage, both East and West universally forbade contraception.

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Homily 5 on Titus, NPNF, Vol. 13, p. 536. There is a conflict in English translations here between the NPNF and Noonan (1965, p. 78) over the text in PG 62.689 with the NPNF translating “no one *blamed*” and Noonan “no one *blames*.” This tense difference may be significant, the present indicating contemporary Christian opinion and the past indicating Old Testament standards. It is not entirely clear who the subject is not doing the blaming. While Chrysostom defended conjugal union in marriage from the charge of defilement, he did not respect it in the elderly who should be over such desires.

³⁴ That is not to say that St. Augustine did not value the role conjugal intercourse played in containing passion. He most certainly did.

³⁵ Procreative intent was not sufficient by itself, however, to make the marital act sinless. On top of this was the requirement to pursue it without passion or self-gratification, essentially rendering the marital act impossible to perform without sin.

The Teaching of St. John Chrysostom

Chrysostom's teaching on contraception is found primarily, not in a treatise designed on the subject or even in his homilies more directly related to marriage and family life, but in a homily on the subject of avarice. In a duly famous homily against avarice, he painted a verbal portrait of the vulgar money-lover. It is a hideous sight indeed. The avaricious man is a "monster" with,

"Darting fire from his eyes, black, having from either shoulder serpents hanging down instead of hands; and let him have also a mouth, with sharp swords set in it instead of teeth, and for a tongue a gushing fountain of poison and some baneful drug; and a belly more consuming than any furnace, devouring all that is cast unto it, and a sort of winged feet more vehement than any flame; and let his face be made up of a dog and of a wolf; and let him utter nothing human...perhaps what we have said seems to you to be terrible, but we have not even yet fashioned him worthily...the covetous man is much more fierce even than this, assailing all alike like hell, swallowing all up, going about a common enemy to the race of men. Why, he would have no man exist, that he may possess all things."³⁶

From avarice personified, St. Chrysostom applies this passion-loving mentality to a subject he calls "sweet and universally desirable" procreation. The money-loving monster does not welcome having children. Instead, he views it as a grievous reality that must be resisted. As if this desire were not evil enough, "many" even go so

³⁶ *Homily XXVIII in Matthew*, NPNF, Vol. 10, p. 194.

far as to pay money to be childless, have "maimed their nature," having committed infanticide, and have not permitted children even to begin to live.³⁷ Chrysostom associates the contraceptor as the companion of the monster avarice. He is also companion to the murderer and the mutilator. This is the type of person St. Chrysostom imagines would engage in contraception: *someone who cares more about money than human beings, and is willing to mutilate and murder to have his way*. This is a very accurate description of what lies behind a great amount of contraception today.³⁸ Is it not exceedingly ironic that the most common excuse that comes from couples in our society, the most prosperous in the history of mankind, is that they cannot afford children? Interpreted, this often really means they cannot afford to live at *their current standard of living* and assume the responsibility of children. What is non-negotiable is no longer having children in marriage, but maintaining a certain standard of living.

St. John Chrysostom also opposed contraception via castration promoted by certain heretical groups.³⁹ Castrators do the

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 194.

³⁸ As I write this I am mourning a recent pastoral situation in which a young girl became pregnant and decided to abort her unborn child even though she fully acknowledged that to do so was murder, and in spite of the fact that another family in the parish offered to pay full expenses for the pregnancy and delivery, and to adopt the child. The young woman said she had to "consider her career" and so she aborted.³⁹

St. John of Damascus in his work *Book Of Heresies*, much of which is a verbatim reproduction of each *anakephalaiosis* (chapter heading and summary) of St. Epiphanius' *Panarion* or *Medicine Chest*, attempted a fairly complete listing of early heresies. According to Louth (2002) it is not certain that the Damascene was at all familiar with St. Epiphanius' work in its

deeds of murderers, according to the Saint.⁴⁰ Such opposition to heretical encouragement to castration was designed to oppose *both* the Gnostics' demonizing of the physical creation *and* their subsequent aversion toward procreation. Writing in his *Commentary on the Galatians* he says:

“Where then are those who dare to mutilate themselves; seeing that they draw down the Apostolic curse, and accuse the workmanship of God, and take part with the Manichees? For the latter call the body a treacherous thing, and from the evil principle...cutting off the member [the penis- JT] as being hostile and treacherous. Ought they not much rather to put out the eyes, for it is through the eyes that desire enters the soul? But in truth neither the eye nor any other part of us is to blame, but the depraved will only. But if you will not allow this, why do you not mutilate the tongue for blasphemy, the hands for rapine, the feet for their evil courses, in short, the whole body?...the perception of a sweet perfume by the nostrils hath bewitched the mind, and made it frantic for pleasure...it is the sin of the soul, for to pamper the flesh is not an act of the flesh but of the soul, for if the soul choose to mortify it, it would possess absolute power over it. But what you do is just the same as if one seeing a man lighting a fire to a house, were to blame the fire, instead of him who kindled it...in like manner desire is implanted for the

entirety, p. 56. St. Epiphanius documents many early heresies which rejected marriage due to their Gnostic assumptions. One sect, the *Valesians*, were universally castrated and were said to castrate visitors by force! *Haer. 34-64*, 58.1.19-24; GCS, p. 358.

⁴⁰ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily LXII in Matthew*, NPNF, Vol. 10, p. 384.

rearing of families and the ensuring of life.”⁴¹

Such mutilation both attacked God's creation, *and* failed to fulfill the function of desire: procreation. It was opposed by the Fathers not just because it reflected a Gnostic disdain for creation, but because it was a form of contraception. It should be noted that, according to the *UN Chronicle* cited earlier in this chapter, the predominant form of contraception today remains a form of castration, sterilization. Sometimes, such as in present-day China and certain African nations, this sterilization is involuntary. The cutting or tying of a woman's *fallopian tubes*, or the cutting or tying of a man's *vas deferens* (vasectomy) is an attack upon the human body, and falls under the censure of the Fathers against castration. It is forbidden by the Church.

Castration cannot quench lust. That is something only the intellect can do.⁴² Bodily passion and sexual intercourse are to be submitted to the illumined nous according to the Fathers. Such methods of contraception as castration and sterilization, are an attempt by men and women to cut the cord to sexual responsibility without avoiding the pleasure of sex. It is a recipe for disaster whenever we seek to separate the divine union of pleasure and responsibility. It is particularly a perverse act when we note that the primary reason God attended the sex act with such pleasure was to encourage procreation. This consistent link between pleasure and procreation is emphasized by Chrysostom on many occasions. Those who would separate the two realities, something which Chrysostom

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⁴² *Commentary on Galatians V*. NPNF, Vol. 13, p. 39.

St. John Chrysostom, *Homily LXII on Matthew*, NPNF, Vol. 10, p. 384.

says cannot be done, must invent a *new perspective on pleasure* not taught by the Church.

Chrysostom delivers his most poignant teaching against contraception in his sermons on St. Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*. Forbidding prostitution, St. John says:

“Why do you sow where the field is eager to destroy the fruit? Where there are medicines of sterility? Where there is murder before the birth? You do not even let a harlot remain only a harlot, but you make her a murderess as well. Do you see that from drunkenness comes fornication, from fornication adultery, from adultery murder? Indeed, it is something worse than murder and I do not know what to call it; for she does not kill what is formed but prevents its formation. What then? Do you condemn the gift of God, and fight with His laws? What is a curse, do you seek as though it were a blessing, and make the chamber of procreation a chamber for murder, and arm the woman that was given for childbearing unto slaughter?”⁴³

What is translated here as “medicines of sterility,” is the Greek word ὄτ κλῶ. Here Chrysostom refers directly to artificial contraceptives. He condemns abortion as murder in this text, and laments not only abortion but also all efforts to prevent formation and begetting of the child altogether, whether abortifacient or contraceptive. His reference to ὄτ κλῶ, in the midst of opposition to abortion, allows the reader to grasp how Chrysostom does not draw a sharp line of demarcation between abortion and contraception.

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Homily XXIV in Romans, NPNF, Vol. 10, p.520. Noonan (1965), p. 98.

It would be a profound mistake, however, to conclude that the reason St. John does not draw a sharp line of demarcation between abortion and contraception is because he imagines all contraception to be abortifacient.⁴⁴ St. John enjoyed the privilege of a thoroughgoing Greek education, which included a far greater emphasis upon medical knowledge than does general education today. He was well aware of the differences between contraceptive drugs and abortifacients.

To his mind, both abortion and contraception were repugnant because they committed five violations in unison. These five criticisms, found in his *Homily 24* in his *Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, form the core of St. Chrysostom's

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This erroneous understanding is supported by William Zion in his text *Eros and Transformation* (1992), p. 242. As one of the very few books on the subject of sexuality written from a purported Eastern Orthodox position in the English language, it has received a wide circulation, especially among priests. While the author is to be commended for launching into an area so little explored by contemporary Orthodox and for bringing to his readership an awareness of an abundance of primary patristic material related to the topic of sexuality, the text unfortunately employs, without sufficient caution, European higher Biblical criticism, and demonstrates an undue reliance upon contemporary Latin scholastic moral theology. Therefore, on occasion the patristic witnesses are forced into contemporary grids of thought foreign to the minds of the authors. Such is the case when dealing neatly with the difference between abortifacient and non-abortifacient contraception. It is noteworthy that Zion ends his work by arguing that an Orthodox conception of marriage must not be built upon the patristic notions of angelic life in Paradise, but upon what he calls the “importance of the Incarnation” for the Christian life, p. 335. Here a false dichotomy is presented, for it is the Incarnation which makes the angelic life possible! Sadly, Zion ended his life tragically outside the Church.

opposition to both abortion and contraception:

1. Both abortion and contraception create a *barren sowing*. Their use creates a context in which the sexual act is designed to be barren, and the conjugal act is denuded of one of its central purposes.⁴⁵ This sowing argument is one of the main emphases in the ecclesiastical opposition to contraception.
2. Both abortion and contraception *despise the gift of God*. The reference here is no doubt to the scriptural teaching that children are a gift from God,⁴⁶ and the use of abortion and contraception is thus a despising of children, who are bestowed by divine providence as God's greatest gift to a married couple.
3. Both abortion and contraception *are expressions of fighting against God's laws*. Here in this reference to fruitful procreation as a part of the *natural law*, we see the adoption of fundamentally Stoic philosophical notions by Chrysostom. In this he follows many Fathers, such as St. Clement of Alexandria, who, more than any early Father, emphasized the natural law requirements of marital intercourse. The use of abortion and/or contraception fights against the natural use of sexual intercourse, turning it into something *unnatural*.
4. Both abortion and contraception turn the curse of

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This notion of the vileness of 'barren intercourse' is also used by Chrysostom in his commentary upon the sin of Sodom, and the unlawfulness of homosexuality. It is also a portion of the logic behind the Church's forbiddance of anal and oral sex.

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Psalms 126 and 127 in the LXX are good examples of the scriptural mentality concerning the gift of children.

barrenness into a blessing, and treat the blessing of fruitfulness as a curse.⁴⁷

5. Both abortion and contraception *misuse women*.

Other Church Fathers against Contraception

St. Chrysostom's teaching is highlighted not just because he is a universal teacher of the Church, possessing a command of Holy Scripture unrivalled throughout Church History, but because he is often appealed to by modern proponents of contraception as a patristic source validating the use of contraception. Such is a vain appeal. He validated no such use anywhere in his writings. St. Chrysostom, however, is just one diamond in the Church's treasury of innumerable precious gems, Church Fathers who clearly and consistently defended the integrity of the conjugal union and censured any use of contraception.

Many heretics, however, permitted and even encouraged contraception. The Church Fathers attacked such wolves and their false teaching. St. Epiphanius of Cyprus, in his famous refutation of heresies, *The Panarion*, or *Medicine Chest*, described his personal experience with what we now often call "Gnostic" heretics within the Church. The Saint describes the following practices and labels them

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Thus, aborters and contraceptors, call the good evil, and the evil good, and fall under the 'woe' of the Prophet Isaiah, *Prophecy of Isaiah* 5:20.

“ceremonies of the devil:”⁴⁸ oral sex,⁴⁹ coitus interruptus,⁵⁰ masturbation,⁵¹ homosexual intercourse,⁵² and the offering to God of human semen obtained by these methods.⁵³ Epiphanius presents these Gnostic practices as the diametric opposite of blessed Christian marital sexuality. What is particularly emphasized by St. Epiphanius is the contraceptive nature of heretical intercourse:⁵⁴ “They exercise

⁴⁸ *Anac.* 26.14.6; GCS 25, p. 294.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.4.6; GCS 25, p. 305.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.11.10; GCS 25, pp. 288ff. St. Epiphanius is the first Patristic writer to explicitly argue that the sin of Onan was coitus interruptus.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 26.11.1; GCS 25, pp. 288ff.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 26.13.1; GCS 25, p. 292.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 26.4; GCS 25, pp. 280-281.

⁵⁴ Noonan comments in a footnote in his text about the similarities and possible source connections between certain branches of Gnostic groups mentioned by Epiphanius and 4th century tantrism in India, with its emphasis upon sexual union without insemination as a means to the supreme bliss. Noonan (1965), footnote 49, pp. 96-97. Additional connections to modern notions of sexual relations as ecstatic religious experience, as sacramental in nature, extolling such ideas as the notion that the marriage bed is a “holy altar” etc., found even within certain circles in Orthodox Christianity, might be profitably explored. I refer to notions expressed in the writings of such as Philip Sherrard, Paul Evdokimov, Dn. John Chrysavvgis, George Gabriel, Basil Zion, and Christos Yannaras. As an example, take Gabriel’s (1996) words, “The plain meaning of Chrysostom’s words is...You do not need procreation as an excuse [for intercourse]. It is not the chief reason for marriage. Neither is it necessary to allow for the possibility of conceiving, and thus having a large number of children, something you may not want. He spoke in a manner that was understood perfectly by his audience,” p. 67. Now here is a case in which a student of Chrysostom commits a logical fallacy. True, Chrysostom does not require procreative intent to justify intercourse, but that is a long way from arguing that intercourse is legitimate when one is artificially contravening conception. The two are not the same

genital acts, yet prevent the conceiving of children. Not in order to produce offspring, but to satisfy lust, are they eager for corruption.”⁵⁵

Such were the teachings of one of the most influential and internationally acclaimed hierarchs of the Church. We could go on and on. Note the following chart of Church Fathers who have explicitly forbidden contraception and those who have permitted it. You may recognize the logic of the chart from a previous chapter.

Church Fathers on Contraception

Contraception Forbidden	Contraception Permitted
St. Clement of Alexandria	-
St. Athanasius the Great	-
St. John Chrysostom	-
St. Epiphanius	-
St. Jerome	-
St. Augustine of Hippo	-
St. Caesarius of Arles	-
St. Gregory the Great	-
St. Augustine of Canterbury	-
St. Maximus the confessor	-
St. Ambrose	-
St. Maximus Confessor	-

thing, and Chrysostom nowhere permits the latter. In fact, as we have shown, he forbids it. Gabriel goes on to say, “In some patristic writings, we should point out, it is possible to find a passing reference to procreation as the purpose of marriage, but it is never intended as a canon or formula,” p. 68. Such a statement is truly shocking coming from someone as versed in the patristic texts as Gabriel appears to be. Whether or not we agree with the Fathers, it is hardly honest to say that one may find but “passing reference” to procreation as the purpose of marriage in the Fathers. It is, in fact, commonplace and virtually universal.³⁵

As quoted in Noonan (1965), pp. 96-97.

Modern Compromise on the Teaching of the Church

Only recently has there begun to be an awakening to traditional Christian teaching against contraception in Protestant circles, but on the whole, the entire Protestant world contracepts. Many Roman Catholics today ignore *Humanae Vitae* or attempt to argue that the encyclical was not “infallible.” We Orthodox Christians, who are traditional and are known for not bowing to the winds of degraded cultural fads, are not much better. Many of our people have been thoroughly compromised on this point, and many contemporary theologians have boldly walked out on an anti-patristic limb.

Take, for instance, the official statements of the two largest Orthodox jurisdictions in North America, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). In the official Greek *Year Book* for 1957 was the following statement concerning contraception:

“If a husband and wife do not desire to have any children, they ought to abstain from all conjugal relations until they are able to have children, and then come together again in sexual union, relying entirely and solely on God’s omniscience. The use of contraceptive devices for the prevention of childbirth is forbidden and condemned unreservedly by the Greek Orthodox Church.”⁵⁶

More recent editions of the Greek *Year Book* omit the statement on birth control altogether. How convenient. A parallel statement and subsequent disappearance can be cited in the *Year Book* of the OCA. In the 1961 edition, a memorandum from Archbishop John (Shahovskoy) of San Francisco was included which read:

“The Church of Christ suggests a way, of which the Gospel revelation speaks quite clearly. Continence outside of marriage, and continence in marriage itself. So says the word of God, and such is the understanding of this word by the best Christians of history...The Orthodox Church, without doubt, categorically rejects interference with the mystery of childbirth.”

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ECR, *Ibid.*, p. 306. This was simply a summary of the Church of Greece’s Synodal condemnation of contraception in the 1930s.

In more recent times the OCA Synod has changed its position, removing its previous strong objection and muddling the Church’s voice on the subject. I guess Orthodox morality does change. Or, is it rather that God’s laws do not change but that certain *hierarchs* do? This is the sad conclusion. Some of our bishops are less faithful to the unbroken tradition of the Church than others.

Just how confusing the contemporary western Orthodox Christian ethical scene is on the subject of contraception, is apparent in the statements concerning it found in the definitive work by Bishop Kallistos Ware, entitled *The Orthodox Church*. In the first version of the text published in 1963 we read:

“Artificial methods of birth control are forbidden in the Orthodox Church.”

The *revised first edition* printed in 1984 reads:

“The use of contraceptives and other devices for birth control is on the whole strongly discouraged in the Orthodox Church. Some bishops and theologians altogether condemn the employment of such methods. Others, however, have *recently* [emphasis added] begun to adopt a less strict position, and urge that the question is best left to the discretion of each individual couple, in consultation with the spiritual father.”

In the *revised second edition* printed in 1993 we read of yet *another* change:

“Concerning contraceptives and other forms of birth control, differing opinions exist within the Orthodox Church. *In the past* [emphasis added] birth control was in general strongly condemned, but today a less strict view is coming to prevail, not only in the west, but in traditional Orthodox countries. Many Orthodox theologians and spiritual fathers consider that the responsible use of contraception within marriage is not in itself sinful. In their view, the question of how many children a couple should have, and at what intervals, is best decided by the partners themselves, according to the guidance of their own consciences.”⁵⁷

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Ware, Timothy (Bishop Kallistos) (1963), p. 302; (1984), p. 302; (1993), p. 296.

It is true that today a less strict view is coming to prevail, even in traditional Orthodox countries like Greece and Russia. This is why such “traditional” Orthodox countries like Greece and Russia have some of the highest abortion rates in the entire world! We “Orthodox” are the worst baby killers on the planet. As a region, Eastern Europe has the highest abortion rates in the world. The highest abortion rate ever documented in official statistics was recorded in Romania.⁵⁸ Such *change* noted by Bishop Kallistos is no comfort to the Christian soul. It is a great sorrow. Violent winds of change have blown across the western world in the last forty years. These winds have radically altered the traditional moral landscape of the Christian West, and through the West the entire world, particularly in its understanding of procreation, sexual relations, and contraception, and have not spared the Orthodox Church from their influence. In such a milieu it is hard to be faithful, but what other option is there for a lover of Christ and His Church? This is certainly a moment in the life of the Church when the synthesis of Holy Tradition and contemporary Christian living ought to be fervently sought. Test yourself, dear reader, and ask if your views and practices in this area are blessed by the Church Fathers. It is wise to embrace the mind of the Church, and to trust the Lord that His ways are the best ways.

⁵⁸ Abortion statistics may be viewed in various published studies of The Alan Guttmacher Institute. See <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/25s3099.html>.