

WHAT DOES BEING "UNCONDITIONALLY PRO-LIFE" IMPLY?

By Dr. E. Christian Brugger

John Paul II admonishes the faithful in [Evangelium vitae](#) "to be unconditionally pro-life" (EV 28). In our day, with the dramatic clash between the "culture of death" and "culture of life," this summons, he says, is not a mere suggestion; it is an "inescapable responsibility." This raises an unavoidable question: what does it mean to be unconditionally pro-life? In other words, what are the concrete implications of this imperative for our life of action?

With respect to the imperative's negative construal, that is with respect to what kinds of acts are incompatible with being unconditionally pro-life, the answer is fairly straightforward. Certain choices are incompatible with a good will and may never rightly be chosen.

Sound ethical reasoning affirms that certain objects of choice (i.e., the what of what is chosen) so "radically contradict" the good of the human person that they are always incompatible with a good will and hence with God's will. Catholic moral tradition terms these acts "intrinsically evil" (*intrinsece malum*) (see JP II, [Veritatis splendor](#), 80).

These include the intentional killing of the innocent, the deliberate rendering of one's conjugal relations infertile, orgasmic same-sex relations, sexual relations outside of marriage, and so on. A person whose basic moral life is in good order excludes from the outset intrinsically evil acts from his range of real alternatives.

Doing so is a sort of minimum requirement of morality. But for a person to consider this alone as making him unconditionally pro-life would be unwarranted flattery. As the great fifth century Church Father Saint Augustine says, one who keeps the Commandments has just begun to lift his head toward freedom.

What then does being unconditionally pro-life enjoin? For devout Catholics the answer is not always so clear. I would like to discuss the positive implications of the pope's admonition in relation to the parental decision to bring forth new life.

An understandable misconception exists among devout Roman Catholics regarding the procreative good of marriage. The logic runs something like this: all children are gifts from God; more children equal more gifts from God; therefore the more children the better. This is not, however, Catholic teaching, nor is it a requirement of morality. A couple should have only those children whom God wants them to have. Which means they should engage in what Vatican II and popes Paul VI and John Paul II call "responsible" family planning ([Gaudium et spes](#), 51, [Humanae vitae](#), 10, 16, [Populorum progressio](#), 37, [Familiaris consortio](#), 6, 11, 31-32,). And God wants couples to have only those children for whom they can emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and materially provide.

In [Humanae vitae](#), Pope Paul VI says, "if there are well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances," recourse to natural fertility cycles can be justifiable (HV 16). The term "well grounded reasons," the Vatican English translation of the Latin term *iusta causa* ("just cause"), sometimes translated "grave reasons," means reasons pertaining to the welfare of the family; to be contrasted with frivolous reasons, or selfish reasons, or no reasons at all. Such reasons might include serious financial uncertainty, for example when a husband is out of a job; or it might include already having a disabled child who demands a high level of care; or it might include the terminal or chronic illness of a spouse or dependent.

But more often than not, "well grounded reasons" pertain to the physical and emotional well being of the wife and mother. Since she will bear almost exclusively the physical and emotional burden of the gestation, and, if she's a stay-home mother, the disproportionate burden of the day-to-day nurture and

education of the children (notwithstanding the many joys as well), husbands have a grave duty to listen to their wives in regard to the question, "should we have more children?"

A husband would be negligently irresponsible to ignore the clear, or even unclear, communications of his wife that she is uncertain whether she has the resources, emotionally or physically, to fulfill peacefully the duties that would necessarily and rightly befall her by bringing another child into the world. No, it's stronger than that. It would be an injustice towards his wife. My own judgment is that this form of injustice could constitute grave matter, which if chosen knowingly and freely, could result in a grave sin against one's spouse. The following is a fundamental principal of morality: one is free to exceed the general demands of God's moral law in one's own life—what theology terms choosing 'heroic virtue' – presuming one is able to do so without detriment to one's already held duties. But one is never free to require someone else to do so.

In considering together the question of having more children, a couple needs first and foremost to communicate. If after both husband and wife have expressed freely all their thoughts and feelings to one another on the issue, and if both have the confidence that the marriage and the family are equipped to undertake the extremely important duty of bringing a little soul into their loving care, then they ought to proceed with cautious confidence.

Why "cautious" confidence? Because there exists on earth no natural cooperative undertaking more solemn, holy and demanding than the bringing into the world of a new eternal soul for God. While procreation is a cause for unique joy, expectation, and appropriate celebration, it is never casual.

If, however, a husband knows that his wife entertains serious doubts as to whether she is able to peacefully bear the burden of another pregnancy or the duties she'll undertake when the child is born, and if he knows that her heart and her life are objectively in right order in relation to Christ and the moral law, then, in my estimation, he is morally obliged to say to her, "You tell me when you're ready, dear," and then pray for her and serve her as if he were Christ serving the Church. Knowing his wife is anxious to please him, a Christian husband will do all he can to leave his wife genuinely free to express her judgment in this regard, which will include among other things not pressuring her to have conjugal relations during fertile periods.

The duty of a wife is to stay close to Jesus in prayer, communicating her needs clearly to her husband so he knows how to serve her. She should conscientiously chart her fertility cycle so she knows and can state precisely when she is and is not fertile. This way her husband is not forced to abstain longer during each cycle than necessary. (Husbands know this is a tangible way for their wives to love them!)

If on the other hand a husband prayerfully and intelligently judges that it would be imprudent, and hence wrong, to bring another child into the family, whether for material, emotional or physical reasons, then the wife should respect that judgment and not tacitly undermine it through careless NFP charting, or emotional manipulation. Using NFP in this way will involve couples in a monthly discernment: should we conceive another child? How should we express our 'yes' to God's will this month? What is in the best interests of the common good of the family? We are led in effect to ask our spouses monthly: How are you doing? And, How are we doing? This fosters conversation, which is valuable for the health of the marriage and family, even when at times being difficult and painful. The first step in the breakdown of a marriage is the breakdown of communication, which is one reason why couples who consistently practice NFP have a startlingly low divorce rate.

From what's been said, one might ask: but doesn't this logic open the way to selfishness in family planning? I mean, if we focus too much on the *iusta causa*, won't we always find a reason not to have more children? This presumes we start the process with a bias against having children. For those whose wills are bent in bias, a back door will always be found. After all, the moral law does not impose itself, it only invites. But authentic Christian marriage and family is not for the duplicitous, nor for corner-cutters.

It is for those who come to God openhearted--with an open mind and will. It is for those who understand that their spousal love, and the fresh flower of new life into which that love usually blossoms, is the deepest and most important natural love they will experience, one that involves a singular sacrifice, a total self-giving, a fusion of hearts. Being unconditionally pro-life means being unconditionally committed to the well being—mental, physical, spiritual and material—of my spouse, my children, and my family, which includes any future children that God should choose to send. It means being unconditionally committed to doing God's will in my life and the life of my family, no matter the cost.

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