

# Why the Catholic Church's Teaching on Contraception Doesn't Resonate

When it comes to prohibiting all contraceptive use during sexual intercourse, the Roman Catholic Church is the “last of the Mohicans” among Christians.

The typical narrative is that all Christian denominations used to consider contraception evil until relatively recently in history. But then the Anglican Church caved at their [1930 Lambeth Conference](#), and it was a domino effect among Christian denominations from that point on.

Most thought the Catholic Church would eventually cave, too. However, in 1968, Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical [Humanae Vitae](#) which reaffirmed the Church's position that all contraceptive use is “intrinsicly evil,” and the Church has held its doctrinal ground since then.

At the same time, though, many Catholics have found this teaching on contraception to be the primary stumbling block to their faith. It has caused great numbers of people to leave the Church. And polling has shown that the overwhelming majority of those who profess to be Catholic both disagree with the Church's teaching and [have used](#) contraception at some point in their sexual lives.

And this week, interestingly, [Pope Benedict XVI himself said](#) that *Humanae Vitae* “was a difficult text for me” and that he had problems with its “reasoning.” (Note: he didn't say that he ever believed contraception was morally good.)

I'm not here to argue either for or against the Catholic Church's prohibition on contraception— “that's above my pay

grade.” □ But I would like to briefly explain what the pope’s problem was with the Church’s teaching, because I think it’s very relevant to all of you.

The approach *Humanae Vitae* took when expressing the Church’s teaching on contraception was a “natural law” approach. According to the Catholic Church, natural law is the law of right and wrong that is “engraved in the soul of each and every man” and discernable through human reason. Note: it is NOT the Catholic Church’s affirmation that an “is” in the natural, biological world is necessarily an “ought” in human moral life. Rather, it’s the Catholic Church’s way of saying that men and women can know truth and goodness—up to a point—without God’s special revelation and the Bible. And when it comes to using contraception, the Catholic Church believes that every man and woman *should* be able to know it’s wrong through the use of their own reason, and they explain why in *Humanae Vitae*.

But as Benedict XVI has said elsewhere, the Church’s natural law reasoning has been [a “blunt instrument” in dialogues with the non-Catholic world](#). Many Catholics have hoped that natural law was sort of neutral ground on which they could meet secular society on not only the issue of contraception, but on all issues of sexual morality.

But as it turns out, natural law isn’t that neutral. The Church’s understanding of natural law itself presupposes metaphysical commitments: that man has a definite nature, that human beings can discern truth and goodness, and heck, that there are even such things as “truth” and “goodness.”

If you’re like me, you’ve discovered that not a small percentage of the population in the Western world no longer even subscribe to these things. As noted scholar David Bentley Hart [has said](#) of natural law proponents, “[They] often fail to grasp just how nihilistic the late modern view of reality has

become..." One could say the same thing about some conservatives today who make arguments in the political arena on behalf of "traditional marriage." (I say "some," because I think many conservatives have adopted a more utilitarian method of argument, which is equally ineffective.)?

However, the statistics show that natural law arguments have also become a "blunt instrument" among most Catholics, as well. And I don't think it's mainly a messaging problem. I think it's mainly because Western Catholics live in a world, and live the kind of lives, in which contraception *makes sense*:

- The overwhelming majority of people, Catholics included, live in urban areas where children—let's be honest—are economic and emotional burdens.
- The majority of women, Catholics included, attend school through college, and in these schools they learn that one's sense of purpose in life is heavily tied to their careers.
- The majority of people, Catholics included, prize carefully controlling and determining their lives in various spheres of their daily existence.
- The majority of people, Catholics included, are thankful for the various technologies that have been developed in the past two centuries to help us exercise this control and ensure our comfort.

I could go on.

We live in a contraceptive world. Until the Catholic Church starts linking their teaching on contraception to a more radical questioning of this world, I believe that it's destined to only be heeded by an ever-shrinking minority.