A Summary of Sexual Morality and Life Issues
by Kelly Bowring

Perhaps the most challenging topic of faith that Catholics face today is in the area of sexual morality. We all must be prepared to address these issues founded on the truths of the Faith. The purpose of this article is to present the teachings of the Catholic Church on sexual morality and on other issues concerning the sacredness of life.

Premarital Sexual Relations

Sexual intercourse between unmarried persons, fornication, has always been regarded as seriously wrong. The Church sees this prohibition as part of natural law. Jesus includes fornication as evil in Matthew 15:19 and Mark 7:21. Pagan converts were taught they must abstain from fornication in Acts 15:20, 29: 21:25. St. Paul lists fornicators among those who will not inherit the Kingdom of God in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Galatians 5:19-21. Paul also discusses that the body is not for fornication but for the Lord (1Cor. 6:13-14). Paul goes on to say:

“Keep away from fornication. All other sins are committed outside the body; but to fornicate is to sin against your own body. Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you since you received him from God” (1Cor. 6:18-19).

Tradition has also been consistent in reference to premarital intercourse as seriously wrong. Pope John Paul II, in “The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World,” refers to God’s plan for marriage and family by emphasizing the human meaning of sexual activity as not merely biological, nor a mere pursuit of pleasure. Instead it “concerns the innermost being of the human person as such” and is realized in a truly human way “only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death.”

Deliberate incomplete sexual acts, with one’s self or with another outside of marriage, are morally wrong as well. Intentional sexual arousal is meant to prepare the body for sexual intercourse and thus for its own sake is disordered and lacks its proper end and good.

Masturbation

Masturbation is the deliberate stimulation of the genital organs to the point of orgasm, which is not part of sexual intercourse. The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith firmly confirms the Church’s consistent teaching that masturbation, when it is a freely chosen act, is seriously wrong:

“. . . Both the Magisterium of the Church—in the course of a constant tradition—and the moral sense of the faithful have declared without hesitation that masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action.”

Sacred Scripture alludes to the intrinsic evil of masturbation in the Onan text in Genesis 38:8-10 and elsewhere in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Romans 1:24. Though these
texts are not explicit in their condemnation of masturbation, the Church firmly concludes: “Even if it cannot be proved that Scripture condemns this sin by name, the tradition of the Church has rightly understood it to be condemned in the New Testament when the latter speaks of impurity; ‘unchasteness’, and other vices contrary to chastity and continence.”

It is important to discuss the varying levels of moral culpability when teaching this topic.

**Acts of Lust**

Jesus declares the ramifications of lust in Mt. 5:28: “Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The Church teaches in her ordinary teaching that all lustful acts are objectively gravely sinful. Lust is listed among the seven capital, deadly sins within the Church’s Tradition. “The ninth commandment warns against lust.” Lust is countered by the virtue of temperance.

**Homosexual Acts**

Homosexual acts are genital acts performed between persons of the same sex, often consisting of and/or including acts of sodomy. The moral judgment of the Church is directed toward homosexual acts and not toward the homosexual condition, though one must keep in mind that homosexual inclinations are “objectively disordered.”

Homosexual acts are clearly regarded as intrinsically evil in Scripture (cf. Lev. 18:22, 20:13; Rom. 1:27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; and Rom. 1:26-27). The Church’s teachings authoritatively reaffirm this truth. For example, the Holy See declared in 1975 “that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved.” The Catechism of the Catholic Church also concludes that homosexual acts “are contrary to the natural law,” and “Under no circumstances can they be approved.” “Homosexual persons are called to chastity.” As a pastoral consideration, there are Catholic support groups, called Courage, for reforming homosexuals.

**Rape**

Rape is a “forcible violation of the sexual intimacy of another person . . . It is always an intrinsically evil act. Graver still is the rape of children committed by parents (incest).”

**Pornography**

“Pornography consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties... It is a grave offense,” and is often accompanied by other sexual sins.

**Adultery**

Adultery is sexual activity between two persons, at least one of whom is married to someone else. It is strictly forbidden by God in the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments
(Exodus 20:14, 17, Deut. 5:18, 21). Jesus clearly teaches that not only adultery itself is sinful but the desire for it as well (Mt. 5:28). Although Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery, He also cautioned her to go and sin no more (Jn. 8:11). Paul also mentions adulterers as those who will not inherit the Kingdom of God (I Cor. 6:9-10). Christian doctrine has reaffirmed and proclaimed the traditional teaching on adultery. Pope Pius XI explicitly condemns it in his encyclical letter, “On Christian Marriage,” 13 as well as the Vatican II Fathers in “The Church in the Modern World,” 14 the Catholic Bishops in “To Live in Christ Jesus” 15 and Pope John Paul II in his address on April 23, 1980.

**Contraception**

Contraception is actively aimed at preventing conception. The Church teaches that “every action that intends to impede procreation must be repudiated . . . whether it is done in anticipation of marital intercourse, or during it, or while it is having its natural consequences.” 16 The Catechism of the Catholic Church declares all forms of contraception to be “intrinsically evil.” 17 There are several ways in which intercourse can be contraceptive: through the use of contraceptive devices (such as condoms or diaphragms); by the activity of withdrawal (coitus interruptus); by use of spermicides; by surgical sterilization; and by use of IUD’s (intrauterine devices) and anovulant pills, which include “The Pill,” long acting injectibles like Depo-Provera and Norplant, and emergency “morning after” contraceptive pills like RU486 and Preven. In the case of the use of IUD’s and contraceptive pills, they are designed with a two-fold purpose, as both contraceptives and abortifacients. When they fail to prevent conception, which at times they do, then they are also designed to prevent the fertilized egg (a completely human person with a soul) from being able to attach to the placenta. Instead, the new life is washed out in the next menstrual cycle, without even the notice of the parents as to his existence. The result is an abortion.

Engaging in contracepted intercourse is regarded as seriously wrong—as constituting objectively grave matter, and thus is grounds for mortal sin. In other words, the following of the Church’s teaching has always been taught to be necessary for salvation. The Church states that the contraception is murder, even when practiced within marriage: “Whoever, therefore, in marriage artificially prevents conception, or procures an abortion, commits a most serious sin: the sin of pre-meditated murder,” 18 and elsewhere states, “to prevent birth is anticipated murder.” 19 The procreative good of intercourse, as God intends it, demands that every act of intercourse be open to life. Even between husband and wife, every completed sexual act must take place exclusively within natural, unobstructed intercourse. Church teaching honors the procreative good 20 of every act of intercourse, together with the unitive good.

For most of Christian history, abortion and contraception have been understood to be gravely immoral. In fact, contraception was unanimously condemned by all Christian denominations until 1930, when the Anglican (Episcopalian) church broke with its previous teaching and began instead to allow unnatural birth control devices and practices. Within a year, most of the American Protestant denominations followed as well. Soon acceptance led to advocacy, and eventually the anti-life mentality of contraception lead to the acceptance of abortion. With contraception, the uniting and
life-giving dimension of marital intercourse was replaced by the pursuit of pleasure as the ultimate end of intercourse, which led to the objectification of the partner/spouse and the devaluing of human life in general. At times, when the contraception failed, the chosen remedy for the resulting unwanted child became abortion. By 1961, though 12 years before the Supreme Court’s decision to legalize abortion, the National Council of Churches (Protestant) had already decided to accept abortion as morally permissible for health reasons or if the life of the mother was at stake. Today, the acceptance of abortion has lead some to campaign for the tolerance of partial-birth abortion and euthanasia (both of which are already legal in some areas of the United States), which are quickly becoming real threats. Despite subjective cultural opinion and pressure, the Catholic Church has almost singularly remained faithful to the teaching and the truth concerning the dignity of all life from conception to natural death.

**Natural Family Planning**

The Church teaches that couples may, for serious reasons only, morally regulate the size of their families by methods which do not involve contraceptive acts, known as periodic continence or “Natural Family Planning” (NFP). “Periodic continence, that is, the methods of birth regulation based on self-observation and the use of infertile periods, is in conformity with the objective criteria of morality.” NFP is not the “rhythm method,” but when it is properly engaged in, either in the planning or postponing of a child, it is more objectively and completely effective than artificial contraception. If serious circumstances exist, NFP may be a viable alternative. Under such circumstances, it is altogether different from contraception, as Pope John Paul II discusses in “The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World.” It respects the integrity of the conjugal act as God intends it, and may even promote the other goods of marriage, for through mutual efforts of self-control, the couple is spared the temptation to use each other as instruments or objects for selfish sexual gratification. NFP also tends to assist married couples in fostering holistic approaches and ways to express mutual love and tender affection with one another.

Drugs administered to remedy sterility are morally acceptable as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s “Respect for Human Life” states: Scientists therefore are to be encouraged to continue their research with the aim of preventing the causes of sterility and of being able to remedy them so that sterile couples will be able to procreate in full respect for their own personal dignity and that of the child to be born.

**Other Violations to Chastity**

Acts done with the intention of preventing a complete genital act within intercourse are also gravely wrong, even among married couples. Such examples include mutual masturbation, and similar acts in which orgasm is sought apart from natural intercourse. Pope Paul VI was clear on this truth in “On Human Life.”

The Church teaches that natural intercourse open to procreation is the only legitimate form of complete sexual expression, even between spouses. However, this does not
imply that mutual genital stimulation other than intercourse is forbidden for spouses as part of the preliminaries to marital intercourse.

A couple of other points are worth discussion concerning conjugal relations between spouses. Spouses are required to seek the moderation and self-restraint necessary to assure the preservation of their love, especially within sexual activity, from becoming shallow, isolated sexual pleasure for its own sake alone. As well, unreasonable refusal by a spouse to intercourse can harm the unitive good of marriage, and such refusal may at times offend conjugal charity.

**Artificial Insemination and “In Vitro” Fertilization**

Pope Paul VI, in “On Human Life,” makes clear that there is an “inseparable connection established by God” between the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning of the conjugal act.”24 Artificial insemination and “in vitro” fertilization (test-tube reproduction) are in all cases immoral, because they manipulate and divide the God-intended union between the procreative and the unitive goods of marriage and destroy the sacredness of marital sexual intimacy. “In vitro” fertilization usually entails three levels of immorality: first, masturbation to obtain the sperm for fertilization; second, fertilization apart from the natural conjugal act; and third, multi-abortive procedures. While usually several eggs are fertilized, only the stronger and healthier fertilized eggs are implanted or frozen, and the rest are discarded.

Human life should begin only in an act of human love whereby God’s creative act of giving new life is safeguarded. Techniques that entail the disassociation of husband and wife, by the intrusion of a person other than the couple (donation of sperm or ovum, surrogate uterus), are gravely immoral . . . . Techniques involving only the married couple (homologous artificial insemination and fertilization) are perhaps less reprehensible, yet remain morally unacceptable.25

**Human Cloning**

Cloning involves removing the nucleus from an unfertilized egg, replacing it with genetic material from another cell, and using an electric impulse to fuse the two and start the cell division that leads to a tiny embryo. Cloning adds to the current secular trends that tend to view children as consumer objects that parents may design at whim. Cloning of animals may be morally permissible, but human cloning is always intrinsically wrong. Human life may only begin through the natural conjugal union of husband and wife in cooperation with God, the Creator of all life.

“Respect for the dignity of the human being excludes all experimental manipulation or exploitation of the human embryo.”26 On the other hand, every ordinary means must be exercised to sustain and/or save the life of an unborn child.

**Abortion**

“Procured (direct or induced) abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence,
extending from conception to birth." The fifth commandment states: “You shall not kill.”

God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (1:5). Psalm 139:15 hints of the mystery of human life in the womb: “My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately in the depths of the earth.”

“Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable.” The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in “Respect for Human Life” states: Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves ‘the creative action of God’, and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can, in any circumstance, claim for himself the right to destroy directly an innocent human being.

Pope John Paul II in his encyclical “The Gospel of Life” reaffirms the sacred and inviolable dignity of life: “I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral”, supporting this truth with natural law, Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium.

Some try to justify abortion by claiming that human life begins long after conception. But in truth, “from the time the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor the mother; it is rather the life of a human being with his own growth.”

“Respect for Human Life” states concerning the rights of every unborn child: “The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life.”

Even the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council sternly condemned abortion: “From the moment of conception life must be guarded with the greatest care, while abortions and infanticide are unspeakable crimes.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church draws the same conclusion that human life begins at conception and must be henceforth protected: “Since it must be treated from conception as a person, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for, and healed, as far as possible, like any other human being.” Thus, embryology, which seeks to respect the life and integrity of the already existing human embryo, is licit, but “it is immoral to produce human embryos intended for exploitation as disposable biological material.”

Pope John Paul II addresses the exploitation of living human embryos and fetuses which are often produced for “in vitro” fertilization or as providers of organs or tissue for transplants, by saying: “The killing of innocent human creatures, even if carried out to help others, constitutes an absolutely unacceptable act.”

Formal cooperation in an abortion merits the canonical penalty of excommunication. Pope John Paul II clarifies culpability by stating: “The excommunication affects all those who commit this crime with knowledge of the penalty attached, and thus includes those accomplices without whose help the crime would not have been committed.”

Given our current political climate, with the moral evil of abortion legal in many societies today, we should address the moral obligation of Christians to such laws. Pope John Paul II, when speaking about laws which aim to legitimize abortion and euthanasia states: “There is a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection.” He further declares, concerning such a law, that “it is therefore never licit
to obey it, or to ‘take part in a propaganda campaign in favor of such a law, or vote for it’."41 It is clear that we are even responsible for whom we cast our vote.

Partial-birth abortion is of particular gravity and an abomination. It involves the intended breech delivery of a baby, even at full term, feet, stomach and hands first to the neck, then the insertion of a needle into the baby’s skull, followed by the removal of the baby’s brain by vacuumed suction through the needle so that the baby is fully delivered lifeless. A brief description of this form of abortion may suffice to depict its horror and evil.

Euthanasia and Suicide

Although not directly related to sexual ethics and chastity education, suicide and euthanasia are pertinent topics of morality among high school students, and concern the sacredness of life in general. “Euthanasia in the strict sense is understood to be the action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death, with the purpose of eliminating all suffering.”42 Concerning this morally offensive act, Pope John Paul II goes on to declare: “I confirm that euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person.” He bases his conclusion on natural law, Sacred Tradition and Magisterial teachings.

In “The Gospel of Life,” Pope John Paul II relates euthanasia to suicide and/or murder. He states that “Suicide is always as morally objectionable as murder,”43 and that the “choice of euthanasia becomes more serious when it takes the form of a murder committed by others on a person who has in no way requested it and who has never consented to it.”44

A distinction should be understood between euthanasia and “over-zealous” treatment to sustain life. Thus, the Catechism the Catholic Church states:

“Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate [whereas] an act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder.”45

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to clearly present chastity, sexual and life issues, with support from Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the teachings of the Magisterium. Catholics must be convinced that moral education assists us in becoming who God intends us to be. Also, though not the scope of this article, education in the virtue of chastity should include an explanation of the dignity of human life; the sanctity of marriage and marital relations; the vitality of the family as God intends it to be; the fruits of living chastely; the call to form one’s character with the virtues, especially modesty and temperance; and the various vocations of chastity—including the pre-eminence of consecrated virginity and celibacy for the greater glory of God,46 married life, and single life either in preparation for marriage or as a vocation in itself.

Moral truth, which is written on the human heart through natural law, and made more clearly evident by divine law, is in itself a gift from God. Through the use of reason and
the acceptance of Divine Revelation, the faithful progress in their understanding that God made us intelligent and free, and He calls us to a life of goodness. God the Father truly calls each of us to find lasting peace and happiness as His children by being obedient to His law of love. Catholics when grasping these moral truths should also become increasingly aware of the Father’s unconditional love and super-abundant mercy. Finally, it must be made clear that a life of moral goodness can be attained only with the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is readily available to everyone through prayer and ongoing and active participation in the Sacraments.

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End Notes

1 CCC # 11
2 New Catholic Encyclopedia
3 “Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics” [D.C.Q.C.S.E.] # 9
4 D.C.Q.C.S.E. 9
5 cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] 2352
6 CCC # 2529
7 CCC (Modifications from the Editio Typica) #2358
8 D.C.Q.C.S.E. # 8
9 CCC # 2357
10 CCC # 2359
11 CCC # 2356
12 CCC # 2354
13 p. 25
14 # 49
15 p.19
16 Paul VI “Humanae Vitae” # 14
17 # 2370
18 The Roman Catechism, Matrimony, # 13
19 Declaration on Procured Abortion
20 “The Church in the Modern World” # 49-50; “To Live in Christ Jesus” p. 18
21 CCC # 2370, paraphrasing “On Human Life” # 16
22 # 32
23 # 14
24 # 12
25 CCC # 2376, 2377 quoting “Respect for Human Life” II. 1, 5
26 “Respect for Human Life” I # 4, quoting the Holy See “Charter of the Rights of the Family”
27 JPII, “The Gospel of Life” # 58
28 Ex. 20:13, Deut. 5:17
29 CCC # 2271
30 Intro.; cf. also CCC # 2258
31 # 57
32 “The Gospel of Life” #60, citing “Declaration on Procured Abortion”
33
34 “The Church in the Modern World” # 51
35 # 2274
36 CCC # 2275, quoting “Respect for Human Life” I, 2
37 “The Gospel of Life” # 63
38 cf. CCC # 2272; Canon # 2350; Code of Canon Law # 1398
39 “The Gospel of Life” # 62, citing Canon # 1329
40 “The Gospel of Life” # 73
41 he cites CDF, “Declaration on Procured Abortion” # 22
42 “The Gospel of Life” # 65
43 # 66
44 # 66
45 # 2278
46 cf. Pope Pius XII, “On Holy Virginity”; Mt. 19