

Church and contraception: Experts expose errors in Pontifical Academy for Life book



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By CNA Staff

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Nine international experts have pointed out in an open letter the serious errors contained in a book published a few weeks ago by the Pontifical Academy for Life, which promotes a change in the Catholic Church's teaching on the use of contraceptives.

“It is not possible to take good care, give spiritual advice, counsel, and accompany a married couple by applying a pastoral approach that does not take the experience of medical studies into account,” the experts pointed out to the academy.

Proposing that Catholics be able to resort to contraceptives, as the document published by the academy does, “is, beyond a theoretical intellectual exercise, an affirmation that does not take the reality of the studies on the coaching of married couples nor the experience of so many marriages into account.”

The open letter, titled **“Pastoral care that does not take into account experience is no longer pastoral care,”** was signed by Spanish doctor Jokin de Irala, a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life; Michèle Barbato of Italy, a specialist in obstetrics and gynecology; Dr. Jacques Aimé Bazebozo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, president of the African Federation for Family Action; and Italian physician Maria Boerci, national president of the Italian Confederation of Centers for Natural Fertility Regulation.

Also signing were Italian doctor Paolo Bordin, a specialist in Internal Medicine; Serena Del Zoppo, a

gynecologist with experience in natural family planning and infertility, as well as a consultant in Naprotechnology; French physician Isabelle Ecochard, former president of the European Institute for Family Life Education; Belgian doctor Pierre Hernalsteen, a professor with experience in Belgium, the Netherlands, Ukraine, and Rwanda; and Italian doctor Furio Pesci, a professor at the Sapienza University of Rome.

The experts' open letter is a response to the book "Theological Ethics of Life: Scripture, Tradition, Practical Challenges" published this year by the Pontifical Academy for Life by Librería Editora Vaticana, the publishing house of the Holy See.

The book compiles in 528 pages the conferences that were held as part of a theological seminar sponsored by the Pontifical Academy for Life in 2021 and has an introduction by its president, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia.

According to Paglia, the book, which proposes that Catholics may resort to contraceptives, presents a "paradigm shift" in moral theology.

"The text makes a radical change, going, so to speak, from the sphere to the polyhedron," he said.

The Church's position on contraceptives 'hasn't changed'

The experts in health, fertility, and accompaniment for families lamented that after the publication of the book by the Pontifical Academy for Life, "There has been some

confusion in some ecclesial circles and in the media for interpreting this as a change from the Holy See on these issues.”

“But the position of the Catholic Church has not changed,” the experts stressed.

“The proposals in the manuscript are from a group of experts; they do not reflect the position of the academy,” they added.

The experts noted that **“St. John Paul II warned against confusing the ‘law of gradualness’ with the ‘gradualness of the law’** as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God’s law for different individuals and situations.”

“The law of gradualness supposes that we are all invited to fully live the proposals of the Church, even if we manage to reach them little by little, from our personal capacities and circumstances, counting on grace and being accompanied to overcome difficulties,” they explained.

“Pope Francis guides us along these lines, strongly emphasizing the importance of accompaniment and merciful discernment of the spouses: ‘It is necessary to face all these situations in a constructive way, trying to transform them into an opportunity for a journey towards the fullness of marriage and the family in the light of the Gospel. It is a matter of welcoming and accompanying them with patience and gentleness’ (Amoris Laetitia, 294).”

For the experts, “the gradualism of the law would mean, on the contrary, that there are

different laws for different people and in different circumstances.”

After noting that “pastoral care should take medical knowledge into account,” the experts stressed that “some of us have been working and coaching married couples for 40 years. Our work covers responsible parenthood, their marital sexuality, and during their use of modern natural methods (MNM), in reciprocal respect for their fertility and in permanent dialogue, to favor, space, or avoid pregnancies.”

What we know about contraceptives after 60 years

After six decades of contraceptive use, they said, “the proven results” shed light on “the effects that this ‘new’ pastoral approach would have.”

“In the 1960s, couples were taught that the pill would solve the so-called overpopulation problem. After 1968, women were taught that the pill would protect them from ‘unwanted’ pregnancies and prevent abortions. In the 1970s, artificial insemination techniques were developed to help childless couples to get their ‘desired child.’”

“Later, in the 1980s, it was claimed that the condom would prevent infections and also ‘unwanted’ pregnancies,” they added.

“The result, the breakdown of the family and the coercion of governments, was predicted by the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*: in addition to the worsening situation of women who were supposed to be ‘liberated’ by these

methods and the increase in marriage failures, we are now suffering a 'demographic winter' and epidemics of sexually transmitted infections are on the rise," they lamented.

In these decades, the experts stressed in their open letter, "we have learned and confirmed" that the natural method known as "symptothermal double-check" is "five times more effective than the condom" in preventing pregnancy.

It's also known that "the current contraceptive pill has, as one of its mechanisms of action, the early elimination of embryos by preventing their implantation," they pointed out, noting that "many women would not want to use it if they knew that the destruction of an embryo was possible."

According to the "best study to date on the relationship between the pill and breast cancer, published in The New England Journal of Medicine," the experts noted, it's known that "oral contraceptives raise the risk of breast cancer in an epidemic scale."

"They reduce some types of cancers, but it is not comparable to the risk of breast, liver, and cervical cancer," they stated.

In addition, "oral contraceptives raise the risk of myocardial infarction [heart attack] and stroke by 60%."

The use of these substances, they continued, is linked to "an increased risk of depression and suicides and suicide attempts."

Science has also shown, they added, that methods such as Natural Procreative (NaPro) technology "obtain results similar to those of artificial methods of assisted

reproduction, without their bioethical drawbacks and side effects,” including “the problem of all frozen embryos.”

According to the experts, “If only the proposals of *Humanae Vitae* had been followed, countless deaths from the causes described above could have been avoided in the last 50 years.”

“To question today the pastoral application of *Humanae Vitae* on the grounds of problems in the use of NFP could lead to one of the greatest public health scandals of all times, because it would affect the health of millions of women,” they warned.

“On the other hand, it would be an unprecedented victory for the pharmaceutical industry that seeks to silence the current medical evidence on the contraceptive pill, in order to continue increasing its business at the expense of women’s health,” they said.

The success of natural methods

The experts said that the use of “modern natural methods promotes marital autonomy; it is effective, environmentally friendly, and healthy,” and they highlighted that over the years their development has presented “increasingly better effectiveness rates, with the help of smartphone applications that include symptom-thermal algorithms with individual teaching and with the support of centers that promote them worldwide with more success and professionalism.”

After noting that those who work in health and family care with natural methods, are accompanying “the grandchildren of the first users of oral contraceptives,” the

experts pointed out that “the pastoral approaches proposed by the previously mentioned working group are not new, and have been applied in some places for 60 years, probably because they did not believe in [Humanae Vitae] or because they did not know how to help married couples in other ways or were overwhelmed by the influence that Big Pharma had on the media and on health workers.”

“Now we hear very different voices in our daily practice. Young women — mostly nonbelievers — are sad, even angry, because they were never told they could live without contraception. Sometimes they have even had to go through an abortion, simply because they blindly trusted those contraceptives,” they lamented.

After discovering the natural methods, they said, the young women “feel good as women again; they feel truly emancipated for the first time, connected to their bodies and sexuality.”

These young women, they continued, “no longer want a pastor who assumes that the ‘ideal’ is not for them, who approves of contraception, minimizes abortion, and considers divorce inevitable. The pastoral approaches that have been applied in many places over the years [have] lost meaning for them because they have endured their physical and psychological consequences. They want to fulfill the dream that the Church has maintained for centuries.”

“Instead of continuing to live in the tow of false hopes of the 60s that are old and have failed, the Church can embrace with more strength the experience and advances

achieved by those who work in this field: to have a renewed pastoral role; be a hopeful sign for a youth hungry for the Truth; and who want to live to the fullest their projects as couples,” they said.

For the experts, applying the law of gradualness to family planning “would mean proposing NFP to those who want to space their pregnancies and, if difficulties arise, accompanying them while they resolve their problems so that they can live like others the good news proclaimed by the Church.”

“On the contrary, the gradualism of the law and these ‘new’ proposals would be tantamount to telling them: ‘This ideal is not for you. In your circumstances, use condoms or other contraceptives,’” they said.

The experts also highlighted the need for “a greater commitment so that lay people, health professionals, and universities with a Christian inspiration do more, much more, to facilitate and improve the care of these couples.”

“It is time to abandon the failed paradigms of the sexual revolution,” they pointed out, and stressed that “it is time for the Church to develop a true and renewed pastoral care that is sustainable, following an integral ecology, centered on free and responsible men and women.”

“The Church’s teaching is healthy and promotes public health,” they said, stressing that natural methods favor “dialogue in marriage and respect for the other, in addition to strengthening the couple’s bonds and goals.”

“When they come from love, they increase true love; when they come from freedom, they increase freedom. Our

experience and science confirm that it is possible to follow and apply the teachings of the Catholic Church and accompany couples in their specific situations without departing from the teachings of *Humanae Vitae*,” they concluded.

This story was first published by ACI Prensa, CNA’s Spanish-language news partner. It has been translated and adapted by CNA.