A Conundrum With Condoms

The “popular” wisdom these days insists that because we can’t stop our children from engaging in pre-marital sex, and because such sex can be dangerous and have bad effects, we should do everything we can to protect our youngsters by giving them condoms.

Condoms, we are assured, help decrease pregnancies and decrease sexually transmitted diseases in a simple, straightforward way. If parents love their children, they will surely see to it that they have “protection.”

This argument, widely accepted in all strata of our society, relies on a seriously flawed understanding of what love really means. We need only consider a related example to see this flaw clearly. If our children decide that they are going to play hopscotch on the asphalt of a busy interstate highway, in the midst of high-speed traffic, would we be manifesting our love for them by giving them helmets to place over their heads for “protection,” or would real love involve pulling them off the roadway and insisting they learn abstinence from freeway hopscotch? Which of these actions genuinely manifests a parent’s love for his children?

True love often demands a higher and a more committed path, in place of an easier or more permissive path. Condoms, in the guise of a loving solution, involve us in a grave moral compromise, tempt us to yield to a more permissive path and invariably fail the demands of true love.

Those demands are particularly challenging for a married couple, one of whom has contracted AIDS. In order to protect the uninfected partner, some argue that it should be permissible for the husband to make use of a condom during marital relations. Otherwise, unprotected sex might well be the equivalent of a death sentence for the uninfected partner.

The popular wisdom here again assures us that condoms are the loving answer to a difficult situation. But true spousal love, in these sad circumstances, beckons us to a higher and harder path — a path of marital abstinence. A husband who has AIDS would never want to subject the wife he loves to a potentially death-dealing act on his part, which is what sexual intercourse could become for her, even while using a condom (which has a failure rate). Would it be a loving act to subject her to the risk of a possibly fatal encounter, even for something as beautiful as conjugal intimacy in marriage? Although it is an integral part of married love, sexual activity is, in fact, not absolutely essential for us as human beings, distinct from the case of eating or sleeping. We tend to lose sight of that basic fact in a relentlessly sex-permeated society.

Perpetual marital abstinence is certainly a difficult proposal, and is generally not recommend-ed, but grave circumstances like AIDS represent a strong call to this particular kind of sacrificial love and sexual self-mastery. It is not completely different from the situation of a married couple, one of whom is called to long-term military service overseas, wherein both are required to practice sexual continence when they are separated perhaps for years.

Many married couples do live as brother and sister for a host of reasons, and AIDS certainly constitutes a grave reason to justify such a choice. Learning to love each other in different and non-genital ways is, in fact, an integral component of every successful and enduring marriage, and an AIDS infection merely brings greater urgency and immediacy to the task.

The use of condoms in marriage, beyond all the talk of effectiveness and failure rates, involves us in some very significant moral violations. Condoms, invariably a form of contraception, violate marital love right at its core. By making use of contraception, we say to our spouse, in effect: “I love you, except for your fertility and fecundity. I will not embrace that part of you. Rather, I will cordon it off, separate it and put it aside, so I can use my sexuality and the rest of you in a way that brings satisfaction to me.”

But marital sexuality, and marriage in general, really involves the complete and unreserved gift of our self to our spouse. Marital love is not meant to be partial. Marital sexual intercourse is a special personal language that always means surrendering ourselves totally. Such a total self-donation embodies within itself the radical possibility of engendering new life, which can then be protected and raised within the pact of that couple’s unreserved and indissoluble love.

The use of a condom, on the other hand, may permit a couple to mutually generate certain pleasurable sensations.
Making Sense

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together, but it explicitly mili-
tates against that full gift of self
that is written right into the in-
ner language of the marital act it-
self. It couples off a part of them-
selves to the other, and
deny access to the deepest and
most life-giving center of who
they are whenever they engage
in contraceptive sex.

Contraception is a kind of lie
that a man and a woman speak
to each other through their
bodies, feigning the total gift
of themselves to each other,
but always actually holding back
that gift.

OBITUARY

Sister of St. Francis Frances Inezetta Arens

MILWAUKEE. Funeral Mass for
School Sister of St. Francis In-
ezetta Arens was celebrated
June 15 at St. Joseph Convent
Chapel in Campbellsport, Wis.
Convent interment followed at
the Sisters’ cemetery there. Sister
Inezetta died June 10 at St. Joseph
Convent.

Sister Inezetta was born
Aug. 30, 1920, in Chicago and
entered the Congregation in
1950. She received the habit
of the Sisters of St. Francis com-
nunity on June 13, 1937. She
made her profession of vows
Aug. 12, 1939.

She was a family nurse,
and her nursing ministry was
as a homemaker, a supervisor
in a medical center and a
director of food service in
Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota,
Nebraska, Colorado and Illinois.

She served as a homemaker
at Corpus Christi Convent in
Colorado Springs from 1954-60.

Respecting the God-given
desires for our sexuality and
struggling towards sexual self-
mastery is one of the great
challenges of our age, and prob-
able of every age. Arguments in
favor of widespread condom avail-
ability are emblematic of a collective
loss of nerve in the face of pow-
ertul libertine pressures within
our culture.

Against the backdrop of that
troubled culture, God opens us
higher and more authentic path
to us. We glimpse that beauti-
ful path every time we allow
the grace of self-control that will
our bod