

continued, " ... We are in fact faced by an objective 'conspiracy against life,' involving even international institutions, engaged in encouraging and carrying out actual campaigns to make contraception, sterilization and abortion widely available. Nor can it be denied that the mass media are often implicated in this conspiracy, by lending credit to that culture which presents recourse to contraception, sterilization, abortion and even euthanasia as a mark of progress and a victory of freedom, while depicting as enemies of freedom and progress those positions which are unreservedly pro-life" (no. 17).

In all, the Catholic teaching on this issue respects the dignity of the individual in both his person and action.

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**The Evangelization Station**

Hudson, Florida, USA

E-mail: [evangelization@earthlink.net](mailto:evangelization@earthlink.net)

[www.evangelizationstation.com](http://www.evangelizationstation.com)

Pamphlet 312

## **Sterilization: Why It Is Wrong**

Fr William Saunders, PhD

I recently saw the movie *Cheaper by the Dozen*. In it, the father, played by Steve Martin, states that he has had a vasectomy. This has caused some discussion among friends, especially because some people think that after 12 children one logically should have a vasectomy. Why does the Church teach that sterilization is wrong?

Before addressing the morality of sterilization, we must first remember that each person is a precious human being made in God's image and likeness with both a body and a soul. Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" asserted, "Man, though made of body and soul is a unity. Through his very bodily condition he sums up in himself the elements of the material world. Through him they are thus brought to their highest perfection and can raise their voice in praise freely given to the Creator. For this reason man may not despise his bodily life. Rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honor since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day" (no. 14). St. Paul also reminds us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) and therefore we should not degrade our bodily dignity by allowing the body to participate in the act of sin. Moreover, such sin hurts the body of the Church.

Therefore, we are responsible to care for our bodily needs with proper nourishment, rest, exercise and hygiene. A person must not do anything to purposefully harm the body or its functions. For example, at times, we take medicine — over-the-counter as well as prescribed — to preserve our bodily health. However, we must not bring harm to our body by abusing legitimate drugs or using drugs known to be harmful.

Circumstances arise when a person may need surgery. To preserve the well-being of the whole body and really the whole person, an organ that is diseased or functioning in a way that harms the body may be removed or altered. For instance, surgery to remove an appendix that is about to rupture is perfectly moral as is surgery to remove a mole which appears to be pre-cancerous. However, cutting off a perfectly healthy hand, thereby destroying not only that bodily part but also its functions is an act of mutilation and is morally wrong.

With this brief outline of principles, we can turn to sterilization. Here a distinction is made between direct and indirect sterilization.

Direct sterilization means that the purpose of the procedure was simply to destroy the normal functioning of a healthy organ so as to prevent the future conception of children. The most effective and least dangerous method of permanent sterilization is through vasectomy for a man and ligation of the fallopian tubes for a woman. Such direct sterilization is an act of mutilation and is

therefore considered morally wrong. Regarding unlawful ways of regulating births, Pope Paul VI in his encyclical "*Humanae Vitae*" (1968) asserted, "Equally to be condemned ... is direct sterilization, whether of the man or of the woman, whether permanent or temporary" (no. 14). The *Catechism* also states, "Except when performed for strictly therapeutic medical reasons, directly intended amputations, mutilations and sterilizations performed on innocent persons are against the moral law" (no. 2297).

Indirect sterilization is morally permissible. Here surgery, or drug or radiation therapy, is not intended to destroy the functioning of a healthy organ or to prevent the conception of children. Rather, the direct intention is to remove or to combat a diseased organ; unfortunately, the surgery or therapy may "indirectly" result in the person being sterilized. For instance, if a woman is diagnosed with a cancerous uterus, the performance of a hysterectomy is perfectly legitimate and moral. The direct effect is to remove the diseased organ and preserve the health of the woman's body; the indirect effect is that she will be rendered sterile and never be able to bear children again. The same would be true if one of a woman's ovaries or if one of a man's testes were cancerous or functioning in a way that is harmful to overall bodily well-being. The caution in this discussion to uphold the morality is that the operation is truly therapeutic in character and arises from a real pathological need.

Lastly, further caution must be taken concerning the role of the state in this area. Pope Pius XI in his encyclical "*Casti connubii*" (1930) warned, "For there are those who, overly solicitous about the ends of eugenics, not only give certain salutary counsels for more certainly procuring the health and vigor of the future offspring ... but also place eugenics before every other end of a higher order; and by public authority wish to prohibit from marriage all those from whom, according to the norms and conjecture of their science, they think that a defective and corrupt offspring will be generated because of hereditary transmission, even if these same persons are naturally fitted for entering upon matrimony. Why, they even wish such persons even against their will to be deprived by law of that natural faculty through the operation of physicians."

Pope Pius XI was prophetic in his teaching, since shortly thereafter the world witnessed the eugenics program of Nazi Germany which included massive sterilization of those deemed "undesirable." In our world, various civil governments still toy with the idea of sterilization to solve welfare problems. Perhaps we may reach the point where health insurance companies pressure individuals to be sterilized rather than risk having children which may require high care.

Pope John Paul II warned in his encyclical "*The Gospel of Life*" ("*Evangelium Vitae*") of "scientifically and systematically programmed threats" against life. He