



PREGNANCY IS A GIFT NOT A FLAW

By Haley Stewart

I think Catholic teaching on contraception is really crucial to understanding the respect for womanhood that the Church affirms. The Church's stance on birth control is one of the most controversial issues of our day. Why should women be enslaved to pregnancy and child-rearing instead of pursuing something, anything else? Why should a woman's right to contraception be taken off the table? Why is the HHS Mandate such a big deal? Does the Church just want all women to be oppressed, barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen? These questions completely miss the point. Far from wanting to degrade women, the Church always wants to honor womanhood.

Before our conversion, I was taking birth control for a year and a half. We got married young—I was only twenty, Daniel was twenty-one and we were both still in college. At the time we were attending a Baptist church. I cannot tell you how many of our well-meaning friends and

members of our faith community asked when they heard of our engagement, "So, Haley, have you started taking birth control, yet? Because you gotta take it a couple months ahead of time for it to be really effective so you don't end up pregnant!"

Apart from being a really invasive question, what kind of message did that send to me? One, that pregnancy is a disaster that needs serious prevention in order to be avoided. Two, that there is something flawed in the way your body works. You need a prescription to fix this problem you have so that you are not the cause of a horrible inconvenience (at best) to yourself and your poor husband.

These folks had our best interests at heart. But far from feeling liberated by this push for birth control, I felt ashamed of my womanhood, embarrassed of my pesky fertility. The way my body was created was clearly flawed.

I had a serious problem and it hinged on the unfortunate fact that I was born a woman.

Fast forward to when I quit taking birth control pills my last semester of college and got pregnant just after graduation. It was unplanned and unexpected, but we were indescribably happy. Assuming we were disappointed, many of our friends attempted to commiserate with us. "Wow. Your life is really gonna change," they would grimace. "Things are gonna be different" was about the most encouraging phrase they could muster. The pastor at our church even asked, "This wasn't planned, was it? I mean, you would have to be crazy to want to be pregnant right now, in your situation!" Our situation was that we were young and Daniel had another year of school to finish and a thesis to write.

That attitude really was a storm cloud over my glowing happiness. I had failed. I had ruined us. There was something wrong with me and because I had not altered the way my body worked with medications, I was supposed to feel embarrassed or stupid or ignorant for "getting us into this situation."

I cannot tell you the striking difference between this mindset and the way Catholics responded to our big news. There was no pity in our Catholic friends' and professors' faces for this hapless young couple. They were actually excited! "Praise God!" they'd say. "What a blessing! How wonderful!"

celebrate the unique honor of my womanhood, because God has given women an opportunity to share in His creation. My husband will never know what it is like to grow new life inside himself. Granted, he will also never know what it feels like to throw up every day for several weeks due to extreme morning sickness. I am not saying pregnancy is easy or without sacrifice, but it is cosmic and amazing. An eternal soul is entering the world and I have been chosen to participate in this work. I am honored. I am celebrated.

If we think that by denying our fertility we are being liberated, we are sadly fooled. By divorcing procreation from sex, women are degraded. We have to apologize for our womanhood, the possibility that we might get pregnant and inconvenience someone. Better to have a surgical procedure render us sterile so that we do not ruin any poor man's life by landing him with, of all things, a baby.

One of the lies about contraception is that increased access to birth control decreases the number of abortions performed. That is rarely true and misses the big picture which is that when a country turns to a contraceptive mentality, changing its view of the purpose of sex, the abortion rate increases ("Family Planning and Induced Abortion in Post-Soviet Russia of the Early 1990s: Unmet Needs in Information Supply" study).

When we no longer value the way God created women and prescribe a medical fix for their natural fertility are

As we began reading the teachings of the Catholic Church on marriage, fertility and contraception, I started to think about my body differently. There was not anything broken about it. There was not anything to apologize for. By making procreation a central feature of sex, we were honoring each other's bodies and their Creator.

Maybe there is not anything wrong with me? I wondered. Maybe it is not insane to be thrilled that we are expecting before having our careers settled and being financially secure. Maybe this womanhood thing is something to celebrate?

As we began reading the teachings of the Catholic Church on marriage, fertility and contraception, I started to think about my body differently. There was not anything broken about it. There was not anything to apologize for. By making procreation a central feature of sex, we were honoring each other's bodies and their Creator. We were fearfully and wonderfully made and we could embrace the womanhood and manhood we brought to the marriage bed. We could be sub-creators, participants in God's redemptive, creative work and that miraculous creation of a new soul could happen within me.

Instead of something to be ashamed of, I began to

we really respecting womanhood? Catholic teaching about marriage, sex, fertility and contraception affirms the value of women and protects us from degradation. As a Catholic woman, I can fully embrace my body. I do not need to apologize for my womanhood. I am honored and celebrated.

HALEY STEWART lives in the southern United States with her bearded husband, three kids and seven backyard chickens. She went to a Baptist college and surprised herself by coming home Catholic. When she gets a moment to herself, she loves to read Austen, Waugh and O'Connor with a strong cup of coffee in hand. Stewart muses about cultivating a Catholic family through literature, liturgical living and urban homesteading at her blog "Carrots for Michaelmas" (www.carrotsformichaelmas.com). She just released her first eBook, "Feast! Real Food, Reflections and Simple Living for the Christian Year." This article originally appeared on Catholic Exchange (www.CatholicExchange.com). Reprinted with permission.