

Pastoral Care for the Sterilized

by Father Tom Hennessey

Editor's Note: This article was written by Father Hennessey in 2000.

In my short time as a priest, I have seen the damage that is done by sin. Sin destroys life, shortens life, and takes away the meaning of life. I have worked with couples with many different problems but most problems are simply the result of sin. The root of all sin is pride and this can be broken down into the different categories, which are lust, gluttony, sloth, anger, pride, covetous, and envy.

One of the more serious problems with counseling couples is the problem of contraception and sterilization. The couple may come in to discuss all the different problems they are having, but what they do not often see is that these are the symptoms to the greater illness. A priest is much like a doctor who analysis the symptoms and then looks at the root problem. A doctor may look at difficulty breathing and other signs and then come to the realization that this person has Lung cancer and not just a bad cold. A priest must do the same thing, looking at the problems, from adultery to bad communication and find the possible causes of these effects.

One of the first questions that I ask, after hearing the different problems that are taking place is, "Are you using some form of contraception?" After hearing the answer to that question, I can begin to look at the other problems. One of the most difficult answers to hear is, " No, my husband (wife) has been sterilized." Sterilization is now a very common means of contraception and possible the most common in the United States.

Sterilization consists in a very intrusive surgery, in which a part of the body is mutilated to stop it from functioning properly. It is dangerous in the short term and the long term but still it has become common. Sterilization also attacks the basic meaning of marriage.

Marriage is a union of a man and a woman and God. It is a promise of love between two people and God to be faithful for life and to be open to life. God has designed marriage to build the couple in their love by desiring to have children. In marriage, two people must learn to sacrifice their own desires and their very selves for the betterment of the other. Marriage is other centered instead of self-centered. Children are the essential ingredient in changing mans struggle to be other centered. However, more than the children are the willingness to conform our will to God's. For it is in conforming our will to God's that we learn to accept all things from God.

When a couple sterilizes themselves, they act against the two great commandments, to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. They have chosen themselves above God by doing their own will not taking God's command into effect. They have also made an intention before God and broken that promise, "to accept children lovingly from God." The couple also act against their neighbor, in which their spouse is the first one affected. This action will affect many others in a very harmful fashion.

Therefore, in guiding sterilized couples, I first call them to confession and repentance to begin the healing process. The most difficult part of the healing process is repairing the damage done by the sinful action.

In all confessions, the process of healing includes four parts; be sorry for sins, have a firm purpose of avoiding the sin, confess our sins to a priest, and be willing to do our penance. The penance should consist in repairing the damage done if possible. Therefore, a couple must be willing to go through the process of correcting the sterilization, if possible. Sometimes this may be very difficult because of the expense involved in having a reversal. The couple must see this part of repentance as all others, a chance to repair damage caused by sinful action. This process is for the couple's best interest, to repair damage that now exists within the marriage. It would be comparable to the family home, which was damaged by an ice storm and part of the roof collapses. The family should see the need to repair the roof, but the house may still be livable. The roof should be repaired so that the family returns to a former basic existence.

All couples need to grow deeper in understanding of the marriage sacrament. They should see the need for the complete understanding of marriage and all its parts so they fully participate in this mystery, the mystery of life.