

I have been asked many a time what the Coptic Orthodox view on contraception and abortion is. So finally I've managed to spare some time to sit down and write the following in regards to the churches view on family planning.

So how am I going to attack this topic, I think the best way is to divide it into the following three topics.

1. The Concept of Procreation in the Orthodox Church, and the many components that need to be considered in raising God-Fearing children.
2. The Concept of contraception, the churches view on contraception and an overview of what is available today that is accepted by the church.
3. The Concept of Abortion and the reasons behind the Church's stance against it.

So let us begin;

FAMILY PLANNING

So what is family planning, put simply it's the plan of parents to have children. While it may seem easy, the church encourages that much thought is given before this occurs. There are certain considerations and ideas that need to be understood before a couple should think of procreation.

The following are a set of questions that need to be asked;

1. Spiritually as a husband and wife can we raise these children that we are going to have in the fear of God?

- a. This is a very important question that needs much thought and prayer. Any child that is brought into this world will be your responsibility in Front of God. Why is this so you may be asking, the answer is simple.

Children are a blessing from God. God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." (Gen. 9:1) God also blessed Abraham and told him, "And I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great." (Gen. 12:2) He promised him that his descendants will be like the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16), and as the stars of the heaven in number (Gen. 15:5). God also told Abraham, "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations." (Gen. 17:5) Also, in Psalms it is written, "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord." (Ps. 127:3)

But not all offspring is a blessing from God. God, Who promised Abraham to bless him by having many descendants, also placed a condition for that. He said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations." (Gen. 17:9) God gave him circumcision as a sign of His covenant (This has been replaced by baptism today). Also God's covenant was

not with all of Abraham's descendants. He said, "But My covenant I will establish with Isaac." (Gen. 17:21) and from Isaac's offspring He chose Jacob.

The true blessing the family receives from the Lord is the good, God-fearing children. The family of Eli the priest was not blessed, because of his evil sons. (1Sam. 2:27-35) Thus it is neither the gender nor the number of children that is important.

The family should not be happy with how many children she has, but with the good children she offers to the Lord, the Church, and society.

2. Economically as a family can we support this human being that we are going to bring into the world?

- a. Nothing can be worse than running out of money, especially when raising a child. Children are not cheap and in a recent survey it was estimated that by the time a child reaches 18, they would have cost a family about \$ 250 000 each. Plan ahead and be wise -I had a friend once who told me when you plan for children, plan for three not one, you never know if the lord will bless you with twins or triplets. While its tongue in cheek, the comment has some value.

3. Socially ask yourself the following questions.

- a. Is everything stable in the family unit?
- b. Is there a war raging at work, or with close family?
- c. Would you as a family have support if you ever needed it to raise a child?
- d. Have you planned how much time work is willing to give you off during maternity?
- e. Do you suffer any genetic medical illnesses that are likely to be passed onto your offspring? Are you willing to raise a child with the same condition?

These are just some of the considerations that need to be considered when having children. Family planning is crucial in maintaining solid Christian families.

The aim is to take these children to heaven, you have a responsibility in front of Your Kids as well as God to raise your Children in the fear of God, for they indeed a gift and heritage from God (Psalm 127:3)

CONTRACEPTION

For the above reasons the church has allowed the use of Contraception in marriage. Unlike the decree of Vatican II in the Catholic Church, the use of contraception is permitted in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

So what forms of contraception are allowed to be used and what is not allowed to be used.

Before I go into this I would like to take the opportunity of apologising in advance if I use technical terms or drug terms in explaining what is available. Moreover the church has not given a clear list of what is allowed or what is not. I have used my medical as well as my pharmaceutical knowledge to explain where appropriate my scientific opinion on why some forms of contraception are good while some are bad

However as I will discuss later the Church is adamant that once fertilisation occurs, i.e. once the egg and sperm fuse, that is considered a living being and any attempt to end its life is simply Murder!

THE ALLOWED:

Barrier Method:

This includes the use of Condoms for men and woman as well as the use of a diaphragm to block the opening of the cervix in the female preventing sperm entry. Seeking advice on the use of diaphragms from your local General Practitioner is greatly recommended as every woman is different.

Cycle Method:

This includes the following

- Carefully calculating days to determine days of ovulation which will determine days of abstinence.
- Ovulation can also be determined by the use of a temperature chart as body temperature rises about 1 degree before ovulation. However this method is not entirely accurate.

Permanent Contraception:

Female sterilisation

This procedure blocks the fallopian tubes, preventing an egg from passing down the tube and being fertilised. The two common surgical methods used are:

- Tubal ligation (having your tubes tied) – performed under general anaesthetic.
- Essure micro-inserts – this involves the placement of metal coils in the fallopian tubes which eventually will cause scar tissue formation and destruction of the function of fallopian tubes.

Male sterilisation (Vasectomy)

This involves blocking sperm by cutting the tubes they pass through from the testes to the penis.

NOT ALLOWED

Before I discuss these i would like to explain in simple English two key hormones in the female body.

Estrogen and Progesterone are two key hormones that play a great role in ovulation as well as maintaining pregnancy. Every month these levels fluctuate normally in the cycle and cause menses to occur if no fertilization happens.

As is evident if we alter the levels of these hormones we can cause menses to be stopped and

I know many will disagree with me saying we can use hormonal drugs in the church. However i ask the question many of these drugs have progesterone in them which thickens the cervical mucus as well as prevents implantation of a fertilised egg. If we think about this, a fertilised egg is considered full human and any attempt at killing it is murder. So I ask all those who will argue with me if we cannot guarantee that this (fertilisation) would not happen, are we happy to take the risk of murder. Put simply any fertilised egg that does not implant because of hormones that are given to prevent implantation is simply Murder.

What types are out there you may be asking?

Intrauterine devices (IUD)

An IUD, sometimes known as a coil, is a small plastic device with either added copper or hormones. It is inserted into the uterus by a doctor. It can stay in the uterus for five to eight years, depending on the type used, and can easily be removed before that if you would like to fall pregnant or are having problems.

Both types are 99 per cent effective and work by changing the lining and environment of the uterus, effectively killing off sperm. **If any sperm survive and fertilise an egg, the egg is unable to stick to the wall of the uterus, so a pregnancy can't continue.**

Combined pill

This is made up of the synthetic forms of the hormones oestrogen and progesterone. The combined pill prevents ovulation, thickens cervical mucus to make it harder for sperm to enter the uterus and **changes the lining of the uterus to make it less suitable for a fertilised egg to stick.**

Vaginal ring

This contains similar hormones to the combined pill and works in the same way. A 'one size fits all' ring is inserted into the vagina and stays there for three weeks. During that time, it slowly releases hormones that pass from the vagina into the bloodstream. The hormones released are again derivatives of estrogen and progesterone which prevents ovulation, thickens cervical mucus to make it harder for sperm to enter the uterus and **changes the lining of the uterus to make it less suitable for a fertilised egg to stick.**

Mini pill

This contains only the synthetic form of progesterone. It makes the cervical mucus thicker, which prevents sperm from entering the uterus. Moreover it **changes the lining of the uterus to make it less suitable for a fertilised egg to stick if sperm pass through the thick cervical mucus.**

Implanon

This is a hormone implant that is inserted under the skin by a doctor at the inner side of the upper arm. It contains etonogestrel, a progesterone-like hormone that prevents ovulation and hinders sperm from entering the cervix (by changing cervical mucus). Further it **changes the lining of the uterus to make it less suitable for a fertilised egg to stick if sperm pass through the thick cervical mucus.**

DPMA injections (Depo-Provera/Depo-Ralovera)

These are long-acting (12 to 14 weeks) injectable contraceptives containing the hormone progestogen. They prevent ovulation, block sperm by thickening the mucus made by the cervix and **cause changes in the lining of the uterus so it is unsuitable for a fertilised egg to stick.**

As you can see all this hormonal drugs will cause a change in the lining of the uterus making it impossible for a fertilised egg to implant, leading to the death of life.

I ask the question again are you willing to take that risk of having a fertilised egg not implant and die?

THE MOMENT OF CONCEPTION & ABORTION

The churches view is that at the instant the sperm meets the egg, a new being is formed and they are alive.

So are there any biblical references to show this is the case? Without a doubt I will mention a few below.

"For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvellous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skilfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me, When as yet there were none of them.

- [Psalms 139:13-16](#)

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations."

- [Jeremiah 1:5](#)

As we can see clearly this idea that you have value after birth is not valid at all with what the bible says. A foetus is human life as soon as it is conceived.

Further in the New Testament, we are given examples of babes already alive at different gestational stages. In the Holy Gospel of St Luke 1:41, we are told, *"And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit."* The babe, St John the Baptist, was in his sixth month of gestation which means that Jesus was just conceived not more than a few weeks old.

Moreover a lot of biblical figures had been ordained before birth:

1. Samson, the strong man, was ordained before his birth to deliver Israel from the Philistines (Judg 13:2-5).
2. Samuel, who later ministered with the priest Eli was ordained before his birth to serve God (1 Sam 1:11-20).
3. St. Paul was foreordained to minister to the Gentiles (Gal 1:15)
4. St. John the Baptist, the kinsman of the Lord Jesus Christ was ordained to be His forerunner (Lk 1: 13-17)
5. Josiah, the king of Judah, his birth as well as his reign were foretold to King Jeroboam (1 Kin 13:2)
6. Psalm 139 talks about God knowing King David before his birth
7. The angel Gabriel foretold the Lord Jesus Christ's birth and ministry to St. Mary.

So why do people terminate their pregnancies?

Termination of pregnancy occurs for various reasons.

- i. Spontaneous abortion due to either maternal or fetal factors resulting in the natural termination of pregnancy.
 - a. These foetus are termed children as we find in Job 3:16 "Or why was I not hidden like a stillborn child, Like infants who never saw light?"
- ii. It can also result from trauma to the mother as a result of an accident, or due to other reasons.

However, sometimes termination of pregnancy is due to human intervention because of the woman's choice to abort by request or consent.

I pose this question:

Is it a woman's right to have an abortion?

Under normal circumstances, pregnancy, despite its pains, brings to the expecting mother joy, which is complete with the birth of her baby. Although a woman experiences labor pain, yet all is forgotten once she gives birth to a new human being.

The question then is: Why would a mother refuse to carry full term and give birth?

There must be reasons for this refusal.

In our discussion about the reasons, let us bear in mind that the decision to have an abortion is very serious and has religious implications. This decision affects the life of a new human, the fetus, regardless whether the baby is a few days (an embryo) or a few weeks.

The Church believes that life begins at the moment of conception and the fetus is regarded as a living being who has the right to both life and dignity. How can a mother, a physician, or anyone agree to participate in ending the life of a living being by having an abortion?

From the religious perspective, this cannot be accepted unless the continuation of pregnancy threatens the life of the mother, and the only solution is "therapeutic abortion".

But we thank God, that as a result of medical advances, these cases are very rare now. Let us discuss the reasons that may force a woman or a family to consider abortion:

Reasons given for Abortions

1. Some choose to have an Abortion as a form of contraception

Couples may choose to use natural or artificial means of birth control. But despite the various contraceptive methods, none has been proven to be absolutely 100% effective; each has a failure rate. Therefore, a couple may find themselves facing a situation, which they are unprepared for having a baby yet the wife is pregnant. As a result they revert to abortion to terminate the pregnancy. A very grave solution indeed.

From a Biblical and Christian perspective, abortion is an interruption of human life and therefore is considered murder. All the arguments made in our permissive and secularized society cannot justify it. So, regardless of the circumstances of the mother, in particular, or the family, in general, resorting to abortion in order to solve a problem is wrong, even if it is in the initial stages of pregnancy.

I would like to take the time out as well to introduce the two legal abortifacants that are legalised in many countries.

Morning After Pill:

While many consider this as nothing more than just ordinary hormonal contraception it in fact has an efficacy of 72hours. This means it's just not used in the morning after sexual intercourse it can be used for a further 3 days. By this time fertilisation has definitely occurred, and the morning after pill which contains very high doses of progesterone will inhibit its implantation in the uterus, causing the embryo to die.

RU-486

This drug has been available for years however not many countries authorise its use. For example in Australia only specialised specialists can obtain it for patient use. RU 486 is the common name for the drug mifepristone (a 100x higher dose than that used in combined pills) it works by blocking the effects of the hormone progesterone, which is crucial to starting and maintaining pregnancy. Without progesterone, the lining that covers the walls of the uterus breaks down. In the absence of progesterone, the uterus cannot hold onto the fertilised egg, making it impossible for pregnancy to continue. Unlike the morning after pill which has efficacy of 3 days, RU-486 is effective up until 10 weeks of gestation.

2. Abortion as a means of concealing sin:

Throughout history, women have used abortion to terminate unwanted pregnancies, especially when it is a young, unmarried woman, who may have sinned with a man and became pregnant. Out of fear that her act may be discovered, she might think of having an abortion. Her family members and even her church friends and servants may approve of her decision and even encourage it.

We must understand that one of the basic rules in trying to live a spiritual life is not hide one sin by committing another one, even if the intentions are good and needs are compelling. Knowing the harsh circumstances the young woman will face and the ordeal she will go through makes her relatives and the church eager to help her. Yet, this does not justify resorting to abortion as a solution. There are other means of helping and caring for the unwed, pregnant women; The one thing that is an absolute certainty is: abortion is not a solution and should not be an option.

3. Some choose to have an abortion as a means of showing mercy towards an abnormal fetus:

Every family hopes for a child that will be fully healthy both physically and mentally. The birth of a child, which has a congenital disease or a physical or mental defect, is an ordeal that the family will have to cope with. To endure the situation, they need very strong and deep faith, as well as encouragement and support from others.

Nowadays, with all the medical advances, physicians can inform the mother if the fetus has congenital disease, a physical anomaly, or a mental defect.

The foreknowledge that the expected child will certainly be born with a physical or mental defect accompanied by the fact that there is no cure, creates a very difficult situation for the many families.

Should the family resort to abortion as an act of mercy towards the fetus, which will suffer, through no fault of his own, after his birth? How about mercy for the family members?! Indeed, it is an extremely difficult position.

However this is not an excuse, no one is justified in killing an innocent newborn because of a birth defect, even if mercy and compassion are the reasons behind it.

4. Abortion as a way of preventing pregnancy after Rape

Pregnancy due to rape is very unfortunate but does not justify killing the foetus. The mother should consider this as a test of faith and carry that cross with joy, knowing that God permits such tribulations to those who can endure them, and He will give the comfort and help needed.

CONCLUSION

I hope to have summarised these very important in a way that is not too complicated. I have listed the main things I wish you all to consider.

1. When Planning a Family, think of the Spiritual, Financial and Social aspects.
2. Contraception is allowed in the church however not all forms are appropriate with many posing the risk of causing death to a fertilised egg.
3. Abortion is against the very will of God as life begins at the moment of conception. It is not just two mere cells, these two cells are alive, they have all the information they need to form man, but more importantly they have the breath of God himself.

God Bless

Bishoy!