Question: I've been hearing about the Catholic bishops getting upset about Catholic institutions providing contraception for employees. They say that this goes against church teaching. What is so wrong about contraception?

Answer: That question is so important that I am going to spend the next couple of columns answering it. First, I would like to examine it from a philosophical point of view. Later, we will view it from a more personal and theological stance.

Love between human beings can be such a tenuous thing. We can truly desire to care for the other and strive to genuinely love them. But we are almost always afflicted with our own selfishness. We are tempted to use the other rather than to love them.

This is especially true when it comes to romantic love. There is so much potential to use the other for my own selfish pleasure that there needs to be a heightened awareness in this regard.

What tethers the sexual act to love? One thing needed is to preserve the "integrity of the sexual act." We need to guard against violating the nature of the sexual act.

Everything has a "nature" — a purpose, a "what it's for." The nature of a chair is "to sit on"; this is what it is for. The nature of a table is "to set things on." Now, this is true even though not all chairs are the same. Some are made of metal, some wood. Some recline, some swivel. They are different, but they share the same nature. The same could be said for the variety of tables; they are different, but they all share the same "what it's for."

At the same time, I can use a chair or a table for my own purposes. For example, I could set my books on a chair or I could sit on a table. In those cases, I am not violating the nature of the chair or the table, but I am using them for a purpose other than the one inherent in their nature. So we can see that not all occasions of using a thing have to directly correspond to its nature. I can use them for my own goals. But I must not use them in a way that violates their nature.

If I were to use the chair as a chopping block, I would pretty soon begin to violate the nature of the chair. I would not simply be using the chair for another purpose, I would be using it in such a way that worked

against the chair's very reason for being. If I were to use a table to prop my car up in order to change the oil, I would soon violate the nature of the table.

Now let's take a look at another, more complex, example. What is the nature of the human act of eating? What is it for? Objectively speaking, eating seems to have two aspects of its nature: pleasure and nourishment. We eat because we enjoy it and because it nourishes our bodies. If I happen to be rushing off to work, I may not be too concerned with how the food tastes; I am merely "putting fuel in the tank." On the other hand, there may be times when the reason I ate this particular meal was more because I wanted Thai food than because I needed these noodles to stay alive. In both cases, I was entering into the "act of eating" with one motive over another. In the first case, I ate with the intention of nourishing myself, and in the second, my intention was to enjoy the meal. But did I violate the nature of eating by deliberately excluding one element over the other? Nope!

What might it look like if I did violate the nature of eating? I could desire the pleasure of eating without the required nourishment. To this end, I might work against the end of nourishment. I could chew and savor, and then spit out the food or throw it up.

This brings us to sex. What is the nature of the sexual act? If an alien scientist came and examined the nature of human intercourse, this alien would discover two inherent elements that make up the nature of sex. Sex is for the union of the couple and the procreation of children. This is the "what it's for" of the sexual act. Could there be a time when a married couple came together more for the intention of the unitive act than for the procreative? Sure they could. Just like a couple who desires to conceive a child might come together more because the bride is ovulating than out of a desire to experience the unitive element of the sexual act.

The problem comes in when a couple takes action to work against one or the other element. If they intentionally work against either the procreative or unitive element, they have violated the nature of the sexual act and have committed a grave evil. What was meant to be an act of love becomes untethered and becomes an act of mutual use rather than mutual love. I have taken something good and distorted it.

This distortion and use occurs every time a couple uses contraception.

Regardless of the advice a couple may have received, they are always (even unintentionally!) using each other if they use contraception because it always destroys the integrity of an act that is meant to communicate love. It is when the act is preserved in its integrity that it can serve its true purpose.