

Talking about contraception

By [David Heim](#)

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Who would have thought that [contraception](#) would become such a major issue in this election year?

Or is it?

The U.S. Catholic bishops stress that the issue is not really contraception but religious liberty--the right of Catholics, and by extension any group of religious people, to practice and live out their faith. That's a plausible argument, as the Century editors [acknowledged](#) a few weeks ago, and it is certainly one designed to gain allies among other religious people.

But at some point the bishops might wonder if pressing that argument to the extent that they have--refusing what to many of [us](#) seems like a reasonable [compromise](#)--really serves the church's interests.

In invoking their rights to avoid having anything to do with contraception, the bishops avoid the more difficult theological challenge: winsomely explaining the church's stance on contraception.

The Catholic Church has a powerful and interesting argument. It asserts that contraception undermines the proper nature of sexual intercourse by separating its unitive and procreative dimensions. In other words, the delights of sex always need to be entwined with baby-making. Otherwise sexual intercourse loses its divine meaning.

Though it seems that few Christians, Catholic or Protestant, are persuaded by this argument, it remains intellectually important and instructive. Indeed, the best Protestant theologians by and large keep the terms of the argument and simply offer a more complex and nuanced understanding of how the procreative and unitive dimensions can be defined and how they can

relate to each other.

At some point the bishops might want to assess the impact of their witness to the culture on this issue. Have they done anything to help a skeptical secular world--and skeptical members of their own churches--better understand and respect the church's traditional view of sex? Or have they reinforced the view of many that the hierarchy is not much interested in that work, and not well equipped for it--but it is skilled at marshalling political clout? The bishops may win a political battle but pay a large price for their victory.

That final point, by the way, can apply to many religious activists, not just the Catholic bishops.