



Theology of the Body and *Humanae Vitae*

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The 40th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's world-shaking encyclical *Humanae Vitae* has provided a sterling opportunity to re-examine not only the letter itself, but also its subsequent reception, interpretation and explanation. The unprecedented rejection of the letter by theologians and even Church prelates is common knowledge; less well known are the efforts of other theologians, bishops and Pope John Paul II to revive the stillborn encyclical, unpack its teaching and develop a theological anthropology that would tie the Church's teaching on birth control to deeper truths about the human person, marriage and sexuality.

In his 1981 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul issued a heartfelt appeal to theologians to assist him in this task. He wrote that, together with the Synod Fathers,

I feel it is my duty to extend a pressing invitation to theologians, asking them to unite their efforts in order to collaborate with the hierarchical Magisterium and to commit themselves to the task of illustrating ever more clearly the biblical foundations, the ethical grounds and the personalistic reasons behind this doctrine [regarding birth regulation]. Thus it will be possible, in the context of an organic exposition, to render the teaching of the Church on this fundamental question truly accessible to all people of good will,

fostering a daily more enlightened and profound understanding of it: in this way God's plan will be ever more completely fulfilled for the salvation of humanity and for the glory of the Creator. (FC 31)

At the same time that John Paul was tendering this challenge to theologians, he was already personally engaged in a concerted effort along the exact same lines. Much attention has been given to John Paul's Theology of the Body in recent years. Few, however, realize that this five-year catechetical series that the Holy Father began shortly after his election was aimed precisely at undergirding and explaining the teachings of *Humanae Vitae*. The first major teaching of John Paul's pontificate, in fact, was this series of papal catecheses given in his Wednesday audiences in the Pope Paul VI Hall between September 1979 and November 1984. These 129 lectures, known collectively as the "Theology of the Body," were divided into "cycles" and culminated in the sixth and final cycle devoted to a study of *Humanae Vitae* and its teaching on responsible parenthood and the regulation of birth.

In considering the ties between the Theology of the Body and *Humanae Vitae*, we must first look briefly at the core of this novel doctrine and consider what a revolution it sparked. Today these teachings seem so familiar to us that we easily take them for granted, forgetting how radical they seemed just thirty years ago.

A Theology of the Body?

When we think of a science studying the human body, we don't spontaneously think of theology. A study of man's corporeal reality sounds more like a job for zoology, or anatomy and physiology, or at very least anthropology, but not theology. Theology, after all, is the study of God. A theology of the body seems somewhat nonsensical, and perhaps even sacrilegious. As a spiritual being, God has no body, and ours seems to have little to do with God. Moreover, we probably instinctively think of the body not only as a-theological, but perhaps even anti-theological. Doesn't the body house our baser instincts, pulling us down to earth, away from God? Doesn't progress in virtue and holiness entail a certain subjection of the body under the dominion of our spiritual faculties? Isn't the flesh, along with the devil and the

“world,” an enemy of our souls? Here I would remind readers of the powerful words of the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, where he contrasts the life of the Spirit with that of the flesh:

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Gal 5:16-24).

According to Paul, not only is the flesh inferior to the spirit, the two stand in stark opposition. The spirit wars against the flesh, and the flesh against the spirit. They seem almost like antagonistic principles, combating for supremacy within the human person. How, then, can we speak sensibly about a theology of the body?

Remember, too, the words of the popular “Penny” catechism used when we were children, which summed up the teaching of the Roman Catechism for easy memorization. The first eight questions and answers neatly summarized the Church’s teaching regarding man’s origins and the meaning and purpose of his existence in this world. They also touched directly on the relation between soul and body. The Catechism reads as follows:

1. *Who made you?*

– God made me.

2. *Why did God make you?*

– God made me to know Him, love Him and serve Him in this world, and be happy with Him forever in the next.

3. *To whose image and likeness did God make you?*

– God made me to his own image and likeness.

4. *Is this likeness to God in your body, or in your soul?*

– This likeness to God is chiefly in my soul.

5. *How is your soul like to God?*

– My soul is like to God because it is a spirit, and is immortal.

6. *What do you mean when you say that your soul is immortal?*

– When I say my soul is immortal, I mean that my soul can never die.

7. *Of which must you take most care, of your body or of your soul?*

– I must take most care of my soul; for Christ has said, “What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26)

8. *What must you do to save your soul?*

– To save my soul I must worship God by Faith, Hope and Charity; that is, I must believe in him, I must hope in him, and I must love him with my whole heart.

In these brief eight numbers we find the assertions that (1) man’s likeness to God is chiefly in his soul, that (2) the soul is like to God because it is spiritual and immortal, and that (3) we must take more care of our souls than of our bodies. This reiterates the teaching of the Roman Catechism, which stated: “Man’s soul He created to His own image and likeness.”¹ This teaching hardly seems to square with a theology of the body. And yet in his catecheses Pope John Paul asserted:

We find ourselves, therefore, almost at the very core of the anthropological reality, the name of which is “body,” the human body. However, as can easily be seen, this core is not only anthropological, but also essentially theological. Right from the beginning, the theology of the body is bound up with the creation of

¹ *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, the Creed, Article 1.

man in the image of God. It becomes, in a way, also the theology of sex, or rather the theology of masculinity and femininity, which has its starting point here in Genesis.²

Here we begin to see how radical John Paul's Theology of the Body is (we must also recall that "theology of the body" is John Paul's own expression and not a label subsequently tacked onto his thought). He claimed that "the theology of the body is bound up with the creation of man in the image of God." How can this be reconciled with the Roman Catechism's reference to man's soul being created to God's image and likeness? Classical theology, too, insisted that man is like God not because of his bodily nature, but because he possesses *reason*. Aristotle had said that man was a rational animal ("animal" being the proximate genus and "rational" being the specific difference) and this teaching had been fully integrated into Catholic theology, shored up by divine revelation. Thus Saint Augustine would write:

Man's excellence consists in the fact that God made him to His own image by giving him an intellectual soul, which raises him above the beasts of the field.³

And Saint Thomas Aquinas similarly wrote:

Man is said to be after the image of God, not as regards his body, but as regards that whereby he excels other animals. Hence, when it is said, "Let us make man to our image and likeness," it is added, "And let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea" (Gen. 1:26). Now man excels all animals by his reason and intelligence; hence it is according to his intelligence and reason, which are incorporeal, that man is said to be according to the image of God.⁴

Is this true? It is. It is all true. But John Paul would assert that though it is all true, it is not *all* the truth. Our likeness to God is *chiefly* in the soul, but not *only* in the soul. It is easy to go through life thinking that the soul is good and like God, and the body is bad and like the

² Pope John Paul II, Wednesday Catechesis of the General Audience of 14 November 1979, (*L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English, 19 November 1979, p. 1).

³ Saint Augustine, *Gen. ad lit.* vi, 12.

⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, I, 3, 1, ad 2.

earth. By this logic, the further we move away from the body and toward the soul, the closer we get to God. Yet, according to John Paul, this body-soul dualism does not do justice to the goodness of God's creation, especially as regards the human body.

In the very first centuries of her founding the Christian Church had soundly rejected the Manichaeian idea that there existed two principles, one evil and the other good (kind of like the dark side of the force and the light side of the force in the *Star Wars* series). The Fathers of the Church concluded that all of creation is good, including, and perhaps especially, the human body. The body is not merely "not bad," it is very good. Therefore we can read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that the "human body shares in the dignity of "the image of God." It goes on to say:

Man, though made of body and soul, is a unity. Through his very bodily condition he sums up in himself the elements of the material world. Through him they are thus brought to their highest perfection and can raise their voice in praise freely given to the Creator. For this reason man may not despise his bodily life. Rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honor since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day (GS 14 § 1; cf. Dan 3:57-80). (CCC 364)

So back to the idea of a "theology" of the body. John Paul's teaching draws heavily from the book of Genesis, from the way things were "in the beginning," that is, God's original plan for humanity.⁵ We read in the very first chapter of this book that God created man and woman in his own image, and according to his likeness (Gen 1:26). Whether you subscribe to evolution (in any of its many forms) or not, as a Christian you believe that God designed you. You are not the product of chance or accident. You are rather the result of God's deliberate will. As Pope John Paul wrote:

In the biblical narrative, the difference between man and other creatures is shown above all by the fact that only the creation of man is presented as the result of a special decision on the part of God, a deliberation to establish a particular and specific bond with the Creator: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'

⁵ Pope John Paul II, Wednesday Catechesis of the General Audience of 5 September 1979, (*L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English 10 September 1979, p. 1).

(Gen. 1:26). The life which God offers to man is a gift by which God shares something of himself with his creature.⁶

John Paul would further insist that since man is created in God's image and likeness, the *whole person* reveals something about God. Both body and soul, and their unity, teach us about God. Nowhere in Genesis do we read the line, "Let us make man in our own image, *and then tack on a material body as well.*" On creating man, in fact, God first creates his body out of the clay of the earth, and then breathes his spirit into his nostrils.

The human person offers us a special window on God, into his nature. It is often asserted that many biblical references God are anthropomorphic, that is, they attribute to God features of the human condition. Yet the deeper reality is not that God is anthropomorphic, but that we are *theomorphic*. The human person is God-shaped. We reveal God in a way that the rest of creation does not. Therefore, the human body is a theology textbook. It tells us more about God than the rest of creation.

It still may be objected, if God is pure spirit, with no material reality whatsoever (except in the Person of Christ, who took upon himself a human nature), what can we possibly learn about God from the human body? Not, obviously, that he has ten fingers and ten toes, or a pancreas or a spleen. Strange as it may seem, we learn more about God from our *sexual nature* than from our digestive or circulatory systems. Human sexuality manifests in a bodily way the unitive and creative qualities of God himself. In our unity and diversity—"maleness" and "femaleness" expressing a single humanity—we image God who is one and three. As Pope John Paul would later note in his encyclical on the moral life, "The person, by the light of reason and the support of virtue, discovers in the body the anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of self, in conformity with the wise plan of the Creator."⁷

⁶ Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), no. 34.

⁷ Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), no. 48.

Man created in the image of the Holy Trinity

Classical theology insisted more on man's creation in the image of God as one, than as God as three. As we have seen, man's imaging of God was always understood as referring to man's reason, at the level of the individual. Here the Theology of the Body, drawing on Genesis, adds a significant consideration to this traditional approach to anthropology.

The first "glitch" in creation happens immediately after the creation of man. At the end of every other day—after the creation of the moon and the stars, of the birds, fishes and creeping things—God had looked upon the work of his hands and found it to be good. Yet after the creation of the first man, the universe hears for the first time "It is not good" (Gen 2:18). Goodness refers to something that is what it should be. When something is not good, it means that it does not reflect this fullness of being. When God says that "it is not good for man to be alone," he is saying that man alone is not good. And solitary man is not good because he fails to image the God who is one and also three. Man's creation is God's image and likeness does not only refer to his reason and free will, very especially the universal human vocation to interpersonal communion.

As has been noted, in his intimate self-counsel as related in Genesis, God refers to himself in the plural: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26). For the first time in Sacred Scripture we find God using a plural noun and verb to describe his action. As the first *communio personarum*, God looks to himself as a model and exemplar for his human creation. For this reason the Catechism can assert:

The divine image is present in every man. It shines forth in the communion of persons, in the likeness of the union of the divine persons among themselves. (CCC, 1702)

Trinitarian theology reveals that man's vocation to communion is not something extrinsic or incidental to his nature, but constitutive of his creation in the image and likeness of God, who is One and Three. "Human beings," wrote Karol Wojtyła prior to his election as pope, "are like unto God not only by reason of their spiritual nature, which

accounts for their existence as persons, but also by reason of their *capacity for community with other persons*.⁸ And so the Second Vatican Council could state: “Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, ‘that all may be one. . . as we are one’ (John 17:21–22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity.”⁹

From the perspective of divine revelation, then, the human person’s relational dimension derives from his creation in the image and likeness of God. The Father communicates his entire self to the Son, such that “all he has is mine, and all I have is his.”¹⁰ The three-way communication among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit begets a perfect communion which in turn is the exemplar of all human interpersonal relations. Like God who is love, man is made for love,¹¹ and for communion with God and with his fellows. To say that man was created in God’s image and likeness, is to attribute to man personality and the vocation to communion.

This central truth of theological anthropology has been echoed by other celebrated theologians, as well, notably Joseph Ratzinger. Since God is described as a Trinitarian set of relations, as *relatio subsistens*—Ratzinger wrote—when “we say that man is the image of God, it means that he is being designed for relationship; it means that, in and through all his relationships, he seeks that relation which is the ground of his existence.”¹² Man cannot fulfill his vocation or reach the

⁸ Karol Wojtyła, “The Family as a Community of Persons,” translated from the Polish “Rodzina jako ‘communio personarum’” (*Ateneum Kaplanskie* 66 [1974]: 347–61) by Theresa Sandok, in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, vol. 4 of *Catholic Thought from Lublin*, edited by Andrew N. Woznicki, 315–27, (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 318.

⁹ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), no. 24.

¹⁰ See John 17:10.

¹¹ “These considerations also bring to light the significance of the *imago Dei*. Man is like God in that he is capable of love and truth” (Joseph Ratzinger, *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism: Sidelights on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997], 16).

¹² Joseph Ratzinger, *Many Religions—One Covenant: Israel, the Church, and the World*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 76–7.

plenitude of his personal existence except in communion with other persons, and ultimately with his Creator.¹³

In his ninth address of the series, Pope John Paul integrated this teaching into his catecheses on human love. He noted that from the Genesis narrative regarding the image of God, we can deduce “that man became the ‘image and likeness’ of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons which man and woman form right from the beginning.” The Pope further observed:

The function of the image is to reflect the one who is the model, to reproduce its own prototype. Man becomes the image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion. Right “from the beginning,” he is not only an image in which the solitude of a person who rules the world is reflected, but also, and essentially, an image of an inscrutable divine communion of persons.

For John Paul, this line of thought “is not without significance for the theology of the body. Perhaps it even constitutes the deepest theological aspect of all that can be said about man.” In the mystery of creation, he went on, “man was endowed with a deep unity between what is, humanly and through the body, male in him and what is, equally humanly and through the body, female in him. On all this, right from the beginning, the blessing of fertility descended, linked with human procreation (cf. Gn 1:28).¹⁴

The Flesh and the Spirit

So what of Paul’s indictment of the “flesh” as opposed to the spirit? Is that merely an antiquated teaching or an embarrassing vestige of Manichaeism that Christians have prudently swept under the rug? No. Paul left us a lasting spiritual and moral paradigm that retains all its validity today. The problem is that we sometimes mistakenly identify the “flesh” with the human body, as if Paul were speaking about the “body” as opposed to the spirit. He was not.

¹³ “All men are called to the same end: God himself. There is a certain resemblance between the union of the divine persons and the fraternity that men are to establish among themselves in truth and love. (Cf. *GS*, 24)” (*CCC*, 1878).

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, Wednesday Catechesis of the General Audience of 14 November 1979, (*L’Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English, 19 November 1979, p. 1).

For Paul, the “flesh” refers to concupiscence, the stain of original sin that inclines us to disorder and pulls us earthward, away from God. The flesh is not man’s physical reality, but his disposition to sin. An immediate indication of this can be found in the Galatians text itself. You will notice in Paul’s list of the works of the “flesh” that several have nothing to do with the body, but are what we might call sins of the spirit. He speaks, for instance, of idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy, none of which is a sin of sensuality, but which Paul unhesitatingly calls sins of the flesh. They are sins of the “old man,” another concept of Paul’s that refers to our fallen nature which is prone to sin.¹⁵

The Catechism of the Catholic Church offers a helpful point of reference for this exploration.

Etymologically, “concupiscence” can refer to any intense form of human desire. Christian theology has given it a particular meaning: the movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of the human reason. The apostle St. Paul identifies it with the rebellion of the “flesh” against the “spirit.” Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man’s moral faculties and, without being in itself an offense, inclines man to commit sins.¹⁶

The flesh, then, in theological terms, is not the human body *per se*, but rather the rebellion of the old man against the Spirit of God. This doesn’t mean that the body, subject as it is to the effects of original sin, doesn’t share in this rebellion. It does mean, however, that the body is good in itself, and shares in the dignity of the person.

TOB and the Question of Contraception

Having looked at the radical proposal of the Theology of the Body, we can see how its fundamental principles and intuitions may be fruitfully applied to the question of contraception. Here we must recall again that John Paul’s discussion of *Humanae Vitae* formed the culmination of his TOB discourses. John Paul II began his discussion of contraception on 11 July 1984 with the 114th lecture in this series

¹⁵ See Colossians 3:9-10.

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2515.

and finished with lecture 129 on November 29, 1984. A close study of the theological arguments employed by John Paul in his extended discussion of *Humanae Vitae* reveals subtle but profound differences between his approach and that of his predecessors. While John Paul's thought on this question was in full continuity with that of Pius XI and Paul VI, he introduced new ways of looking at the marital act and its meaning.

Perhaps the most novel aspect of John Paul's treatment of the marital act and its integrity involves his use of the analogy of "language." Just as verbal language conveys meaning, so, too, the human person expresses meaning through acts of the body. Where it is nowadays common for psychologists to talk of "body language" in references to the many ways that human persons add meaning to their formal spoken language, John Paul used the term to describe the specific way that men and women speak to each other through the marital act itself. The exact words used by the Pontiff are the following:

As ministers of a sacrament which is constituted by consent and perfected by conjugal union, man and woman are called *to express that mysterious language of their bodies in all the truth which is proper to it*. By means of gestures and reactions, by means of the whole dynamism, reciprocally conditioned, of tension and enjoyment—whose direct source is the body in its masculinity and its femininity, the body in its action and interaction—by means of all this, man, the person, "speaks."¹⁷

Like all human language, the language of the body engages the person as a moral agent, and makes ethical demands on his conduct. Language can be used to edify or destroy, to convey truth or distort the truth through deceit. To see the marital act as the language of the body, confers on this act a similar moral structure. In John Paul's words:

Man and woman carry on in the language of the body that dialogue which, according to Genesis, chapter 2, vv.24, 25, had its beginning on the day of creation. Precisely on the level of this language of the body—which is something more than mere sexual reaction and which, as authentic language of the persons, is subject to the demands of truth, that is, to objective moral norms—man

¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, Wednesday Catechesis of the General Audience of 22 August 1984, (*L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English, 27 August 1984, p. 7).

and woman reciprocally express *themselves* in the fullest and most profound way possible to them. By the corporeal dimension of masculinity and femininity, man and woman express themselves in the measure of the whole truth of the human person.¹⁸

So what relevance does this approach have to the question of contraception? If the marital act, as language, bespeaks total self-giving, the deliberate limiting of that gift would affect the truth of the act. Just as withholding an essential piece of the truth constitutes a partial truth, or “half truth,” which is indistinguishable from a lie, so too the intentional withholding of one’s fertility in the marital act perverts that act. John Paul does not hesitate to call this withholding a “falsification” of the inner truth of the conjugal act. Again, in John Paul’s words:

Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality. . . . The difference, both anthropological and moral, between contraception and recourse to the rhythm of the cycle . . . involves in the final analysis two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality.¹⁹

A second important innovation in John Paul’s approach to sexual ethics and its relation to contraception was the integration of his Thomistic personalism into Magisterial teaching. He had already outlined this method in his 1960 work on sexual ethics *Love and Responsibility*. In this seminal work, he contrasted the “using” proper to things with the “love” due to all persons, by the fact of their personhood. By this logic, persons are the sort of beings that should never be used as mere means to an end, but should be loved as ends in themselves. Not only did John Paul adopt this personalistic approach in his own ethical analysis, he also enjoined theologians to do the same. In his catechesis of November 28, 1984 he recalled this petition as it was expressed in *Familiaris Consortio*.

¹⁸ Pope John Paul II, Wednesday Catechesis of the General Audience of 22 August 1984, (*L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English, 27 August 1984, p. 7).

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), no. 32.

In addition, the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, fruit of the 1980 Synod of Bishops on "The Role of the Christian Family," confirms it. The document contains an appeal, directed especially to theologians, to elaborate more completely *the biblical and personalistic aspects of the doctrine* contained in *Humanae Vitae*.²⁰

According to John Paul, the evil of contraception is revealed not only in its opposition to God's law, but significantly as an offense *against the human person*. John Paul went to great lengths to show that God commands nothing arbitrarily. His "Law" is not a heteronymous imposition of a foreign will, or a series of edicts invented to make life more difficult and test our capacity to obey. Rather the entire moral law is a guide to goodness and happiness. God only commands things that are truly good for us. In the context of marriage, John Paul insists that contraception demeans human beings and demeans the couple. In the marital act itself, the human person is always an end to be loved, and not a means to be used (even if the other person should consent to be used).

Though Paul VI never used the term "personalism" in his explanation of the evil of contraception, John Paul believed that personalistic arguments were implicit to Paul's thought and needed to be brought out. By the centrality attributed to the person in Paul's description of progress (a theme dear to Paul), John Paul saw a personalistic ethical structure. Thus in the same catechesis of November 28, 1984, John Paul wrote:

The analysis of the personalistic aspects of the Church's doctrine, contained in Paul VI's encyclical, emphasizes a determined appeal to measure man's progress on the basis of the person, that is, of what is good for man as man—what corresponds to his essential dignity.

The analysis of the *personalistic aspects* leads to the conviction that the encyclical presents as a *fundamental problem* the viewpoint of *man's authentic development*. This development is meas-

²⁰ Pope John Paul II, Wednesday Catechesis of the General Audience of 28 November 1984, (*L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English, 3 December 1984, p. 1).

ured to the greatest extent on the basis of ethics and not only on technology.²¹

The originality of John Paul's approach to the question of birth regulation, grounded in a full-blown biblical anthropology, provides a key for understanding the essential differences between natural family planning and contraception. In so doing, it also allows us to identify some mistaken notions regarding these differences. At this point it will be useful to briefly examine some of these mistaken notions and discard them.

Confusion regarding the difference between contraception and NFP

Perhaps the most widespread error concerning the difference between natural family planning and contraception involves the use of the terms "artificial" and "natural." Because of the presence of the adjective "natural" in the title "natural family planning," some have come to the conclusion that NFP is the "natural" form of contraception, namely because in working with a woman's fertility cycle, it introduces no "artificial" devices into the marriage act. Artificial contraception, on the other hand, would be evil because it involves all sorts of foreign apparatuses, disrespecting the natural, immediate conjunction of husband and wife. The Church's opposition to "artificial" contraception would reflect its obscurantist distrust of technology and science. Yet this is a mistake. There is an important argument to be made regarding the artificial character of contraception, but it has nothing to do with the use of extraneous devices. In addressing the moral problems of contraception back in 1960 (prior to the introduction of the anovulatory pill!), Bishop Karol Wojtyla wrote the following:

Methods of birth control are of two general types... On the one hand, there are what are called natural methods, on the other artificial methods requiring the use of contraceptives.

Here, Wojtyla pointed out the ethical dichotomy between natural and artificial methods of birth control. Natural methods would be

²¹ Pope John Paul II, Wednesday Catechesis of the General Audience of 28 November 1984, (*L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English, 3 December 1984, p. 1).

morally unproblematic whereas artificial methods would be morally wrong. The problem is, many people use the terms “birth control” and “contraception” as synonyms, which they are not. The notion of birth control includes the natural methods of regulating birth (including the positive employment of this method for couples to get pregnant!). Contraception, on the other hand, refers to the deliberate sterilization of the sexual act.

Because of this confusion, it is not uncommon to hear people refer to “artificial contraception” in contrast to the Church’s approved “natural” methods. By this logic, the Church would not be opposed to contraception *tout court*, but only to “artificial” contraception. NFP would merely be Church-approved contraception. This misconception carries over into the secular world, where, for instance, personal devices that help a woman more accurately chart her menstrual cycle and fertile and infertile periods are referred to in advertisements as “natural contraception.” This further aggravates people’s inability to distinguish between natural methods and contraception, as well as their consternation with the Church’s opposition to contraception.

The problem with the juxtaposition of the words “artificial” and “contraception” is that it is redundant; all contraception by its nature is artificial, as in *unnatural*. To speak of “artificial contraception” is to suggest that there is also a contraception that is not artificial. Yet what makes contraception “artificial” and unnatural in itself is not the artificiality of the devices employed (pills, condoms, IUDs, diaphragms, etc.) but rather the *essence* of contraception itself. As evidence of this, the prime example used by Wojtyla when discussing the evil of contraception is the method of *coitus interruptus*,²² which obviously does not rely on chemical or mechanical means at all, and whose artificiality must be found in the act itself (or in this case, its *artificial* interruption).

A second error regarding the difference between the morality of natural family planning as opposed to contraception results from a failure to carefully distinguish between ends and means. If the evil of contraception lies in the couple’s desire and intention not to get pregnant, rather than in the means or methods used to achieve this end, then it becomes nearly impossible to explain why contraception is wrong and natural family planning is licit.

²² See Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 282-283.

I will give two examples of expressions that foment this confusion. First, it is not uncommon to hear people refer to a “contraceptive mentality” that can be found even among couples using NFP. Couples that could easily have more children but choose not to do so out of selfish motives are said to be acting under a contraceptive mentality that is unreasonably and thus immorally closed to new life. There is clearly a legitimate use of the expression “contraceptive mentality,” in that the ubiquity of contraceptives in contemporary society and the resulting attitude toward sexual relations could well be described as a contraceptive mentality. The problem lies in applying this expression to those who refuse contraception as a means, and rely rather on natural methods of family planning.

Second, it is often argued that the evil of contraception is found in its opposition to new life, sometimes expressed as an “anti-life will” or a “contra-life will.” The choice to contracept would represent a hostile act toward the value of life itself, by closing out the possibility of new life coming to be.²³

The problem with both expressions—the “contraceptive mentality” and the “anti-life will”—lies in a shift in attention from the object of the moral act to the intention of the moral agent(s). A person can act out of good or evil intentions, and the presence of an evil intention vitiates even an act that is good according to its moral species (such as Christ’s condemnation of those who pray [a good action in itself] in order to be seen and thought well of [a twisted intention that vitiates the act]). Both couples contracepting and couples practicing NFP can be doing so out of an illicit intention to limit the number of children they have when they have no just reason to do so. But in itself, this has nothing to do with contraception. Contraception is evil in its object (as a means) and not in its intention (the general end of “not wanting to get pregnant”). Therefore, couples that have a good reason not to conceive a child still sin when contracepting, because the means they have chosen is illicit. Their fault resides not in their intention not to get pregnant, but in the means they have chosen to bring about this end. They are no more “anti-life” than their neighbors practicing NFP; their error lies in the choice of contraception as a means to avoid pregnancy. Contraception does not express a generic anti-life will, but

²³ Perhaps the best exposition of the theory of the contra-life will can be found in Grisez, G., Boyle J., Finnis, J., May W.E., “‘Every Marital Act Ought to Be Open to New Life’: Toward a Clearer Understanding,” *The Thomist* 52/3 (1988): 365-426.

is essentially related to the sexual act, and intends to prevent new life from coming to be from determined acts of sexual intercourse.²⁴

The real difference between contraception and NFP

Where, then, does the real difference lie between contraception and natural family planning? We must first underscore the fundamental difference between what we could call “incidentally” sterile sex (a sexual act that *de facto* or *per accidens* is infertile, but whose structure is still inherently life-giving) and “essentially” sterile sex (a sexual act that *de iure* or *per se* is by its nature or has been rendered infertile). Examples of the latter include acts that by their very structure are sterile, such as anal or oral sex, as well as acts that have been intentionally deprived of their fruitfulness, which we term contracepted sex.

The choice of a couple to engage in sexual relations only when the woman is thought to be in an infertile period of her menstrual cycle, presuming a good intention in doing so, commits no evil and may very well be exercising its duty to responsible parenthood. This can easily be seen at the level of each moral act taken in separation. Let’s say first of all that today the woman finds herself in her fertile period. The couple’s decision not to engage in sexual congress today entails no elements of evil. They are under no obligation to have sexual relations on this particular day more than any other, and their choice not to do so *because* the wife is fertile adds no moral evil. If we look at the contrary case the moral judgment remains the same. Let’s say that today the woman finds herself in her infertile period. The couple’s choice to engage in sexual intercourse that day is not evil in itself, since the couple has every right to do so. The fact that they would not be doing so if she were in a fertile period does not vitiate their choice. They may be quite certain that their act will be “incidentally” sterile, but the act itself retains its essential structure and procreative meaning. The act continues to be essentially ordered to procreation, even

²⁴ In this regard, Martin Rhonheimer has helpfully written that “it does not seem that the difference between contraception and periodic continence is due to their different intentional relations towards ‘the beginning of a person’s life’ but rather to their different intentionality with regard to *sexual activity* and its being a possible *cause* of the initiation of new life” (Martin Rhonheimer, “Contraception, Sexual Behavior, and Natural Law: Philosophical Foundation of the Norm of *Humanae vitae*,” in *Humanae Vitae: 20 Anni Dopo*, atti del II Congresso di Teologia Morale, [Milan: Edizioni Ares, 1989], 84).

though the couple both foresees and intends (but does not procure) its probable *de facto* infertility.

A contracepted act, on the contrary, perverts conjugal relations by deliberately removing the procreative meaning of the act. Here the couple's sexual act is not only sterile *per accidens*, but has been rendered sterile *per se*. The procreative structure of the act has been manipulated and the nature of the act itself has therefore been changed. Contracepted sexual relations take on a new form, not unlike the form of other essentially sterile acts such as oral sex, anal sex, or mutual masturbation. The reason that genital sex between spouses is a good and moral act, and the reason that other sexual acts such as anal sex are evil, is not found in the subjective appreciation or experience of the act, but in its ordering to procreation (whether or not procreation takes place *de facto*, or not).

Here there can be no question of a presumed "anti-life will." The evil of the choice to contracept is not in its opposition to the basic human good of life, but in the destruction of the good of the marital act itself. True, the good of the marital act in question is bound up with its relation to life, but only insofar as the procreative meaning of the conjugal act is determinative of the moral good of the act itself. A couple abstaining from sexual relations and a couple practicing contraception may have an identical attitude toward potential new life in their family (they do not wish to conceive at this time), but they have a radically different attitude toward the marital act itself and its meaning.

This consideration brings us to another significant element of our discussion, namely the relationship between the procreative and unitive meanings of the marital act. It is easy to envisage these two meanings as running in parallel—both important, but essentially unrelated to one another. They must both be respected, but are not mutually implicating. This is incorrect. Again we must ask ourselves why the marital act is *in itself* unitive while oral sex, for instance, is not unitive. Its unitive meaning is not imposed by the acting subject but resides in the act itself. "Meaning" here refers not to something given by the couple but intrinsic to the act, and *respected* by the couple. Otherwise people could rightly say (and some do say!) that mutual masturbation is more unitive for them than genital sex. Mutual masturbation can never be unitive, even if the couple intends to confer that meaning on their act. The reason is that the unitive and procreative meanings of the sexual act are intertwined, rather than parallel. They are bound up

with each other. The unitive meaning of the conjugal act is not super-added to its procreative meaning, but depends on it. The marital act is unitive in its procreative structure, and procreative in its union.

This reflection in turn leads us to yet another important consideration. It is not a mere coincidence that the “contraceptive mentality” prevalent in today’s society has gone hand-in-hand with a similar openness to homosexual relations as normal and good. Homosexual acts are essentially sterile, and in this regard contracepted sex mimics the natural infertility of such acts. Since contraception removes the essential difference between genital sex and any other sexual act (oral, anal, manual), it also removes a key difference between sexual commerce between a man and woman and sexual commerce between two men or between two women.²⁵ What argument can contracepting spouses possibly have to assert that their sexual activity is any more “unitive” than that of their married neighbors to one side who engage in oral sex, and their gay neighbors to the other side who similarly engage in their necessarily sterile sexual acts?

Natural family planning is called “natural” because it respects the inherent procreative meaning of the conjugal act, and works with a woman’s cycle to avoid or achieve pregnancy. In so doing, it recognizes in a woman’s nature not an obstacle, but as the blessed intent of its creator. As Wojtyla wrote in *Love and Responsibility*:

[I]f a man and a woman use these methods with full understanding of the facts and recognizing the objective purpose of marriage, natural methods leave them with a sense of choice and spontaneity (‘naturalness’) in their experience, and—most important of all—the possibility of deliberate regulation of procreation.²⁶

Along with its naturalness, NFP demands the practice of virtue on the part of the spouses. A husband’s loving acceptance of his wife’s femininity and his desire to work with her fertility cycle (rather than run roughshod over it) requires attention to her as a person, and minimizes his temptation to objectivize her or use her simply as a means of

²⁵ “It can’t be the mere pattern of bodily behavior in which the stimulation is procured that makes all the difference! But if such things are all right, it becomes perfectly impossible to see anything wrong with homosexual intercourse, for example. [...] you have have no solid reason against these things” (G.E.M. Anscombe, *Contraception and Chastity*, [London: Catholic Truth Society, 1975], 18-19).

²⁶ Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 284.

pleasure. Here, too, John Paul's personalism has a direct implication in a couple's sexual intimacy. The virtue practiced is twofold, involving both love and continence, that is, self mastery (continence) placed at the service of the other (love). In Karol Wojtyła's words:

It must be clearly stated that one basic method underlies all natural methods of regulating fertility: the 'method' of virtue (love and continence).²⁷

Of course some couples today see continence not as a virtue, but as an enemy of spontaneity and freedom within marriage. Here experience seems to indicate that women more readily than men intuitively appreciate the value of continence in marriage. Just as the woman is more likely to be objectified in a sexual relationship (and is more sensitive to the pain of this experience), so too the woman is more attentive to the factors that reduce the likelihood of such objectivization. Love is possible only when the other is recognized as a person, as an end in him or herself, and thus all forms of objectivization of the other are the enemy of love.

Conclusion

In the foregoing reflections we have seen how Pope John Paul's theology of the body furnished an invaluable anthropological framework not only for understanding the nature of masculinity and femininity and their place in God's creative design for the human person, but also the immediate application that this framework offers for better understanding the teaching of Paul VI in *Humanae vitae*. By rooting his explorations in Biblical sources such as the Genesis account of creation, John Paul responded personally to the Council's call to resourcement, and provided a useful model for overcoming some of the rationalism abundant in moral theology prior to the Council.

Despite his well-known insistence on the importance of subjectivity for understanding the uniqueness of persons vis-à-vis the entire non-personal created world, John Paul offered a firmly grounded explanation of the objective structure of the marital act and the meanings inherent to it. These meanings are not the fruit of a subjective projec-

²⁷ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 282.

tion, but form the objective content of the act itself and invite respect and intentional integration from the acting subject.

Early in his pontificate Pope John Paul called on theologians to research ways of better understanding and explaining the teaching of Paul VI on the regulation of birth, as a service to Church and humanity. In point of fact, it was the Pontiff himself who presented the most cogent and articulated response to his own appeal. Theologians who today wish to take up the important challenge issued by John Paul in an area that is still as critical as it was thirty years ago can have no better starting point than the legacy left by John Paul himself, handed down to us under the name of the Theology of the Body.

Sommario: *L'articolo intende mostrare la stretta unione che esiste fra l'enciclica *Humanae vitae* di Paolo VI e la serie di catechesi di Giovanni Paolo II comunemente chiamata la "teologia del corpo". L'autore comincia con una riflessione sulla profonda originalità della teologia del corpo, contrastandola con l'antropologia teologica classica, soprattutto come raccolta nel Catechismo del Concilio di Trento. Poi mostra che tutta la teologia del corpo aveva come intenzione primaria offrire delle fondamenta antropologiche per l'insegnamento di Paolo VI sul regolamento delle nascite nella sua enciclica *Humanae vitae*. Nell'ultima parte dell'articolo, l'autore considera alcuni degli errori tipici riguardanti l'immoralità della contraccezione e spiega come si possono superare attraverso uno studio più approfondito della teologia del corpo.*

Parole chiave: teologia del corpo, contraccezione, *Humanae vitae*, Paolo VI, Giovanni Paolo II, San Tommaso d'Aquino, Sant'Agostino, personalismo, regolamento delle nascite, Karol Wojtyła, *Amore e responsabilità*, catechesi sull'amore umano, *Familiaris consortio*, sessualità, etica sessuale, matrimonio, linguaggio del corpo, omosessualità, Pio XI, Catechismo romano, Catechismo della Chiesa Cattolica, corpo, carne, spirito, immagine di Dio, *imago Dei*, *Evangelium vitae*, *Veritatis splendor*.

Key words: theology of the body, John Paul II, Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, Catecheses on Human Love, *Familiaris Consortio*, sexuality, sexual ethics, marriage, birth control, contraception, language of the body, body language, personalism, homosexuality, *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI., Pius XI, Roman Catechism, Catechism of the Catholic Church, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Penny Catechism, body, flesh, spirit, image of God, *imago Dei*, *Evangelium Vitae*, *Veritatis Splendor*.