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Theological Reflections on Natural Family Planning

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When human earthly history finally comes to an end and the eschaton arrives, it seems fair to say that this 20th Century will be noted as the first century in which human procreation became a global problem and preoccupation.

In this century we made such progress in controlling disease and developing an urban, industrialized society that population became an international problem. In this century we first began to fear our procreative potential and to develop sophisticated chemical and mechanical methods of counteracting it. We have thus steered the ship of humanity into new and uncharted waters.

Sensing that sexual intercourse fulfills a deep personal need for intimacy, we have exalted its relational capacity even while subduing its burdensome procreational capacity. Hence our century, like no previous era in human history, has exalted the capacity of sexual intercourse to provide human fulfillment. Awed by the apocalyptic atmosphere of the nuclear age and depersonalized by the sophistication of material progress and affluence, we have idolized the intimacy of intercourse in which fragile and fearful human persons experience so intensely the warmth and reassurance of human love.

In other words, our 20th Century culture has compensated for devaluing procreation by a super-valuing of the relational rewards of

genital sexual activity. The gradual acceptance of marital contraception by various Christian churches which began with the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops in August, 1930, culminated in the publication by eleven Quakers in 1963 of a short work entitled "Toward a Quaker View of Sex." These authors maintained that in sexual activity it is the relationship that matters rather than the acts it may involve. Sexual activity could dispense with its procreative potential as long as it expressed a meaningful human relationship.

Against this backdrop, Pope Paul VI in 1968 wrote his historic encyclical letter "Of Human Life" (*Humanae Vitae*). He explicitly recognized the insistence in the culture of his day and in the majority of his own Papal Commission on Birth Control that genital intercourse could be justified for unitive reasons alone, even at the cost of eliminating its procreative potential.

Pope Paul considered the strong appeal of such arguments and rejected them. He affirmed that the life-giving potential of human conjugal intercourse must not be destroyed even for the sake of its unitive potential. Pope Paul wrote his pastoral letter in the context of 20 centuries of Christian teaching. Over most of those centuries lesser importance had been accorded to the unitive benefits of conjugal intercourse, since the primary focus had concentrated on its wonderful procreative potential. But Pope Paul resolutely refused to acquiesce to the strong insistence of an *opposite* emphasis, that unitive benefits could justify eliminating the procreative potential of the act of conjugal love. He did not ignore the unitive role of conjugal sexuality; in fact, he wrote that conjugal acts which do not express a unitive disposition "deny an exigency of the right moral order in the relationship between husband and wife."¹

Pope Paul may eventually be honored as a prophet rejected by his own people because of his teaching. Apparently he foresaw that a moral theory which would justify eliminating the procreative power from conjugal intercourse would violate the inherent integrity of this powerful human action and eventually undermine human marriage and sexual responsibility.

In paragraph 17 of his encyclical, he foretold that even accepting sterilization or contraception within marriage would lead to three results: 1) conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality; 2) deleterious effects upon men's attitude toward women, and 3) the placing of a dangerous weapon in the hands of public authorities who take no heed of moral exigencies.

The decade since *Humanae Vitae* was so forcefully rejected has witnessed some of these effects. Despite Pope Paul's opposition, contraception has become standard practice among most Catholic couples in the United States today.² But, concomitantly if not consequentially, marital permanence and fidelity have been undermined. Men and women have pursued the unitive benefits of sexual activity before

and outside marriage as never before in Christian history.³ The 33% increase in premarital pregnancies from 1971-1976 corresponds precisely with a 33% increase of premarital sexual activity during the same period.⁴ Parents — perhaps because of their own confusion and compromises — have been unable to communicate the ideals of marital chastity to their children. The widespread glorification of premarital and extramarital sexual activity on television may be a symptom of the reigning disaffection for marital chastity as much as a cause of further social deterioration of moral values.

Now that personal fulfillment through sexual activity has occupied center stage, what Eugene Kennedy called “The Great Orgasm Hunt” has been launched under full sail. Oral and anal sexual activity are now widely recommended as delightful variants of traditional intercourse and many persons consider such actions by homosexual persons as morally good if they are tender, satisfying, and unifying.

Indian Experiment Caused Backlash

Although the Indian government’s experiment in compulsory sterilization created a backlash, public authorities generally throughout the world are investing heavily in facilitating non-procreative sexual activity. Planned Parenthood of America has launched a five year program to guarantee all citizens the benefits of so-called “reproductive freedom,” that is, full access to non-procreative genital activity and abortion. The Rockefeller Commission in 1972 recommended a “national policy and voluntary program to reduce unwanted fertility.”

Family life in the United States is rapidly deteriorating. Child abuse has become a national scandal affecting one million children per year. Venereal disease has exceeded epidemic proportions. For every two marriages in 1977, one divorce was granted.⁵ Abortions may total two million this year and a great number of these will occur among married women whose method of contraception was unsuccessful.

This gloomy picture should not be blamed uniquely and exclusively on the current preoccupation with the unitive experience of sexual activity at the expense of contraceptive safeguards. But it can be argued that contraceptive acceptance has facilitated a “contraceptive mentality” without which this picture would be radically different. We have no evidence that the contraceptive mentality has strengthened marriage and the family.

What does this term, “contraceptive mentality” mean? I take it to mean the mentality in which human persons feel free to consider procreation a totally optional aspect of their genital sexual activity. The contraceptive mentality suggests that child-bearing is all right for those who enjoy that sort of thing, but modern people have been contraceptively liberated from both physical and moral obligations to parenthood.

The majority of advisors to Pope Paul on this Papal Birth Control Commission favored an encyclical which would condemn this contraceptive mentality but would not rule out individual contraceptive acts by couples who take seriously the duty of parenthood.

Pope Paul, after months of prayerful anguish, chose to teach officially and in his unique role as Vicar of Christ and Shepherd of the universal Church that even individual acts of conjugal contraception are objectively evil. There are numerous ways of explaining his judgment. Let me mention three of them.

1) He may well have recognized the destructiveness, both physical and psychological, of individual acts of contraception, regardless of their link to the contraceptive mentality, simply because these acts do violence to the sensitive powers of human procreation. In the past decade, our tampering with the divine design for human procreation has begun to manifest escalating harm to human health and well-being. This past November, a physician researcher told the American Heart Association convention in Miami that oral contraceptives triple the risk of death from heart disease for women aged 15 to 44.⁶ Dr. Robert Kistner recently pointed out to the American College of Surgeons that because of increased sexual activity with multiple partners, women under 25 years of age now constitute 93% of the female population with cervical cancer, up from 30% in 1950.⁷ Last October, the British medical journal, *Lancet*, carried a study which concluded that "the death rate from disease of the circulatory system in women who had used oral contraceptives was five times that of the controls who had never used them, and the death rate in those who had taken the pill continuously for five years or more was ten times that of the controls."⁸

Sterilization procedures may also turn out to be increasingly destructive both psychologically and physiologically. For example, Dr. Gerald Glowacki of Baltimore has noted that after vasectomy 25% of males develop anti-sperm antibodies. These lower the person's immunological resistance so that "post-vasectomized males with sperm antibodies have developed significant arthritis, and it is believed that susceptibility to such diseases as lymphoma, leukemia, and Hodgkin's disease are all theoretical potentials of this sequence of immune events."⁹

Perhaps Pope Paul had an intuition of the hidden destructiveness of contraceptive and sterilizing acts. It should be clearly noted that in all of human history, no such large scale interference with human procreativity has occurred as in the past 20 years. Humanity is truly sailing in uncharted waters.

2) Secondly, Pope Paul may have maintained the objective evil of individual acts of contraception because he understood human weakness and the human inability to make judgments about sexual practices without self-justifying rationalization. In other words, even if

individual acts would not foster the contraceptive mentality when undertaken for sufficient reasons, once they are considered possibly permissible, the pressure of human weakness works in the individual persons and in society as a whole toward an ever-widening justification of contraception and the contraceptive mentality. Contraception within marriage even seems to lead to contraception before marriage.

This may be termed the "slippery slope" consideration — that countenancing of individual acts of contraception for especially persuasive reasons can launch society as a whole onto a slippery slope leading down to the contraceptive mentality at the bottom. As the contraceptive mentality actually does take deeper hold upon our contemporary culture we may expect more persons to accept this slippery slope explanation. It does seem that despite official Judeo-Christian opposition to the contraceptive mentality, the supposedly-limited toleration of contraception by many moral leaders has launched our society upon that slippery slope.

3) Probably the strongest reason why Pope Paul could not accept the justification even of individual acts of contraception is the conviction that even individual acts inescapably violate conjugal love, independently of their social consequences.

Some defenders of contraception today suggest that it merely manipulates a physical, biological process. Hence, they feel that for higher reasons, such as the total good of a family, this can be justified. But Pope Paul does not see contraception as merely a matter of biology and a mere physical intervention. He said that to use the reciprocal act of love, which he termed a divine gift, while "destroying, even if only partially, its meaning and its purpose is to contradict the nature both of man and of woman and of their most intimate relationship, and therefore it is to contradict also the plan of God and His will."¹⁰ Thus he sees the act as contrary to the personal nature of spouses and to their *interpersonal* relationship. In other words, human persons are not merely animal beings, so one *cannot* intervene in the human life process in a merely biological way. The intervention affects *persons* and not simply physical *bodies*.

Contraception therefore is seen as crippling the act of human and personal conjugal love. As one author says, "If you separate out or cancel the procreative role of human intercourse you erode the unitive function of human sexuality."¹¹

This judgment, however, is not self-evident. It remains a moral judgment based on accepting the reciprocal interdependence and interpenetration of the human body and spirit. Pope Paul undoubtedly holds that view and sees contraception as pretending to separate body and spirit by pretending that it represents *only* a bodily and biological intervention instead of violating the body/spirit integrity involved in conjugal love. The weight of Catholic Christian tradition, which has profound respect for the integrity of persons and the human life

process and which rejects Platonic and Manichaeian dualism, stands behind this moral judgment of Pope Paul.

To summarize this third basis of Pope Paul's position, it may be said that the pontiff opposed individual contraceptive acts as contrary to the incarnate conjugal love of human persons even if they had no demonstrable outcome in the contraceptive mentality with its deleterious effects on sexual morality, marriage, and the family.

Alternative to Contraception

At this point we turn to the alternative to contraception which Pope Paul offered: natural family planning. We know that far from sterilizing conjugal love natural family planning idealizes it and insists on the fullest and most profound freedom of the spouses in their acts of conjugal intercourse. The spouses who choose to forego random acts of intercourse assure themselves of a far deeper and more intense involvement in their acts of conjugal love.

One recent author, Rev. Arthur McNally, C.P., has found an echo of the doctrine of conjugal chastity taught by natural family planning in the writings of the late Jesuit scientist-anthropologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. "Teilhard," he wrote, "sees us called to master the creative forces of sexuality with chastity, not contraceptives. With virtue, not technology. From the inside, not from the outside. I think he would regard contraceptives and sterilization as a way of side-stepping the whole challenge of sexuality in the twentieth century."¹²

Obviously Chardin's plea for mastering the creative forces of human sexuality with virtue instead of technology stands diametrically opposed to the spreading contraceptive permissiveness and sexual trivialization of our day. The key to chastity is respect for the unitive and procreative dynamic of conjugal sexuality. Contraception erodes that respect by eliminating that procreative dynamic. Natural family planning inculcates that respect by teaching abstinence when that powerful dynamic cannot be responsibly engaged.

There remains a real possibility that natural family planning can itself foster its own version of the contraceptive mentality by unnecessarily avoiding the procreative dynamic of conjugal love. Yet the sensitivity of conscience of spouses who forego contraception tends to forecast an equivalent sensitivity in avoiding a selfish flight from parental responsibility.

This same sensitivity of conscience in natural family planning is enhanced by the mutual respect of spouses for each other. One clue to the truly interpersonal dignity and beauty of the natural method of family planning lies in the necessity of full mutual participation by both spouses. All artificial methods place the entire burden on either wife or husband. Admittedly in the less-than-ideal everyday world

there are reluctant spouses who follow the natural method because of the insistence of their partners. Even here, however, an act of respect for the life power is accomplished rather than an act of violence such as contraception and sterilization entail.

As the practice of natural family planning in the context of conjugal chastity becomes more widespread, its enriching effects on marital love will become better known. The Catholic University study, published in the *International Review of Natural Family Planning* last winter, demonstrated an amazing satisfaction with natural family planning. Less than 2% of the respondents said they would not recommend natural family planning to other couples. Approximately three-fourths perceived positive effects of fertility awareness both upon themselves and their spouses.¹³

As the world at large has become more deeply involved in the spread of contraceptive technology with the accompanying contraceptive mentality, natural family planning has become both more effective and more desirable. Providentially, human achievement in contraception has been matched by human progress in fertility awareness. The Couple to Couple League based in Cincinnati has found increasing interest in natural family planning and has now certified 150 teaching couples. Last fall one of the teaching couples, both of whom are Lutherans, taught a series of classes to a group in Idaho Falls, Idaho, who were 50% Mormon, 25% Catholic, and 25% other religious affiliations. A Lutheran clergyman and his wife, Larry and Nordis Christenson, whose previous book, *The Christian Family*, sold over a million copies, have now authored a new book, *The Christian Couple*, which sharply opposes contraception and advocates a return to natural family planning.¹⁴

Those who read these signs of the times see a grass roots movement rejecting contraception and sterilization stirring throughout the United States. This will only develop through the dedicated efforts of married persons who become guides to other married couples. Pope Paul spoke of this as one of those forms of apostolate which seem most opportune today.¹⁵

Conclusion

We have spoken of the ship of humanity sailing today in uncharted waters. Malcolm Muggeridge is the British author and television interviewer who became enthralled with the work of Mother Teresa in India, including her strong emphasis on teaching natural family planning. In one of his essays Muggeridge describes the possible foundering of the ship of humanity in these picturesque words:

It is sometimes difficult to resist the conclusion that Western Man has decided to abolish himself, creating his own boredom out of his own affluence, his own vulnerability out of his own strength, his own impotence out

of his own erotomania . . . and having convinced himself that he is too numerous, laboring with pill and scalpel and syringe to make himself fewer.

Finally, having educated himself into imbecility, and polluted and drugged himself into stupefaction, he keels over, a weary, battered old brontosaurus, and becomes extinct.¹⁶

My final and major theological reflection suggests in response to this gloomy picture that God, the Author of love and life, offers an alternative if we will seek His will. Creative continence and reverential conjugal love can save us from extinction.

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