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Gintautas Vaitoska

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# The Psychology of Continence

by

**Gintautas Vaitoska, M.D.**

*This author practices psychiatry in Vilnius, Lithuania. He embraced Christianity when he came to believe that "being open to the spiritual dimension of the psyche helps to understand mental problems much better and in a deeper way."*

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This article aims to provide some topics for reflection and to give a few practical suggestions to those who want to learn the art of transformation of sexual energy into other forms of personal creativity. Thus, two categories of people may find it interesting: couples practicing NFP, and single men and women. This is an art: as Rev. Ronald Lawler pointed out at the International Humanae Vitae Conference in Omaha in July 1993, it is like learning music. At first the fingers of a young pianist do not "want" to follow easily the ideas of his mind and heart, but with a little practice it becomes easier and a time comes when the ability to master the instrument gets expressed in the freedom of spontaneous improvisation. Fr. Lawler spoke about chastity; to an important degree this paper also focuses on the virtue of chastity. My desire is to look for ways to overcome the negative view of both continence and chastity, for these are the virtues which aim at a true liberation of our selves: a liberation from the urge of the instinct, to the spontaneity of love.

## **Sexual Energy and the Comprehensive Model of Personality**

For whatever reason modern psychology still has to rediscover some very basic aspects of human psychic structure, which were well known to the giants of classical philosophy and theology, such as Aristotle, St. Thomas, and St. Augustine. This is the knowledge about the hierarchical ordering among the various energies in the human personality, according to which the more powerful and the subtler powers of one's psyche subdue and reign over the energies of a lower order. In the diagram of human personality, (please see figure 1 which is important here and for the entire discussion), reason, will and love form a "triad" of the highest powers in a man, and they have a potency to rule over the energy of desires (or sensitive appetite), as well as to influence the powers of the bodily level: the senses, the power of local movement and the vegetative functions of the body<sup>1</sup>.

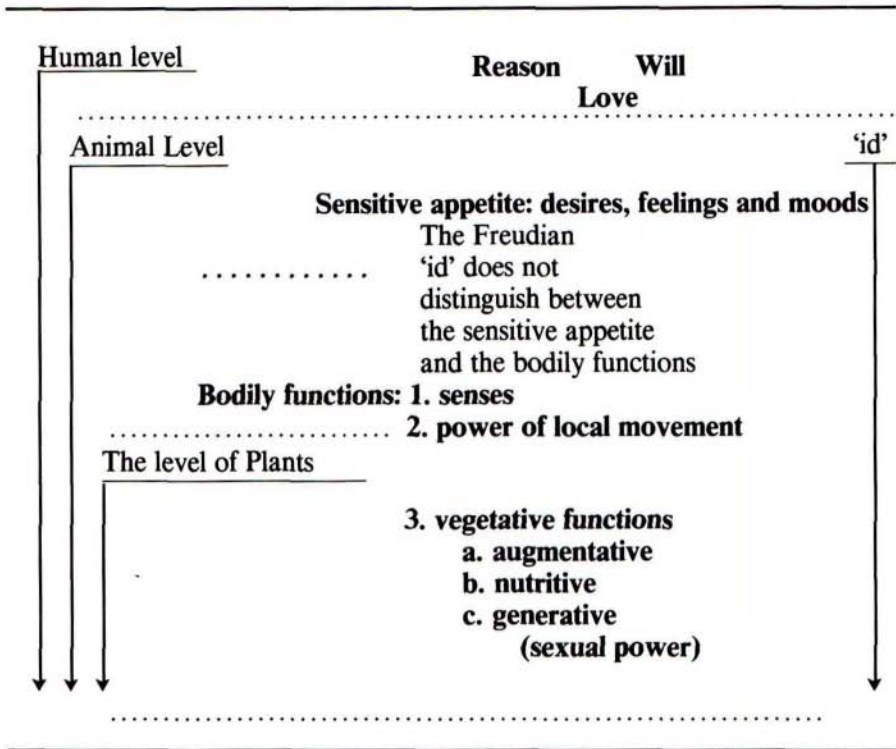


Fig.1

As we see, the hierarchy of human powers corresponds to that in the Universe, where each level is included in, and governed by, the higher<sup>2</sup>. What is the significance of this understanding of the true structure of human personality, as it were, for real life? One could consider this kind of knowledge as something purely theoretical. The answer to this question is that this knowledge liberates us from the widespread myth about an imperative character of the need to experience a regular sexual satisfaction. According to this view, which comes perhaps from a rather unsophisticated understanding of Freud's teaching on sexuality, a human organism needs to regularly engage in sexual activity in order to maintain physical health, not to mention psychological comfort.

The consequences of Freud's ignorance of the classical understanding of the structure of the human personality are obvious here. Keen observer though he was, he nevertheless failed to recognize a distinction between the needs and wants in the human person. The totality of the psyche's energies below the level of

reason is subsumed under the notion of **id** in Freudian teaching. The "id" is mentioned to designate the instinctual part of human nature, which is considered to be hostile to one's civilized mind and human cravings.<sup>3</sup> In stating this, Freud does not see the **distinction between the power of the sensitive appetite and the bodily functions of human soul**. The needs of the **body** (although we must always keep in mind that in reality there does not exist a body, separate from the soul; we use the term "body" only in order to fit common language) are often quite different from the needs or, more precisely, "wants" of the sensitive appetite. The clinical phenomenon of bulimia can serve us well for seeing the difference of operation between these two structures in the body-soul complex. Because of reasons mainly related to stress, a person suffering from bulimia eats enormous amounts of food and is not able to stop eating even when he understands rationally that this amount of food will make him sick. Along with this voice of reason, psychologically he experiences a desire to continue eating; or he "wants" to eat. It is clear in this instance, that it is the structure of the **sensitive appetite** in the personality which urges him to do that - and not the need of the **body** as a living organism, which needs food only in order to stay in good health. The organs of the body are damaged in cases of bulimia and the person experiences pain and sickness. Obviously, the body itself does not urge anybody to ruin its health by overeating; on the contrary, the voice of the body can be truly called an "instinct", as it tells the person when it is time to stop eating, because the amount of food consumed at this particular meal is appropriate for its good state. If somebody is attentive enough to the "voice" of the body, he or she can even become aware of the proper time to eat as well as of the kind of food the instinct of the body "tells" him or her to eat. The bodily powers are not hostile or insubordinate to intellect and will, but, in fact, operate in good cooperation with these higher structures of the human personality.<sup>4</sup>

The Freudian understanding of the instinct attributes to it qualities of inertness, "wildness", and hostility to the authority of the civilized mind. The body is a source of resistance in the human personality, and Freud does not seem to notice that it is not the body itself that resists reason, or to put it more exactly, not the vegetative or generative powers of the soul-body complex that can be unsubmitive to our wills, but it is the power of the **sensitive appetite** that is responsible for that. In a strict sense, the body is neutral rather than negative —this is the classical Christian position found in the teaching of St. Paul<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps unconsciously, Freud himself was trapped into a Manichean kind of understanding of the body-soul relation, where the body is "bad" and the soul is "good", although the conclusions he drew from this position were contrary to those of early Christian heretics. However since we do not intend to examine Freud's understanding in detail in this paper, we will turn now to what is the essential part in our analysis of continence: namely, we will examine the "place" and operation of the sexual instinct in the structure of the personality.

The sexual instinct belongs to the generative powers of the body-soul complex. As such it "resides" at the same level as vegetative powers or these of the local movement (see fig. 1 again). As we saw in the example of bulimia, it is the sensitive appetite, and not the body itself, that urges a person to overeat; the body

itself is concerned only with good health. In the case of sexual instinct, however, it is clear that sexual intercourse is not analogous to the consumption of food with respect to maintaining good health. The intake of food is crucial to the survival of the individual, while the ejaculation of semen in males and receiving it in females is important for the survival of the human species in general; the individual body does not get energy for its survival in sexual intercourse. On the contrary, on a purely biological level it is possible to speak about the waning of bodily "glamor" after performing the generative task — as we see in examples from nature when the male individual even dies after the sexual act, as in case of bees. Although human sexuality has more complex laws, it is clear that statements about the "unhealthiness" of abstaining from sexual activity are not rationally grounded.

Was then Freud completely wrong when he wrote about neurosis being a result of sexual restrictions? Perhaps not. Neurosis or even bodily dysfunctions can develop in an individual if he or she experiences a long term frustration because of not satisfying the sexual **urge**. But this urge is a product of the concupiscible and sensitive appetite and not of the body itself. How does this appetite develop such a compulsive force in some people, while we know that in other persons it can remain quite manageable, to say the least?

In order to understand this we must look into the reasons why the sensitive appetite in the human personality can resist the rational mind and will. St. Thomas says that this is so because "the sensitive appetite is moved not only by cogitative power which universal reason guides, but also by imagination and sense" (S.T.I., q.81, art.3). It is the imagination which is mostly responsible for the strength and the "disobedience" of the sensitive appetite in us. The sexual instinct, which in a precise sense is strictly a power of the body, is not urging, **unless one succumbs to the imagination of sexual scenes**. This statement can seem rather strong at first, but nevertheless it reflects truth about the nature of our desires. A simple experiment, if it were legitimate to undertake it for moral reasons, could prove the truthfulness of this statement: there is no way to become sexually aroused without seeing a sexually attractive person; in solitude however one **must** also "see" in the imagination. There is no need, of course, to experiment with what ruins personal integrity and offends the dignity of another person. The principle of the necessary participation of imagination in sexual desire can be known by anyone who strives for chastity in his thought — because this **interior** chastity is the only guarantee of chaste behavior. Even in the case of the body itself, due to its physiological cycles being more ready to engage in sexual activity at certain times, sexual arousal, not to mention the urge, is not possible unless one **imagines** that kind of behavior.

According to the classical position, the generative powers are as if closer to the hierarchically higher structure of the sensitive appetite than purely bodily powers of local movement or the nutritive and augmentative activities of the body-soul complex. (S.T.I.Q.78,Art.3). On the one hand this creates a slightly different level of submissiveness to these powers to reason. The powers of local movement, for example, submit to reason easily, without any arguments of their own, so to speak, while the generative power does not always comply with a straightforward command because of its closeness to the sensitive appetite and thus its

connectedness with imagination. Therefore, as St. Thomas puts it, in order to rule over the generative power, one has to apply a “political” power — in contrast to the effectiveness of the “despotic” power in the case of governing the other energies of the bodily level (S.T.I, Q.81, Art.3). We will discuss the nature of this “political” ruling later. But on the other hand, the generative energy nevertheless remains essentially rooted at the **bodily** level, thereby reason has a decisive power over it.

### Practical Guidelines

Understanding the exact position of the various energies in the human personality sets us free from Freudian superstitions about the imperative character of sexual activity in one’s life. Men who use Natural Family Planning discover in practice that an erection in itself does not necessarily mean that one **must** engage in sexual intercourse, and nothing happens either to their bodies or to their emotional equilibrium if they abstain from intercourse at certain times.<sup>6</sup> The erection itself does not even urge **unless** one “adds” the imagination to it. For an erection is a simple reflex of the body and a man is free with respect to it: he can use his generative power in the conjugal act if spouses decide so, but he is also free not to do so. The same is true with regard to a greater readiness of a female body for conjugal love at certain periods. Moreover, this hierarchical submissiveness of the body to the higher powers of the personality makes a person who is single free from compulsion.

Strictly speaking, St. Paul’s famous phrase “For it is better to marry, than to be aflame with passion” (1Cor.7:9), is valid only in that situation, when a person gives in to lustful imagination. It is true that our bodies at certain periods have a greater generative energy than at other times. And we must admit that, during these times, the images of a sexual type have a tendency to get into the consciousness more easily — although a person remains free to “give consent” to these spontaneously emerging images and to “feed” them with his or her attention — or not to do so. As we know from theology, this experience of having images is not sinful; sinning begins when we internally give our consent and begin to “watch” them. The images grow bigger as we “nourish” them with the energy of our attention. They finally occupy such a huge space in one’s consciousness and develop such a strength, that the person becomes inflamed with sexual passion<sup>7</sup>.

Nevertheless that happens only with the consent of the person. The best way to get rid of the images which sometimes can bother us is not to worry about them. Since we must rule our imagination with “political” power, it is not wise to fight these images with anxiety. They spontaneously wane away when we are not interested in them and direct our attention toward some other activity. It is most important to fully realize that it is not the body itself that can make continence more difficult at times, but the sensitive appetite; the **body** submits to reason without resistance.

### Continence Specifically in NFP

Continence in married life has one important difference from that in single life,

because it involves **love** with respect to a concrete human being — one's spouse. As we saw in the structure of the personality, love, together with reason and will, stands at the hierarchically highest position in the realm of energies of the soul, and this is the reason why a loving attitude towards a spouse can greatly help periodic continence.

At first glance this can sound strange, for we have a strong tendency to confuse love with sexual desire. Of course there is no strict separation between the two in marriage, although spouses should take on the challenge of integrating their sexuality with **personal** love towards one another. Sexuality should be part of the gift of oneself in mutual relations; it should be related to a most genuine caring about one's friend for life. When such love exists, it is tightly connected with wisdom; within this context, the understanding that sexual intercourse would cause some worries to the spouse would kindly temper the sexual arousal and, as it were, transform its energy into even deeper personal caring and tenderness. As Karol Wojtyla writes in *Love and Responsibility*, it is precisely tenderness "which is directed primarily toward the 'human being' . . . which can temper and tone down the violent reactions of sensuality, which is oriented towards 'the body' "8. This tenderness, however, must have one important quality: it must be not selfish, i.e. it must exercise not self-satisfaction, but operate out of sincere caring for the spouse.

In this way continence ceases to be a problem for spouses<sup>9</sup>. On the contrary, it can become a powerful aid for deepening the psychological union, and thus a source of joy. And even more than that. There is good reason to believe the views about the 'convertability' of various energies in the body-soul complex. The Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli has a whole chapter called "Transformation of the Sexual Energy" in one of his books.<sup>10</sup> He presents many examples of how continence served spiritual creativity in the lives of numerous famous people. Besides an enriched love for the spouse, periodic continence gives the impulse for various spiritual faculties to flourish. The witness of a married woman, described in a study of couples who are using NFP, reflects this mysterious event: "I'm more loving [during the fertile period] but with rather spiritual or divine love at that time . . . This is the time God created us to create. Sex came later."<sup>11</sup> The experience of prayer can deepen at that time: it is as if spiritual reality is seen in brighter colors . . .

### **Influence of Physiological Rhythms and Conditions**

Although modern science does not seem to be very interested in finding what influence physiological or bodily conditions have on the intensity of sexual desire, we certainly can not be satisfied with the present condition of scientific research. The principle of the unity of the body and soul imperatively calls our attention to the importance of different physiological situations for the peaks and low points of human sexuality. Some influences were noticed by scientists themselves, some of them are suggested by the traditions of old, and other observations can be drawn from a more attentive observation of everyday experience. Without pretending to any complete knowledge of this subtle field, we will present some hints here, hoping that they will encourage the reader

himself to become an investigator of his own bodily-emotional rhythms. Human individuality being so diverse, it seems that a proper attentiveness to concrete and personal experiences is itself the most scientific method of investigation.

1. It seems natural to think that food has an influence on one's emotions and bodily condition. There is a branch of medicine which is especially interested in food's influence on the functioning of the psyche: psychodietetics. Since we are interested in the dynamics of sexual desire here, both ancient observations and some modern experimental data shed light on how it relates to the food we eat — and first of all meat. Abstaining from meat was widely known in the Western monastic tradition: we read that already in the classical rule of St. Benedict, extending back to the fifth century.<sup>12</sup> During the period of abstaining from sexual relations in the first three nights of marriage in India, a wife and a husband were told not to eat spicy food.<sup>13</sup> The meat produced industrially is more loaded with substances which very likely have a positive influence on human sexuality.<sup>14</sup> Although for more precise conclusions, the whole issue of nutritional influence on the intensity of sexual desire would require a separate study of literature and perhaps a specially designed scientific research, it seems legitimate to suppose that the above mentioned facts give at least some evidence of the sexually stimulating influence of meat. Speaking practically, it seems wise to suggest some limitation of meat at least in the evening, if a person wants to abstain from sexual relations.

2. Up to the present day, gardeners observe the phases of the Moon in order to sow the seeds at a favorable time. A. L. Lieber, M.D., in his study, "Biological Tides and Human Emotions" writes that a definite lunar influence on fertility cycles at the animal level of life is observed by many of the biologists who investigate biological rhythms.<sup>15</sup> As we integrate the biological and animal level of life in our human functioning, the scientist's statement about "the likelihood of lunar-timing effect on the human reproductive cycle"<sup>16</sup> deserves attention. Lieber's reminder that "so often a moonlit light is associated with love and romance" and further questions "Does the romantic cliché represent a biological principle?" and "is the full Moon more than scenic inspiration for lovers?" can scarcely be regarded as totally irrelevant<sup>17</sup>. The most obvious and powerful cosmic influence on our functioning — and, perhaps, because of this extreme obviousness it is easy to forget that it is really cosmic — is that of the Sun. We want to sleep at night . . . Although the exact influence of enhanced solar activity on the balance of sexual hormones has not yet attracted the attention of scientific research, it seems that a metaphorical remark by my anatomy professor at medical school has a good chance one day to be proven: the Sun heats the pituitary gland in spring so that romantic attractions are vigorously enhanced among his students . . . Indeed, it seems easy to question the necessity to look through the microscope in order to observe this renewed vigor of love and friendship — in the context of the powerful symphony of rebirth of the whole of nature.

A spiritual dimension may be considered here. Experiencing the joyful blooming of nature and the changes in our emotions in the springtime, it seems



possible to think that it is not by chance that the age-old wisdom of Christianity arranged two spiritual practices exactly at this period of the year. The period of fasting in Lent and the Marian prayers in May, apart from what may be their purely theological objective, seem to serve well for the sublimating of our enhanced bodily powers: making sexuality blossom at the higher realm. In numerous paintings of Holy Mary she is portrayed as having the moon and the serpent under her feet . . . The serpent — the old enemy of humanity and also a distinctive symbol of sexuality (even if we have to add: the **disordered**, destructive kind of sexuality). And the moon: a symbol of the rhythmic changes in the realm of nature. Mary has already achieved that point of destination, into which we all are called: she is the forerunner . . .<sup>18</sup> By the power of her Son, Mary stands above all natural cycles and these their dimensions, which were distorted by the evil force. She conquers them, but she is also aware of what she is conquering. The Christian way is neither that of superstition nor naivete. To be aware of the rhythms of nature in our bodies does not mean to fall into a kind of astrological passivity, but objectively to explore that realm, which has to be transformed in the spiritual life. Again, it is individual and personal attentiveness that can most exactly uncover the ever-unique pattern of cyclical changes. This can be our humble cooperation with the redeeming power of our Savior in the way enlightened by Mary: the Queen of Chastity . . .

3. For single persons, especially if they are in their twenties or teenage years, a physical activity in their daily lives is also helpful for abstinence and chastity. Their vigorous bodily energy must get a good expression. This is, of course, a well known truth. What is less commonly observed in our suggestions, especially for young men struggling for integration of **posture** on the inner condition and the quality of one's thoughts. Sexual images are much easier controllable when standing or sitting, than when laying in bed. A practical suggestion for a young person is not to stay in the bed after awakening in the mornings. A natural erection in young men in the morning comes from the good health of their **bodies**. It does not urge anybody to have a sexual outlet. Although it can become an urge if one adds the images of the sexual kind. This is more likely to happen when the body is relaxed and not totally using its energy in any other activity, i.e. in the horizontal position. As a final word on the physiological influences, it seems pertinent to question our habit to give the right to know what is going on in our bodies exclusively to the technically-equipped diagnostics. Basically this seems to be a Cartesian influence, in which the body is regarded as a machine, only extrinsically related to our consciousness. This is a problem which cannot be examined comprehensively here, so it will suffice only to mention that the whole modern set of life, with its emphasis on analytical and mathematical knowledge and with its onslaught of information, unnoticeably although forcibly urges us to perceive ourselves as **minds**, leaving the body with all its possible processes totally out of our scope of interest. This overidentification with the thinking system results in a wide range of consequences, beginning with problems of sexual morality and ending with the inability to hear the signals of the exhausted condition of cardiovascular system at the right time — so that it finally forces us

to notice it when something serious develops out of this and **then** there is a real need for a well-equipped medical examination. A considerable part of the long list of psychosomatic diseases can clearly be considered as the price for our subconscious reduction of ourselves down to the image of a walking head. This is a problem of integration; speaking in Karol Wojtyla's language, we are in need to expand the area of what can be called the *actus humanus*: to include the emotional and bodily realms of our lives into the realm of conscious acting.<sup>19</sup> Our resistance to the Cartesian dualism — the problem lying at the basis of so many ethical questions today — has to be implemented not in theory, but in practice. For only then our argumentation on behalf of the integral nature of the human being will be strengthened by a **witness** of this important truth.

### Conclusion

We did not discuss here the spiritual aspects of continence. They would indicate the recourse to prayer, asking for divine assistance to grow in chastity and also certain suggestions with regard to that interior stance in daily communication with persons of the opposite sex, which enables us to experience the gift of being created as men and women rather than opposition and competitiveness on the hand, or developing disintegrated erotic attractions on the other. Much of this is said in the well-known Wednesday Catecheses' of John Paul II, which still has to be embraced by those who seek a profound understanding of human sexuality.<sup>20</sup>

### REFERENCES

1. Here I use a model of personality, based on the traditional Thomistic-Aristotelian understanding-structure of human personality with a difference of emphasizing love, which is usually included into the notion of will. The purpose of this article is not to get deeper into the investigation of the relation between love and will. I simply follow here a position taken by Dietrich von Hildebrandt, who does not equate love with the will (see his *Man and Woman*, Sophia Institute Press, Manchester, New Hampshire, p.17). As long as its affective part is subsumed by generosity and has a character of sincere gift of oneself, love seems to legitimately belong to the attributes of the spiritual nature in man.

2. Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy Vol. I*, Image Books, 1993, ch.XXX on Aristotle's Philosophy of Nature and Psychology.

3. See Sigmund Freud, "*Civilization and Its Discontents*", Great Books of the Western World, p. 789

4. For my understanding of the true meaning of the instinct and of the distinction between the body and the sensitive appetite both in theory and in practical work, I owe much to a Lithuanian philosopher, dramatist, and musician, Vydunas, who lived in East Prussia, Germany (1868 - 1953). Although not explicitly Christian, he was famous for his exclusively holy life and provided an in-depth analysis of human sexuality as he was a passionate defender of chastity. He is well known in the culture of the Lithuanian exodus in the U.S., although his works are not available in English.

5. Although St. Paul strictly condemns the desires of the flesh, this can not be identified with condemnation of the body itself. The body can become either "the base of operations of sin in the unbeliever, [or] for the Holy Spirit in the believer (cf. Robert H. Gundry, "*Soma in Biblical Theology, with an emphasis on Pauline Anthropology*", Cambridge University Press, P.50). St. Augustine explains the matter impressively in #25 of his *On Christian Doctrine*, when he addresses those, who are hating their bodies: ". . . In this way they were deceived by the words: 'The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary to one another' [Gal.5:17]. For this was said on account of unconquered **habit** of the flesh . . . not that the body should

be destroyed, but that its **concupiscence** which is its evil habit, should be completely conquered so that it is rendered subject to the spirit as natural order demands." (transl. by D.W. Robertson, MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, p.21, emphasis added). Therefore the resistance of flesh to the spirit is attributed not to the body itself, but to its bad habit of concupiscence; St. Thomas, however, describes its exact "location" in the personality structure: the concupiscible power is a species of the sensitive appetite (*Summa Theologica*, I, Q.81, art.2).

6. See Mary Shivanadan, "Challenge to Love" KM Associates, Maryland, Bethesda, 1988, p.12.

7. Once again I owe this insight to Vydunas, in his *Health Youthfulness and Beauty; Collected Works, vol.II*, Vilnius, 1991, ch. 6 (in Lithuanian).

8. Ignatius Press, San Francisco, repr. 1993, p.275.

9. Going back to more "technical" analysis of how one's sexuality obeys his or her will, it can be said that sexual images, which are the sign of an **urging** sexual desire, do not arise, because there is no 'place' for them in one's consciousness, when it is filled with personal caring and tenderness for the spouse, united with understanding of the actual need to abstain from conjugal intercourse. The finest energy of love easily extinguishes the fire of mere lust. This is not a theory!..

10. R. Assagioli (1888-1973) was a founder of one of the spiritual branches in modern psychotherapy, called psychosynthesis. Its theory and practice is explicitly concerned with the spiritual growth both of the patient and of the practicing professional, while including the methods of analytically-oriented psychotherapy as the starting ground. See *Psychosynthesis*, New York, Viking: 1971, Chapter VIII.

11. Mary Shivanandan, Thomasina Borkman, "The Impact of NFP on Selected Aspects of Couple Relationship" in *International Review of Natural Family Planning*, Spring 1984.

12. *Western Asecticism*, The library of Christian Classics Ichthus Edition, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, p. 317

13. Raj B. Pandey, *Hindu Samskaras*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1975, p. 195

14. J. A. McLachlan and D. P. Rall from the National Institute of Environmental Health, North Carolina, have found in their research that "the potent synthetic estrogen, diethylstilbestrol (DES) has been used extensively as a growth promoting agent for poultry, cattle and sheep over twenty years." R. Hertz from George Washington University Medical Center observed instances of gynecomastia in children, who consumed food loaded with artificial hormones. See *Estrogens in the Environment*, Ed. J.A. McLachlan, Elsevier, Holland, pp. 199, 347-350.

15. *The Lunar Effect, Biological Tides and Human Emotions*, Anchor Press/Doubleday, New York, 1978, ch.4.

16. idem, p.53.

17. idem, pp.51-52. We can also remember here, that the eros-enhancing effect of the new and full moon was known not only to the writers and poets: the ancient pagan cults arranged their fertility-related rituals according to the lunar calendar. "I will put an end to all her mirth, her feasts, her **new moons** . . . and all her appointed feasts", proclaims the prophet Hosea with respect to his unfaithful wife, who joined the idolatrous fertility cult practiced by pagan Canaanites (Hos.2:11, emphasis added).

18. *Redemptoris Mater*, Encyclical of John Paul II, #6.

19. Kenneth L. Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama. The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., p.78

20. See the three book cycle of John Paul II: *Original Unity of Man and Woman, Blessed Are the Pure of Heart*, and *On Theology of Marriage and Celibacy*, all edited by Paulist Books and Media. A good summary of this teaching was provided by Fr. Richard Hogan in an article "A Theology of the Body", *The International Review of Natural Family Planning*, (Fall 1982).