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The Catholic Point of View on the Regulation of Births from Reflections on *Humanae Vitae* by Pope John Paul II

Condensed by Judith Echaniz
with Jeanne Sweeney and Barbara Gutowski

The three women who produced the following article are the Catholic members of the Family-Life Culture and Education Council, Inc., of which Mrs. Echaniz was the founding president. FLCEC is a not-for-profit volunteer group, incorporated in 1979.

It is well known that in his encyclical letter, *On Human Life (Humanae Vitae)*, Pope Paul VI, after thorough study of the question, rejected artificial contraception in all its forms and this remains an undeniable factor in the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on the regulation of births. It is known that in so doing, the pope reaffirmed the constant teaching of the Church. However, it seems to be forgotten that *Humanae Vitae*, appearing after the Second Vatican Council, is in complete harmony with the teaching of the Council.¹ Pope John Paul II, for most of the last half of 1984, made use of his general audiences, his Wednesday time with the public, to give a series of reflections on *Humanae Vitae*. This topic appeared as the concluding section, a kind of culmination to several years of learned reflections on portions of Sacred Scripture and the life of virtue and ethics which he often referred to as the "theology of the body." Pope John Paul II has seen the need to introduce all people—not merely Catholics—to the surrounding, necessary dimensions of the subject and to point out all the elements of responsible parenthood and the values and benefits of living withing this ethic. He explained the essential wrongness of contraception and differentiated this from the possibility of misusing periodic continence. He has produced some beautiful and clarifying definitions of love, sexual continence and chastity.

We, as Catholics, present here a brief summary of the papal reflections as we understand them.

Before we begin, however, we must state a principle which underlies our presentation:

Wherever there is a question of human freedom and dignity, of morality, of choosing good over evil, the faithful Catholic will seek to cooperate with God as His creature and child, to recognize God's plan, which we learn both from the study of nature and from divine revelation as handed down by the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church: the pope and those bishops in union with him. It should be noted particularly that the resulting conclusions will be a harmonization, an integration of all confirmed elements. It is what does *not* harmonize, which contradicts, which is rejected by Catholic moral teaching.

Resume

A focus of study in the matter of the regulation of births must be our human nature in harmony with the dignity of our person and the sacramentality of marriage and in harmony with ethics—what is morally correct.

The fundamental structure of marriage is that there is an inseparable connection between its unitive and procreative dimensions. As things exist, the conjugal act in human beings is to be an expression of love furthering the communion of husband and wife—an expression which is, at the same time, the context for the procreation of children. These meanings of the conjugal act are so bound together that should one be rejected in the act, the other will suffer. The communion of persons in marriage requires the linking of its meanings. This is simply the truth of the life of husband and wife. This truth, then, is essential for acting in accordance with the moral norm. Because this concerns our human nature, it applies to all men and women, not just Catholics. The sacramental sign of marriage is based on this fundamental structure, this inseparable connection.

The conjugal act in its two-fold significance bears in itself the sign of the divine mystery of creation (in openness to new life) and of redemption (in the giving of self in love). Because it is a gift of God, the conjugal act is *holy* and worthy of respect in itself. It must *not* become a mere habit; it must not become degraded. In it, there must be expressed a sufficient fullness of personal, ethical and religious content: veneration for the majesty of the Creator and for the spousal love of the Redeemer. Respect for the conjugal act as a gift of God is manifested in two ways: as a salvific fear, a fear of jeopardizing our salvation by violating what bears the sign of creation and redemption, and as a sensitivity filled with veneration for the essential values of the conjugal union.

Love is a power, a capacity of the human soul, of a theological nature, a power given to man in order that he may participate in God's love in the mystery of creation and redemption. The role of love consists in safeguarding the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act.

Love is united to conjugal chastity which, manifesting itself as sexual continence, brings about the interior order of married life. Chastity means to live in the order of the heart, which permits the development of the manifestations of affection in their proper proportion and meaning. Conjugal chastity is thoroughly linked with love as a power as it relates to marriage. (Chastity in general relates to love as a power.) Sexual continence, an aspect of temperance, is not merely negative; rather, it is the capacity of the person to dominate, control and direct drives of a sexual character and their consequences. Since one virtue does not exist apart from the others, continence, too, is linked with conjugal chastity and love.

Concept of 'Disinterestedness'

Basic to this understanding of love, conjugal chastity and continence as related powers is the concept of "disinterestedness", the ability to be more concerned for the good of the other than for oneself. Disinterested love requires self-mastery. Self-mastery presupposes the clear perception of values, the formation of firm convictions and the rise of virtues.

Essential to the human person is that he is master of himself and has self-control. One cannot give what one does not possess. To give oneself in love to one's spouse presupposes self-mastery and a correct understanding of the nature of marriage, the inseparable connection between the two meanings of marriage.

The natural regulation of fertility by using fertile or infertile periods according to prudence is a cooperation with the structure established by God; it is positive. It is morally lawful to have recourse to infertile periods. The difference between periodic continence and artificial contraception is intrinsic and ethical. Artificial contraception obstructs the natural development of the generative process; it is negative. Being motivated by acceptable reasons does *not* change the moral character which is based on the very structure of the conjugal act as such. Using infertile periods for invalid reasons is a *separate ethical problem*.

The issue is not merely a matter of "technique", but of ethics in the strict sense of the term as the morality of conduct. It is a question of the real good of human persons and of what corresponds to the true dignity of the person. When the ethical dimension is not seen, one cannot grasp the Catholic approach to the regulation of births as anything more than a difference over "method." Within the context of marriage and Catholic spirituality—both correctly understood—difficulties encountered in the practice of periodic continence can be overcome; that is, they are not impossibilities.

The evil of the contraceptive act shows itself in the destruction it wreaks on the truth of marriage, on marriage as a sacramental sign, on the husband and wife as persons and in its consequences in society. But the essential evil of the contraceptive act remains the same: it breaks the structure of marriage; it does not admit the truth of the inseparable connection of the unitive and procreative meanings. It violates the

sacramental sign based on the structure. It violates the participation in God's love in the mystery of creation and redemption.

Incompleteness of Gift of Self

In suppressing fertility, artificial contraception qualifies and renders incomplete the mutual gift of self. Furthermore, it removes the specifically human element of self-mastery, attempting to transfer it to technical control. This is an actual reduction of the spouses' human dimension—and makes them objects of manipulation. Without self-mastery there cannot be the free reciprocal gift and acceptance of the spouses, the basis for the communion of persons. Therefore, although there is a real bodily union, there is no communion of persons. Virtue becomes a casualty. Love loses its essential disinterestedness, conjugal chastity loses its positive dimension to direct excitement and emotion, sexual continence is weakened or destroyed. Nor can there be an exercise of the Catholic concept of responsible parenthood, the appreciation of all its values nor the fruition of all its benefits.

Responsible parenthood in the Catholic understanding has a moral character: to harmonize married love with the responsible transmission of life within the context of conjugal chastity. It involves common reflection and effort of the couple to consider various goods—of the couple, the family and society—in spiritual as well as material dimensions. It contains the disposition not merely to avoid more children, but also to increase the family in accordance with the criteria of prudence. It cannot be reduced to one of its partial aspects, but must be seen in relation to biological processes, the knowledge and observance of their specific functions.

The Catholic concept of responsible parenthood expresses the domination which reason and will must exert over the innate drives and emotions of man; responsible parenthood is thus humanizing. It should always be examined and decided in the light of the moral order instituted by God, of which a right conscience correctly formed is the true interpreter. It excludes acting arbitrarily; the couple must act in accord with God's creative intention, respecting the internal structure of marriage.

The Catholic concept of responsible parenthood *must* exclude contraception because it is not ethical.

The Catholic concept of responsible parenthood is an important element of all conjugal and family spirituality, related to the power of the sacrament of marriage.

Values in Responsible Parenthood

There are specific values pertaining to the Catholic concept of responsible parenthood that include an appreciation for the true blessings of family life, for self-mastery, for self-denial, for self-discipline, and for spiritual blessings. Perseverance will lead to salutary effects, including the full development of the personalities. Responsible parenthood is a value not merely for the couple, but also for the whole family understood as a community of persons.

Additional benefits accrue from perseverance in the practice of self-discipline in the context of authentic married love and conjugal chastity in harmony with the Catholic concept of responsible parenthood. This self-discipline brings tranquility and peace to family life and helps in solving difficulties of other kinds. It fosters in husband and wife thoughtfulness and loving consideration for each other; it helps them repel the excessive self-love which is the opposite of charity. It arouses in them a consciousness of their responsibilities and confers upon parents a deeper and more effective influence in the education of their children. This self-discipline, in the proper context of its values, is not just a mode of behavior but an attitude which completes the spouses' integral moral maturity on which it is based.

References

1. The most familiar of the Council documents relating to marriage and the family is *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, Part Two, Chapter I. Highly instructive, also, is Chapter IV of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, containing specific mention of the married couple and the family. The consistent and correct understanding of marriage as a sacrament and the ensuing Catholic married life is basic to the correct interpretation of these documents.

2. We have studied Pope John Paul II's reflections on *Humanae Vitae* directly in the English edition of issues of *L'Osservatore Romano* from July 16 to December 3, 1984. However, the reflections are now published in book form by the Daughters of St. Paul and should be available from any Catholic bookstore.

The document *On Human Life* (titled *On the Regulation of Birth*, which is *Humanae Vitae* itself) may be obtained from the Office of Publishing Services, United States Catholic Conference, 1312 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005, or from the Daughters of St. Paul, 50 St. Paul's Ave., Jamaica Plain, Boston, MA 02130.

N.B. We have found consistently that official documents and papal writings are often clearer and easier to understand than commentaries written to explain them. Commentaries or reductions—even such as this one—should motivate the reader to go to the sources. In line with this attitude, we further recommend:

The *Vatican Declaration on Sexual Ethics* (1975). This document, emanating from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is a sort of companion piece to *Humanae Vitae*, identifying correct behavior for the unmarried. This was published some years ago by Our Sunday Visitor Press. We suggest first writing to the U.S. Catholic Conference's Office of Publishing Services or the Daughters of St. Paul. (Addresses above.)

The Daughters of St. Paul (address above) have published portions of Pope John Paul II's multi-year, multi-faceted series on the theology of the body. We cannot recommend these books highly enough.

The Apostolic Exhortation *The Community of the Family (Familiaris consortio)* (1981).
Educational Guidance in Human Love, Outlines for Sex Education (1983).