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Human Love and the Sacredness of Sex

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THERE MIGHT have been howls protesting the harshness of the position if Pope Paul's *Humanae Vitae* had condemned birth control by both contraception and "rhythm" (natural family planning) on the grounds that "both intend the use of sex for reasons other than its primary end, the procreation of children." Again, there might have been a chorus of praise mingled with relief if the pope had judged that contraception is the same as natural family planning (NFP) and both are morally acceptable. But in fact the pope declared only contraception to be morally evil; he explicitly declared that the use of "rhythm," for serious reasons, is perfectly licit.

Some of the many opponents of the encyclical profess indignation or at least confusion over what they term the inconsistency of the official Catholic position as taught once more by the magisterium. Given that contraceptives are sinful because they frustrate the end intended by God and nature in the use of sex, they ask just why NFP should be permitted. Those who use NFP not only hope for no child, they deliberately time intercourse so that procreation is unlikely to result. But if that is lawful, if couples can intentionally employ the marital act quite apart from its procreative purposes, how can one consistently maintain that the use of contraceptives is sinful? For this use has no other end than NFP has, namely, the use and enjoyment of sexual intercourse without the consequence of conception.

Pope Paul himself anticipated this charge of inconsistency when he wrote: Neither the Church nor her doctrine is inconsistent when she considers it lawful for married people to take advantage of the infertile period but condemns as always unlawful the use of means which directly exclude conception, even when

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the reasons given for the latter practice are neither trivial nor immoral. In reality, these two cases are completely different.¹

This article will attempt to explore the moral difference to which the pope alludes. My analysis will be based primarily on the moral philosophy of Dietrich von Hildebrand. I believe his philosophy offers the best explanation, the best defense, and the best and clearest philosophical foundation of the part of the encyclical that deals precisely with the moral difference between NFP and contraception. From 1925 until the present, von Hildebrand has explicated a profound and consistent ethics of sex. Perhaps it may not be too much to say that Vatican II's teaching on Christian marriage reflects more the thought of von Hildebrand than that of any other writer on the subject. His status as a married layman writing on sex antedated by forty years those who today proclaim their competence in the field by virtue of their own married status. He has persistently taught that love has a value all its own and that the specific kind of love called spousal love should be the motive for both marriage and the marital act. Above all, he has always insisted upon the sacred character of human sexuality.

Many Issues Are Related

The question of contraception necessarily implicates the entire range of questions about the ethics of sex. As John T. Noonan's book² brings out with such clarity, the reasons and arguments advanced against contraception have set in motion a dialectic that pulses through all the related items: the meaning of marriage, the evil of fornication, the evil of masturbation, and even the exact evil of the mutilation of any bodily member, as well as of sexual members and processes.

Before contraception can be discussed, therefore, certain basic propositions about sex, love, and marriage must be set down and defended. The crucial question about "the end of marriage" must be considered afresh. Then we shall inquire into the exact evil of contraception and shall contrast this with the innocence of NFP. A third section will examine certain aspects of the logic of the question.

What Is the Christian Approach?

How is love related to marriage, and how are both of them related to sex? The one position that seems to have dominated the traditional Christian approach to the theory of marriage might be summarized as follows: The living individuals of any species have only a limited time of earthly existence and then they perish. God, willing the continuation of the species in new individuals, has placed strong biological instincts in the individual to goad it to sexual union. In the case of the animals these mating instincts, employing the pleasure of satisfaction and the pain of unfulfilled desire as their power, suffice for the generation of offspring. Some additional maternal (and occa-

sionally “paternal”) instincts are also needed to ensure that the new individuals will not be abandoned by their genitors before they can fend for themselves.

In the case of man—so the dominant traditional theory continues—much more is needed than merely the instinctive drives within parents to mate and to give nourishment to their offspring for a short time. A human offspring is, even biologically, more dependent than an animal offspring, and for a longer time. What is more, he has psychic and spiritual needs unknown to the animal world. He therefore needs the stability and security of a home and the training and instruction that only adults devoted to his welfare can give. Marriage, then—the permanent “contract” between prospective parents—is necessary for the proper nurturing of the children. It is the God-designed institution with just this purpose.

Love Induces Fidelity

Who, however, would commit himself permanently to an institution devoted to the welfare of others? What possible incentive would there be to enter the state of matrimony? The traditional theory now presses “love” into service. Acting like a “spiritual instinct,” love makes a man so enamored of a woman that he is willing to renounce his freedom and pledge fidelity—permanent fidelity—to her. It does the same to the woman. Both partners, caught up in the swoon and exhilaration of love, at last agree to marry.

That the love cools down, that the mutual exhilaration soon disappears, is predictable and even understandable. For now that they are married, the spouses must settle down to the *serious* task of procreation and education. God’s purposes are admirably accomplished: a stable and permanent home has been prepared for the offspring to come. Whatever the subjective expectations and intentions of the spouses, they now find themselves in a permanent institution that enables them to give the proper atmosphere and teaching to the children of their union.

According to the view just sketched, love exists for the sake of marriage. It is subordinate in God’s sight to the union that it motivates. Marriage itself is for the sake of the offspring. Von Hildebrand opposed this view as far back as the lectures in Innsbruck in 1925, which appeared in English as the book *In Defense of Purity*.³ His hierarchical relation gives the primacy to spousal love, which, he claims, has a meaning and a value all its own. He uses the term “value” in a strictly technical sense whereby it means something autonomously good, something already precious and noble, something that glorifies God by the splendor that rises from it. The fact that two humans are of one heart and mind because of a mutual spousal love is something *good* in the universe. It needs no other justification than its own value. It does not have to be linked as a means to some end before its *raison d’être* can be grasped.

Earnestness Is a Sign of Love

Against the autonomous splendor of spousal love, marriage can be seen in its true God-given nature as at the service of spousal love. This love, which shakes a man to his depths, which has a primacy among human loves and an exclusiveness not found in other loves, calls for a mutual pledge of fidelity, and this, of course, is the essential meaning of marriage. Far from being some formality imposed by positive law or custom, the mutual pledge is an organic outgrowth of the spousal love itself. The lovers want to share their life and their fate. They are happy to exchange the firm pledges of their wills as proof against whatever possible change of hearts the future might bring. There is hence a great *earnestness* in genuine love, a taking seriously the beloved and the love itself. It is just this earnestness that is expressed in the vows of marriage.

Spousal Love Gives Sex Depth

If marriage can be understood only against the background of spousal love, the same holds true for human sex. To consider it from below—as a powerful instinct meant for procreation but too often abused for “pleasure”—is to misunderstand it. To construct an ethics of sex on this view from below is to dig enough pitfalls to bury both consistency and intelligibility. As von Hildebrand says, if the purpose of sex is procreation it is difficult to see why fornication is evil, especially if it leads to procreation. It is equally difficult to justify marriage and the marital act when one partner is known to be sterile or when the wife is pregnant.

Against the background of spousal love, however, sex reveals its depth and importance and nobility. In and with sex a man gives himself. Sex is the great secret of the individual. The spousal love that exists between two persons is a spiritual reality, a communion of heart with heart. When it is placed beyond arbitrariness by the earnestness of the marriage vows, this love humbly accepts and gladly bestows the mutual bodily donations. Sex is the fulfillment through the body of the spirit’s word of self-donation. It is not just a bodily symbol of love or a bodily process having a great analogy with love. It is, rather, the genuine expression and completion of the love enkindled in the spirit. The real self of each partner is truly abandoned to the other and is truly united to the other. We must notice that it is this aspect of the marital act, and not its procreative consequences, that is stressed by the words of Christ: “And they shall be two in one flesh.”

The evil of fornication can be clearly grasped from the above doctrine. It is not made clearer or stronger by appealing to the illegitimate offspring that might result. For it is just as sinful to fornicate with a sterile as with a fertile person, even as it is just as lawful to have intercourse with a sterile as with a fertile spouse. The evil of fornication consists in the abuse of something

destined to complete a union of hearts in a reverent self-donation. This objective evil is consciously grasped, moreover, by those who at last come to love another person. Von Hildebrand says:

As soon as someone who saw in sexual intercourse nothing but a normal satisfaction of an instinct should awaken through a great and deep love to a discovery of the real meaning to this sphere, he could not but deeply regret he ever threw himself away, that he ever desecrated this union. . . . If one has grasped that in the bodily union lies a unique gift of one's secret to the beloved, one cannot but see the horror of abusing it as a mere satisfaction of an instinct, as a means for fun, as a vehement physical pleasure, as an amusing game with a person for whom perhaps we shall no longer care a few days later.

The real lover understands that the bodily union is a mysterious and deep thing, that it is here that he discloses his deep secret exclusively to the beloved, and that the beloved discloses her secret to him. It is a very significant and deep fact that the Bible speaks of this bodily union as a "knowing," to know a woman. This term expresses the intimacy and depth of the disclosure of the secret of the person, the self-donation which this union embodies.⁴

Because the role of love was so little emphasized in the traditional theories of the ethics of sex, however great a role it played in practice, these theories fastened upon certain external features of sex and marriage when they sought arguments against extramarital sex. Often enough they viewed sex itself as something negative that could become morally tolerable only when subordinated to the "chief good of marriage," offspring.

Extramarital sex loses none of its evil in von Hildebrand's view, but his arguments on this point are much more intelligible (and more "human") than the view he opposes:

Thus, instead of saying that sinful satisfaction of sexual desire becomes legitimate through marriage, we should say that the sexual act, because it is destined to be the consummation of this sublime union and fulfillment of spousal love, becomes sinful when desecrated by isolation.⁵

Granted that von Hildebrand's theory offers at least as strong a case as the traditional theory against fornication, does it not contradict the formula clearly and constantly taught by the Church, that the "primary end of marriage is the procreation and education of offspring"? And is not the entire contraception question raging about this very formula? In the moment another end, for example, the "expression and strengthening of mutual love," is granted a status superior or even just equal to procreation, will not all the questions be resolved? What, indeed, was the thrust of Cardinal Suenens's hope that Vatican II would redefine the ends of marriage to include both procreation and love, except that this single change would permit Catholic moralists to judge licit the contraceptive practices of those for whom another pregnancy would mean a disaster—physical, mental, or spiritual?

Von Hildebrand is at pains to note that his position in no way contradicts the formula that procreation is the end of marriage. As he rightly observes, the term "end" is used in traditional philosophy in a very loose sense; we should even say in an analogous sense. And as soon as an analogous term is understood as univocal, it leads to ambiguities. Thus, it remains necessary to shed light on the special type of finality which underlies the definition of procreation as the primary end of marriage.⁶

In explanation he distinguishes between two kinds of finality. The one, involving instrumental finality, is such that the whole meaning and value of the means is exhausted in its service to the end. Its *raison d'être* is found only in the end it serves. Its very structure or form, therefore, is fixed pragmatically by the end. A knife has such a shape and such a sharpened blade for no other reason than to perform efficiently its end of cutting. The various parts of a bodily organism, the teeth, for example, are formed in view of the end they serve. Their meaning and value coincides with their usefulness for this end.

Intercourse Has Meaning

The other kind of finality relevant here, which von Hildebrand calls superabundant finality, is such that the so-called means has a meaning and value of its own. It *also* serves an end, however, and thus the final relation between it and the end is one of "superabundance." The being that brings about or serves this superabundant end is never a mere means, *an instrument existing for the sake of nothing else*. It is rather something important and serious in its own right. It has an autonomous meaning and value. Its form or structure is not exhausted or even determined by the end it superabundantly serves.

The relation between marriage and the marital act on the one hand and procreation on the other is just this one of superabundant finality. Sexual intercourse as the expression and completion of spousal love has a value and meaning of its own. It needs no other justification for being. Its *raison d'être* need not be postponed to the end that it may be found to serve. This action, already possessing a full meaning and value, is also superabundantly linked to procreation, however. Nor is procreation therefore minimized because it is understood in this way and not as something that forms and justifies and exhausts the meaning of the marital act.

Von Hildebrand writes:

The stressing of the meaning and value of marriage as the most intimate indissoluble union of love does not contradict the doctrine that procreation is the primary end of marriage. The distinction between marriage and end, as well as the stressing that marriage has also a value of its own besides the sublime value it has as source of procreation, in no way diminishes the importance of the link between marriage and procreation but rather enhances it and places it in the right perspective.⁷

Elsewhere, von Hildebrand wrote so well:

It is no chance that God has invested that act with this creative significance. As God's love is the creative principle in the universe, so love is everywhere creation, and there is a profound significance in the nexus—at once symbol and reality—whereby from the creative act, in which two become one flesh from love and in love, the new human being proceeds. It was this thought that inspired the following prayer, taken from an old nuptial liturgy: "O Lord our God, who didst create man pure and spotless and thereafter ordain that in the propagation of the human race one generation should be produced from another by the mystery of love . . ."⁸

The above analysis seems to favor the following moral judgments: (1) Fornication is sinful because it squanders and desecrates what belongs exclusively to the union and self-abandonment of wedded love. (2) A given marriage may have a full meaning and value apart from any procreative consequences; it is enough that it be formed by a pure love and supported by the earnestness of vows and completed in the bodily union. (3) Since the marital act only superabundantly has procreation as its end, it can have full justification, both objectively and subjectively, apart from procreation. (4) *Therefore* contraception by whatever means may sometimes be permitted or even demanded. For the expression of wedded love is at least equal, if not superior, to the superabundant end of procreation.

Examine These Two Cases

We, of course, agree completely with the first three judgments. It is the fourth to which we now address ourselves. Let us outline two cases, that of the NFP couple and that of the contraceptive couple. Let us assume that the following characteristics are true of each couple:

1. The spouses love each other with a genuine spousal love.
2. They are married; that is, they have freely committed themselves to a life together, with a bond that is now invulnerable to future changes of will or heart.
3. They have a serious reason to want to avoid another pregnancy. This reason may be rooted in a grave medical danger that another pregnancy may bring about, or in a personalistic concern for the education and well-being of the child already in existence, or in any other reason of importance.

The one couple shares these common characteristics with the other. What is not shared, however, is the attitude and practice of the couples when each strives to avoid another pregnancy even while engaging in intercourse.

The attitude of the NFP couple, if it is morally correct, will be as follows:

"We know that our bodies, though separately infertile, possess the awesome power of procreating another human life when they are joined in intercourse. Although the intercourse may be fully justified for reasons apart from procreation, and although these reasons may fully preoccupy

our attention, that does not lessen the objective link that God has established between the marital act and procreation. Knowing that God himself might stir and call into being an immortal identity upon the occasion of our having intercourse, we will refrain from exercising our power when there is the likelihood of conception. We will in no way dare to unite sexually while simultaneously tampering with the process whereby God is called upon to stir and create. Such a respect and reverence we have for the process itself and the power we have of initiating it that we will refrain from its exercise when we have reason to avoid its possible consequences.”

See the Difference

The attitude of the contraceptive couple in its ideal articulation will be as follows:

“We, too, know that the marital act has been joined by God to procreation; not that every such act results in procreation, but that (ordinarily) every coming into being of a man has resulted from such acts. We are not, however, awed by this God-willed link, at least not to the point of treating it as something sacred, never to be intersected by human acting. When we have valid reasons to avoid pregnancy, therefore, and valid reasons to join in sexual intercourse, we will sever the link between sex and procreation by using contraceptive instruments and techniques.”

There is clearly a profound difference between the attitude of this couple and that of the NFP couple. This difference is obviously not reducible to any of the characteristics held in common: the intention of married lovers to avoid conception and still to engage in intercourse. The difference lies in their response to a process that has to do with the transmission of human life. The NFP couple sees the process as a sacred absolute, beyond its competence to touch. The contraceptive couple sees the process as just one more natural sequence that human knowledge can make subject to human intervention.

Von Hildebrand characterizes the attitude of the contraceptive couple as basically one of irreverence:

We are here confronted with the basic sin of irreverence towards God, the denial of our creaturehood, the acting as if we were our own lords. It is the basic denial of the *religio*, of our being bound to God; it is a disrespect for the mysteries of God's creation, which increases in its sinfulness the higher the rank of the mystery in question. It is the same sinfulness which lies in suicide, or in euthanasia, in both of which we act as if we were masters of life. It is the same irreverence which ignores the indissolubility of marriage, and in which marriages are contracted and ended as one would change gloves.

Every active intervention on the part of the spouses, which eliminates the possibility of conception through the conjugal act, is incompatible with the holy

mystery of the superabundant relation in the incredible gift offered by God. And this irreverence also affects the purity of the conjugal act, because the union can be a real fulfillment of love only when it is approached with reverence and when it is embedded in the *religio*, the consciousness of our basic bond to God.

To the sublime link between marriage and procreation the words of Christ also apply: "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder."⁹

How well this agrees with the spirit and even the wording of *Humanae Vitae*! In what seems to me to be the key paragraph of the entire encyclical, Pope Paul stresses this basic difference between man as lord and man as steward:

But to experience the gift of married love while respecting the laws of conception is to acknowledge that one is not the master of the sources of life but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator. Just as man does not have unlimited dominion over his body in general, so also, and with more particular reason, he has no such dominion over his specifically sexual faculties, for these are concerned by their very nature with the generation of life, of which God is the source.¹⁰

The above arguments seem to me to be equally decisive against the practices of sterilization and genetic engineering, which are, unfortunately, gaining in popularity today. Mutilation as such is already immoral. But when the bodily member in question is part of the reproductive process, a specifically new kind of evil is added—the irreverent tampering with something that is literally sacred. So, too, genetic engineering is rooted in the notion that man is the lord of human life and that he has indeed "unlimited dominion over his body and over his specifically sexual faculties." The issue is clearly joined: Christian acceptance of creaturehood versus worldly rebellion and irreverence.

At least part of the reason for the expectation among many Catholics, prior to the appearance of *Humanae Vitae*, that the Church would relax the absolute ban on contraception was the increasing awareness of the weakness of all previous arguments against contraceptives. As these arguments were submitted to an internal dialectic centered around the ethics of sex in general, they were seen to be limited and even negated by other arguments, for example, against fornication or for marriage between sterile persons. Again, where once it might have seemed sufficient to say that contraception is wrong because it "frustrates nature," now even the staunchest opponents of contraception will admit that this argument proves too much or is otherwise invalid.¹¹

Von Hildebrand Looks Deeply

This article, following von Hildebrand, has tried to give more convincing arguments for the evil of contraception and for all the other moral conclusions related to it and to the ethics of sex. Rather than starting from some

general or abstract principle about nature or purpose, von Hildebrand's philosophy undertakes a *journey into depth*. It articulates what most of us grasp when we look upon human life and its transmission in an attitude of awe and wonder. This philosophy allows us to grasp the inner meaning of sex and love. It does not get mired down in details, either. Right now the amassing of details has resulted in a smug familiarity with sex, love, and procreation. One acts as if the moral sign of contraception, or sterilization, or whatever, would, like some secret writing in invisible ink, become manifest when touched against medical or psychological reports. Whatever philosophical wonders underlay the incomplete insights of the past have now been totally smothered by this familiarity. What is essentially a mystery—indeed, one of the central mysteries of human existence—has come to be treated more and more like a mere problem.

The mystery of procreation is part of man's metaphysical situation. In an attitude of hushed awe before the vault of the universe, the reverent person will begin to understand the sacred character of human life—in its origin, its earthly duration, its temporal death. His insight will at all times include the Absolute Person of God holding in his hands the times of men. The birth of each individual man will show itself as an *apparition* on earth of a personality, not from another planet but from another dimension of existence. And the sexual intercourse that precedes the conception and birth will be forever understood in its awesome character.

Man Is Someone Special

A basic picture will be etched in the reverent person's mind: Above man is God, the source and lord of all life; below man is the rest of the temporal universe. Man himself is equipped with the great spiritual powers that enable him to know, to will, and to love. And the greatness of these powers is still evident through the ugly disfigurements and distortions of human history. Despite all his errors, his horrendous crimes, his unbelievable ferocity and hatreds, man still reveals from time to time the original glimmer of nobility that stamps him as something very special in temporal creation.

Now, these very powers of man, which constitute the essential dowry of his personality, are given literally a world to conquer. So many activities are permitted to man, so many demanded of him, so many invitingly called to his attention. Far from its being the case that "nature" must be left alone, man is clearly the lord of nature, the rightful sovereign of natural processes, permitted and invited to divert and manipulate these processes for his own use.

But all such freedoms and invitations abruptly terminate if the sacredness of human life is threatened. Man has every right, and even the duty, to further human life. In this he shows himself the good steward who not only employs well but also defends the life entrusted to his care. But man is strictly enjoined

from playing the lord of human life—whether as concerns its origin, duration, or end.

The above is really the crucial insight of this whole article. It renders consistent and intelligible the many hard-won conclusions of serious casuistry about suicide, mercy-killing, killing in self-defense, transplanting of organs, and, we insist, contraception. The ultimate touchstone is whether a man acts as reverent steward or independent lord, not over “nature” but over human life, whether his own or that of another. This same insight is, we believe, the key to *Humanae Vitae*. Its acceptance becomes ever more urgent now that certain men, inebriated by the power especially of the biological sciences, push ahead with terrifying singlemindedness to throw off their creaturehood and claim for themselves absolute sovereignty over man and woman and the fertile union between them.

Notes

- 1 *Humanae Vitae*, revised edition of translation by the Catholic Truth Society (London, 1970), p. 17. All quotations are from this edition.
- 2 *Contraception* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966).
- 3 Published in English first by Sheed and Ward in 1935. Republished in 1962 by Helicon Press, Baltimore; again republished in 1970 by Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago.
- 4 *Man and Woman* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1965), pp. 24-25.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 8 *In Defense of Purity* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970), pp. 14-15.
- 9 *Man and Woman*, p. 98.
- 10 *Humanae Vitae*, pp. 14-15, par. 13.
- 11 Cf. Germain Grisez, *Contraception and the Natural Law* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1964). Most of chapter 2 is devoted to an excellent analysis of “inadequate arguments.”