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Humanae Vitae

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There are some wonderful recent Church documents which deal with the beauty of Christian marriage. There are also arguments in support of the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* that all acts of marriage be open to life, based on the “theology of the body.” One of these documents is *Liberating Potential*, issued by the CCCB Plenary Assembly in 2008, the fortieth anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*. The following article has a very modest aim, namely to give one rationale for the claim that no act of contraception is morally neutral.

One of the questions that one constantly encounters with respect to the Church’s teaching on contraception is how an act of intercourse can be considered generative when generation is impossible. The question is presented in different complementary ways. Some say that most acts of intercourse cannot result in conception because a woman has mature ova able to be fertilized only for a few days in a month. So most acts of intercourse are not generative. Others say that the Church teaches that natural family planning is morally acceptable when there are sufficient reasons to avoid a new conception. The intention here is to have intercourse that cannot result in a child, and so is obviously not generative, and in fact the intention is the same as that behind contraception.

The most common answer to this difficulty is to say that there is a difference between accepting the infertile phase of a woman’s cycle and causing infertility by human interference. There is a difference between

acting and permitting. This is in accordance with the papal teaching that the unitive and generative dimensions of the marriage act cannot be separated by a human person on his or her own authority—or, which is the same thing, that each act must remain open to generation. Look at the difference between allowing a person to die (when there is no duty to act or even a duty not to act) and killing a person. A person is not bound to use extraordinary means to preserve his/her life. That is very different from euthanasia. So, too, embracing the infertile period is different from causing temporary sterilization.

This answer, however, has its own difficulties. Killing and allowing to die concern a once-and-forever act. There is one life at stake and when it is gone (in death), there is no going back. Even if many acts of intercourse within marriage were rendered infertile through contraception, the parents could still produce a family of a size manageable for them as this particular couple. To imitate nature in its infertile phase in order to space children does not seem to frustrate the overall intention to have children. Indeed, the demand that physical nature can be embraced to suit one’s purposes, but cannot be manipulated to do so, seems to fall victim to the accusation that the Church’s argument is physicalist—making physical nature the determinant of morality. This argument would also imply that an act of intercourse during the infertile phase of a woman’s cycle would be unitive only, without any connection to the aptness for procreation dimension spoken of in earlier presentations of the Church’s teaching. As an aside, once we get to unitive only, we get into grave difficulties in opposing same sex sexual activity.

To deal with these difficulties, let's consider the matter from a different direction. An acorn is essentially determined to become an oak tree. It will not, cannot become a sunflower or a pig. It will not necessarily become an oak tree, because certain conditions are necessary for this to happen. There has to be soil conducive to the growth of the acorn; there has to be sufficient water, sunlight and so on. And it has to remain hidden from marauding squirrels. If the conditions are not right, this particular acorn will not become an oak tree in fact. But it would still be determined by an intrinsic principle to become an oak tree. There is an intrinsic thrust towards its becoming an oak tree, but extrinsic factors can be present or absent which do not allow the intrinsic thrust to come to fruition.

Now, let's look at a person who is visiting a coal mine. He or she takes a cage to the lowest floor of the mine, and then takes a train along a long corridor of workings. Suddenly all lights are extinguished. The darkness is complete. The person opens his or her eyes in the darkness. His or her act is a seeing act, the same act that he or she would have performed if the darkness were not there. But the person actually sees nothing. For this act to result in actual sight, external factors have to be present. There has to be light.

Now look at the act of marital intercourse. It is geared towards procreation. It is the same action whether or not actual procreation is possible. For actual procreation to take place, there has to be present a factor extrinsic to the act itself, namely the presence of a ripe ovum. But the absence of a mature ovum does not change the intrinsic nature of the act. To the extent that it is in itself an act apt for procreation, it remains a procreative act, even though actual procreation is impossible.

So, in answer to the query as to how an impossibility can be the end of an act, it

cannot be so, if the impossibility is intrinsic. Intellection cannot be the end of a cat's mental activity. The cat is essentially incapable of intellection. But something can be the end of an action if the impossibility arises from an extrinsic factor.

What we are after here is the meaning of the act of intercourse, not its physical integrity as such. The act is essentially an act in itself geared to procreation, one apt for procreation. Since we are dealing with the procreation of a precious human being, the act should be between two people who are most perfected to nurture this new person. Their own relationship should be one that creates the best possible environment for this new person, one constituted by mutual interpersonal love that is exclusive (faithful) and permanent. Human experience shows that the act of intercourse has the capability of deeply nurturing this love, that it calls forth the ongoing personal relationship of the spouses.

Artificial birth control changes the meaning of marital intercourse. It is no longer procreative, but is essentially non-procreative. In turn, it is an act that no longer joins the spouses as spouses. It may, and no doubt often does, unite a man and a woman who are married, but not precisely as husband and wife. Husband and wife are, as such, designated by their sexuality as givers and receivers of procreative love, whether or not actual procreation is a possibility for this particular couple through this particular act. This meaning is embraced when the couple is practising natural family planning. It is denied when the couple is practising contraception. ■

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