



# The Prophetic Character of Christian-Oriented Sexual Freedom in the Conjugal Relationship in the Thinking of Moral Theologians

## A Brief Theological and Ethical Look Back at Pope Paul VI's Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* of 1968

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**Abstract:** In 2023, people on the European continent find themselves recovering after several social upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as several military conflicts, especially the war in Ukraine. At the same time, however, there is a significant wave of migration to the so-called safe (socially secure) countries of Western Europe. Despite the significant problems that this migration causes for a politically polarized Europe, Western European, but also other countries are experiencing an astoundingly strong demand for labor (e.g. Germany openly talks about the economic need for up to 400,000 jobs per year). This year marks the 55th anniversary of the publication of the long-awaited encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, which rejected all methods of artificial contraception. In this contribution, the author attempts to look at the problems of the culture of life in European space through the lens of several ethical and philosophical thoughts. This contribution, therefore, seeks to reflect both upon the rejection of *Humanae vitae* by modern Western society, as well as consider the propositions of future steps that will help stabilize European society, including the concepts of economics, family, and values according to the said encyclical.

**Keywords:** family policy of Europe, protection of marriage in the age of demographic crisis, the message of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* for the modern society of the 21st century, Christian sexual ethics in the context of the culture of life

## Introduction and Retrospection

In July 2023, 55 years have passed since the promulgation of Pope Paul VI's then long-awaited encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which rejected all methods of artificial contraception, that is the use of artificial means to prevent conception. The acceptance of this encyclical was already very complicated and several bishops' conferences (German, Austrian, Belgian) were very cautious about accepting it at the time.<sup>1</sup> These national conferences of bishops left the acceptance of *Humanae Vitae* to the decision

<sup>1</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 201.

of the conscience of the individual, which brought about many tense situations at the time of the sexual revolution in Western Europe.<sup>2</sup> Although the year 1968 resonates for our post-communist countries as the year of the unsuccessful so-called Prague Spring and the subsequent forced, unwelcome visit of a contingent of Warsaw Pact troops to the territory of then Czechoslovakia, for the countries of Western Europe and the USA, other important themes of the development of modern post-war society, including new forms of freedom, were at stake at that time, such as pacifism, the fight against racism, or unregulated sexual freedom.

In later reflection on the subject, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini caused quite a stir in 2008 when he interviewed P. George Sporschill (an Austrian Jesuit who is known for his long-standing commitment to street children in Romania) in his book *Jerusalem Nachtgespräche*, where he sharply rejected *Humanae Vitae* as a work that had caused many “lies” and “damage.” Martini claimed that many people had turned away from the Church as a result of the Encyclical letter and that the Church had distanced itself from them as well. On the other hand, Archbishop Héctor Rubén Aguer of La Plata, Argentina, for example, rejected Martini’s criticism and described *Humanae Vitae* as a doctrine based on a continuous tradition that goes back to the Church Fathers.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Pope John Paul II developed his personalist theory of sexuality and consistently defended the meaning of the encyclical.

Helmut Weber, a moral theologian from Trier, Germany, highly praises John Paul II’s contribution to the interpretation of *Humanae Vitae* in the exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*. The said exhortation contains the essential ideas of the 1980 Synod of Bishops, which are reworked by John Paul II and bring new arguments to the debate. The decision of the *Humanae Vitae* is here reaffirmed, but at the same time, the only recognized method of natural family planning is here more prominently highlighted and morally defensible with a new argument in which it is no longer the greatness of nature but the greatness of the person that is considered as the decisive element. The use of this method thus has personal consequences and secures personal values such as considerateness, the capacity for renunciation, and fidelity. Another German moralist, Bernhard Fraling, points out that the criticism of *Humanae Vitae* often overlooks that, in addition to reinterpreting the spousal relationship based on personalistic philosophy, this encyclical was written for the entire world with an eye on developing countries and advocated matters of great importance for the neglected poor. These countries have often been the target of indiscriminate attacks by campaigns for artificial contraception far beneath human dignity. These campaigns were making development aid conditional upon the use of artificial protection before conception, and such pressure harmed the people of Latin America

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<sup>2</sup> Boné – Malherbe, *Engendrés par la science*, 124.

<sup>3</sup> “Kardinal Martini distanziert sich von *Humanae vitae*” and “Kopfwäsche für Kardinal Martini.”

in particular. Representatives of these countries thus understood *Humanae Vitae* as a document of liberation.<sup>4</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI also highlighted and confirmed the validity of *Humanae Vitae*.<sup>5</sup> Benedict recalled that the teachings of Paul VI were taken up by John Paul II and underpinned by anthropological and moral foundations. In this light,

children are not objects of human planning but recognized as true gifts, which are received with an attitude of responsible generosity towards God. In this way, natural planning of parenthood enables people to administer what the Creator in His wisdom has inscribed in a human being without damaging the intact sense of sexual devotion. This requires a psychological maturity that is not direct but grows in dialogue and mutual listening, as well as in a unique control of sexual desire. This is the path of growth in virtue.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequently, on the 40th anniversary of this encyclical, the famous sermon by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna was also written, recalling the guilt of Europe, which has said no to life three times in the last 40 years: against *Humanae Vitae*, by legalizing abortion, and the future of life by legalizing homosexual marriages.<sup>7</sup> The Canadian Bishops' Conference, in turn, on the 50th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, was fervent for the rediscovery of the values of *Humanae Vitae*, especially for those who are troubled by problems of love. In this way, the bishops highlight the *prophetic character of Humanae Vitae* for the development of two fundamental human institutions: marriage and the family. The bishops add that *Humanae Vitae* shows a truly thorough reflection on God's plan for human love. It shows a holistic view of a human being and the mission to which humans are called. *Humanae Vitae* is an invitation to become open to the sincerity, beauty, and dignity of the creaturely call that is a vocation.<sup>8</sup>

## 1. Responsible Parenting as a General Ethical Principle of Sexuality

In seeking an answer to responsibly lived conjugal sexuality, one must recognize that this is not an issue based on a single encyclical and a subsequent 55 years of approval or rejection. As several moral theologians have pointed out, this is an issue that has resonated in the Church since its beginning. In the context of the history

<sup>4</sup> FC 32, CCC § 2370, cf. Weber, *Spezielle Moraltheologie*, 370 and Fraling, *Sexualethik*, 203.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Humanae vitae: aktualität und prophetische Bedeutung," 136 and Human Life International Österreich, Europäische Ärzteaktion, *Humanae vitae. Der Glanz der Wahrheit*, 121.

<sup>6</sup> "Benedikt XVI.: Humanae vitae nach wie vor aktuell."

<sup>7</sup> Schönborn, "Die Sünde der Bischöfe."

<sup>8</sup> "Canada: Bishops Issue Statement to Mark 50th Anniversary of Humanae Vitae."

of contraception in Catholic theology and in the canon law of the Church, Joachim Piegsa and Fraling recommend a study by John T. Noonan.<sup>9</sup> *Birth control* was a term of importance in the late 1960s (and, as a matter of fact, remains so in certain circles of Western European social ethicists to this day), about as important as global warming and consistent pacifism are today. Thus, in advocating artificial methods of *birth control* (birth control can also be referred to by the phrase fertility control),<sup>10</sup> i.e., various methods of contraception, many (including Catholic theologians) appeal to the demands of conjugal love and responsible parenthood, human freedom, or responsible sex. A book by Georg Denzel is one of the available works in this area of research.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely because of his way of arguing and criticizing the Church, that it will be important to look deeper into this topic in the future. In contrast to the now widespread notion of family planning, Wilhelm Ernst of Erfurt emphasizes the term responsible parenthood as a generalizing ethical principle.<sup>12</sup> These authors prefer not to specify a particular method, but to leave the decision to the conscience of the parents. At the outset, therefore, it is necessary to try to define and clarify these important elements of married life, since they are the essence and the starting point of the ethical evaluation of contraception as understood by popes from Paul VI to the present day.<sup>13</sup>

The Second Vatican Council described spouses as “equally cooperating” with God’s creative love and “equally as interpreters of that love.” The word “equally” seeks to point to the *limited capacity of human beings to understand the plans of God*. Thus, the spouses are left with the right to decide exercising their “joint discretion” whether they wish to conceive a child and what spacing of time should exist between children conceived by them. Piegsa refers to the comment of Bernard Häring on GS 50.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the Council has defined an important criterion about responsible parenthood: there is no real contradiction between God’s laws regarding the transmission of life and what serves true conjugal love. In this way, responsible parenthood *serves* and does not harm conjugal love.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 197, n. 316 and Fraling, *Sexualethik*, 201, Noonan, *Empfängnisverhütung* and Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L’Église et la sexualité*, 86–103.

<sup>10</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L’Église et la sexualité*, 99.

<sup>11</sup> Denzel, *Zakázaná slasť* [Forbidden Bliss], 95–105.

<sup>12</sup> Ernst, “Empfängnisregelung,” 131.

<sup>13</sup> Fraling, *Sexualethik*, 204.

<sup>14</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 196, n. 309.

<sup>15</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 196.

## 2. Clarification of the Essential Goals of Marriage in Modern Catholic Doctrine

The essential realities of marriage, which are consistent with its goals, are communion in love and the willingness to accept and raise children. However, it was not until the Second Vatican Council in GS 48, 1 that these goals were first affirmed.<sup>16</sup> Marital sexuality has similar goals – the first is the expression of the spouses’ love for one another (the bonding goal) and the second is the transmission of life (the procreative goal). The author adds that this order was already defined by the *Catechism Romanus* as a work of the Council of Trent in 1566.<sup>17</sup> These goals are inscribed in sexuality, and cannot be separated from each other. John Paul II defined these goals as follows: the *connective goal* is understood as the expression of the spouses’ mutual love and thus the expression of their total self-giving. “Sexuality only humanly manifests itself if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves completely to each other until death. Full bodily self-giving would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of a whole personal self-giving in which the whole personality is present even with its earthly dimension” (FC 11). This conjugal love comes from its highest source, God. He instituted marriage intending to bring about in human beings the plan of His love. Therefore, by giving themselves to one another, which is proper and exclusive to them, spouses strive for such a communion of persons (*intentio unionis*) that they may cooperate with God in the procreation and education of new beings. Marital love can be characterized primarily as a fully human love, that is, a sensual and spiritual love. It is not, therefore, a mere instinctive or emotional desire, but above all an act of free will that tends to maintain the unity and growth of this love. In this way, the spouses become as it were one heart and one soul so that together they attain their human perfection. Another characteristic of this love is its completeness, which means the spouses share everything, both joys, and pains, without pursuing selfish advantages or unjust exceptions. If one truly loves one’s spouse, it is certainly not only for the sake of what one receives from them, but one loves them for their own sake, and this is done gladly to enrich the other by the gift of oneself and to become completely united with them. Conjugal love is also faithful and exclusive to the end of life and tends to bring new lives into the world (HV 8–9). This mutual self-giving, or the true essence of conjugal love, is accomplished by the explicit expression of the will of the partners before God. The desire for the complete unity of the spouses (or even of the betrothed) finds in this consent its valid expression and fulfillment in the irrevocable unity which is the exact constitutive element of this consent. In the conjugal sexual act, then, this desire achieves a new fulfillment, because it is precisely in the sexual act that the self-surrender – consent

<sup>16</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L’Église et la sexualité*, 100.

<sup>17</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 198.

to which has previously been manifested and promised – is performed. With this consummation of marriage, the consummation of self-surrender, its indissolubility begins. The physical union is thus the fulfillment of conjugal love.<sup>18</sup>

In contemplating the *procreative function*, it is necessary to understand that conjugal love, which unites the spouses completely and makes them one flesh, is not exhausted only within the conjugal couple. For it makes them capable of the greatest possible giving, by which they become God's co-workers in transmitting the gift of life to the new human being. In this way, by giving themselves to one another, the spouses also give of themselves a new reality, a child, a living and real image of their love, a permanent sign of conjugal unity, as well as a living and indivisible synthesis of their paternity and maternity (*FC* 34–35). Marital procreation is thus the fruit and sign of their love, a living witness of their full mutual giving (*FC* 28). Simply put, the transmission of life consists in the act of the human being – the perfectly natural sexual action – and in the work of nature – the fertilization and implantation of the ovum in the womb.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it follows from this analysis that one cannot agree that the sexual act is an act of nature, because it is primarily an act of the person.<sup>20</sup>

These two goals have not been easy to define in the history of the Church, which for a long time leaned towards the Augustinian (Neo-Platonic) tradition, and only at the Second Vatican Council did it lean towards the Thomistic (Aristotelian) tradition.<sup>21</sup> It was not until Pius XI's encyclical *Casti Connubii* that the natural method of family planning (albeit now superseded by the Ogino–Knaus method) was clearly stated, thus affirming the above-mentioned two goals of marriage and sexuality. Unlike *Humanae Vitae*, however, Pius XI's encyclical also contains the ecclesiastical-legal consequences of not following the natural method of planned parenthood. Artificial contraception has been called a grave sin.<sup>22</sup> Finally, we must note that the contraceptive pill RU 486 is regarded as an abortifacient pill.<sup>23</sup> Pope Pius XII himself explicitly stood for natural family planning and, at the same time, for allowing spouses to enjoy sexual pleasure even if it does not lead directly to the procreation of offspring. Piegsa quotes in particular Pius XII's speech of October 29, 1951, to the members of the Association of Italian Catholic Midwives and of November 26, 1951, to the members of the "Front of the Family" Congress and the Association of Large Families.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Hildebrand, *25 let „Humanae vitae“* [25 Years of "Humanae Vitae"], 24.

<sup>19</sup> Tondra, *Morálna teológia* [Moral Theology], 122–123.

<sup>20</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L'Église et la sexualité*, 112.

<sup>21</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 197.

<sup>22</sup> Fraling, *Sexualethik*, 202.

<sup>23</sup> Boné – Malherbe, *Engendrés par la science*, 47.

<sup>24</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 197, n. 317 and 318.

### 3. Council Argumentation and Method of Artificial Contraception

The Council's reasoning (GS 51) was intended, according to Piegsa, to show that spouses who choose not a natural, but an artificial method of contraception are also seeking to care for their marital love. But this so-called "good intention" alone cannot determine the moral quality of the way they act, because as the Council emphasized: this quality depends on "**objective criteria**" that are based on the nature of the person and his or her act. Piegsa adds that this is true in the conduct of human beings in all spheres of life. That which is not congruent with the personal dignity of one or the other partner cannot be "sanctified by the good intention" of one or both partners. This applies primarily to means that directly lead to premature abortion. Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* declares that these criteria of morality are taken from the nature of the person and their acts. *Humanae Vitae*, in turn, teaches that the criteria in question are derived from the nature (character) of marriage and its acts.<sup>25</sup> These analyses thus depend strongly on the definition of the word nature.<sup>26</sup> The Council argues first for the essence of the person and then for the essence of the act. The Catholic, therefore, cannot argue that good intention sanctifies the means, that is, in this case, the means for artificial contraception. Indeed, objective criteria must be taken into account for the reason that the attitudes of the spouses thus remain morally unobjectionable. The Catholic, therefore, cannot argue that good intention sanctifies the means, that is, in this case, the means of artificial contraception. Indeed, objective criteria must be taken into account for the reason that the attitudes of the spouses thus remain morally unobjectionable.<sup>27</sup> What the Council meant by objective criteria concerning marriage (GS 51) is expressed by Piegsa as follows: the conjugal act corresponds to "the full sense of the mutual surrender of the partners" as well as to the full sense of "truly humane conception in true love."<sup>28</sup> It should be noted, however, that the Council's aim was not to determine directly the morality of contraception but to give a principle of the solution by favoring the mutual good of the spouses rather than the good of the natural finality of the act of conception.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, *Humanae Vitae*'s unequivocal decision for the natural method of family planning is not to be taken as a choice of one method among many, but as a **partnership path** to which there is no humane alternative.<sup>30</sup> Piegsa relies on the book by Josef Rötzer.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 197.

<sup>26</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L'Église et la sexualité*, 104.

<sup>27</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 206, n. 357.

<sup>28</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 206.

<sup>29</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L'Église et la sexualité*, 101.

<sup>30</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 199.

<sup>31</sup> Rötzer, *Natürliche Geburtenregelung*, 9.

What, according to Piegsa, is the essential difference between natural family planning methods and artificial methods of preventing conception? According to *HV 12*, the essential difference lies in the violation of “the irrevocable union of the two senses of sexuality: loving self-giving and life-giving. Whoever *actively* violates this connection acts (at least in fact) as if they were the master of the sources of life and not a servant of the Creator’s plan (*HV 13*).”<sup>32</sup> Thus the difference between these methods is moral.<sup>33</sup>

According to Michel Séguin, Paul VI’s analysis rests on three points: responsible parenthood (that is, mutual knowledge of and respect for each other’s biological processes and their function); biological laws are part of the human person; reason and the will must exercise a proper mastery over instinct and the passions.<sup>34</sup> To do this, one must again realize from the theological perspective of *Humanae Vitae* that the *creative act of God is the origin of all human life*: in the moment of the sexual encounter of the spouses, one discovers the transcendent intervention of God for the coming into existence of every human being. In the cyclical capacity of the couple’s conception the openness to the one God can be found, because in this way the possible beginning of life is established, which takes its source in the depth of God and His creative, free, and loving act. This is the essential ground of the argument.<sup>35</sup> By abstaining sexually on fertile days in this way, the married couple affirms the recognition of the presence of God the Creator belonging to their sexuality, even if they do not want to have children at that moment. In this way the spouses prove that they are not lords and masters over the source of life, but rather servants of the image given by the Creator.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. A More Accurate Understanding of Difficult *Humanae Vitae* Passages Using the Law of Gradual Growth

Piegsa shows how difficult it is to explain this theology of creation by the example of the traditional understanding of contraception as killing the future fetus (and of people protecting themselves against conception as potential murderers). Scholastic theologians rejected the prevention of conception mainly for three reasons: it is killing, it goes against nature, and it destroys the marriage relationship. The Holy Officium decrees of May 21, 1851, and April 19, 1853, state that preventing conception violates

<sup>32</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 209.

<sup>33</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L’Église et la sexualité*, 102; and Séguin, *La contraception et l’Église*, 63–64.

<sup>34</sup> Séguin, *La contraception et l’Église*, 63–64.

<sup>35</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L’Église et la sexualité*, 109.

<sup>36</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L’Église et la sexualité*, 110.

natural law.<sup>37</sup> An unsigned article in *L'Osservatore Romano* on February 16, 1989, countered this argument, which is still often used today, and whose argument was found years later in the 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, in article 18.<sup>38</sup> Thus, about John Paul II's statement in *FC* 32, where he points to the use of artificial contraception as an act that is "in itself a moral disorder" (*intrinsicum malum*), it is important to recall the argument in question from *EV* 61: "Christian Tradition – is clear and unanimous, from the beginning up to our day, in describing abortion as a particularly grave moral disorder." Ernst adds that John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* made clear his twofold objection to artificial contraception: it works against openness to life and also against the total mutual surrender of the spouses. In contrast, there is no such reservation with the natural method of family planning. Here the spouses submit themselves completely to God's plan and the condition of complete mutual surrender, that is, surrender without interference with bodily integrity.<sup>39</sup>

Piegsa notes that, in comparison with "situational ethics," which mainly stresses the subjective situation, there remains a balanced, clear view of what the decision will and will not bring into existence. The choice, therefore, cannot transform "internal confusion" into "order," but it can nevertheless affect the responsibility of the actor to different levels. The citation in question is, therefore, a refusal not only of situational ethics but also of its contrary extremity, which in some circumstances – referred to as moral confusion in itself (*intrinsicum malum*) – does not allow for grounds that reduce culpability. This is why the term "law of graduality" (gradual growth) has been introduced both in moral theology and in pastoral theology, and even in some instructions of the Magisterium.<sup>40</sup> This term has its origin in John Paul II as the notion of the "**law of gradualness**." "And so what is known as 'the law of gradualness' or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with 'gradualness of the law,' as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situations. In God's plan, all husbands and wives are called in marriage to holiness, and this lofty vocation is fulfilled to the extent that the human person can respond to God's command with serene confidence in God's grace and his or her own will" (*FC* 34).<sup>41</sup> Otherwise, it is known as **the gradual mode of growth**. "Therefore, an educational growth process is necessary, so that individual believers, families and peoples, even civilization itself, by beginning from what they have already received of the mystery of Christ, may patiently be led forward, arriving at a richer understanding and a fuller integration of this mystery in their lives" (*FC* 9). However, this law must not be interpreted as a denial of immutable norms. Nevertheless, there remains a tension between objective duties and subjective capacities (but not in the sense of

<sup>37</sup> Denzel, *Zakázaná slast*, 98, 100.

<sup>38</sup> "La norma morale di «Humanae vitae»"; Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 210–211.

<sup>39</sup> Ernst, "Empfängnisregelung," 135.

<sup>40</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 211.

<sup>41</sup> Giovanni Paolo II, "Omelia durante la Santa Messa."

autonomous morality). One must not present the commandments as objective commandments in the sense of an unattainable ideal (FC 34). Piegsa cites the introduction of the principle of graduality by Archbishop Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in his diocese of Munich-Freising on December 8, 1980: “This idea of graduality outlines the motif of being on the way, which is thus concretized for moral knowledge and practice. The whole Christian journey is a conversion-conversion in gradual steps.”<sup>42</sup> For John Paul II, in this way, the body in the sexual act becomes an access route to the knowledge of the person as the subject of the relationship of gift. The body signals that a person is an object worthy of the gift. Thus, a person finds in this relationship the deep meaning of his or her being. The body thus possesses a conjugal significance (*significatio sponsale*) – even in the celibate sense, as a marriage to the Church and to Christ.<sup>43</sup>

## 5. Understanding the Difficult Concept of *Intrinsecum Malum* as the Principle of Superabundance

Regarding the notion of *intrinsecum malum*, John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* did not accept the proposals of the Synod of Bishops of 1980, and in the context of the still open questions on this subject, he recalled this notion even more strongly. After *Familiaris Consortio*, as Fraling points out, this question is no longer open, and, in the sense of *Humanae Vitae*, artificial contraception is understood as *intrinsecum malum*. Fraling seems to think that how artificial protection from conception is prohibited in *Familiaris Consortio* is close to a view of grave misconduct.<sup>44</sup>

However, as some theologians have pointed out, the relationship between love and human conception can only be fully appreciated if it is understood as a principle of **superabundance** (“overflowing abundance”), rather than as a mere instrumental connection, where the *sexual act would appear to be merely a means to procreate children*. Superabundant finality implies an “overflowing” fullness of purposeful finality, where the meaning of a thing is not only the achievement of a given purpose but also, in some way, an “extra” meaning; a meaning in itself. It also differs from instrumental finality, where the meaning and value of a fact (which is a means) is directed only towards its purpose, whereas in the case of superabundant finality, the instrumental fact has its meaning and value independently of the purpose towards which it is directed. As has already been said, the essential meaning and value of the conjugal sexual act is the closest unity in love-self-giving, and this unity has a value higher than

<sup>42</sup> Piegsa, *Der Mensch*, 212–213.

<sup>43</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L'Église et la sexualité*, 113.

<sup>44</sup> Fraling, *Sexualethik*, 207.

any other union of persons. However, to this, in itself, a valuable and meaningful good, is also entrusted with the procreation of offspring. The same act, the purpose of which is the completion of unity, at the same time becomes, in its “overflowing” fullness, the source of the conception of new life. Its purpose, then, is procreation, but not in the sense of mere instrumental functionality, as in the case of animals, but in the sense of “overflowing” or “overflowing fullness” – the overflowing of love.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, sexuality, through which a man and a woman give themselves to each other in acts that are proper and belong exclusively to the spouses, is not a merely biological dimension but it touches the **inner core of the human personality as such**. The reproach of biologism of sexuality concerns a very restrictive vision of *Humanae Vitae* that concentrates the criteria of the morality of the sexual act from the material respect of the natural cycle of fertility and thus relegates to the background of the personal value of the sexual act. With the theoretical support of natural law, the value of the capacity to conceive sexually, which humans share with animals, does not involve what is intrinsic to the human person, i.e. the unity of persons. Thus, moral criteria should not be based on the biological dimension of sexuality, but on the personal mutual relation of the spouses giving of themselves to each other. The answer is to be sought in the unity of the two goals of marriage (*HV* 12). In this biological orientation of the sexual act of human nature, one must discover the “true good” of the person, a meaning and finality that transcends the simple biological level.<sup>46</sup> If a man were to hold something back for himself, even if only the possibility of deciding otherwise later, he would not be fully giving himself away for that reason alone. This fullness of self-giving required by conjugal love is consistent with the demands of responsible procreation, which, insofar as it is directed towards the procreation of a human being, transcends by its nature a purely biological order and includes within itself personal values that need the contribution of both spouses for their harmony (cf. *FC* 11). Conjugal love, therefore, requires that spouses are well aware of their mission concerning responsible parenthood, which is very much emphasized today and therefore should be properly understood. It must therefore be considered from various legitimate interrelated points of view. If biological processes are taken into account, responsible parenthood means knowing their functions and respecting them; because in the capacity to bring forth life, the human reason discovers the biological laws that are part of the human person. If innate instincts and drives are taken into account, then responsible parenthood implies the necessary mastery to be exercised over them by reason and will. If the physical, economic, psychological, and social conditions are considered, then responsible parents are those who, after reasonable deliberation and with generosity, decide to adopt a larger number of children, or who, for serious reasons and in keeping with moral precepts,

<sup>45</sup> Hildebrand, 25 let „*Humanae Vitae*“, 26–29.

<sup>46</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L'Église et la sexualité*, 106–107.

decide not to have another child for a certain or indefinite period. But the responsible parenthood in question consists above all of an inner relation to the objective moral order which God has established and of which a right conscience is a true interpreter. The task of responsible parenthood, therefore, requires that the spouses fully understand their duties towards God, towards themselves, towards the family, and human society, while correctly maintaining a scale of values (*HV* 10).

## 6. A Repeated Solution to the Arguments of Biological Anxiety and the Physical-Spiritual Unity of the Human Person before the Face of God's Holiness

In his address to the International Congress for Moral Theology on November 12, 1988, on the 20th anniversary of the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, John Paul II returned to the affirmation of this doctrine. Against the reservations of many theologians, he stated that “what is in doubt here, when this doctrine is rejected, is the idea of the very *holiness of God*. This is not a doctrine invented by human beings, but rather a doctrine inscribed by the creative hand of God like the human person and confirmed by God in Revelation. If we open this doctrine up for discussion, we are thereby declaring obedience to God Himself. That is, we prefer the light of our reason to the light of Divine wisdom and thus fall into the darkness of error. At this point, it seems as if John Paul II wanted to elevate this doctrine as infallible, whereas many episcopal conferences at the time classified it as not infallible.<sup>47</sup>

Yet we must also be aware of the extent of the counter-arguments here:

- It is possible to come across the argument that the use of contraception is a *purely biological act*. This is not true, since even the conception of a human being, even if it were done without love, is not a mere biological act. For the whole of human personality, spiritual life is in various ways linked to some physiological presuppositions but therefore does not itself become a purely biological reality. Throughout the universe, we find always and again the fact that far higher realities are bound up with conditions of a lower order. But it would be absurd to confuse these orders. The creation of the human person, in which the spouses are co-participants, is therefore not a simple biological act, although it is bound by purely biological relations, and therefore the interruption of this process is also not a purely biological intervention. Similarly, “blowing off” another person’s head is not a biological intervention, but murder, because the life of a human being depends on certain biological processes, disrupted by that very shot. Artificial birth control is thus a rupture of the causal bond embedded in human

<sup>47</sup> Ernst, “Empfängnisregelung,” 135.

beings, in which the biological processes of the marital act are meant to be the expression and fulfillment of the closest union in love, which has a causal connection to the creation of a new human being.<sup>48</sup> The finality of conception is much more than the simple physical act of conception (a law of nature). It is essentially an expression of the natural law that is inscribed in every human being. This law itself asserts a moral obligation for human beings and gives sexuality a purely metaphysical meaning. The fundamental motive that enables human reason to see the capacity for conception as more than a simple biological act is that the fruit of the sexual act is a person, that is, a being directly willed and loved by God and henceforth in relationship with Him for all eternity. Therefore, the conjugal union maintains an “intrinsic procreative sense” even during the woman’s infertile period. Even if the ability to conceive is sometimes impossible due to a possible error of physical nature, the metaphysical meaning persists because the act remains essentially oriented toward conception.<sup>49</sup>

- It is also often argued that contraception, if safe and available to all, is the most effective means of preventing abortion. Therefore, those who proclaim the wrongness of contraception are accused of actually aiding the spread of abortion. Such reasoning is, in fact, fallacious. Perhaps many people do indeed use contraceptives to avoid the temptation of abortion later on. However, the anti-values inherent in the “contraceptive mentality” – which is something fairly different from responsible fatherhood and motherhood, expressed as respect for the entire truth of the marital act – cause this very temptation to become even stronger when an “unwanted” life is actually conceived. The pro-abortion culture is most prevalent in environments that reject the Church’s teaching on contraception.

From the perspective of the Church, contraception, and abortion are certainly two fundamentally different forms of evil: one opposes the entire truth of the sexual act as the proper expression of conjugal love, and the other destroys the life of the human being. Despite their different natures and moral weight, they are very often closely related as fruits of the same tree. There is indeed no shortage of cases in which a person resorts to contraception or even abortion under the pressure of many existential difficulties, which, however, do not exempt anyone from respecting natural norms.

John Paul II adds:

Still, in very many other instances such practices are rooted in a hedonistic mentality unwilling to accept responsibility in matters of sexuality, and they imply a self-centred concept of freedom, which regards procreation as an obstacle to personal fulfilment. The life

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<sup>48</sup> Hildebrand, 25 *let „Humanae Vitae“*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L’Église et la sexualité*, 107–108.

which could result from a sexual encounter thus becomes an enemy to be avoided at all costs, and abortion becomes the only possible decisive response to failed contraception. The close connection which exists, in mentality, between the practice of contraception and that of abortion is becoming increasingly obvious. It is being demonstrated alarmingly by the development of chemical products, intrauterine devices and vaccines which, distributed with the same ease as contraceptives, really act as abortifacients in the very early stages of the development of the life of the new human being (EV 13).

Summarizing the issues discussed at the congress in 1988, one can see two fundamentally different anthropologies that appear in the dispute about *Humanae Vitae*: the Christian one and the biologist one, i.e., the ultimate materialist one. This thread is only hinted at by evoking the spiritual and purely biological sense of contraception. At the same time, it should be added that when discussing the fact of the deification of the person through contraception, this occurs objectively, i.e., even when contraceptive intercourse is consensual.

## **7. The Consequences of Different Approaches to Birth Control and the Role of the State in the Pursuit of Liberty, Justice, and the Common Good**

The fundamental issue, however, is that the analysis of contraception is limited only to the dimension of individual morality. Since the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, there have been two negative developments in this regard. The first was foreseen by Paul VI in *HV* 17, where he signals the expected development of anti-natalist policies pursued by national governments and international organizations and aimed mainly at reducing the population in developing countries.

If the Church finds contraception ethically acceptable, it will also not have the ability to criticize such policies from an ethical position:

Finally, careful consideration should be given to the danger of this power passing into the hands of those public authorities who care little for the precepts of the moral law. Who will blame a government which in its attempt to resolve the problems affecting an entire country resorts to the same measures that are regarded as lawful by married people in the solution of a particular family difficulty? Who will prevent public authorities from favouring those contraceptive methods which they consider more effective? They may even impose their use on everyone if they regard this, as necessary. It could well happen, therefore, that when people, either individually or in the family or social life, experience the inherent difficulties of the divine law and are determined to avoid them, they may give

into the hands of public authorities the power to intervene in the most personal and intimate responsibility of husband and wife (*HV* 17).

The second is related to the blurring of the line between contraception and abortion with the advent of the early abortion pill. Since the combined oral contraceptive pill (COCP) is also potentially abortifacient, making embryo implementation impossible or significantly more difficult, acceptance of the contraceptive pill would practically be equivalent to acceptance of the early abortion pill.<sup>50</sup> After all, it is hard to imagine that big pharmaceutical companies would produce contraceptives only for Catholics. This leads to a fundamental objection to attempts to undermine the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*: for the Church to permit the use of hormonal contraception would be almost equivalent to the Church withdrawing its objections to abortion.

In addition to the reasons for responsible parenthood laid down by the Council (the good of the spouses as well as of their children; “the material and spiritual conditions of the times and the standard of living”; the good of the whole family, society and the Church; *GS* 50), the *overpopulation of the world and thus the inability to feed such a large population, or the inability of poor countries and people to provide for their offspring*, is very often used as an argument for the necessity of artificial contraception. Eberhard Schockenhoff, on the other hand, stresses that evaluated according to ethical criteria, the natural method of family planning is advantageous: it is safe, cheap, has no harmful side effects, and is reversible at any time. At the same time, this method favors cooperation between man and woman and fosters an attitude of mutual respect and consideration whereas most artificial methods make it easier for the man to transfer the tasks of family planning entirely to the woman.<sup>51</sup> A married couple who chooses to live this way must embrace the new lifestyle together. This natural method then repays the couple by strengthening their independence and moving away from permanent dependency.

Some theologians even doubt the efficacy of natural methods of family planning in other cultural circumstances: however, Schockenhoff also points out the disadvantage of the natural method, which is often inapplicable in conditions of extreme poverty, since the failure of inadequate nutrition and other circumstances can disrupt a woman’s cycle, often leaving married couples unable to make full use of the method. On the other hand, the moral norm of the Church cannot accommodate itself to the moral weakness of human beings.<sup>52</sup> Franz Furger, for example, cites the civilizational differences existing between the method of measuring temperature and the method of self-observation of the properties of cervical mucus, and from

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<sup>50</sup> Jarczewska, *Szkodliwość doustnej antykoncepcji hormonalnej* [Harmfulness of Oral Hormonal Contraception].

<sup>51</sup> Schockenhoff, *Ethik des Leben*, 379.

<sup>52</sup> Schockenhoff, *Ethik des Lebens*, 379–380.

this, he derives the necessity that the burden of family planning should not rest solely on the woman, and, according to him, a procedure that does not burden biological processes must be preferred.<sup>53</sup>

*The State* is also an essential institution for *responsible parenthood*, and it too must be concerned with the good of the human person and respect for human dignity. “The good of the human person requires that the latter be taken seriously not only from a biological, sociological, or demographic point of view but in its bodily-spiritual integrity and moral self-efficacy.” The state must seek to help citizens by balancing the ethical principles of liberty, justice, and the common good.<sup>54</sup>

## 8. A Philosophical View of Man and Nature

Finally, it seems reasonable at this point to consider the relationship between human beings and nature from a philosophical perspective. The philosopher Jean-François Malherbe points out that the fundamental moral question raised by contraception is not whether this or that method is natural or not, because the concept of nature (at least of a biological nature) cannot serve as an ethical criterion. It does not follow, of course, that all methods of regulating conception are the same and that it is possible to renounce their moral evaluation, but that it is necessary to find a criterion of evaluation other than biological character (naturalness). Malherbe focuses his attention here on **respect for the person**.<sup>55</sup> In the scientific world, it is common to think that if a problem is technically solved (in this case the artificial possibility of preventing conception), then the solution can automatically be classified as humane. Indeed, objectifying surgery is fruitful because, without it, people would have no physiological knowledge of the reproductive cycle. However, the use of this objectification can be wrong: if we would like to be convinced, either by mistake or voluntarily, that the problem of contraception is a purely technical or physiological matter. The ethical problem of contraception is the men and women who use such methods and at the same time ask about the meaning of their decision. Thus, it is not the technique of contraception used that is the greatest problem today, but the **dialectic of objectification**, that is, the decision to regard the other and, on this occasion, oneself as an object. **Subjectification**, on the contrary, wants to adopt the technical tool used so that it can be an opportunity to develop a relationship, a communication,

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<sup>53</sup> Furger, *Etika seberealizace* [The Ethics of Self-Realization], 136.

<sup>54</sup> Schockenhoff, *Ethik des Lebens*, 358.

<sup>55</sup> Boné – Malherbe, *Engendrés par la science*, 53.

a humanization to appropriate the means of its action: to make things pure for us as they are, if people are to resist the danger of technological dependence.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

On the substantive side, it is worth pointing out at least one issue. Not only biologicistic but as John Paul II says, a holistic view of human sexuality is very important (FC 11). It is worth emphasizing that in the Church's teaching, biological facts in themselves never constitute a criterion for ethical action. Rather, Catholic anthropology emphasizes the bodily-spiritual unity of the person ("Corpore et animus" – GS 14). With consciousness and freedom, sexual activity, including its biological aspect, is an act of the person as a whole. In the natural rhythm of fertility, reason recognizes the message of the Creator, essential for the ethical ordering of sexual life. Just as an extreme biologism is unacceptable in ethical considerations, so is the marginalization of the corporeal (biological) aspects, as if they pertained only to non-personal reality.

All open-minded people can be sufficiently convinced of the negative consequences of the spread of the contraceptive mentality. Above all, it is necessary to realize what a wide and easy path such an attitude can open for marital infidelity, a general decline in morality, and a degradation of ethical values. There is a danger that men and women, accustomed to using contraceptives, will lose respect for each other, disregard their physical and mental balance, make themselves a tool for satisfying their sexual urges, and will not regard themselves as life partners to be loved and honored.

Already in 1984, the philosopher Jean-François Malherbe stated in his lectures during a series of lectures at the University of Namur in France that artificial contraception had resulted in an anti-contraceptive (sic) mentality, the suicidal character of which we are gradually learning.<sup>57</sup> Malherbe also asks the question of whether birth control is more natural, or is it less natural than the fight against infant mortality in the world.<sup>58</sup>

Nor is long experience necessary for the next argument. Namely, to be convinced of the weakness of human nature and to understand that people – especially young, who are so easily swayed by compulsions – need encouragement to uphold ethical values and, conversely, must not be allowed to ease their way into violating them. The use of contraception is spreading wrong views among young people about

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<sup>56</sup> Boné – Malherbe, *Engendrés par la science*, 56.

<sup>57</sup> Boné – Malherbe, *Engendrés par la science*, 81.

<sup>58</sup> Boné – Malherbe, *Engendrés par la science*, 53.

the meaning of sexuality, with only the word “enjoy” coming to the fore, without fear of becoming pregnant. The holistically personal meaning of sexuality and its expression of the complete self-giving of two persons in marriage is forgotten.

Finally, one must realize that the more parents try to use the natural method of family planning, the more they will realize its moral superiority. However, the further transmission of life can only truly succeed if the parents live in a lasting relationship together.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, if the mission of procreating is not to be at the mercy of human arbitrariness, it must be recognized that the power that a person can have over their own body and its natural functions has certain limits that must not be exceeded. These limits are not set for any other reason than paying due respect to the whole human body and its natural functions, according to the principles already mentioned (*HV* 17).

Given John Paul II’s theology of the body, respecting the meaning of total self-giving means respecting the inherent power of life. In this way, artificial contraception is an “objective disorder of love” because a contradiction arises between the meaning of the spouses’ mutual giving of themselves through the unity of love and the effective sexual act. This is the definition proposed by G. Martelet. Nevertheless, this incongruity may not be subjectively perceived if the psychological perception of the interruption of the gift is not fully conscious. Thus, instead of total gift-giving, a falsification of the inner truth of love may occur (*FC* 32).<sup>60</sup> Thus, the means of artificial contraception practically falsify the meaning of the total gift. Although such a vision seems very idealistic, it nevertheless corresponds to the Christian understanding of human nature, which is created, fallen, and redeemed to its capacity for conception. Human love and sexuality, despite their original beauty and the promise of happiness that comes with it, are sites of a moral struggle of self-mastery, of openness to God and others, that interferes with the mystery of sin and grace in our lives.<sup>61</sup>

In this article, the idea that the love of man and woman must fight against the objectification of the body and redeem itself in subjectivization, concretized in the respect of one for each other, is certainly an idea to be highlighted and promoted: love must manifest itself in work for the well-being of the other. However, this work for the well-being of the other should also include sexual well-being, and it should not, arguably, be conditioned by fear of conception. Believing that the purpose of human beings is, without a doubt, procreation and, therefore, believing in the special relationship that is the union of a man and a woman, one finds it also reasonable to believe that people have been given the freedom to choose the right moment, i.e. the moment in which the couple is in the material, psychological and moral conditions favorable for motherhood/paternity.

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<sup>59</sup> Weber, *Spezielle Moralthologie*, 371.

<sup>60</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L’Église et la sexualité*, 119.

<sup>61</sup> Bedouelle – Bruguès – Becquart, *L’Église et la sexualité*, 120.

All religions of the world (except Buddhism) have a *pronatalist* character.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, the ideas of *responsible parenthood* according to rational criteria (prudence, consideration of the good, consideration of the family situation, guarantee of proper upbringing) are only invoked within Christianity with an explicitly religious legitimation.<sup>63</sup> Even in the face of the many injustices in the world, one must always bear in mind that the birth of every child is a celebration of life which must not lead to feelings of threat and reactions of fear but must be a cause for joy and blessing. The arrival of each new life, wherever it is born on earth, shows the profound meaning of life beyond all planning.<sup>64</sup>

*Translated by Eliodora Olan*

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<sup>62</sup> Schockenhoff, *Ethik des Lebens*, 382.

<sup>63</sup> Schockenhoff, *Ethik des Lebens*, 383.

<sup>64</sup> Schockenhoff, *Ethik des Lebens*, 386.

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