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Sending You on Your Way: The Sending by the Lord, the Giver of Life, and Fertility-Related Issues

Introduction

In the Creed we profess our belief in the “Holy Spirit, the giver of life” who is also the source of supreme love that comes to us from the Blessed Trinity. St. Paul invites us to a hope “that is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rm 5, 5). The Holy Spirit is the greatest gift promised to us by Jesus. As the hidden soul of the Church, the Holy Spirit transforms human hearts enabling a love that is an echo of the inter-Trinitarian love, that is, a love that is attentive towards the other, not self-imposing, a love that is a gift, a love that breaks open the hardness of hearts, generating a spirit of service, a love that is the source of life. The Holy Spirit, who inhabits the human soul, knocks at our hearts, not from without, trying to get in, but from within, trying to release our hearts from the hardened crust of egoism. The renewal of the Church and of humanity comes from that inner movement of the Holy Spirit.

When we attempt to organize our lives only according to our own ideas and projects, we ultimately discover the limits of our possibilities, the fact that even good intentions dry up or that they are finally tarnished by personal ambitions and weaknesses. It is only when through our faith in Christ we open ourselves to the life giving and the love giving movement of the Holy Spirit, true goodness brings fruit. In addressing therefore every moral dilemma, be it a question of private morals or a social issue, the prime context in which we need to tackle it is the salvific influence of the Holy Spirit. This principle applies to all walks of life, and therefore also to issues concerning the love of married couples, the transmission of life, and the mystery of human fertility. All dimensions of human life, the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, or bodily have come out of the hands of God in such a manner, that they are, as Aquinas tells us¹, amenable to the mysterious and hidden influence of the Holy Spirit. The life of grace, the life of the human spirit, of the intellect and the will, and the life of the body with all the dynamisms that contemporary medicine

¹*Ia-IIae*, q. 68, art. 4: *Sicut autem vires appetitivae natae sunt moveri per imperium rationis, ita omnes vires humanae natae sunt moveri per instinctum Dei, sicut a quadam superiori potentia.*

studies are one, with the various levels being distinct but not separate. There is therefore nothing strange in the fact that while we view the physiological processes of human fertility, we can at the same time discern the ethical dimension of these processes, and we can also, in faith, perceive that they can be the locus in which that supreme mystical reality that is the love of God infused into our hearts becomes manifest.

The natural law is not the ultimate point of reference

It follows therefore that the natural law is not the ultimate point of reference in the Christian view of moral issues. The discourse of moral theology as distinct from that of philosophical ethics is primarily about God, who through grace is present within human action. It is possible on the basis of the truths that have been revealed to us to look into the fecundity of grace within specifically human action, as that action is nourished from within by the supernatural presence of the Holy Spirit. The explanation of this theological mystery requires the input of knowledge known through philosophy and the other sciences, but that knowledge is then integrated in a higher view that has the truths of faith as its basis. It is not possible to prove rationally or even more, empirically the workings of grace, which remain mysterious. But believing in the workings of grace it is possible to look into them using all the powers of the human mind. Within faith reason is not extinguished. Faith, being the humility of the intellect respects the natural powers of the mind, and even more it spurs the mind so that it would not stop short on the level of purely empirical observation, so that it would strive towards the plenitude of truth. It should not therefore come as a surprise that the Christian viewpoint can be given the place of honor that it deserves, without being banished from respectable thinking and from responsible action.

When we therefore address moral dilemmas and in particular those that touch upon love and life, it is only appropriate that we remember about the highest source of love. The deepest and most touching word that the Church gives on the function of human sexuality is based primarily not on uniquely natural law reflection, but as St. Paul insisted, on Christ crucified, on the power of the gift of self of the Son of God Himself, given on the cross and repeatedly giving himself during the sacrifice of the Mass and in all the sacraments. St. Paul had the courage to tell the philosophically minded Corinthians: "During my stay with you, the only knowledge I claimed to have was about Jesus, and about him as the crucified Christ... And in my speeches and the sermons I gave, there were none of the arguments that belong to philosophy; only a

demonstration of the power of the Spirit. And I did this so that your faith should not depend upon human philosophy but on the power of God” (1 Cor 2, 2. 4-5). The gift of self of Christ received in faith enables charity, the supernatural love of God that establishes friendship between God and ourselves and allows us to include others in that same friendship. Charity empowers us to love one another in truth as friends of God with that same love that animates the Trinity from within and which is shared by God with us. The sacrament of marriage therefore immerses the spouses in that love which flows from the Trinity. It is a supreme type of love that is incarnated in human situations, stimulating generosity, the focus on the other, mutual listening, respect and mutual service. It is a love that opens hearts so that the spouses not only love one another, but they also love their children that are the fruit of their love. True love generates life that is loved. The Holy Spirit who animates the Trinity from within is at the same time the Lord, the giver of life in our world.

Catholic moral theology distinguishes therefore between the level of a purely natural reflection and that of the reflection that has the new law of the Gospel as its foundation.

Natural law reflection is based on the supreme achievement of the natural human mind that is the metaphysical view of reality. The great difficulty of contemporary culture is that the dominant view, based on philosophical positivism, restricts perception to that which is empirically observable denying that spiritual realities such as the human soul, or the essences of things and their intrinsic finalities exist, even though the human mind, even that of a child, asks questions about the sense of things and what they are for. When however the metaphysical perspective is excluded, natural law reflection becomes incomprehensible. To understand philosophically the meaning of sexuality, that is to go beyond the gathering of accumulated observable evidence towards its inner logic, one has to have recourse to such realities as finality and the metaphysical inclinations within the human person towards the maintaining of existence, towards the transmission of life and concern for the offspring and towards the knowledge of truth and the building of social units based upon that known truth. The perception of metaphysical inclinations and finalities is not the same as the mere observation of empirical facts. Their perception is the fruit of rigorous thinking and it is on their basis that ethical conclusions can be made. It is possible to defend the moral rejection of contraception and the contraceptive mentality on the basis of such rational natural law reflection. It is not however a simple intellectual endeavor and it may happen that even though the rational logic of the argumentation will be accepted as flawless the cognition of the ethical

principle will not necessarily provoke appropriate action. There is more in moral decision-making than the application of convincing conclusions.

The Church disposes however of a higher level of moral reflection and a deeper source of moral action. The new law of the Gospel, called also the law of the Holy Spirit or the law of charity is not a written law although it makes use of written texts. St. Thomas Aquinas sees in it the supreme expression of the Christian moral orientation.² That which is the primary element of the new law and that in which its power consists is the mysterious interior presence of the grace of the Holy Spirit, given to those who believe in Christ. Secondly, the new law also makes use of written texts, of the Gospel, and in particular of the Sermon on the Mount, as also of all teaching imparted by the Church. That written or spoken teaching disposes towards the grace of the Holy Spirit and shows how to use it within multiple human situations. Both elements of the new law of the Gospel work together. The written or spoken word bears real fruit only when it is combined with a vivid faith in Christ and in the presence of His Holy Spirit, who inhabits the soul and from within has an impact on human thinking, deciding and action. When primacy is attributed to the interior grace of the Holy Spirit enabling a real faith that is operative in charity, the words of moral exhortation and encouragement come alive because they are words that show how to use the grace of the Holy Spirit and how to apply it in multiple human situations and vocations.

Since the question of the use of contraceptives is a moral question it can be viewed in the light of a rational discourse based upon the natural law. But it can also be viewed in the light of the new law of the Gospel, which has the supreme generosity of God, incarnated within our human existence as its foundation. In such a perspective the beauty of married love becomes immediately apparent. The main reason therefore why the Church rejects contraception does not consist in merely philosophical arguments, or in physiological or sociological observations. The main reason is theological. The Church is concerned above all about the supreme gift of God, which is the infused virtue of charity that enables us to love one another with a divine love. That gift is not to be contaminated by egoism. The supreme moment of marital love that is the physical union of the spouses is not to be polluted with egoism, but animated by the love that comes from God. The idea that in ethics we are concerned only about the objective moral order that is to be maintained is a Greek philosophical idea. The Biblical perspective is focused on something

²*Ia-IIae*, q. 106-108.

much greater, on the love of God, infused in human hearts by the Holy Spirit, elevating human relationships to the highest level. The rejection therefore of that which destroys the quality of love is an obvious consequence of our fascinated gratitude for the gift of divine love.

The egoism of contraception

The main problem with contraception is that in its essence it is a form of egoism. It both expresses egoism and furthers it. The husband who requires that his wife takes every day a contraceptive drug that poisons her capacity to conceive so that he can enjoy her physically whenever he wants to, basically tells his wife: "I love you, but there is one thing in you that I hate, and that is your capacity to become a mother. I therefore demand that you excise with the help of poison that natural feminine capacity which is within you." And if the spouses use a condom, basically it generates a similar attitude of egoism. "I want you for my pleasure, but I demand that with the help of a plastic glove, you exclude from you your natural capacity to be the father of our child". Contraceptives separate the sexual union from the transmission of life. The sexual union is deemed to be a value in itself, as a source of intense physical and psychic pleasure. The transmission of life with the responsible loving generosity that it requires is deemed to be an enemy. By the separation of the sexual union from the transmission of life contraception distorts the nature of love. Since love ceases to be true love, but a parody of love, deprived of generosity, of the gift of self, it furthers egoism and does not contribute to the generation of responsible family virtues. It elevates pleasure to the rank of a supreme value and so it produces a hedonist attitude. Contraception changes not only something in the physiology of the woman, but also something in the mind of both men and women. It produces a caricature of love, into which the supreme divine love of charity cannot be incarnated. It also generates an aggression against children. If something fails in the working of the contraceptive (as sometimes happens), the mind-set that has been changed is so focused against the child that the unwanted pregnancy most often ends in an abortion. Contraception leads to abortion and to the culture of death. And when, finally, the child is desired, due to previous contraception, it is desired as an object, to which one has a right, and not as a gift to be received.

Since contraceptive sexual activity excises the openness to life with all the responsibility that concern for children requires focusing uniquely on intense pleasure, it can never be fully satisfying. Pleasure is not the

same as happiness. “There is more happiness in giving than in receiving” (Ac 20, 35). When the other is used for personal pleasure even when that use of the other is mutual, it is manipulative and contains a latent loneliness. Not being a true source of happiness it generates a hunger for more, leading to the search for new sexual experiences in the hope that they may be fully satisfying. Hence the search for sexual contacts of a depraved nature, contacts with other partners, who may be more satisfying, or contacts with persons of the same sex. The dissatisfaction of contraceptive sex and the recognition of its manipulative character leads women unconsciously to feminist aggressiveness against men.

Marital sexual union open to the transmission of life deepens love and generates responsible family virtues. The concentration on self in contraceptive sex does not elicit responsible virtues. It would be interesting to make some sociological studies and see whether there is a correlation between the growing contemporary phenomenon of child battering and the use of contraception. Even though concerned love for a fragile infant is an instinctive characteristic not only of humans but also of animals, it has to be integrated in virtuous choices. It requires responsibility and generosity to love an infant, in particular when that infant cries at night, when it makes demands on its parents by its mere existence. People who cannot stand the cries of their infant and beat it have distorted within them the basic generosity of a parent. They are angry that their child requires something of them, that it forces them to give up their egoist desires. Have not these parents, guilty of aggression against their own children learnt the spirit of rejection of children earlier, treating sexuality uniquely as a source of hedonist pleasure completely divorced from the transmission of life? A similar sociological question could be asked about euthanasia. Those who are not concerned about their elderly parents and would like to have them out of the way, locked and forgotten in nursing homes or disposed of through euthanasia, have they not poisoned the growth of charity in their hearts by contraception? Are they maybe not aware that they had discerned a hidden aggression against children in their parents and or even are they not aware that their siblings have been aborted by the very parent that is now elderly and in need of attention?

Contraception and abortion are often presented as issues that concern women. This is not precise. The ethics of married life concerns both men and women, and the prime responsibility, or lack of it, is that of men. If the male is responsible, the woman will not abort, nor will she poison herself with contraceptive drugs. Contraception allows for male irresponsibility but always at the expense of the woman.

The difference between natural regulation of conception and contraception

The argument is sometimes raised that from a moral point of view there seems to be no great difference between contraception and the use of natural family planning. After all both methods are used to ensure that conception does not take place. There is however a major difference. The natural methods regulating conception (incidentally this term that is more precise than the term “birth control” is used in the marriage preparation courses in Poland, initiated by card. Karol Wojtyła) are not focused on the rejection of life. They begin with knowledge, knowledge about the physiology of the woman. Knowledge in itself is morally indifferent. It can be used for the good or for the evil. A woman may carefully observe the periods of fertility and infertility in her cycle, and then use this knowledge for the purpose of sexual license. The moral experience of marital love of couples that follow natural regulation of conception however is completely different from that of couples that use contraception. The knowledge of the fertility cycle allows the couple to adapt their sexual activity responsibly in such a way that the conception of children is planned. The step to transmit life is the result of a mutual decision that is not haphazard. This means that when the woman is fertile and her sexual desire is strongest, if the couple is not planning a child at the moment they decide to refrain from sexual activity. The husband then says to his wife: “I love you but because I do not want to burden you with another child I refrain from sexual union in this moment.” And the wife says to her husband: “Even though I love you and I intensely desire sexual intercourse, I do not want to burden you with the need of earning more so as to sustain another child, and so I refrain from sexual union in this moment”. In this case, the spouses do not fall into egoism, nor they do refrain from love, but they express their love by restraining their sexual desire, as they do anyway in many other situations, when the moment for the marital act is inappropriate or as they do in respect to other people who may occasionally attract them sexually. Marital fidelity is strengthened and confirmed by the renunciation of sexual union in a moment of desire, when the renunciation is motivated by love and mutual concern.

In the control of conception through the respect of the natural physiological cycle, there is no unhealthy sexual repression. A respectful control of fertility leads to a virtuous control of the sexuality. It may be good to remember that in the virtue of temperance the sensitive powers

cooperate with the spiritual faculties to which they are by nature geared.³ The virtue of chastity integrates the sexual desire with values freely chosen by the reason and the will and this is not only normal but also possible. Neurotic repression of the sexual desire is quite different and it takes place only when the sexual desire is inhibited by another emotion such as fear (or the emotional sense of energy or duty). This is unhealthy and wears out the emotions. In the case of the natural regulation of conception the restraining power is not the emotion of fear, but love. The couple refrains from sexual activity in the days of the woman's fertility motivated by love, by the concern for the other and the good of the family. Restraint of the sexual desire motivated by true love does not generate neurosis. Nor does it generate egoism. It contributes to the growth of generosity and love. True love can be expressed in various ways, not only in sexual activity, but also in service, work, in concern for the other and in the capacity for renunciation that builds mutual trust. When couples are afraid of conception and have recourse to contraception this is not a healthy solution, because fear is not a good counselor. If it is fear of a prospective child that is the motive for contraception, this does not contribute to the growth of virtue, and generates uneasiness and tension. If the couple fears a prospective child, the problem lies in the fear, and something has to be done to overcome that fear. The best means of overcoming fear is knowledge and true love. "Fear is driven out by perfect love" (1 J 4, 18). Sexuality has to be accepted as an important and valued reality, as it is controlled. It is not a side aspect of human existence that can be ignored or shunned. It is a gift of God, and as such it needs to be met with respect and knowledge and not with fear. The various methods of analyzing the fertility cycle of the woman's body can supply the necessary knowledge that calms any latent fear. When both husband and wife know at what stage of the fertility cycle the wife is at the given moment they can express their love accordingly, by sexual union, or by refraining from it, both directions being ways of expressing love. If there is still a residue of fear, it may mean that the appropriate knowledge is missing. What needs to be done then is the better learning of the details of feminine physiology so as to be able to assess appropriately and with confidence the current status. This then allows for such an expression of love that contributes to the growth of love.

Since the sacrament of matrimony sanctifies the spouses by tying them with gift of self of Christ, every expression of true charity within married life is a means of growing in the divine life. This happens not only on a purely spiritual level. The love of God passes through all the

³*Ia-IIae*, q. 74, art. 4, ad 1: *Appetitus sensitivus in nobis prae aliis animalibus habet quandam excellentiam, scilicet quod natus est obedire rationi.*

dimensions of human lives, including the bodily. “Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6, 19) said St. Paul. The marital act therefore lived out as an expression of charity is a way of celebrating the sacrament of marriage. The mutual gift of self, pure and free from egoism, built on a concern for the loved one that expresses itself in multiple ways grows and matures through the marital union.

In this context I would like to offer a quote from the old Tridentine *Roman Catechism*. This *Catechism*, which is much shorter than the present *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was addressed not to the faithful but to parish priests. There we find quoted the sensible remark of St. Jerome:

A wise husband should love his wife moved by a rational judgment, and not uniquely by his affect. May he control the impetus of his concupiscence, so that he would not blindly fall into intercourse. There is nothing worse than the loving of one’s wife as a prostitute.⁴

Is it not beautiful when we consider that there have been generations of parish priests, who having received such counsel, through the confessional defended human dignity endangered by sexual abuse? If the Church has in focus such a high level of love, this is because the Church believes in the power of grace capable of healing human love and elevating it and the Church knows such an experience of marital love that is fruitful and is an image of the love of Christ, the Spouse of the Church. It is this love, received from God that the Church offers the faithful - and warns against its deformation.

The assistance of the Holy Spirit in the presentation of the beauty of married love

In conclusion, I would like to draw your attention to a fragment of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae vitae*, where the Pope addressed priests. He wrote to them:

So speak with full confidence, beloved sons, convinced that while the Holy Spirit of God is present to the Magisterium proclaiming sound doctrine, He also illumines from within the hearts of the faithful and invites their assent.⁵

⁴L. 2, c. 8, a. 33.

⁵29.

There is a difference in the reception of the Church's teaching on the issue of contraception when it is presented in a conference hall, and when it is presented in the confessional. If a conference is given in a public hall, the minds of the listeners are most often on the level of the reason. They listen and they record what they hear with their minds. The fruit of the discourse is information that is passed from the speaker to the listener, convincing the listener or not, although of course conviction is not uniquely a consequence of the clarity of the argument and its logic. Conviction has to deal also with inner resistances, which may come from fears, from hidden egoism, from a rejection of a teaching because it is demanding, calling for moral change. The context of the confessional is different. There the mind of the penitent is on a different register. It is not only the rational mind that is listening to information that is being transmitted by the priest. In the confessional, the mind of the penitent is opened by faith, and in the spiritual and moral helplessness with which the penitent comes, he or she is crying out for the grace of Christ that is gratuitously given in that moment. In the circumstance of this utter gift of Christ's grace, if the issue has to be raised, the egoism of contraception immediately becomes evident. Rarely, is it difficult to explain to the penitent the ugliness of the egoism of contraception that contaminates the quality of love within what one would expect to be a manifestation of supreme marital love. If necessary, the priest may then send the penitent to a Catholic counseling service (if such a service exists in the diocese), where the technicalities of the observation of the fertility cycle will be explained. When the spouses acquire this art they can adapt their sexual activity according to their decision about the transmission of life thereby maintaining the high level of generosity and mutual respect that true love requires.

Most of you here present today are not priests and you know the confessional only from one side. But I invite you to enter into the same spiritual experience. When dealing with couples who come to you for your professional medical and social aid believe in the power of the Holy Spirit, believe in the presence of the grace of the Holy Spirit, inhabiting the souls of those to whom you speak. And as you explain to them the beauty of generous and fruitful self-giving love and the ways of living out that love within the marital act, adapting in a responsible way to the accessible knowledge of the woman's fertility cycle, and as you work on the healing of fertility that has been wounded both physiologically and psychologically, believe in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Invite the Holy Spirit, by an inner act of faith, into that conversation, and you shall see the fecundity of the Holy Spirit in those to whom you shall be

speaking, as their eyes, minds, hearts and ultimately bodies will open to the fullness of the love of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life.