



Does Periodic Continence Harm Spousal Love? Pope John Paul II's Response to the Pastoral Difficulties of Living Out *Humanae Vitae*

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Abstract

The main reason for the widespread dissent from *Humanae vitae* is not primarily academic. Rather, dissent arises first on a practical level by couples themselves on account of the difficulty they experience in living out the teaching. More specifically, couples often feel that there is a “contradiction” between the responsible regulation of birth and the unity of their love. This essay addresses this pastoral objection head on through a candid appreciation of the “difficulties” couples experience and through demonstrating Pope John Paul II's idea of cultivating a “conjugal spirituality,” which moves couples interiorly from merely following rules to fostering reverence both for one's spouse and for God.

Summary: This article provides a pastoral response to the difficulties of living out the teaching of *Humanae vitae*, by explaining the teaching of *Humanae vitae* through the lens of Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. Specifically, I explain John Paul II's exhortation to couples to develop a “conjugal spirituality” through the virtues, so that they will grow in reverence for their spouse and for God.

Keywords

Applied ethics, Catholic spirituality, Ethics of reproduction, Fertility awareness information technology, *Humanae vitae*, Pastoral difficulties, *Theology of the Body*

There has been much talk recently about the need for moral theology to take a more “pastoral” approach in the area of human sexuality. Unfortunately, this sentiment is often a guise to excuse persons from the moral law in difficult circumstances rather than a genuine attempt to provide true pastoral care. I do believe that it comes from a place of compassion for couples in distress, yet underlying this approach is the inability to see how moral truth contributes to the flourishing of the human person. Rather, moral truth is regarded as a kind of legalism or rigorism from which persons should free themselves, especially in difficult situations. In response to this view, on the other hand, are those who wish to champion the truth of the moral law by demonstrating its correctness

through speculative reasoning, a noble and necessary endeavor indeed. But this approach can also remain limited. By failing to listen to the experiences of couples and their real pastoral difficulties, such an approach may lack the real power to convince and guide persons to live out the truth of human sexuality. What is needed, then, is (1) a demonstration of

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how moral truth enriches human love and (2) a thoughtful and practical response to specific pastoral difficulties.

The main reason for the widespread dissent from the encyclical *Humanae vitae* is not primarily academic. The rationale in the encyclical is so clear and indisputable that one would have to reinvent entirely the principles of Catholic moral theology and human reason in order to present an argument against it, which is what has taken place in the past fifty years in academic scholarship.¹ Rather, dissent arises first on a practical level by couples themselves on account of the difficulty they experience in living out the teaching. *More specifically, couples often feel that there is a "contradiction" between the responsible regulation of birth and the unity of their love.* In their experience, periodic continence seems to harm spousal love. Even dissenting scholars present an argument against *Humanae vitae* along similar lines. For example, the 1968 Majority Report of the Papal Commission for the Study of Problems of the Family, Population, and Birth Rate, which suggested that contraception may be morally licit in certain conditions on the grounds that man has a right to "intervene in physiological processes," followed their academic argument by voicing their real underlying pastoral concern: "the condemnation of a couple to a long and often heroic abstinence as the means to regulate conception, cannot be founded on the truth." Another major dissenting voice, the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research (2018b), in addition to restating the same academic arguments against the teaching based on either problematic moral reasoning² or on a view of nature that is erroneous,³ also endorses a practical argument against it: "The Church has to recognize the reality of people's lives. The gulf between practice and teaching is too great and causes serious anxiety to many people."

Rather than dismissing the "serious anxiety" of couples and their subjective experience, Pope John Paul II, as a true pastor, takes head on the objection that *Humanae vitae* hurts the union of couples. He demonstrates a keen awareness of the experience of couples when he states in *The Theology of the Body*, "This 'contradiction' is the most frequent reason for objecting to *Humanae vitae* and the teaching of the Church" (John Paul II 2006, no. 127.4). Fifty years later, it remains an objection and a question in couples' hearts that needs an adequate *pastoral* response, both for couples who dissent and for those who may find themselves frustrated in living out the teaching. In this article, I demonstrate that both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II as true pastors took the

lived experience of couples very seriously and offered through their writings a deeply pastoral response. They desire to provide both practical help and, even more importantly, spiritual help for couples, so that they may live according to the truth of their humanity in their masculinity and femininity. These popes are convinced that "whatever conjugal difficulties may arise . . . [the Church] is convinced that there can be no true contradiction between the divine law on transmitting life and that on fostering authentic married love" (John Paul II 1981, no. 33). Certainly, the "gulf between practice and teaching" is very real, and I will provide some concrete examples of these sensitive issues. Yet, I argue that a true evangelization of the culture with the truth of *Humanae vitae* must be accompanied by an answer to the question of love that remains deep within the hearts of married couples in the face of their difficulties. While it is necessary and invaluable to teach couples the methods and mechanics of natural family planning (NFP), I believe that this instruction alone is not sufficient. Married couples need to gain a spiritual awareness of how uniting the two meanings of the conjugal act *forms* their hearts for happiness. Pope John Paul II gives an answer to this question in the final section of his *Theology of the Body*, titled "An Outline of a Conjugal Spirituality," precisely, so that a couple's intimate life together will not be burdened but "enriched" by the teaching of *Humanae vitae*. In this way, couples can not only conform to what is right in the external act (avoiding contraception) but actually experience, in a pure and embodied way, a true marital love. As Archbishop Cordileone (2018) recently stated, "*Humanae vitae* is not easy to live out, but it will lead couples to the most happiness and therefore must be taught in a way that is winsome and effective, without shying away from the suffering involved . . . rather than offering excuses for fleeing the cross, what we need are creative new ideas to help people understand the wisdom and beauty of God's design" (no. 1–21). The aim of this article is to make known in greater clarity Pope John Paul II's "creative new idea" of fostering a conjugal spirituality that aims to move the couple interiorly from merely "following rules" to *cultivating reverence* both for one another and for God.

In the first part of this essay, I will be transparent with some of the concrete difficulties that cause couples to feel interiorly that the teaching is either hopelessly outdated in the modern world, or anti-woman, or contributes to the detriment of couples. Second, through Pope John Paul II's commentary on *Humanae vitae* in papal and prepapal writings, I will explain Pope John Paul II's idea of a "conjugal

spirituality,” so that married couples can embrace a chaste love wholeheartedly. Finally, I will reply to each of the specific difficulties I raise in the first part. It is necessary to demonstrate convincingly both to couples and to pastors, who counsel them, that *Humanae vitae* fosters healthy marriages and families. Couples who embrace the sacredness of conjugal union and the mission of marriage promote a deeper unity between husband and wife and contribute to a flourishing and truly human society. As Pope Paul VI (1968) writes in *Humanae vitae*, “In preserving intact the whole moral law of marriage, the Church is convinced that she is contributing to the creation of a truly human civilization” (no. 18).

Humanae Vitae and Its Difficulties Fifty Years Later

In the encyclical, Pope Paul VI demonstrates that he was, in fact, acutely aware of the difficulties that this teaching presents in the lives of married couples, since he adverts to the “difficulties” or “distresses” no less than ten items in a document that is only several pages long. Furthermore, under chapter 3 titled “Pastoral Directives,” he calls upon scientists, doctors, nurses, Christian couples, priests, and legislators to do all within their power and specific abilities to enable couples to live out this teaching. For example, he states that it is “extremely desirable” that scientists find ways to make knowledge of the cycle of fertility easier to understand (Paul VI 1968, no. 24). Pope Paul VI also calls for a family apostolate in which couples could be apostles to one another by sharing their experiences, their knowledge, and their struggles. With surprisingly strong words he says, “among *all* the forms of the Christian apostolate, it is hard to think of one more opportune for the present time” (Paul VI 1968, no. 26). To his own brother priests, he counsels that they show charity and compassion to married couples, especially when they are “deeply distressed by reason of the difficulties of their life” (Paul VI 1968, no. 29). He urges priests to make sure that married couples “never lose heart” and urges his priests to “teach them the way of prayer.” He desires that couples find in their priests the voice and heart of Christ himself (Paul VI 1968, no. 29).

Looking back fifty years later at his pastoral directives, Pope Paul VI’s call has certainly been heard. There are now significant medical advances in understanding the fertile cycle and multiple methods of NFP (Creighton, Billings, Marquette, Sympto-Thermal, Family of the Americas, Boston method, and others). Pope John Paul II (1981)

commends these advances in *Familiaris consortio*: “the Church notes with satisfaction the results achieved by scientific research aimed at a more precise knowledge of the rhythms of women’s fertility” (no. 35). Even more recently, there are all sorts of smartphone applications and devices for tracking fertility. In response to the call for a family apostolate, the Couple to Couple League has formed an international family apostolate with resources and publications to share stories and information with couples. Similar online venues such as “Living the Sacrament” provide a forum space for couples to help and encourage one another in their joys and trials of learning and living out NFP (<https://livingthesacrament.com/>).

Yet, despite the incredible medical advances and organizations designed to give support to married couples, there still exists a remarkable level of dissent among couples in the United States fifty years later. Pope Paul VI’s (1968) encyclical remains the most disregarded moral teaching among both the secular culture as well as among Catholics, though it is a teaching that is not only for persons of faith but is in fact “in harmony with human reason” (no. 12). In a 2011 study, the Guttmacher Institute, which champions contraceptive “rights,” found that 99 percent women in the United States of reproductive age had at one point used artificial contraceptives, and for Catholic women, 98 percent (Jones and Dreweke 2011). For women “currently using” contraceptives, these numbers fell only to 88 percent overall, and for Catholic women, 87 percent. Catholics have mostly followed the culture on this moral issue.

Broader Cultural Issues

One of the key intellectual shifts in the twentieth century, even among Christians, is a loss of understanding of the nature and purpose of marriage. The Church, in defending the natural law, has always taught and continues to teach that the primary end of marriage is the procreation and education of children.⁴ It is the particular mission of married persons to cooperate with God in bringing forth children. Yet the loss of the *mission* of married persons tends to enforce the idea that having children is merely a personal choice of the couple. Some couples may want children in order to increase their own happiness, and some may not. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB 2009) recognizes and speaks out against these “disturbing” ideas: “We note a disturbing trend today to view marriage as a mostly private matter, an individualistic project not related to the common good but oriented mostly to

achieving personal satisfaction” (p. 4). The notion that marriage is a public matter oriented outside itself to the good of children and the good of a flourishing society is largely lost. They continue:

We are alarmed that a couple’s responsibility to serve life by being open to children is being denied and abandoned more frequently today. Couples too often reflect a lack of understanding of the purposes of marriage. There is a loss of belief in the value of those purposes when couples readily treat, as separate choices, the decisions to get married and to have children. This indicates a mentality in which children are seen not as integral to a marriage but as optional. When children are viewed in this way, there can be damaging consequences not only for them but also for the marriage itself. (USCCB 2009, 4)

There are “damaging consequences” for the marriage because their common mission to parenthood is in fact the very ground for the unification of the couple. To lose, the primary end—“that for the sake of which” marriage exists—creates a significant loss of a sense of a marital *mission* or vocation. The mentality of the “optional” character of having children or having them only in relation to their personal choice and contentment apart from a conscious awareness of the mission of married couples or the good of the family is also reflected in the statistics from the Jones and Dreweke’s study (2011): “U.S. women, on average, want two children, as a result, they spend about five years of their lives pregnant, postpartum or trying to become pregnant, and about 30 years of trying to avoid unintended pregnancy.”

These statistics are somewhat shocking. If the new norm is to spend approximately *thirty years* of avoiding pregnancy, it is no wonder that many couples resort to the use of contraceptives. It is highly unusual in most circumstances (aside from grave health risk) for a couple to use NFP to postpone a new conception for twenty to thirty consecutive years. Most would not attempt it. The reason is that while NFP is a moral means to space births since it always preserves the “inseparable connection” between the unitive and procreative significances of the conjugal act (Paul VI 1968, no. 12), it also preserves the complementary design and ardent desire for sexual intercourse that is a part of human nature and its inclinations. Because in the cycle of fertility the woman experiences an increase in libido during the fertile time and also releases pheromones (Lafranchi 2018), which heighten her attractiveness

to her spouse, couples quite naturally will find themselves wanting to express their love for one another in a conjugal manner during the fertile time. Nature, in a sense, wants conception to occur. It is only when the couple discerns together that they have a serious or just reason for postponing a future pregnancy that they make the decision to abstain temporarily. Because this cycle of attraction is a part of God’s design, NFP already contains a certain dynamic within it, which enables couples to root out less compelling reasons for postponing conception. Spouses will naturally have to ask themselves every month, “remind me again, why are we abstaining?” Not only does the opportunity to communicate about the important marital issues arise but, even more importantly, their conjugal life becomes for them a constant reminder of their God-given *mission* as articulated in *Gaudium et spes*: “the true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of the family life which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Savior, Who through them will enlarge and enrich His own family day by day” (Vatican Council II 1965, no. 50). The practice of NFP not only is a moral means of spacing births but also retains the very meaning and mission of marriage inscribed into “the actual nature of man and woman” (Paul VI 1968, no. 12). The first major difficulty to overcome in evangelizing *Humanae vitae* is to recover and teach anew to couples that the primary end of marriage is the procreation and education of children, to which all other ends are ordered. It is the unique mission that God entrusts to them. I find in practice that many Catholics are confused about this teaching and think that the change in ecclesial language at the Second Vatican Council and in the 1983 Code of Canon law as compared with the 1917 code demonstrates that the Church abrogated its earlier teaching. Some suggest that Pope John Paul II’s personalist language supports their view. Yet, in his *Theology of the Body*, he states explicitly, “Although, in approaching the issue [on the ends of marriage], neither the conciliar constitution [*Gaudium et spes*] nor the encyclical [*Humanae vitae*] use the language that was at one time customary, they nevertheless speak about that to which the traditional expressions refer” (John Paul II 2006, no. 127.3). It is critical to uphold this teaching since it forms an essential part of the ground for the unity of couples and their marital expectations. In fact, a recent study on the decline in marital satisfaction of new mothers found that wives who more closely aligned their marital expectations with the mission of childbearing (vs. those who thought of

marriage primarily as a private romantic relationship) were less likely to experience a decline in marital satisfaction after the birth of their first child (Dew and Wilcox 2011, 5).

The second major shift in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that contributes to the difficulties and dissent from *Humanae vitae* from a pastoral perspective is the emergence of the “nuclear family” as distinct from families living close to their extended family. Couples in the United States are typically significantly more alone in their task of fulfilling the obligations of their state. The alienation of persons and families from each other is radical. While both the Industrial Revolution (Linn, Wilson, and Fako 2012) and greater facility in traveling for employment may have contributed to the phenomenon, the unintended effect is that there is now a fundamental lack of structural support for families. Rather than sharing the experience of family life with grandparents and extended family, the advent of the nuclear family leads to greater pressure on parents alone to fulfill all of the demands of child-rearing without the physical or psychological support of intergenerational living. It also contributes to an unnatural isolation of mothers without a daily community. For example, one sign of this isolation is the existence of thousands of online blogs written by mothers who write to anyone and to no one in particular about their lives, seeking some semblance of community and personal contact with others in the virtual world to supplement their loss of personal friendships and community. This modern situation is strange and even irregular for women who tend to thrive in relationships with others.⁵ The alienation of the modern couple is a new phenomenon that brings about tremendous difficulties for living out *Humanae vitae*. As Linn states, “The family structure of American families differs substantially from the forms predominating in most developing nations. In these more traditional societies, extended families including grandparents, parents, and their young and grown children usually are the norm” (Linn, Wilson, and Fako 2012). The conclusion is that a real tension now exists between the alienated situation of families in the modern world and the design of human nature from which the moral law is derived. As the philosopher Edward Feser (2015) observes about the order of nature:

Nature makes it very difficult to indulge in sex without procreation. There is no prophylactic sheathe issued with a penis at birth and no diaphragm issued with a vagina. It takes some effort

to come up with these devices, and even then, in the form in which they existed for most of human history they were not terribly effective. . . . We’re built in such a way that sexual arousal is hard to resist and occurs very frequently, and such that it is very difficult to avoid pregnancies resulting from indulgence of that arousal. The obvious conclusion is that the natural end of sex is (in part) not just procreation, but procreation in large numbers. Mother Nature clearly wants us to have babies, and lots of them. (pp. 389–90)

The difficulty here is that man and woman are designed not only for procreation but for procreation in large numbers. While the fundamental nature of the human person has not changed (nor can it), nor the strength of sexual desire, nor the moral law, the situation of the “nuclear family” in the modern world makes it difficult for two parents alone to raise a large family without adequate help. Pope Paul VI does not state, however, that families must conceive as many children as they possibly can nor even that couples must have a large family. Responsible parenting according to Paul VI (1968) can include *both* those “who prudently and generously decide to have more children, and those who, for serious reasons and with due respect to moral precepts, decide not to have additional children for either a certain or an indefinite period of time” (no. 10). Nevertheless, part of the difficulty from a pastoral perspective is that if a couple discerns that they must limit their family size for a “certain or indefinite period of time,” they will still experience the intensity of nature’s design for a more prolific family life. The duration of abstention needed may be longer than what God himself actually designed for married life. A couple’s experience of NFP in this case might actually seem somewhat unnatural, not in a moral sense but in a philosophic sense that, due to limits in their circumstances, the couple must consciously choose to go against the broader trajectory of nature’s aim for procreation in large numbers.

Specific Marital Issues

There are a number of other pastoral difficulties which I would like to name, so that medical professionals, priests, and those involved in Family Life Offices in parishes can be more acutely aware of the situation of families and the pastoral reasons for dissent. While I do not think that any of these difficulties are insurmountable, they may be hidden reasons for why couples dissent and look for confirmation of

their dissent in priests or theologians who suggest only that they “follow their conscience” even if it is directly contradictory with both human reason and revealed truth. In the final section, I will offer a response to each of these difficulties.

1. Difficulty ascertaining fertile and infertile times, especially in the postpartum period. While public lectures on the difference between contraception and NFP still remain somewhat rare, the lectures in favor of NFP almost always point to the female menstrual cycle and the “few” days of possible joint fertility, about six to seven days of abstaining, if a couple desires to postpone a future pregnancy. A call to abstain for this short time does not seem unreasonable, and priests who preach on the subject may be at a loss to understand why this period is so difficult for couples. The main difficulty is not abstention for roughly one week but how to identify with accuracy and certainty which week it is. While there are couples who can identify their fertile signs with ease, there are many still whose signs of fertility remain confusing to interpret, and this situation can cause “serious anxiety” and a much lengthier abstention, for some couples, almost the entire cycle. Additional medical issues such as polycystic ovarian syndrome can also make the identification of the fertile window much more difficult to identify.

A further difficulty is the identification of the onset of fertility during the postpartum phase of lactational amenorrhea. Many couples, unsure of their signs at this time, delay conjugal union for many months. Some couples, assured that they interpreted their signs correctly, become pregnant soon after the birth of a new baby. Women in particular may find themselves between a rock and a hard place in that when their fertility is delayed by nocturnal nursing, they are either available for intercourse but do not get sufficient sleep at night or if the baby sleeps for more than four to six hours during the night without breastfeeding, fertility in some cases may quickly return. The rate of fertility return may depend on a variety of factors and may be different for the same woman in subsequent pregnancies.

Finally, when fertility returns following the postpartum period, the cycles of fertility tend to be more irregular and often much longer than normal. A couple seriously trying to postpone a new conception, depending on which method of NFP they are using, may need to abstain almost the whole month for the first several cycles until a more normal menstrual pattern emerges (Marquette Institute for Natural Family Planning 2017).

A further difficulty in identifying signs of fertility is that some biological indicators of fertility can be obscured by activities and medications. There are several different methods of NFP which rely on either a single fertility sign or several signs together. For example, Billings and Creighton rely either heavily or only on sensation or visual observation of the cervical mucus sign, whereas other methods such as Sympto-Thermal also include basal body temperature. For women experiencing cycles, some of the biological signs that these methods rely on to indicate fertility can be obscured by various activities and medications. For example, for an accurate basal body temperature reading, the woman needs to have several hours of consecutive sleep the night before and take her temperature at the same time in the morning. Family life with young children who frequently wake at night can disrupt the pattern and may in practice render this sign to be unreliable. Basal body temperature is also unreliable if couples are trying to identify ovulation postpartum. Their joint fertility can enable them to conceive before they are able to identify the temperature shift, although it can confirm after the fact that ovulation has occurred. Methods that rely primarily on the mucus sign can be obscured by other activities and medications. For example, normal activities such as swimming or frequent intercourse can cause a woman to miss or misinterpret her mucus sign. In addition, certain over-the-counter medications for colds, and some allergy medications can cause the mucus sign to dry up, in which case a woman relying on this sign has lost her ability to track accurately her fertile signs. In practice, a woman who needs to take a medication for another ailment may have to choose between suffering without that medication (for the sake of keeping an accurate chart and being available for intercourse) or taking the medication to ease her symptoms but losing an accurate chart and the couple needing to abstain. Furthermore, there is little information available to couples on how additional environmental influences, such as consumption of alcohol, or other combinations of medications might affect the biological signs couples rely on for identifying their fertility.

2. The only time women can engage in intercourse is when they are least interested in it. A more common issue among couples is that the naturally infertile times in both the menstrual cycle and during the postpartum period of lactational amenorrhea are also times when women typically experience a decreased interest in intercourse (LaMarre, Paterson, and

Goetzalka 2003). Women with healthy menstrual cycles typically experience increased libido during the fertile time (Roney and Simmons 2013). Does this trend imply that the use of NFP is in a way, anti-woman? How can couples transition from the fertile phase II,⁶ when the female is interested but unavailable if postponing conception, to phase III, when she is available but has less interest?

3. Length of abstaining is difficult for husbands. This difficulty is not meant to suggest that the sacrifice is felt only by husbands, yet it remains a unique difficulty for men in particular, given that men do not have a reproductive cycle with identifiable increases and decreases in desire due to hormonal changes. In a healthy male, sexual desire tends to be more constant. Is NFP in a sense also anti-male? How can the man, who has valiantly waited and respected his wife in the total meaning of her body, be received joyfully by her, when in phase III she has naturally become less interested in intercourse? Will he not feel rejected or she used?

4. Medical problems in pregnancy and childbirth cause increased health risks for future pregnancies. Great medical advances in the last century have brought about a decline in both infant and maternal mortality. One of the ways in which infant mortality has decreased has been through more routine Cesarean sections over a vaginal birth. The difficulty for post-Cesarean mothers is that unless the following birth is a vaginal birth (VBAC), the mother will likely need repeat C-sections in future pregnancies to avoid uterine rupture. Frequent births with minimal spacing can also increase the risk of postpartum hemorrhage in vaginal births. These medical issues can cause unexpected limitations on the number of children a mother can safely bring to birth and be a major factor in a couple's family planning discernment. Further, there are some illnesses exacerbated in pregnancy, such as pulmonary hypertension, that can severely jeopardize the health of the mother. It seems that total abstinence to avoid a pregnancy is unthinkable in these cases, and as the 1968 Majority Report suggested, "cannot be founded on truth" (Papal Commission 1968).

I have ventured to lay out many of the common difficulties that couples experience in living the teaching of *Humanae vitae*. In doing so, I have attempted to make more concrete the words of Pope Paul VI (1968): "We do not at all intend to hide the sometimes serious difficulties inherent in the life of Christian married persons" (no. 25). My purpose in

confronting the practical difficulties is twofold. First, I hope to show that most of these difficulties are not uncommon. Pastors should not be surprised by them nor consider them sufficient circumstances for advising a couple to depart from the moral law. Couples who experience them should not feel alone and should reach out to Christian apostolates for support and practical help. Secondly, I hope that a more open and honest dialogue about them can provide better solutions to these issues, both from advances in medicine and dialogue about current medical practices and, even more importantly, from an advancement in understanding how the moral law does not limit but invites couples to foster authentic marital love.

It is difficulties such as these that are at the root of dissent from the teaching. They are some of the fundamental reasons which require prolonged abstinence for couples, or more children than they expected, and thus represent the subjective experience of a "contradiction" between spousal love and the moral imperative not to frustrate the conjugal act.

Developing a Conjugal Spirituality: Pope John Paul II's Commentary on *Humanae Vitae*

The Role of Periodic Continence within Spousal Love

It is unusual to see the words "conjugal" and "spirituality" next to one another so as to constitute a single phrase. The word "spirituality" conjures up images of praying in pews, not the act of sexual intercourse. In fact, in the Catholic tradition, this phrase has never existed until the writings of Pope John Paul II in his commentary on *Humanae vitae*. In the final section of his *Theology of the Body*, Pope John Paul II dedicates time to outlining a "conjugal spirituality" for married couples precisely in the face of pastoral difficulties. Following his explanation on why *Humanae vitae* preserves the "language of the body" in truth, Pope John Paul II turns to address the main objection to *Humanae vitae*, namely, that periodic continence harms spousal love. He puts one form of the objection this way: "It is often thought that continence causes inner tensions from which men and women should free themselves" (John Paul II 2006, no. 129.1). In a manner characteristic of his own Thomistic personalism, he responds to the issue from within the experience of the person, yet with due attention to the whole nature of man (Wojtyła 1993, 167–76). The key issue, in his mind, is how to understand the meaning of continence for married

persons precisely in its relationship to marital love. He argues that “what is needed is *a more thorough and in-depth analysis of continence and of its particular meaning for the truth of the mutual “language of the body”*” (John Paul II 2006, no. 127.5). His attention in this section, then, is less on the moral liceity of using NFP to space births and more on how the practice of periodic continence forms the hearts and souls of spouses for happiness through the virtue of chastity, but most especially through the power of love. “The fundamental element of conjugal spirituality is the love poured out in the hearts of the spouses as a gift of the Holy Spirit. . . . Love is united with conjugal chastity, which, manifesting itself as continence, realizes the inner order of conjugal life together” (John Paul II 2006, no. 131.1). For Pope John Paul II, the question of continence must be treated from within the inner subjectivity of husband and wife and their own longing for a true encounter of love in marriage. While he argues that *Humane vitae* gives attention to the biological and periodic character of human fertility, “it is nevertheless *not on this level alone* that a problem like this, which has such a deeply personalistic and sacramental (theological) meaning, can be resolved” (John Paul II 2006, no. 130.3). His focus then is on the personalistic value of periodic continence in its relationship to marital love and to the growth of the couple in holiness.

Since supernatural love is the “fundamental element” of conjugal spirituality, he demonstrates that this love accepts the totality of the other in his or her masculinity or femininity. It is not a blind obedience to the whims of fertility but “the power of love” which “rightly unites the two meanings of the conjugal act” (John Paul II 2006, no. 127.5). This great power “exclude[s] not only in theory, but above all in practice, the “contradiction” that could come about in this area” (John Paul II 2006, no. 127.5). It is “above all” love for one’s spouse and for God that guides spouses to unite the two meanings of the conjugal act. Such love opens the way not only to the healing of concupiscence but to a more profound appreciation for the value of his or her spouse. The key is to transition from a negative view of chastity as merely restraint to a positive view in which an interior formation in virtue enables a person to experience a more enriching spousal encounter.

If conjugal chastity (and chastity in general) manifests itself at first as an ability to resist the concupiscence of the flesh, it subsequently reveals itself as a *singular ability* to perceive, love, and

realize those meanings of the “language of the body” that remain completely unknown to concupiscence itself and progressively enrich the spousal dialogue of the couple by purifying, deepening, and at the same time simplifying it. For this reason, the asceticism of continence, about which the encyclical speaks (HV 21 [Paul VI 1968]), does not impoverish “affective manifestations” but on the contrary, it makes them spiritually more intense and thus enriches them. (John Paul II 2006, no. 128.3)

The virtue of conjugal chastity enables rather than restricts a deepening of love. For example, a couple using NFP to postpone conception might think of their time of abstaining as merely “resistance” to the flesh. This is one step on the way to maturity and growth in love. Another step forward might be to consciously look at whether one is in fact building any virtue and love for the other during this time or merely thinking about the pleasure (both physical and emotional) one is not able to have during this time. Pope Paul VI (1968) explicitly speaks of the value of chastity as follows: “far from being a hindrance to their love of one another, [chastity] transforms it, by giving it a more truly human character.”(no. 21). Just as a bachelor may or may not have a heart transformed by chastity though he refrains from intercourse so also is the same challenge presented to spouses. Pope Paul VI says that chastity “fosters in husband and wife thoughtfulness and loving consideration for one another” (Paul VI 1968, no. 21). If a couple does nothing to foster such thoughtfulness or tenderness for the other during times of abstaining, is there really a growth in chastity and “above all” love? What “development of their personalities” and repealing of “inordinate self-love” have they overcome in this time (Paul VI 1968, no. 21)? It is not the moral law itself nor the asceticism of continence which necessarily creates tension for the unity of love, but the concupiscence of the flesh and the profound need for *greater*, not less, “affective manifestations” and “thoughtfulness” which is characteristic of the virtue of love. Love gives attention to the needs of the other. In fact, if a spouse gives affection only at times when he or she expects intercourse to follow, even spouses can feel used rather than loved as persons for their own sake.

At the same time, Pope Paul VI (1968) mentions that periodic continence even “arouses in them an awareness of their responsibilities” (no. 21). Since the reason for abstaining is to prevent a new conception, it is precisely the reverence for the moral law

which *enhances* their awareness of their responsibilities as parents and serves as a concrete reminder to foster greater expressions of paternal and maternal love. This conscious awareness, then, should lead spouses to *use the time of periodic continence wisely*. Spouses can sublimate their energies toward bringing about the good of family life in a variety of ways; for example, fathers can spend more quality time with their children. In fact, a wife's attraction to her husband often increases the more she witnesses expressions of her husband's fatherly love for their children. Likewise, providing time for a wife to replenish herself physically, emotionally, and spiritually enables her to be a more joyful and attractive spouse to her husband and a more patient mother. All of these blessings are the sweet fruits of the *virtue* of conjugal chastity, as distinct from merely restraint. Pope John Paul II (2006) says, "when we analyze continence in this way . . . we realize that the apparent 'contradiction' often brought in as an objection against *Humanae vitae* and against the Church's teaching about conjugal morality disappears" (no. 128.4). Love and true virtue, as distinct from mere resistance, have the real power to purify, deepen, and enrich a couple's experience of love—that is, *if they challenge themselves to move in that direction through personal effort and sacramental grace and through the power of the Holy Spirit*. The key is to make an "interior and ascetical commitment" (John Paul II 2006, no. 128.4) to growing in love for one's spouse, both in times of continence and in consummation. Thus, Pope John Paul II concludes his discussion on continence with somewhat surprising words. Whereas periodic continence was accused of harming marital love, because it can create unwanted marital "tensions," he argues that "on the contrary, [continence, integrally understood] is the *one and only way to free oneself from such tensions*" (John Paul II 2006, no. 129.1). How can this be? The reason is that periodic continence must be more than mere submission to the rhythms of fertility in spacing births.

To rise to the level of virtue and self-mastery, there must be an interior and mature self-possession which enables the couple to experience the inner freedom necessary to be able to make their gift a true expression of love.

By itself, knowledge of the rhythms of fertility—though indispensable—does not yet create that interior freedom of the gift that is explicitly spiritual in nature and depends on the maturity of the

inner man. This freedom presupposes that one is able to direct sensual and emotive reactions in order to allow the gift of self to the other "I" on the basis of the mature possession of one's own "I" in its bodily and emotive subjectivity. (John Paul II 2006, no. 130.4, emphasis added)

The conjugal act, he argues, is complex in that it involves instinct, arousal, and deep emotion; yet precisely because it is a *personal* act, it involves the will of man at a fundamental level. He argues that husband and wife must first attain a mature self-possession in order to make a "gift of self" in the conjugal act. It is precisely this self-possession and "interior freedom of the gift" that enables the conjugal act to be an act of giving and being received by the other in its full joy and stunning vulnerability and not merely a taking or using of the other person. As he states in *Familiaris consortio*: "The total physical self-giving would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving. God's design in the order of nature is truly personal; it reveals the innermost being of the person" (John Paul II 1981, no. 11). Since the conjugal act would be a "lie" if it were not simultaneously a personal gift—and the ability to give a personal gift depends entirely upon a mature self-possession and self-mastery through the virtue of chastity—*It is the voluntary character of continence itself* (chosen for just reasons) *in which the power of love and respect for the other person resides*. He who can voluntarily choose the good of the other in the totality of his or her body is one who loves, respects, and reverences his or her spouse—and this reality is the most precious gift which periodic continence protects and preserves.

The Real Questions of Love Posed to One Another

Spouses who reverence one another through the "power of love" in times of periodic continence provide the real substance and meaning to their subsequent consummation. The question of real love is posed: "Are you willing to wait for me until you can receive me totally?" Their answer to one another is a profound "yes"—"you, above all, are worth waiting for." It is the "yes" of real love. The spouses speak through the language of their bodies in conjugal union what is already true in their souls through their prior continent love. The ecstatic joy of conjugal union which is the Creator's gift is intended to be an experience in which spouses consummate the mystery of their love in a bodily way, which

simultaneously ordains their love to the possibility of a further relational gift—motherhood and fatherhood. Thus, another question of love emerges: “We might be parents together; are you with me in this awesome responsibility?” When spouses tell the truth through their bodies in chaste marital love, the answer here too is a resounding “yes”: “I am with you, and I am willing to lay down my life for you and our children.” It is the “yes” of true marital love. How deep and enduring is this “yes” to a chaste love when parents have already experienced the sacrifices and joys that children bring. The possibility of raising a new life together is both thrilling and daunting—even if a couple’s intention is to postpone a new conception, a chaste love poses the question again: “What if, by chance, we conceive even if conception is not our plan right now? Are you still with me in all of this? The sleepless nights? Toddler tantrums? Teenage years?” “Yes, I am with you always.” It is this kind of beauty and depth that the language of human sexuality is meant to express. That is why the language of conjugal consummation echo the very words of Christ himself, “I am with you always” (Mt 28:20) and the totality of his own self gift on the cross. In the Eucharist, by which he remains always with us, he invites couples to live in the flesh the words of his own perfect love: “This is my body given up for you.” There is a reason why above all things it is marriage which echoes the “great mystery” of Christ’s embodied love for the Church, his bride (Eph 5).

From Rules to Reverence: Spousal and Divine Intimacy through Conjugal Union

In the final section of his “Conjugal Spirituality,” Pope John Paul II turns to the theme of reverence as a gift of the Holy Spirit. What is surprising is that he suggests that couples discover a newfound reverence for God, not apart from but *through* the sacred act of conjugal union. John Paul II believes that merely encouraging couples to follow moral rules is an inadequate pastoral response because it does not sufficiently form the human heart for happiness. Nor does it respond sufficiently to the main objection couples present to *Humane Vitae*. Rather, John Paul teaches that there must be an interior change. Couples must experience a movement in their hearts from *rules to reverence*. The Book of Psalms begins with this very appeal. “Blessed [happy] is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked. . . . His delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1: 1–2). True moral and spiritual progress takes place in the inner man when

he no longer needs “rules” because he himself “delights” in the holiness of God and experiences interiorly how the law of the Lord draws his soul to intimacy with Him. Thus, the gift of chastity and the power of love bear new fruit in a holy reverence for God. “At the center of conjugal spirituality, therefore, stands chastity, not only as a moral virtue (formed by love), but equally as a virtue connected with the gifts of the Holy Spirit—above all with the gift of reverence for what comes from God” (John Paul II 2006, no. 131.2). Here, John Paul II promotes a spirituality that is truly conjugal. It is the act of sex itself, which becomes the invitation to spouses to reverence the mystery of God. “The gift of reverence for what God has created makes the apparent ‘contradiction’ in this sphere disappear and gradually overcomes the difficulty stemming from concupiscence, thanks to the maturity of the virtues and the power of the gift of the Holy Spirit” (John Paul II 2006, no. 131:5). The experience of a “contradiction” between the divine law and the unity of conjugal love is overcome by a change, not in the moral law but in the inner man who must grow in reverence for God through a chaste and holy union. It is this precise difficulty—love uniting the two meanings of the conjugal act—which becomes the invitation not only for the redemption of the human heart, but, for a newfound dialogue and even intimacy with God himself. Conjugal union is the unique sign, not only of creation, since it is that whereby God continues his creative work, but also becomes the theological sign of the Redeemer’s own spousal love.

Reverence for the work of God contributes to ensuring that the conjugal act is not diminished and deprived of interiority in the whole of conjugal life—that it does not become “habitual”—and that there be expressed in it an appropriate fullness of personal and ethical contents, as well as religious contents, that is veneration for the majesty of the Creator, the only and ultimate depository of the source of life, and for the spousal love of the Redeemer. (John Paul II 2006, no. 132.3)

While in marital life it is normal and healthy for conjugal life to be “habitual,” John Paul II is stating that it ought not to be merely a habit that never rises to recognition and reverence for God. If it were so, the conjugal act would be seriously “deprived of interiority” and the joy of reverence and gratitude for God’s unique gift to spouses. For this reason, whenever spouses give due attention to God—and love

consists in such attention—the habit of attention necessarily overflows into other loves and relationships. Therefore, “this gift brings with it a deep and all-encompassing *attention to the person* in his or her masculinity or femininity, thus creating the interior climate suitable for personal communion” (John Paul II 2006, no. 132.5).

Reverence for God’s gift of conjugal union cultivates and deepens true marital love. In giving God the attention that is due, spouses can foster a renewed attention to one another in which a true “personal communion” consists. True reverence can enable couples to increase, and not neglect, their true affection for one another. “The attitude of reverence for the work of God, which the Spirit stirs up in the spouses, has an enormous significance for those “affective manifestations,” because it goes hand in hand with the capacity for profound pleasure in, admiration for, disinterested attention to the “visible” and at the same time “invisible” beauty of femininity and masculinity, and finally a profound appreciation for the disinterested gift of the “other”” (John Paul II 2006, no. 132.6). Reverence enables couples to experience greater joy in both the visible manifestation of the other and a renewed appreciation for the subjectivity or “invisible” beauty of the other. By contrast, “the antithesis of conjugal spirituality” consists of a “subjective lack of such understanding, connected with anti-conceptive practices and mentality” (John Paul II 2006, no. 132.2). A fundamental lack of true reverence for the other in his or her total personhood as male or female leads to “an enormous harm from the point of view of the inner culture of the human person” (John Paul II 2006, no. 132.2). Chastity, love, and most especially the gift of reverence “shapes the spirituality of the spouses for the sake of protecting the particular dignity of this act” (John Paul II 2006, no. 132.2).

What then of the great “gulf between teaching and practice” and the “serious anxiety” that *Humanae vitae* sometimes presents in the lives of married couples? If there is a “gulf” between an enriching experience of periodic continence and a couple’s actual experience—a reality to be expected given the weakness of man and his need for a Redeemer—then the only thing that remains is the challenge to grow in love. Just as religious begin their consecration to God as merely novices in love, so too do married couples. Through the sacrament of marriage, they too are “consecrated” (Paul VI 1968, no. 25; John Paul II 2006, no. 127.5) to God and set apart for his own purposes and not merely their own. Like religious life, marriage too provides a rigorous formation in real love through an authentic gift of self.

That is why Pope John Paul II (2006) argues that “one should not speak about ‘contradiction’ here, but only about difficulty” (no. 127.4). In the face of this difficulty, John Paul II has a name for this specific love which preserves the sacredness of conjugal union according to God’s design: “conjugal charity.” In *Familiaris consortio* he states, “Conjugal charity is the proper and specific way in which the spouses participate in and are called to live the very charity of Christ who gave himself on the cross” (John Paul II 1981, no. 15). The idea of conjugal charity is at the heart of his notion of conjugal spirituality because it is precisely through a real imitation of Christ’s own self-gift, and not merely through submission to rules, that spouses grow in love for one another and in holiness before God.

Pastoral Replies to Practical Difficulties

While the main work of my response consists in providing a deeper understanding of the role of periodic continence in marriage in relation to spousal love, nevertheless, there are sensitive issues that ought to be addressed, however briefly, in order to encourage further dialogue and advancement.

Objection 1: Difficulty Ascertaining Signs of Fertility

Reply: While there have been tremendous improvements in understanding the fertility cycle thanks to advances in medical science, there remains room for fine-tuning the methods and rules for NFP, both in the cycling and especially in the postpartum phases. I suggest that there needs to be more communication between couples who practice NFP and those who commit themselves professionally to the study, research, and practice of medicine, so that the difficulties mentioned above can be somewhat alleviated. Since mainstream obstetrics and gynecology does not invest significantly into this research, there still remain many areas of possible drug or environmental contraindications that can affect the interpretation of signs of fertility. Pope John Paul II (1981) already called for a “more decisive and wide-ranging extension of that research” (no. 35). Giving couples more precise knowledge will help their confidence and commitment in following the method. At the same time, couples should be advised that they can switch methods if another method of NFP provides more peace of mind.

Some more recent advances in NFP research include the possibility of at-home progesterone test

strips to confirm with greater certainty that ovulation has occurred. Couples who have not only a serious but a grave reason to avoid pregnancy may not need to have recourse to total abstinence if they are able to identify more reliably the transition from phase II to phase III of the menstrual cycle. While this shift can be confirmed by blood draw, it is more convenient to have testing at home. Whereas, in 1951, Pope Pius XII (1951) told midwives in an allocution that in such extreme cases total abstinence is necessary, that conclusion may not necessarily be the case today. In such a case, couples should receive special instruction from a qualified medical practitioner. Without the certainty that the cycle has reached phase III, however, it would be unloving to expose one's spouse to grave health risk.

Family Life Offices should promote information about a wide variety of methods of NFP, not only the ones available in their diocese, so couples can choose the method that is right for them. Couples should also receive NFP instruction for special circumstances such as coming off of hormonal birth control, miscarriage, postpartum, and menopause.

Objection 2. The Only Time That Women Can Engage in Intercourse Is When They Are Least Interested in It

Reply: Since the natural rhythms aim for conception as the *telos* of intercourse, it is not surprising that women experience heightened desire during the fertile time. Does nature provide no further help to women? Has God designed the whole system unfairly so that women will only experience a sexual encounter with great interest and desire on rare occasions when they intend to conceive? Two points should be made here. The first concerns human biology and the second the psychological/emotional sphere. I chose these two aspects for my response because Pope Paul VI (1968) in *Humane Vitae* expresses his concern for both the "physical" and "emotional equilibrium" of wives (no. 17). First, the woman's body contains the only organ in the human body that has no further identifiable purpose than to aid in sexual pleasure. This fact is absolutely striking from a philosophic perspective because there are no other organs whose sole purpose is pleasure; rather, pleasure accompanies the purposes (*teloi*) that certain organs and systems of the human body aim to achieve (e.g., eating, while pleasurable is for nourishment). Pope John Paul II in *Love and Responsibility* is interested in these anatomical differences and how they play into arousal for the purpose of

fostering the good of marriage. "Non-observance of these teachings of sexology in the marital relationship is contrary to the good of the other partner to the marriage and the durability and cohesion of the marriage itself" (Wojtyla 1993, 273). It is worth quoting his text here at length in order to see first hand just how deeply he thought about this issue and his concern that the woman's experience not be "qualitatively inferior."

Sexologists state that the curve of arousal in woman is different from that in man—it rises more slowly and falls more slowly. Anatomically, arousal occurs in the same way in women and in men (the locus of excitement is in the cerebro-spinal system at S2-S3). The female organism, as was mentioned above, reacts more easily to excitation in various parts of the body, which to some extent compensates for the fact that the woman's excitement grows more slowly than that of the man. The man must take this difference between male and female reactions into account, not for hedonistic but for altruistic reasons. There exists a rhythm dictated by nature itself which both spouses must discover so that climax may be reached both by the man and by the woman, and as far as possible occur in both simultaneously. (Wojtyla 1993, 272)

It must be taken into account that it is naturally difficult for the woman to adapt herself to the man in the sexual relationship, that there is a natural unevenness of physical and psychological rhythms, so that there is a need for harmonization, which is impossible without good will, especially on the part of the man, who must carefully observe the reactions of the woman. If a woman does not obtain natural gratification from the sexual act, there is a danger that her experience of it will be qualitatively inferior, [and] will not involve her fully as a person. (Wojtyla 1993, 273)

John Paul II suggests that the man should pay particular attention to the curve of arousal in his wife. He must take the truth of her feminine difference as a sexual being into account, so that she also experiences the joy of a climactic union. The reason, however, is "not hedonistic, but altruistic." It is an act of virtue and good will for the man to put his wife's good before himself and so "harmonize" the experience so that his wife also enjoys a natural gratification from their union. The term "harmonize" is particularly poignant. A harmony does not eradicate

difference nor is it a solo act. To sing on harmony, one must listen and respond to the pitch and rhythm of the other, yet in his own note which is different from her note. Together they make something beautiful. This harmony is the fruit of true reverence for the woman. Pope Paul VI (1968) notes in *Humanae vitae* that one of the consequences of growing accustomed to contraception is that man “may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection” (Paul VI 1968, no. 17).

The second point concerns the realm of the psychological/emotional sphere. In the *Theology of the Body*, John Paul II discusses the importance of the role of the emotions in intercourse: “In the conjugal act, the intimate union should bring with itself a particular intensification of emotion, even more, the deep emotional stirring, of the other person” (John Paul II 2006, no. 130.2). John Paul II also suggests that spouses try to achieve a favorable emotional climate in their marriage through the virtue of tenderness. He says, “this ability to enter readily into another person’s emotions and experiences can play a big part in harmonization of marital intercourse” (Wojtyla 1993, 273). Just as attention to physical truth about sexual difference in intercourse is valuable for the good of the spouses, so also is attention to the truth about women’s emotions. John Paul II argues that women have a greater need for tenderness on account of their rich emotional life as well as on account of the sacrifices they take on through childbearing. Nature also seems to have an inequality here. Whereas both engage in the conjugal act, the woman carries the child within her for nine months, “a unique experience of joy and travail” and with great difficulty, brings the child into the world (John Paul II 1995, *Letter to Women*, no. 2). For many months or even years, she feeds the infant from her own body day and night. Her task is greater, at least in the beginning. Yet, the man can also harmonize the difference by cherishing her and offering her great affection and tenderness. “A man is capable of fully accepting a woman’s gift of herself only if he is fully conscious of the magnitude of the gift—which he cannot be unless he affirms the value of her person. Realization of the value of the gift awakens the need to show gratitude and to reciprocate in ways which would match its value” (Wojtyla 1993, 129). If the masculine heart is cognizant of the “magnitude of the gift” he has received, and that he must always strive to “match its value,” he will try to foster an

emotional climate in which the woman feels cherished, adored, and loved. As a practical point, women who are mothers can often be fatigued on account of the sacrifices they make for their children. One way that men can match the value of this gift is to find creative ways to provide their wives with the time and space for self-care. Nothing diminishes the beauty of the feminine spirit as much as neglect of caring for herself. Such attention to the good of the human person is characteristic of true love.

Objection 3. Length of Abstinence Is Difficult for Men

Reply: The great attention that Pope John Paul II gives to the subjectivity of the human person may be of help in this regard. Just as it is good for men to recognize and value “the magnitude of the gift” of woman and to respond to her heightened need for tenderness, so also should a woman recognize and enter into the subjectivity of her spouse. She should acknowledge his naturally heightened sensuality and desire to experience her spousal love for him in a conjugal manner. If a woman feels the strain of abstinence during her fertile time, she would do well to consider that the strength of her desire at this time is likely similar to what her spouse feels much or all of the time, since the male has no cycle with a verifiable increase or decrease in desire. His sacrifice for her is great, and she would be remiss to undervalue it.

Yet, a key part of the tension in abstaining for men can be resolved through a more thoughtful understanding of what the man subjectively desires when he desires conjugal union. Wives can make a significant effort to meet the psychological desire of their husbands (here I use the term more classically, *psuche*, as in, the desire of the soul), even if they are unable to consummate their love in that time. In the act of sex, a woman not only receives her spouse into her own body, but from his perspective, *she envelops him* with the fullness of her feminine beauty, charm, softness, and allure. These distinctly feminine qualities are a welcome relief from the fierce and highly competitive world in which husbands spend much of their time for the sake of providing for their families. In her, he has a safe haven, where he can at last be enclosed in a garden of beauty and peace (Sg 5:1). There is a place for him to bring his own vulnerability and to rest his heart. “The heart of her husband trusts in her” (Prv 31:11). Even if the couple must abstain from intercourse temporarily, wives can respond to the masculine desire to be utterly enveloped in her beauty

through other affections and through their peaceful emotional attention and presence. It takes tremendous virtue, especially the virtue of patience, for wives who are often fatigued and even irritable from long days in isolation with their children, to put the good of their husbands first by making a conscious choice to preserve their own interior peace and feminine beauty so that they can offer a true solace to their husbands. Yet the very first pope, St. Peter himself, exhorts wives to present themselves precisely in this manner: “[Your beauty] should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight” (1 Pt 3:4). The feminine disposition of beauty and interior peace can be a great balm to the masculine soul. Wives should aspire to fulfill such desires as much as possible in general and even more so when just reasons require them to abstain. In this way, she who is by nature more tender can offer this gift to her husband: “Tenderness creates a feeling of not being alone, a feeling that her or his whole life is equally the content of another and very dear person’s life. This conviction very greatly facilitates and reinforces their sense of unity” (Wojtyla 1993, 207). Finally, wives should consider it an act of love to make accurate and consistent observations of their fertile signs and to chart them together, so that there are more available days for conjugal union. Laziness in this area can cause further frustration and could be very easily ameliorated with a little more “thoughtfulness and loving consideration” of her spouse (Paul VI 1968, no. 21).

Objection 4. Medical Problems in Pregnancy and Childbirth Cause Increased Health Risks for Future Pregnancies

Reply: Medical reasons certainly become an integral part of the discernment of whether to postpone conception and for how long. Here, I issue an invitation for the field of obstetrics to consider a more holistic picture of pregnancy and childbirth and to foster dialogue with those who study midwifery. Obstetricians should be cautious and more discerning about the need for inductions and interventions in the process of labor and childbirth, which often lead to further complications and Cesarean sections. If there is no identifiable medical issue that requires such a major surgery, doctors should not insist on performing the procedure unnecessarily. The C-section rate in the United States is 32 percent or about one in three births (Martin et al. 2018). This rate is abnormally high. When surgery is necessary to save a mother

or a baby’s life, it is absolutely invaluable. When it is unnecessary, it does a great disservice to the woman’s “physical and emotional equilibrium” and can be a major factor in the couple’s future family planning discernment. Justice for women and their families requires greater transparency about the risks and reasons for performing a more radical form of delivery.

A special acknowledgment should go out to those women who, in order to bear new life, suffer through the difficult recovery of a C-section. Their witness to the gift of life and their additional sacrifice ought to be publically acknowledged and commended. Mothers who need repeat C-sections for safe deliveries are masters of heroic love.

Conclusion

There is a certain kind of “pastoral” approach that suggests that, due to tough circumstances, individual persons may be exempt from the truth of the moral law simply because it may bring a temporary form of relief to disregard it. Such “pastoral advice” often suggests that moral decisions about intrinsic evils should be left to individual consciences. There are priests who unfortunately make these suggestions to couples. Yet the Church herself condemns this view precisely in its failure to be truly caring and pastoral. “We wish to make clear that departure from the Church’s teaching, or silence about it, in an effort to provide pastoral care is neither caring nor pastoral. Only what is true can ultimately be pastoral” (Ratzinger, 1986, no. 15). I would like to conclude by arguing that this supposedly “pastoral” approach is not only erroneous but ultimately *demeaning* to married couples. It tells them that they are incapable of the holiness to which Christ calls them and that his grace is utterly insufficient to redeem their fallen hearts. The circumstances God’s providence permits present the pathway to grow in holiness—they are the locus of the soul’s encounter with God. When pastors encourage married couples to “flee the cross,” they also cause them to lose the very means by which they will “work out” their salvation and taste the real happiness and profound marital joy that comes from building virtue and self-mastery.

If *Humanae vitae* speaks of difficulty ten times in the Encyclical, know that it speaks of “love” and love’s design nearly forty times. Let me conclude then, by sharing an alternative pastoral approach, by a young priest, Karol Wojtyla who writes in a personal letter to a friend in the midst of family life: “I sense tiredness in your letter, which is easy to understand . . . on top of this you always wanted to plan and to do everything rationally. And here is the

kingdom of irrationality, where normal activity and energy aren't enough. I realized that on the one hand, there is always a price we pay for love. On the other, thanks to God, love is returned in that price. What I mean is, the concrete challenge of love cannot be separated from Him; it is always in Him" (Weigel 2005, 250). Sacrifice is indeed "the price we pay for love," but love makes it a joyful and beautiful gift. John Paul II writes specifically that the *concrete* challenges of love—that is, each couple's particular situation in all of its difficult circumstances—"cannot be separated from Him"; and this challenge to couples is at the heart of his moral teaching and conjugal spirituality. In the fullness of time, God gave to man the gift of himself, so that man too may make a gift of himself to his own spouse, and simultaneously with true interior abandonment, a gift of himself to the Father. Married love uniquely signifies the "great mystery" (Eph 5:32) of the Son's abandonment to the will of the Father by offering the total gift of himself to the Church, his bride. Spouses, then, demonstrate the depth of their own love for Christ when they live a chaste conjugal love. The great "gulf between teaching and practice" can, with the help of grace, be overcome *in the concrete*, yet only when it does not remain separated from God's grace (Paul VI 1968, no. 25): "it is always in Him."

A chaste conjugal life with all of its real sacrifices is, in fact, the path that unites married couples both more intimately to each other and to God—and this point is critical—it is *simply wrong for pastoral reasons to deprive married couples of this profound intimacy*. Far from a hindrance to the unity of their love, when their love is founded on a true reverence for the design of God who is Love itself (1 Jn), and the source of their own love, they will indeed "mak[e] visible to men the holiness and sweetness of the law which unites the mutual love of husband and wife with their cooperation with the love of God the author of human life" (Paul VI 1968, no. 25). The act of contraception deprives men and women of the holiness and sweetness of the divine wisdom in their lives and of recognizing the sacred act of conjugal union as a profound way of offering one's whole self, body, and soul to God. Let married couples heed the exhortation of St. Francis in their own conjugal lives: "Hold back nothing of yourselves, for yourselves, so that He who gave himself totally to you, may receive you totally."⁷

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Notes

1. The proportionalist method, which Pope John Paul II (1993) critiques in chapter 2 of *Veritatis splendor*, largely grew out of the dispute about *Humanae vitae* and other teachings concerning human sexuality. While the academic debate was fruitful insofar as it helped to bring greater clarity to the use of terminology, especially the meaning of how circumstances affect or do not affect the object of the moral act, the dissenting theologians have nevertheless departed in a substantial way from the natural-law teaching of the Church. For a summary of the arguments in this exchange, see Curran and McCormick (1979) and Smith (1991).
2. The first principle of their "Moral Evaluation of Using Contraceptives for Family Planning and Prophylactic Purposes" is in section no. 7, which states, "The morality of any human action is determined by the *motives* and *intentions* of the agent, the *circumstances* of the situation, and the *consequences* of that action" (Wijnngaards Institute for Catholic Research 2018a). Never in the Catholic moral tradition has the morality of a human action been determined by only the motives, circumstances, and the consequences. Not only is morality of a negative precept not determined by the consequences but a glaring omission to this list is the "object of the moral act," which Pope John Paul II says has a certain "primacy" over the intention and circumstances (see John Paul II 1993, no. 78).
3. In section 3, they argue against the intrinsic relationship of sex to procreation based on the following argument: "This misinterprets the biological evidence. The causal relationship between insemination and, on the other hand, fertilization, implantation, and ultimately procreation, is statistical, not necessary. The vast majority of acts of sexual intercourse do not have the biological 'capacity' for procreation, and therefore they cannot have procreation as their 'finality' or 'significance.'" The mode of argumentation here is physicalist and fails to see the order of nature in that agency is ordered to finality, whether or not it in fact achieves it in every instance. Another argument they make which coheres with their first is that "it is mistaken to derive a moral prescription directly from a factual description, that is, a judgment of value (about what morally ought to be) directly from a judgment of fact (about what is)." Here, they adopt Hume's argument against the naturalistic fallacy. But Hume's argument proceeds from a more physicalist notion of nature and not the Church's philosophical view. Pope John Paul II has argued both in *Veritatis splendor*, no. 47 (John Paul II 1993) and in his prepapal work, *Love and Responsibility* (Wojtola 1981), that one ought not to confuse the "order of nature" with the "biological order."

4. "Can we entertain the opinion of some modern authorities who deny that the primary end of marriage is procreation and education or teach that the secondary ends are not necessarily subordinate to the primary on but are equally important and independent? *The members of the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office have decided to reply in the negative.*" *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, April 1, 1944. While the Church's development of its theology of marriage in the twentieth century enhances its view of marriage, no true development of doctrine can change from a previous one but must blossom even more from the previously received tradition. For more on this topic, see Cahall (2017).
5. To be clear, I am not suggesting that there is anything unnatural about mothers who stay at home with their children. I am suggesting, however, that the *isolation* of the modern situation of alienation from other adults, and especially other women, is contrary to the feminine spirit.
6. The phases of the menstrual cycle are as follows: Phase I includes menstruation and the period before the fertile time begins. Phase II is the fertile period in which the joint fertility of the couple may lead to conception if they engage in intercourse during this time. Phase III is the period of infertility that follows ovulation until the end of the menstrual cycle.
7. Additional resources for natural family planning: Couple to Couple League (<https://ccli.org>); Billings Ovulation Method (<https://billings.life/en/>); Marquette Method (<https://nfp.marquette.edu>); Creighton Model Fertility Care System (<https://www.creightonmodel.com>); Boston Cross Check Method (<http://www.bostoncatholic.org/Offices-And-Services/Office-Detail.aspx?id=11760&pid=480>); Family of the Americas (<https://familyplanning.net>); and Livingthesacrament.com—Online Forum Support.

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