

***Humanae Vitae* Is Necessary; Sex Is Not: What Is the Relationship between Conjugal Union and Human Fullness?**

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Introduction

“Navigare necesse est. Vivere non necesse est.”¹ What was at stake in Pompey’s confrontation with the sailors who initially refused to risk their lives in an effort to deliver necessary supplies to the starving city of Rome was precisely the meaning of life itself. In the midst of that crisis, the sailors came to see that the meaning of life is greater than merely living, and that only in light of this recognition is the possibility of leading a full life to be found. Then did they set out, braving the stormy seas—their ships heavy with grain, the Urbe their destination. If they had insisted, instead, on sparing themselves at the price of letting Rome perish, what would their earthly existence, on such paltry terms, have been worth?

Similarly, when speaking of sex, the issue is not just sexual intercourse itself, but its very meaning in life itself. Only in reference to a meaning do human beings discover the possibility of living out their sexuality fully, and therefore of leading full lives. This question of the meaning of sex is what

* This article is an English translation of the original Italian text, published in *Anthropotes* 34 (2018): 309–24.

¹ The sentence is from the Latin translation of Plutarch made by Antonius Tudertinus Pacinus in 1478; English can be found in *Lives, Volume V: Agesilaus and Pompey, Pelopidas and Marcellus*, trans. by Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library 87 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), 247.

Pope Paul VI intended to address with precision and clarity in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, demonstrating that nothing short of man's very happiness is on the line, as is indicated decisively in the encyclical's first and last paragraphs. His message could be crystallized as follows: In order for conjugal union to usher spouses into the very fullness of living, that union must remain per se destined for procreation (see §11, *particularly the Latin* ["quilibet matrimonii usus ad vitam humanam procreandam per se destinatus permaneat"], which is not exactly rendered in the official English translation ["every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life"]). The objection then arises: Is the possibility of procreating so important an aspect of the conjugal act that precluding it constricts, even unto disappearance, the horizon of spousal happiness itself?

First of all, in order to answer this question, we must examine what the conjugal act is. When spouses come together, what precisely are they choosing? Beginning with *Humanae Vitae* and continuing in a special way throughout the writings of John Paul II, the answer definitively emerges: The spouses are giving to one another a gift of self. Secondly, sex is an action that brings the whole human being into focus. Since it is rooted in bodily desire, we must concern ourselves also with the invisible springs secretly animating that desire. In other words, how does the "gift of self" call forth an *excellence* of erotic longing, simultaneously demanding and effectuating nothing short of a new configuration of the phantasy itself? Once we grasp the answers to these questions, we will understand why *Humanae Vitae* is necessary, while sex is not.

The Conjugal Act as a Gift of Self

From the perspective of *Humanae Vitae*, the conjugal act is a gift (§§9, 13). One may understand this perspective in harmony with the insights detailed in §49 of the Second Vatican Council's 1965 *Gaudium et Spes*, which finds in married life and in the spouses' own actions the possibility of making a free and mutual gift of themselves. Spouses then reveal to each other the possibility of "rediscovering themselves," as spelled out in a powerful theological framework positing a similarity between the union of the divine persons and the union of the children of God in truth and love (§24). John Paul II developed this theme into one of his touchstones for explaining the truth about conjugal love: The conjugal act itself, then, becomes a specific actualization of the gift of self.

In what precisely, though, does this "gift of self" consist? What *is* the "gift of self"? How does the conjugal act realize the mutual exchange that

took place in marriage, and extend the exchange throughout the course of two lifetimes?

i

To talk about “self-giving” is to focus on the issue of personal identity. “Who am I?” becomes the central issue. All too often, however, we find that this question is marred by an adolescent narcissism, overly concerned with one’s own image. Lovers, on the other hand, are not separately absorbed by how they appear as individuals; each, instead, is more concerned with their common destiny, with reaching the fullness to which they are called. Love, experienced authentically, has revealed to them precisely a new *telos*, a new destiny, a way of living “not just *with* the other, but *for* the other,” in a reciprocity capable of generating a family. What has been revealed, in other words, is a common “we” within which each person’s self acquires its fullness. And this “we” was given to the lovers as a promise—as a good to be achieved, to be built together.

The question “Who am I?” is elucidated by the gifts received and by the possibilities they confer. As a result, the issue of personal identity cannot be resolved unless another question is asked: “Who can I become?”² This destiny—the *telos* revealed by the shared experience of mutual love—thus forges personal identity. When we desire this destiny together, we each become our *telos*; then do we become our own selves most deeply. Here we have the first identifiable dimension of self-giving: What spouses bestow upon each other in marriage is a new common *telos*.

Yet could it be asserted conversely that “I am my own *telos*”? By way of objection, it might be pointed out that, properly speaking, I am not yet my own *telos*. The *telos* is what I would like to become but am still in the process of becoming. This objection would be justified if the promise of love were reducible to the level of cognition alone—if it were merely a question of thinking about an ideal state that awakens desire. This, however, is not the case. In reality, the promise of love transforms a person. The proper aspect of love, as passion, is to affect, lastingly, those who experience it: to transform, to change, to adapt one’s innermost being to the beloved;³ and vice versa, to generate an attraction toward the other founded on an “inwardly rooted affection.”⁴ All these effects of love could not come about if the one who

² See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1985), ch. 15.

³ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 26, a. 2.

⁴ ST I-II, q. 28, a. 2.

loves did not already find himself affectively present in the beloved.⁵ This kind of presence admits of degrees, and the deepest degree may be reached only if both commit to the same destination, the same *telos*.

In this way intimacy is kindled, an intimacy that joins the spouses in a reciprocal *affectio coniugal*.⁶ It is no longer a simple matter of two people sharing a “continuous will to live together,” as in Roman law. We are now speaking of an affection that builds intimacy in lovers, as a mutual presence generating a mutual belonging. The marriage bond is thus rooted in an affection that establishes authentic intimacy between one spouse and the other.

A new gift from God is to be recognized in the establishment of this kind of intimacy. Through a fresh outpouring of the Spirit,⁷ conjugal love becomes conjugal charity,⁸ enabling both the lover and the beloved to live friendship with God in their human friendship. Human *eros* thus becomes the very receptacle of a new kind of love, divinely tinged, that transforms it into its very origin.

This destiny can no longer be misunderstood as something simply to be achieved. It reveals itself, instead, as something given to us to become the very principle of our actions in an affective way. For spouses, affections anchor themselves in the body. There, in the body, freedom is rooted. And in this land, our will is capable of choosing. At this point, a second dimension of the “gifts of self” emerges with startling clarity: Spouses hand over their freedom, which binds to each other, and hand over to each other the love that lies at the origin of their freedom, their human love and the divine love they have received.

ii

What are newlyweds actually choosing when they decide to join together conjugally? Do either of them really know?⁹ Moved by erotic desire, the couple indulges in an action that attracts them, confident of its unquestioned goodness. Each of their bodies, flooded with affection, changes in anticipation of sexual action; each of the parties, in phantasy, is aroused, which,

⁵ See J. J. Pérez-Soba, *El amor: Introducción a un misterio* (Madrid: BAC, 2011), ch. 2.

⁶ See Sang Yong Kim, *La affectio coniugal nella definizione del matrimonio* (Siena, Italy: Cantagalli, 2014).

⁷ See José Granados, *Una carne uno Spirito: Teologia del matrimonio* (Siena, Italy: Cantagalli, 2014), ch. 14.

⁸ See Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), §13. About the topic, see Luis De Prada, *Caridad conyugal* (Madrid: Didaskalos, 2018).

⁹ See Paul Ricoeur, “La sexualité. La merveille, l’errance, l’énigme,” *Esprit* 28 (1960): 1665–76.

through the new hormonal balance, makes possible erection, dilation, and lubrication, so that the will can then move the body, thus prepared, toward mutual interaction and sexual unification: to penetrate and be penetrated; to ejaculate semen and to receive it.¹⁰

Is this alone what spouses choose? No. For, these same processes may take place during acts of fornication and adultery as well. What distinguishes certain sexual acts from conjugal union is not the executed act itself, not penetration, or even the natural consequences it may have, such as fertility. The essential distinction is found, rather, in what is sought primarily. Conjugal acts are a composition that practical reason realizes on the basis of sex, penetration, ejaculation, pleasure, and fertility. For spouses, what the will chooses, of course, does involve all of this. However, it cannot be reduced to this, because the object of an action is not what we execute, but what we choose when we aspire to an end.¹¹

To what end do spouses aspire? Without a doubt, it is to a full communion with one another. Looking toward this communion, the spouses choose to surrender themselves totally, giving and receiving each other sexually,¹² as each one of them actually is—in their own individual masculinity and femininity.¹³ This choice shapes the outward act of sexual intercourse, making it a truly conjugal act in which the spouses can live interpersonal communion with each other.

When we are speaking of this particular spousal form of self-giving, what exactly counts as the gift itself? The body, transmuted by affection, certainly counts.¹⁴ It is in the body that the spouses unite with each other in sexual interaction. They physically caress one another; the body, while touched, is touched in return. This brings us to yet another question: What is it that is sexually “touched” and which does the sexual “touching”? The offering of the body reveals a willingness to surrender; specifically, the surrender of one’s freedom and one’s love. Is skin or flesh the place where this “surrendering touch” is accomplished? Yes, but not only there: in neither skin nor flesh does this “surrendering touch” originate and terminate. Desire is its source,

¹⁰ See Michael Bader, *Arousal: The Secret Logic of Sexual Fantasies* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2002).

¹¹ See Martin Rhonheimer, *Ethics of Procreation & the Defense of Human Life: Contraception, Artificial Fertilization, and Abortion* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 81–88.

¹² See Rhonheimer, *Ethics of Procreation*, 81–88.

¹³ See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Press, 2006), 194–98.

¹⁴ I use the word to “transmute”/“transmutation” in its technical meaning, according to *ST* I-II, q. 22, a. 1.

welling up from within the heart; a desire reaching out from one's own heart without being willing to halt anywhere other than the very heart of the other.¹⁵ But the heart—not simply the body—is the place where two persons dwell together in their common *telos*. One touches one's own presence in the heart of the beloved, thus arriving at the spousal “we” that the promise of love has made possible.

What, then, takes place in the accomplishment of the conjugal act? The body is transmuted or transformed by the passion of love in a dynamism of delivery, and this generates a mutual intercorporeity, where the interiority of each is the echo of the interiority of the other.¹⁶ This body, so transformed, seeks to penetrate and be penetrated in order to reach the deepest point: “The place where life can begin,”¹⁷ because one spouse delivers, as the other receives, the seed where it can be waited for by the ovum—waiting here in this destination, and nowhere else. This is why the very totality of the surrender of the body, in its masculinity and in its femininity, ineluctably entails the possibility of the participants becoming parents together. To this end, the sexual gift of the body is *per se destinatus*, as an inextricable aspect of the natural intentionality of the conjugal act as a total gift. To speak of sexual action is to speak of procreation—not as something one decides, nor even as something which the couple agrees upon together, but as something to which such an action “is directed in and of itself,” or, according to the English translation of *Humanae Vitae*, as something that has an “intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life” (§11).

Now we begin to comprehend the extent of the “surrendering touch” of the conjugal act, reaching not only the intimate interiority of the beloved (the heart), or even the mutual “we” of the spouses themselves, but the “we” of the family. One who joins in a conjugal act recognizes the other not only as a spouse but also as a person with whom he or she can become a father or mother. Here is the difference between “sailing” and “merely living”; here, the spouses touch not only each other, but also the fullness of life—the fullness which alone makes it great, beautiful, and worth risking all else. The conjugal “gift of self,” then, naturally involves the possibility of becoming parents as something that belongs to the structure of a total gift. It is a totality which alone is capable of forging an unbreakable relationship with *telos*. In the case of spouses, this unbreakable relationship is expressed in the

¹⁵ See José Noriega, *L'enigma del piacere: fame desiderio e felicità* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2014), ch. 2.2.

¹⁶ I apply to the specific touch in the sexual union an idea by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature: Notes cours du Collège de France* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), 325.

¹⁷ Henri Van Lier, *L'intention sexuelle* (Paris: Casterman, 1968), 83.

disposition of love to broaden the relational scope through the generation and education of children. Therefore, the procreation of new life is no mere biological fact.

iii

Along with these dimensions of the spousal, necessarily total “gift of self,” a new dimension inseparably appears: pleasure. Sexual touch, having its origin in the transmutation of the body, implies that the other’s body fits fully and, because of this, is conjugally enjoyed. Pleasure, however, is always symbolic.¹⁸ As the ultimate perfection of an action—an “act of an act,” according to the Aristotelian definition—pleasure depends radically on the magnitude of the *coniunctio* in which it took place.¹⁹ It is a *coniunctio* not only of bodies desiring and meeting each other, but of bodies effectuating intimacy, because there is a *coniunctio* of wills surrendering themselves in concord. Thus, each spouse offers to the other a specific *cognitio*: the experiential knowledge which can be received only with supreme gratitude, not only for the other but also for the *telos* shared with the other.²⁰ It is a knowledge by connatural-ity of the *telos* as well of one’s own life—of that which makes even individual existence great and beautiful—and of fruitful communion, not only to the extent that, as a matter of biological fact, fertility gives rise to new life, but insofar as mutual love inextricably embraces that new life. What becomes known, then, is a way of loving that is capable of communicating itself, that is, its greatness.

The experience of pleasure has an effect on the heart, specifically enabling its dilation. When a heart is closed, certain difficulties result—difficulties in joining intimately with another. Melting from pleasure into mutual pleasure, conversely, permits the formation of a greater interpersonal concord.²¹ The heart binds itself to another heart, finding rest in that good which is so intimately accessible to it, and becomes one flesh, so tenderly experienced: “which acquiesces in the pleasurable object, and rests therein, offering, as it were, to enfold it within itself.”²²

¹⁸ See N. J. H. Dent, *The Moral Psychology of the Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 35–63, 130–51.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.12.1153a14.

²⁰ *ST* I-II, q. 31, a. 3.

²¹ See Van Lier, *L'intention sexuelle*, 25–35.

²² *ST* I-II, q. 33, a. 1—although English translation cannot fully convey the depth of the Latin here: “quodammodo se praebens ei ad eam interius capiendam.”

iv

Spouses, uniting conjugally, hand themselves over to each other in the totality of their male and female being. In this exchange, they can each be known for what they are: a spouse and a parent, at once. In this way, married individuals specifically honor each other, for “to honor” means to testify to another’s irreplaceable singularity in our affections and estimation, acknowledging his or her greatness and excellence for us. Those who are loved in this way, by experiencing what it means to have a space reserved for them in the other person’s heart, will also be able to discover their own place in the world.²³ The conjugal act, seen in this light, can be understood as the deepest form of confirming the goodness of someone else, in the uniqueness and preciousness of his or her existence. The sexual “gift of self” is thus transformed into a “language of recognition,” conveying the truth of who we are. Here then, in the conjugal expression of sexuality, a man and woman can recognize himself and herself, each finding the self in the other.

Not only that. Through the passivity involved in all sexual dynamism, man is simultaneously prompted to remember that he is created, enabling him to encounter his Creator. Those who experience sexual pleasure have the memory of humanity’s very origin: “And God saw that it was a very good thing” (see Gen 1:31). As John Paul II portrays it:

When they unite with each other (in the conjugal act) so closely so as to become “one flesh,” man and woman rediscover every time and in a special way the mystery of creation, thus returning to the union in humanity (“flesh from my flesh and bone from my bones” [see Gen 2:23]) that allows them to recognize each other reciprocally and to call each other by name, as they did the first time.²⁴

Considering all of this, we find that we have reached a decisive conclusion: Sexuality opens the possibility of the very *anamnesis* of the Creator, the made-present-memory of the good work he has done and continues to do in our lives.²⁵ The “gift of self,” as a “being one for the other,” is also a kinship with the divine.

The “body language” of the conjugal act here becomes liturgical.²⁶ It becomes the place of praising God, indeed, of the transmission of the gifts

²³ See *ST II-II*, q. 103, a. 2.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 167.

²⁵ I am here applying to the topic of sexuality a reflection by Joseph Ratzinger on conscience from “Conscience and Truth,” in *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007), 11–41.

²⁶ See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 610–12.

received from him (that is, the Spirit), inasmuch as—being the act proper to conjugal friendship—it allows for a specific *communicatio*. The spousal “gift of self” is actualized, in other words, in every conjugal act, celebrating what took place at the exchange of vows and consummating this exchange. It is not only the first conjugal copulation which, in this sense, brings the sacrament to fullness; every conjugal act, as a total “gift of self,” realizes the fulfillment of conjugal life, becoming the “place” to find oneself, and to find the Creator, again.

From this perspective, sex is synonymous with self-giving, with a gift, offered and received. The donation of one’s very being to another becomes the whispered secret of the spousal sexual act. Precisely because sex entails so total a bestowal, interpersonal union and the possibility of procreation always go hand in hand, united inseparably. As occasions of mutual honor, of gratitude to the Creator, and of a communication of his gifts—this is the greatness in light of which sex should be understood.

v

Perhaps, at this point, the following objection may be anticipated: Is it really necessary to identify procreation, as such, as an indispensable aspect of the conjugal act, when that act may or may not generate new life in any given instance? The teaching of *Humanae Vitae* counters the challenge: Does not the insistence that every conjugal act must be open to the possibility of new life reduce procreation itself to the level of reproductive functionality alone? Is there truly a need to be restricted to processes proper to the biological level of life, rather than rising to the level of the truly human? In this vein, André Guindon argues: The indispensable aspect of exercised sexuality should be identified not as procreation per se, but instead as fecundity. Fecundity, so defined, occurs when sex confers upon participants vitality, personal energy, and a passion for existence and for being in relationship with the other, so that they can go beyond themselves. Therefore it is recommended, by Guindon and others, that tenderness and sensuality be regarded as unbreakably linked to sex, rather than the unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act according to the understanding presented in *Humanae Vitae*. Our Canadian theologian applies this concept of fecundity to homosexuality first, and then to contraception itself. Contracepted sex, he proposes, could, after all, be contained within the concept of “fecundity” selectively envisioned, even though contracepted acts, like homosexual ones, are in no way procreative.²⁷

²⁷ See André Guindon, *The Sexual Creators: An Ethical Proposal for Concerned Christians* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1986).

Here, then, is the question: Can a spouse's "gift of self" from which the possibility of procreation is intentionally excluded ever be found fruitful?

Sex certainly has the power to communicate a sense of vital energy, of *joie de vivre*, of connection with reality. Whence arises this power? From the joining of tenderness to sensuality? No; but from the fact that the conjugal act has its own intrinsic truth as the gift that it is. The requirement for the communication of intimacy—for the sex act to be able, in other words, to bind its protagonists to the impulse of life (as the notion of "fecundity" justifiably alleges it can do)—is that the delivery of the "gift of self" be total. One enters intimacy when the gift is total. And the totality of this delivery also includes the natural potentiality of the conjugal act, that is, the capacity to become parents, not as a fact, because so many times this does not occur, nor even as something one must intentionally want, because having children is not the direct object of any human choice, but as an intrinsic dimension to which the act itself is "destined for itself." The intention of eliminating the procreative dimension through a contraceptive choice simultaneously compromises the totality of the "gift of self." Hence this infelicitous intention cannot but end in "a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality," as John Paul II warns in *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) §32; deliberately non-procreative sex leaves off being a choice capable of expressing love and of inculcating in the participants a communion to each other, to life, and to God.²⁸ What is not given is the possibility to become a father or mother. Such an act may be—yes—a sexual act, but it is not a conjugal act, because it lacks that which would specify it as such.²⁹

Humanae Vitae, by pointing out that a contracepted sexual act is an intrinsically evil one, emphasizes the required totality of mutual self-donation if sexual intercourse is to become truly an act of conjugal love—that is, if it is to be capable of uniting spouses.³⁰ By means of this insistence, *Humanae Vitae* highlights decisively the way in which the marriage specifically contributes to the common good, not only insofar as it generates new human beings, but also insofar as it demands that at the origin of each person there be a total "gift of self."³¹ Here, then, we understand why the family that embraces *Humanae Vitae* becomes authentically generative of human society.

²⁸ See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 632–33.

²⁹ See G. E. M. Anscombe, "Contraception and Chastity," in *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy, and Ethics* by G.E.M. Anscombe (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2008).

³⁰ See Rhonheimer, *Ethics of Procreation*.

³¹ See Juan de Dios Larrú, *El sello en el corazón: Ensayo de espiritualidad matrimonial* (Burgos, Spain: Monte Carmelo, 2014), ch. 18.

Periodic Continence or Periodic Unions? The Effect of a New Phantasy and Desire

i

Although Pope Paul's encyclical unequivocally affirms that "each and every conjugal act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship (*per se destinatus*) to the procreation of human life" (HV §11), this does not mean that spouses must intentionally want to have children of every conjugal union. The phrase *per se destinatus* speaks instead of an end that the conjugal act possesses of itself, insofar as it is a total gift: that is, the encyclical states that the possibility of procreation does not depend on one's own decision, but on the very essence of the act. Therefore, in accordance with the distinction previously investigated by Pius XII, *Humanae Vitae* acknowledges the moral acceptability of spouses referring the moment of sexual union to the rhythms of the woman's fertility when there are serious reasons for attempting to extend the time between the birth of one child and the next. This experience in the lives of married people has come to be called "periodic continence," and it may involve a profound change in the couple's sexual habits that is not always easy to accomplish or immediate in its practical realization.

The reason for undertaking this adjustment is precisely the procreative responsibility of the spouses themselves.³² For, although they may not intentionally desire to become parents at the moment of any given sexual encounter, they are nevertheless electing to engage in an act which by nature is able to procreate. Spouses, then, by changing their habits and choosing to unite during times of identifiable infertility, do not deny the essential nature of the conjugal act, since prospective parenthood does not depend on their wills, but in the nature of the conjugal act *per se*. What they are doing is managing the possible actualization of procreation without willfully denying it; thus, their act continues to be destined for procreation even if it doesn't factually result in it. In the case of a contracepted sexual encounter, on the contrary, spouses intentionally attempt to eliminate the possibility of procreation by frustrating reproductive functionality at the biological level, one way or another. Therefore, their act is no longer destined *per se* for procreation, and because of that, the contraceptive choice corrupts the delivery of the "gift of self," which necessarily ceases to be total. Contracepted encounters will not be able to unite people even if bodies are united. In their wills, the participants do not and cannot agree in the total "gift of self," but settle, rather, for a mere sexual experience.

By way of explanation, it could be noted that "you use the rhythm method

³² See Rhonheimer, *Ethics of Procreation*.

not just by having intercourse now, but by not having it next week, say; and not having it next week isn't something that does something to today's intercourse to turn it into an infertile act; today's intercourse is an ordinary act of intercourse, an ordinary marriage act," even though it may not result in pregnancy because the couple has performed it at a time when that outcome is highly unlikely.³³ Here, the "gift of self" remains total, with this totality of who, and of what, one is. Is it a dialectical trick? Those who live it know that it is not that way. Through periodic continence, spouses do not intentionally eliminate the procreative potential of their current sexual choice, which belongs to the very essence of the act, but they "rightly use a faculty provided them by nature" (*HV* §16), choosing to come together during moments when the birth of a new child is not likely to follow.

ii

The challenge that *Humanae Vitae* poses to married life has demanded a response from men of science—so much so that, today, we know much more about the practicalities of procreative potential through observing the biological functioning of the bodies of women. Different methods of observations offer knowledge which allows prudence to administer the gift of fertility without betraying the meaning of love. Therefore every conjugal act, even when pregnancy is not its intended outcome, can still be placed at the service of the greatness of the vocation of marriage itself; that is, of the fullness of a love that is capable of bringing spouses to wholeness. These biological insights may be very humble, but they remain decisive contributions to a couple's ability to live the truth of love even when there are serious reasons to manage the timing of childbearing.

In addition to the obvious service of knowing one's fertility, such methods allow the couple to take on the procreative dimension of sexuality in an authentically responsible way. For so many people today, sexuality represents an opportunity to indulge in the pleasurable aspect of such activities. In that context, the continual need to ascertain the state of immediate fertility as a married couple means that prudence can honor the procreative dimension as intrinsic to the language of love, responding to it in a personal way. If previous generations experienced the *per se destinatus* of the conjugal act as something taken for granted, and without any moral means of management, either, then—beginning with *Humanae Vitae*—spouses can start interacting

³³ Anscombe, "Contraception and Chastity," 184.

in a personal way with this potentiality, uniting themselves even more closely and more accountably to the Creator's own intentions.³⁴

iii

Changing a couple's sexual habits is not something that can be achieved in the absence of serious intentionality. Instead, it calls for a basic choice, the choice of preserving the sense of "gift" which is proper to every sexual encounter. At the same time, it also requires a constant deepening of one's understanding of how to manage time itself—of how to allocate one's own attention and energy, first of all, and then, of how to spend the time one has with one's spouse. We are speaking here of a work of tremendous delicacy. Careful and just consideration toward the totality of life must be brought to bear if new habits are to be un-begrudgingly inculcated. How is this to be accomplished in the absence of ongoing and sincere dialogue about sexuality itself—about the reasons for making changes, about mutual help, about each one's hopes and justifiable expectations? As a male, it involves speaking and acting as a male, while entering in empathy into the lived world of a woman. As a female, it involves speaking and acting as a female, while entering in empathy into the lived world of a man. Masculinity and femininity, then, strike a concordance that allows them to decide together. As a result of this quality of decision, the sexual exercise of a couple's shared desires ceases to be a matter of course. In its wordless language, the conjugal act can claim a new creativity that allows the spouses to show each other belonging and mutual affection. Without recognition of the requirement of all of this relational work going on in the background, and threading together the tapestried picture of a couple's married life as a whole, the proposal of *Humanae Vitae* may end up inflaming not only dissatisfaction and misunderstanding, but also resentment—as if it were an impossible standard imposed upon men and women aspiring to be anything but heroes.

That having been said, the most decisive aspect of periodic continence is still to be found in the ability of the spouses to envision their future together. According to Aristotle, phantasy is a specific form of perception, in that it entails an interior conjuring of a future action.³⁵ A lion sees an antelope running in front of him and imagines himself eating it. It is not the sighting itself that impels the previously indolent predator to rouse himself to the hunt, but the impact of the prey upon his projections. A bride and groom

³⁴ This is an idea of Dr. Michele Barbato.

³⁵ I draw inspiration from the interpretation of M. C. Nussbaum, "The Role of Phantasia in Aristotle's Explanation of Action," in *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 221–70.

envision each other erotically. So attractive is this dreamt-of encounter that it prompts them to act, remotely or immediately, in order to make their sexual union a reality. The very intentionality of phantasy reveals in itself a decisively intentional element. This intentional perception introduces a decisive element into temporality: it directs it toward its fullness, prepares it, recreates it.

Erotic phantasy as a mode of perception is, therefore, a sensibility susceptible to education. There exists the possibility, and the responsibility, of shaping it, thanks to and according to the *logos*, as Aristotle states.³⁶ We are speaking of a twofold *logos* here: that of narratives through which a *mimesis*, an emulation, is born; and that of practices, which is perhaps not so immediately understandable.³⁷ These two—stories and practices—work together in configuring sexual desire, which itself becomes the basis for the eventual accomplishment of erotic action. *Humanae Vitae*, then, is asking spouses—among other things, and not impossibly either—to sculpt even their envisionings in a mutual, supportive way.

When the serious need to stretch out the interval between the birth of one child and the next arises, the corresponding requirement of determining and of honoring the spans of chosen continence forces a confrontation between the fashioned longings of the spouses themselves and the intrinsic meaning of all sexual union. This is not only a matter of facing the drama and, potentially, the agony of married masculinity and femininity responsibly lived out.³⁸ It is also one of recreating their greatness. Is the timing of conjugal intercourse to be left to chance, or not? Does a simple “I’d like to” suffice? Precisely because the conjugal union constitutes a “consummation” in which the spousal liturgy is actualized, the whole span of sexual “silence” alters in significance. No longer to be endured as merely empty, it becomes eloquent. No longer to be dreaded as blandly privative, it gathers to a crescendo. The time of elective avoidance becomes a necessary and even joyful endeavor of preparation, during which desire and phantasy work harmoniously in making the next conjugal act, when its time comes, a true recreation of conjugal communion, bringing the whole process to completion. Here, then, instead of speaking of “periodic continence,” it might be more fitting to frame the issue as that of “periodic unions.”³⁹

³⁶ See Aristotle, *De motu animalium* 8.702a 18.

³⁷ See Luis Granados, *Imaginar la vida: La fantasía y su educación* (Burgos, Spain: Monte Carmelo, 2014).

³⁸ See Byung-Chul Han, *Eros in agonía* (Rome: Notte Tempo, 2013).

³⁹ I owe this perspective to Mr. and Mrs. René and Isabelle Ecohard.

iv

The revelation at the heart of *Humanae Vitae* now obliges us to address big questions regarding lived sexuality that had not, in previous historical eras, been considered very urgent. The erotic sensitivities of couples and, more specifically, the issue of the formation of sexual desire, have become the great topics of the day. How the virtue of chastity is to receive its education is considered by the papal document to be an essential concern (*HV* §22).

Here, then, we come face to face at last with a key question about the virtue of chastity: Is it a question only of self-control, as is so often supposed, or rather, is it a matter of integrating the full truth of sexuality with the reality of erotic desire?⁴⁰

The answer seems obvious. Recent investigations of this topic, however, propose a reevaluation of this virtue as moderation of desires or self-control. Jean Porter has proposed an understanding of chastity by likening it thematically to justice. To be chaste, in other words, is only fair. “The good” is what is due to other people based on the kind of relationship we share with them.⁴¹ “The good,” however, understood as “what is due,” is not determined—in the universe contrived of this interpretation—by the nature of the relationship itself and the corresponding *ordo amoris*, but by how a person perceives and values that relationship. In this way, this philosopher let it be understood that chastity could even be present in spouses employing contraception. Of greatest importance according to this theory would be the correspondence of any sexual act to the interior dispositions of the subject, its acceptability allegedly flowing from a determination not to impose upon, or pretend to use, the other consenting participant, so as to respect justice.

The question which arises forcefully is, therefore: Can a spouse who uses contraception be chaste? Certainly, he can have dominion—in the sense of willed control—over the sexual impulse itself. Not succumbing to it, however, is one thing. Integrating the truth of sexuality into erotic desire is another.

In this distinction lies the recognition and the acceptance of the inherently procreative dimension, the *per se destinatus*, of sexuality. To order one’s desires to include this dimension is to accept the procreative responsibility. Conformed desire, then, allows one not only to act well, but more importantly to react well in the face of what sexual attraction entails. What actually is attracting where sex is concerned? The enjoyment? Is that it? Not all by itself, because we have already seen that pleasure is symbolic and, as such,

⁴⁰ See Livio Melina, *Per una cultura della famiglia* (Venice: Marcianum, 2006), ch. 6.

⁴¹ See Jean Porter, “Chastity as a Virtue,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58 (2005): 285–301.

dependent on the weight of the action itself. What attracts is something much greater. Sexuality pulls us toward one another, and toward the Creator himself, precisely because it is a means of interpersonal communion and communication, making mere existence something ineffably magnificent.

The virtue of chastity is more truthfully apprehended, then, as the willed configuration of erotic desire in such a way that the logic of the “gift of self” may be lived out. Since, moreover, chastity itself is originally received as a gift, this virtue is meant to be integrated into a divine dynamism, capable of elevating the person unto union with God. Human *eros*, however, stands in need of rescuing by God’s own love if this integration is to take place.⁴² *Agape* is the savior of *eros* not only because it has prevented the shrinking of *eros* into self-enclosure, but also because *agape* alone is capable of forging the ligature of divinization. Charity becomes the very form of chastity, insofar as chastity invites *eros* to share in tending toward charity’s own end—in other words, toward friendship with God Himself.⁴³

Here, then, the last insight comes into focus: chastity and charity, transforming the person, give him a new sexual sensitivity. “Each sees the end as he is”—so stated Aristotle, in a formulation that fascinated St. Thomas.⁴⁴ This “as he is” refers not to the natural being, shared with all, but to the moral being of the person as an individual, to the being we have constructed by our actions—that is, to be virtuous or not.⁴⁵ Chastity authentically put into practice, then—disallowing desire to be concentrated in the particular but limited good of pleasure, and directing it instead to the ultimate good which is fullness of life—makes it possible for the person to experience sexual attraction as a call to communion, to the “gift of self” which converges, in the final analysis, with union with God.⁴⁶ *Humanae Vitae* thus sketches in broad strokes the radical nature of the education of desire, calling for a Church

⁴² For further expositio of *eros* and *agape*, see Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), §7.

⁴³ See *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 8.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.5.1114a32. Among other texts, see: *ST* I-II, q. 9, a. 2; II-II, q. 24, a. 11; *De virtutibus*, q. 2, a. 12; *In III eth.*, lec. 13.

⁴⁵ J. J. Pérez-Soba, “Operari sequitur esse?,” in Livio Melina, José Noriega, and Juan José Pérez-Soba, *La plenitud del obrar cristiano: Dinámica de la acción y perspectiva teológica de la moral* (Madrid: Palabra, 2001), 65–83. The decisive text is found in *In II sent.*, d. 7, a. 2: “eo quod qualis est *secundum habitum*, talis finis videtur ei” (the Latin here shows the important question of the *habitus*, which is not often focused on).

⁴⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “La fragilité affective,” in *Philosophie de la volonté*, vol. 2, *Finitude et culpabilité I: L’homme faillible* (Paris: Aubier, 1960), 97–148 (ch. 4); Ignacio Serrada, *Acción y sexualidad: Hermeneutica simbólica a partir de Paul Ricoeur* (Siena, Italy: Cantagalli, 2011).

that is capable of assisting people in configuring their desires—especially, the erotic ones—in a virtuous way.

v

In the various points outlined above, then, congealed into a unified insight, we find defined the pastoral task most crucial for the Church of late modernity: to announce the grandeur of human sexuality in its beauty and its holiness, and to accompany people on the path of integrating their sexuality into the wholeness of their personality, of configuring their phantasy accordingly, and of forging desire into virtue. He who teaches *Humanae Vitae*, then, knows that he can hope to succeed only by offering, along with the announcement, a path of accompaniment, that is, a process of building up the person by whom the announcement is received, so that he or she may master the art of loving.

Conclusion

Why is *Humanae Vitae* necessary, while sex is not? Because nothing short of man's very happiness, understood as the fullness of action, is at stake. This fullness is possible only if the conjugal act of the spouses continues to be a total gift of themselves to one another; that act is capable of bringing conjugal life to its fullness, being a sign of the greatness of human life. Such a gift can be experienced over time only if the spouses have configured their subjectivity properly. In other words, the spouses must commit to stirring up in themselves first, and then fostering in the heart of the other, an excellence in vision and desire. Or, in other words, forging in their desires the virtue of chastity.

The question here confronted addresses, then, the meaning of sex. *Humanae Vitae* proclaims in no uncertain terms that sex cannot be understood as something restricted to the experiential level alone. Satisfaction is not its horizon. Self-giving, rather—with its facets of mutual acceptance, of willingness to face the future together, of deepening both spousal and familial love—either goes hand in hand with the possibility of procreative fruitfulness, or else both of them perish together. Sex is capable of opening human life to its greatness and beauty, precisely because an authentic communion of persons is made possible.

Humanae Vitae is necessary; sex is not. If modern man sometimes has a problem with this assertion, it is not just with the sacrifice inherent in adjusting our actions to the requirements placed upon us. Pope Paul's encyclical is hardly singular in this respect. In none of life's aspects, after all, do one's own

weaknesses or one's moral reluctance become the measure of the truth. The goad of *Humanae Vitae* is meant, more fully apprehended, to bring out into the open what makes married life great and beautiful, so that man's capacity for love can flourish in the fullness of truth.

"Navigare necesse est. Vivere non necesse est." The demand of *Humanae Vitae* is as radical as that of Pompey, and it requires just as bold a response. Yes, *Humanae Vitae* is necessary, but for its teaching to be fulfilled, it needs a Church which is ready to accompany married couples in their conjugal "navigation," and to prepare young people to live out the greatness of love, by fostering chastity in and among them. N.V.