

Anthropological Foundations of Sexuality and Human Love

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The summer of 1968 has marked the pages of modern history books far more with stories of bra burnings and orgies in the streets of San Francisco or those of the student-led protests in Paris, than with the promulgation of what George Weigel calls the most controversial encyclical in history. One could, in fact, hardly find a more unlikely coincidence of events, nor a more implausible meeting of philosophical entreaties than those of the sexual revolution and *Humanae Vitae*.

The one told us to take off our clothes and put on our condoms; the other to keep our clothes on and to take off our condoms.

One claimed to “make love not war”, the other: to make war on our selfishness and on our disoriented passions in the name of love.

One told us to free our sexual energies from the yoke of children; the other told us to keep those energies thriving through their fertility.

Such contradictory teachings could hardly survive together for long, and there is no doubt that the sexual revolution has gained far more converts than has Catholic sexual morality: even among Catholics, judging by their contraceptive use.

In fact, a 2014 survey of 12,000 Catholics in 12 countries revealed a generalized disagreement of 78% - only one percentage point below the U.S. average of 79% – with Catholic doctrine concerning contraception. This figure climbed to over 90% among Catholics in Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Spain and France. Only the African countries of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda were less likely to break with Church teaching. Both of those countries had an average of 44% in favor of contraception.¹

¹ L'enquête (« Voice of the People ») a été menée par le réseau hispanophone américain, Univision, et publiée le 9 février 2014. Voir : http://univision.data4.mx/resultados_catolicos/eng/ENG_catholic-survey.pdf

We might conclude in words borrowed from the Scottish Dominican, Fergus Kerr, that we are in the presence of a “silent schism.”²

Assuredly this is not simply a question of bad will, but of, rather, a widespread willingness to follow the philosophical winds of the time. For the Church’s moral teaching and the doctrine of the sexual revolution witness to two dramatically opposing anthropologies, that is to say, two visions of the human person, and therefore two visions of freedom, of human nature, of sexuality and of love.

In the case of the sexual revolution, we are confronted with the **battle cry of “sexual freedom”**: freedom with respect to our bodies and their reproductive powers, whence the perverted meaning of that widespread cliché, which the organizers of this congress are inviting us to call into question, namely, “My Body, My Choice.” To be sure, this is just the beginning of the challenges surrounding what is popularly known as “sexual freedom.” This concept also implies freedom from socio-cultural and religious expectations and mores, freedom with respect to our actions and their consequences, freedom to express our unabridged sexual passions, freedom with regard to our relationships, even freedom with respect to our own freedom: freedom to change our minds, if you will, or freedom from our own choices, such that the human will need no longer be inhibited by the dictates of reason. Here, in other words, we have a notion of freedom that is essentially uprooted from human nature and thus from anything that might give it direction or definition, if not for the naked human will itself. The latter, in turn, is moved by nothing other than raw passion, having abandoned the standard of reason and thus also of truth, as measured by knowledge of the real world and even of the self beyond sentiment and folly. This is what Servais Pinckaers calls *freedom of indifference*: “freedom” with no intrinsic point of reference beyond its own willing power. Such is a purely negative sense of freedom – freedom from constraint – because it is radically undetermined. In other words, it has no implicit aim, no intrinsic direction toward a fullness of being or perfection. Indeed, it is free even with respect to human nature and human happiness. “This ultimately means making freedom self-defining and a phenomenon creative of itself and its values. Indeed, when all is said and done,” Pope John Paul II explained in his encyclical letter, *Veritatis Splendor*, “man would not even have a nature; he would be his own personal life-project. Man would be nothing more than his own freedom!”³ Man is thus “condemned” to freedom – as the “other” Jean-Paul (Jean-Paul Sartre) would have it – because freedom becomes an end in itself, rather than the means to an end, namely

² Fergus KERR, *Twentieth Century Theologians. From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism*, Malden, MA / Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 219.

³ Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, encyclical letter on the Splendor of Truth, August 6, 1993, no. 46.

that of human perfection, which the metaphysical tradition of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas recognized as measured by authentic, and thus lasting, human happiness.

It is from within that (metaphysical) tradition, which represents the opposing anthropological tendency typifying *Humanae Vitae*, that Karol Wojtyła, the man destined to become the future pope John Paul II, presented freedom as far more than a wild card enabling us to do as we will. Instead, Wojtyła taught that freedom is radically directed toward love: and not just *any* sort of love – the so-called “free love” of the sexual revolution does not qualify, for example—but that precise love that is characterized by an authentic self-gift.

Love [writes Wojtyła] consists in a commitment of freedom because, after all, love is self-giving, and to give oneself means precisely to limit one’s freedom on account of the other person. The limitation of one’s won freedom would be something negative and unpleasant, but love makes it something positive, joyful, and creative. Freedom is for love. ... Man longs for love more than for freedom—freedom is the means, whereas love is the end.⁴

That is why, “Man cannot live without love,” John Paul II wrote in his very first encyclical. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”⁵

Or again, as he put it in *Veritatis Splendor*, “Perfection demands that maturity in self-giving to which human freedom is called.”⁶

From this personalist and metaphysical perspective of Pope John Paul II, we have a notion of freedom that is not so much tied down, as upward striving: a notion of freedom that is dynamically orientated toward a certain fulness or perfection that is already programmed within the very nature in which freedom itself is rooted (human nature), whence the designation *freedom for excellence*. Nature, in fact – at least as it was presented throughout much of the metaphysical tradition – implies an end (*telos*), which is synonymous with its perfection and which serves to differentiate it with respect to other natures and thus to define it. From this perspective, the end or perfection of any natural being might be thought of as a development or an unfolding of what is already latent within

⁴ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2013), p. 124.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris hominis*, Encyclical letter on the Redeemer of Man, March 4, 1979, nr. 10.

⁶ John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, nr. 17. Original emphasis.

it. One need only think of the maple tree contained within the acorn, the plant within the seed, the leaf within the bud, the full-grown man within the fetus.

Human development is not simply *biological* development, however, because the human being is also a spiritual agent destined for communion, wherein he experiences a certain fullness or satisfaction. This is implied in the aforementioned teaching that he can realize himself uniquely by giving himself. And, just as human development, or perfection, is not simply biological in nature, so also human procreation is not simply a biological act, but might include – indeed *ought* to include – the spiritual dimension of the human person. That is why it is in fact often asked, as Pope Paul VI acknowledges, “whether... the time has not come when the transmission of life should be regulated by ... [human] intelligence and will rather than through the specific rhythms of their own bodies.”⁷

Allow me to insist in view of being perfectly clear: this question is rhetorical in nature, and the answer that Paul VI gives to this question is far from categorical. Man is spirit *and* body, and his responsibility for his nature will be *both* spiritual and biological. To be sure, Paul VI emphasizes that

“The Church is the first to praise and commend the application of human intelligence to an activity in which a rational creature such as man is so closely associated with his Creator,” namely the conjugal act by which new lives are procreated. “But,” he continues, “she [the Church] affirms that this must be done within the limits of the order of reality established by God.”⁸ For, “Just as man does not have unlimited dominion over his body in general, so also, and with more particular reason, he has no such dominion over his specifically sexual faculties, for these are concerned by their very nature with the generation of life, of which God is the source.”⁹

This is not to say that we should be ruled by our bodies, in accord with the anatomy is destiny philosophy that many feminists attribute to a so-called patriarchal church. Far less is it a proposition that would allow us to be ruled by passion in accord with the philosophy of “free love” and “safe sex”. Rather than either of these propositions, which are radically reductive of the human person and of the conjugal act, Paul VI encouraged us to consider both our bodies and our passions from the perspective of our nature as rational and nonetheless as given in the dual sense of the term: as a fact (*datum*) and as a gift (*donum*). For as Pope Benedict puts it straightforwardly in words that are cited in part by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudatio Si*,

⁷ *Humanae vitae*, nr. 3.

⁸ *Humanae Vitae*, nr. 16

⁹ *Humanae Vitae*, nr. 13.

There is also an ecology of man. Man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will. Man is not merely self-creating freedom. Man does not create himself. He is intellect and will, but he is also nature, and his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is, as one who did not create himself. In this way, and in no other, is true human freedom fulfilled.¹⁰

Indeed, it belongs to any natural being – in virtue of the very definition of the term *nature* – to be inclined to its proper good. That is why animals – including human animals – naturally seek out food, water and shelter; that is why we naturally flee from danger and why we, like other animals, naturally reproduce and care for our young, even if our manner of doing so is, in each case, obviously very different than that of other animals.

We are not minds residing in bodies that we control like engineers controlling machines of their own making. To think otherwise is to flirt with that philosophy of modern man, who, as Paul VI portrays him, tends to extend his “stupendous progress in the domination and rational organization of the forces of nature” to “every aspect of his own life—over his body, over his mind and emotions, over his social life, and even over the laws that regulate the transmission of life.”¹¹ Hence the obvious question, posed by so many couples, and explicitly acknowledged by *Humanae Vitae*: “whether it is not reasonable in so many cases to use artificial birth control?”¹²

In response to this question, Paul VI encourages us instead to “master instinct by the reason and will,”¹³ thereby reminding us that we are embodied spirits capable of governing ourselves and of doing so by way of virtuous self-control. Because, in fact, we are *rational* animals, we are not simply inclined to our natural end or perfection like arrows sent to a target by an archer, to borrow from Aristotle to describe the way irrational beings are inclined to their own ends. Unlike them, we are capable of recognizing ourselves as internally directed, or naturally ordered, to goods that befit us or to a naturally perfected state of being (as measured by health and happiness, for example). Moreover, we are capable of directing our actions accordingly: of actively seeking out our own good, even when

¹⁰ Pope Benedict, “The Listening Heart: Reflections on the Foundations of Law,” Address to the Bundestag, Berlin, 22-25 September 2011, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html. Cited by Pope Francis in his speech to the United Nations. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/25/pope-franciss-speech-to-the-un-in-full>; and idem, *Laudatio Si*, nr. 6.

¹¹ *Humanae Vitae*, no. 2.

¹² *Humanae Vitae*, no. 16. Similarly, “With regard to man's innate drives and emotions, responsible parenthood means that man's reason and will must exert control over them.” (Ibid., nr. 10).

¹³ *Humanae Vitae*, no. 21.

this requires opposing the pull of passions toward an end in conflict with the greater good of, for example, marital fidelity or responsible parenthood. Such are the foundations not so much of an ethic of constraint, but far more positively of one of attraction, for it is the good that dominates, whence the need to discern the *true* good.

Such, in fact, is the meaning of the natural law, which St. Thomas presents as “nothing other than the light of understanding” by which “we know what we must do and what we must avoid.”¹⁴ As such, it “is called ‘natural,’ not in reference to the nature of irrational beings”¹⁵— to, that is to say, that which we share with other animals—but in virtue of that which is proper, or distinct, to us as human. This, it bears insisting, is our capacity to act rationally: to seek out the truth and to choose the good, as discerned by reason. And because we are incarnate spirits, this discernment will include knowledge of the body’s own natural functions, including those of our reproductive systems.

De fait, comme l’expérience l’atteste, chaque rencontre conjugale n’engendre pas une nouvelle vie [explique Paul VI dans *Humanae Vitae*]. [Car] Dieu a sagement fixé des lois et des rythmes naturels de fécondité qui espacent déjà par eux-mêmes la succession des naissances. ... En effet, par sa structure intime, l’acte conjugal, en même temps qu’il unit profondément les époux, les rend aptes à la génération de nouvelles vies, selon des lois inscrites dans l’être même de l’homme et de la femme.¹⁶

In short, the human person is capable, in virtue of his rational nature, of knowing his own natural laws and rhythms – laws and rhythms that are at once biological, hormonal, emotional and passionate – and to make use of this knowledge to either achieve or avoid pregnancy in accord with a discerned choice that refuses to turn marital love against parental love. For, in accord with the constant teaching of the Magisterium, Pope Paul VI teaches that “each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life”¹⁷ and that in preserving “each of these essential qualities, the unitive and the procreative”, the conjugal act “fully retains its sense of true mutual love and its ordination to the supreme responsibility of parenthood to which man is called.”¹⁸ The moral value of this act ought not to be determined uniquely by subjective criteria, therefore, such as « sincere intentions » or « an evaluation of motives, but must be determined,” as the Second Vatican Council taught, “by objective standards, [...] based on the nature of the human person and his acts”: standards

¹⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Dec. præc.* I. Cited the Catechism of the Catholic Church, nr. 1955.

¹⁵ CCC, nr. 1955.

¹⁶ *Humanae Vitae*, nr. 11.

¹⁷ *Humanae Vitae*, nr. 11.

¹⁸ *Humanae Vitae*, nr. 12.

which “preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love.”¹⁹

It is this same language of “significance” that is chosen by Paul VI to emphasize “the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the *unitive significance and the procreative significance* which are both inherent to the marriage act.”²⁰ The word “significance” is itself highly significant in this context, and it is not simply synonymous with the words “end” or “finality” which have been previously employed by the Magisterium to designate the objects of the conjugal act, namely union and procreation. Certainly, the word “meaning” also refers to the objective quality of the act, but precisely as captured, or understood, by an intelligence. As such, it evokes the fact that we are capable, by means of our consciousness and knowledge, to grasp this objective meaning: a meaning that exists independently of our intelligences and wills, but which can nevertheless be discerned by our intelligences and chosen by our wills.

One cannot, therefore, think of it as a mechanical application of biological laws. 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” [a man to his wife, a woman to her husband] *on the basis of the mature possession* of one’s own “I” in its bodily and emotive subjectivity.²¹

At stake is thus, and in sum, the decision to act in conformity with our own nature in accord with the « most serious » act of the “transmission of human life.”²² For “Human life is sacred,” as Pope Jean XXIII insisted in words that are cited by *Humanae Vitae*. “From its very inception it reveals the creating hand of God.”²³ As for human freedom, it is, as Pope John Paul II put it, « a gift ... to be received like a seed and to be cultivated responsibly. »²⁴ When that liberty is in service of love, it leads the whole man toward the fullness that corresponds to his humanity. For, as the Council put it in what

¹⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 51, 3. Emphasis added.

²⁰ *Humanae Vitae*, nr. 12.

²¹ Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006, p. 652.

²² *Humanae Vitae*, nr. 1.

²³ *Humanae Vitae*, nr. 13.

²⁴ *Veritatis splendor*, nr. 86.

terms that John Paul II recognized as a summary of “the whole of Christian anthropology”²⁵: “Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself”.²⁶

He might just as well have said, “My body, my gift. And my freedom makes it possible.”

²⁵ Voir le pape Jean-Paul II, *Dominum et vivificantem*, Lettre encyclique sur l’Esprit Saint dans la vie de l’Eglise et de le monde, 18 mai 1986, nr. 59.

²⁶ *Gaudium et spes*, nr. 24.