

The Argument from Totality

by John Kippley August 23, 2007

In the mid-Sixties, some of the would-be revisionists developed an argument called the Argument from the Totality of the Marriage. Its principal theological proponents seriously proposed this rationale in a Note attached to the position paper of the Papal Birth Control Commission, which provides:

“Not every act which proceeds from man is a complete human act. The subject of morality for St. Thomas is always the human act whose master is man (determined from a knowledge of the object or end). But this human act which has one moral specification can be composed of several particular acts *if these partial acts do not have some object in itself already morally specified*. And this is the case for matrimonial acts which are composed of several fertile and infertile acts; they constitute one totality because they are referred to one deliberate choice” (emphasis added).

Pope Paul specifically rejected this argument in the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* as follows:

“In truth, if it is sometimes licit to *tolerate* a lesser evil in order to avoid a greater evil or to promote a greater good, it is not licit, even for the gravest reasons, to *do* evil so that good may follow there from, that is, to make into the object of a positive act of the will something which is intrinsically disordered, and hence unworthy of the human person, even when the intention is to safeguard or promote individual, family or social well-being. *Consequently it is an error to think that a conjugal act which is deliberately made infecund and so is intrinsically dishonest could be made honest and right by the ensemble of a fecund conjugal life* (no. 14, emphasis added).

(The first sentence in the above quotation has 83 words and illustrates a problem I have with much papal writing. Too many sentences are too hard to understand even when you agree with the points they make.)

Despite centuries of teaching that sexual acts are individually important, the revisionists taught that individual acts were only partial acts. To put the best possible face on this argument, we have to imagine that its proponents had so disciplined their minds and were so pure that it did not occur to them that their argument could be used as a rationalization for adultery as well as contraception. After all, if individual sexual acts are only partial acts that take their morality from the big picture of the marriage as a whole, what is to prevent the traveling spouse from rationalizing that an act of adultery is just a partial act that takes its morality from the most-of-the-time fidelity in the marriage? There's much more on this in Chapter 15 “A Critique of Arguments for Contraception” in *Sex and the Marriage Covenant* listed below.

One has to wonder how even revisionist theoreticians could come up with such a rationalization. It shows that intelligent and well-educated people, encouraged by their

think-alike peers, can sometimes get so caught up in their own ivory tower theories that they can come out with things that ordinary faithful people have to call simply stupid. It illustrates once again that, where sexuality is concerned, self-interest can cloud one's reasoning, and the revisionist theologians had considerable self-interest at stake. They wanted to be accepted by the contraceptionists both inside and outside the Church, and indeed they were—both before *Humanae Vitae* and in their years of dissent.

Some of the leading dissenters have already gone to meet their Maker, and I hope they made it to purgatory. There, I believe, they see clearly all things in the light of the shadow of the cross on which the Savior of the world hung and died, to paraphrase Karl Rahner, S.J. in his pre-*Humanae Vitae* years. If it is not improper to speculate on fitting activities for those in purgatory, I suggest that dissenting theologians might have to read over and over again their efforts to change the unchangeable teaching of the Church.