

The End Does Not Homogenize the Means

By John F. Kippley July 27, 2007

Most Christians recognize that the end does not *justify* the means. Many recall St. Paul's allusions to this truth in Romans 3:6 and 6:1 and 15. In the birth control controversy, Pope Paul VI teaches clearly in *Humanae Vitae* that "it is not licit, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil so that good may follow therefrom..." (n. 14). Civilization would simply cease to exist if everyone accepted as a moral principle the idea that "To accomplish some good, I can do anything; whatever I do is justified by my good purpose." This is so easy to see that ordinary people of good will almost instinctively recognize that "the end does not justify the means."

Discussions about birth control, however, entail human sexuality, and sexual matters have a way of clouding reason because there is so much self-interest involved. Thus some people say that if it is morally permissible for people to use *natural* methods of conception regulation, then it is also okay to use *unnatural* methods. After all, they say, people who use either "method" have the same purpose, so what's the difference? In other words, a common purpose would make morally the same—homogenize—the various ways of carrying out that purpose.

In my experience, people who think this way about birth control do not think this way about anything else in life. I ask such folks to consider two couples who would both like to live in a better house that they can't afford right now. One couple decides to cut back on spending, to work harder, and to save more. The other couple decides to engage in the illicit drug trade. Does having the common purpose of buying a better house make it morally the same to use either of these ways to accomplish that purpose? I have never met anyone who says that wanting a better house makes drug dealing and working harder at an honest trade morally the same. Once the subject is no longer sex and birth control, everyone recognizes the truth of the moral principle, "The end does not homogenize the means."

Since the error of this common mistake is so easy to see, and since it would be easy for someone to "feel stupid" if he was publicly corrected, here's a suggestion. If you give a talk where someone might raise this question, pre-empt and answer the question in your talk. That way, you make the point, and nobody is embarrassed.