

Humanae Vitae and Three Natures

By John Kippley | January 28, 2008

In last month's commentary we looked at the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* from the perspective of the authority of the Church to teach about human love. Specifically, we saw that Jesus at the Last Supper promised that the Holy Spirit would continue to guide the Apostles and their successors in teaching the truth, including the truth about human love (Jn. 14:26). In brief, the teaching authority of the Church is the continuing authority of Jesus, who has positively willed to keep His teaching alive and up-to-date through His body, the Church.

This month we look at the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* from the perspective of three natures—human nature, the nature of marriage, and the nature of the marriage act. If the authority of the teaching Church can be called an outside reason for believing the teaching affirmed by *Humanae Vitae*, the argument from these natures can be called an inner reason.

Human nature. It is the very nature of being human to be honest. We know that the Eighth Commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:16) resonates within us. The words of Polonius to Laertes ring true: “To thy own self be true; then thou cannot be false to any man.” We know that we are called to be true to ourselves, to God, and to our neighbor. We know how much harm has been done by the great dishonesty of pretended love. We may not like a lot of our weaknesses, but we definitely don't want others to think of us as dishonest. And, while some might take pride in being lustful, they do not like to think of themselves as dishonest.

The nature of marriage. What makes a marriage? Probably the easiest way to see this is to reflect on what our reaction would be if we heard these words from the couple before the minister: “We take each other for better but definitely not for worse, in good times but not in bad, in good health but we want to be free if one of us should ever get really sick, and we do all of this for as long as everything is working out just fine.”

None of us would need a degree in canon law or even a brief marriage course to know that whatever that couple was planning, it was not matrimony. It would be completely invalid. Legalized prostitution would be the more correct term. What makes a wedding ceremony into a marriage is the unreserved commitment to take each other for better AND for worse—for life. It's a very big commitment, one that the Lord Jesus raised to the level of a sacrament to give us the graces we need to live it.

The nature of the marriage act. The marriage act really ought to be a true marriage act. That is, sexual intercourse is intended by God to be at least implicitly a renewal of the marriage covenant. The marriage act ought to renew and refresh the love and the commitment of the original marriage covenant. I've been saying that since 1967, but my theological authority and a dollar might get you a cup of coffee (some places). So it was personally encouraging for me to read in the *Letter to Families* from Pope John Paul II

(2/2/94) as follows: “In the conjugal act, husband and wife are called to confirm in a responsible way the mutual gift of self which they have made to each other in the marriage covenant.”

What does that say about contraceptive behaviors? Actions speak louder than words, and the body language of contraception speaks clearly: “We take each other for better but definitely NOT for the imagined worse of possible pregnancy.” The body language of contraception makes it clear that the contracepted marriage act is NOT a renewal of the marriage covenant into which the spouses freely entered. In fact, it contradicts the unreserved gift of self that made their wedding promises a true marriage. Thus, marital contraception by contradicting the very meaning of the marriage act makes it invalid as a marriage act and therefore dishonest. Appropriately, Pope Paul VI called it “intrinsically dishonest” in *Humanae Vitae* (no. 14).

Pope John Paul II added this to the quotation above in his *Letter to Families*: “The logic of the total gift of self to the other involves a potential openness to procreation: in this way the marriage is called to even greater fulfillment as a family.”

Summary. We are called to be honest in all of our dealings with others, and this includes the marriage relationship. Contraception renders the marriage act dishonest. Marital contraception runs contrary to the nature of marriage itself and to our basic human call to be true to the human nature that God has given us.