

The Marriage Act: Unitive and Procreative

by John F. Kippley July 23, 2007

Immediately after he reaffirmed that the marriage act must not be deliberately closed to the transmission of life, the Pope explained:

“That teaching, often set forth by the Magisterium, is founded upon the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning” (HV n.12).

“Unitive” and “procreative” are Latin derivatives, and words derived from Latin sometimes do not register as well as more common expressions. More bluntly, they can go right over our heads. In everyday speech, the Pope is teaching that husband and wife cannot deliberately take apart what we commonly call “making love” and “making babies.”

The Pope ends this short section of the encyclical by saying, “We believe that men of our day are particularly capable of seizing the deeply reasonable and human character of this fundamental principle.” Well, yes, but they need a little help.

Men and women of our day are so influenced by the contraceptive culture that it is difficult for them to realize, without some help, what couples actually do when they engage in contraceptive behaviors. The following short dialogue might act as a wake-up for some.

“Who put together in one act what we commonly call ‘making love’ and ‘making babies’?” Anyone who believes in God has only one answer: “God.” “Well, then, what is contraception except the deliberate effort to take apart what God has put together in the marriage act?” That’s precisely what contraceptive behavior is—the effort to take apart what God has put together in the marriage act.

The consequences of this are enormous. If people believe that sexual intercourse is intended by God to be exclusively a marriage act and that it ought to reflect and renew the marriage covenant, they have a basis from which to judge all sexual behaviors. On the other hand, if people believe (and it is an act of faith either in someone else or in their own opinions) that they can take apart what God Himself has put together in the marriage act, they have no stopping point. The logic of birth control replaces the logic of human nature, and mutual acceptability becomes the sole criterion. That’s what you see in the contemporary sexual revolution.

Should the marriage act reflect and renew the couple’s marriage covenant? That’s the teaching of Pope John Paul II in his 1994 *Letter to Families*: “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” (n.12). I think that most reflective persons, especially those who have been married for a while, will agree. In

their marriage acts, couples ought to renew, at least implicitly, the gift of self, the caring love, the pledge of fidelity and openness to life, and the mutual support they first covenanted on their wedding day—for better and for worse until death do they part.

By reaffirming that we cannot take apart what God has put together in the marriage act, the Popes have also reaffirmed the sanctity and permanence of marriage. The bottom line is that if spouses are going to be faithful to God and to their marriage covenant, they have to respect the integrity of both their marriage and their marriage acts: “What God has put together, let no one take apart.”