

INCARNATE NATURE, INCARNATE LAW

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Humanae Vitae rests on two pillars. One is reverence for the purposes to which sex and marriage are ordained; the other is reverence for the human body, for its natural cadences and operations. To those who prefer to theorize at greater heights, the latter is especially scandalous. For in the background of *Humanae Vitae* are not only the odorless and immaterial substances of will and thought and promise, but also the embodiment of those intangibles in flesh: glistening eyes and soft dark orifices, moisture and menses, muscle and bones and blood. Rightly so, for body and spirit are equally the concern of the adoring God, who by Creation fused them, by Incarnation assumed them, and by Pentecost infused them. In our day it isn't the Christians who sweep the body under the carpet and speak of love only in pretty priggish abstractions. Look rather to those who find that reverence for the body's lovely ways gets in the way of the unlovely things that they want to do with it.

So deeply has God wrought His purposes upon the human body that it is not merely fruitful but rhythmic -- providing not only for the bringing forth of children but for their spacing. To deprive an act of conjugal love of its potential to breed new life is not only irreverent but needless; rather than hindering nature, we have only to cooperate with it. Discipline is difficult, but as experience confirms, the difficulties themselves are ordained to our many-fold good, and avoided only at peril.

I am grateful to Paul VI for saying these things, and hope that I will not be blamed for remarking what also needs to be remarked: That he did not say them convincingly. Though addressed not only to Roman Catholics but to "all Men of goodwill," *Humanae Vitae* is both diffuse and elliptical; its premises are scattered, and to non-Catholics obscure. Though the encyclical letter is magisterial in the sense of being lordly, it is not magisterial in the sense of teaching well. It seems to lack the sense, which any discussion of natural law requires, of what must be done to make the self-evident evident, to make the intuitive available to intuition, to make what is plain in itself plain to us.

The greatest obstacle to the communication of Paul VI's message is that the spirit of the age has burdened most people with a false picture of nature. Their eyes dazzled by what technology can do, when they gaze upon human nature they see not a Design, but a canvass for their own designs. Because they can sever the *causal* link between sex and procreation, they suppose they have severed the *link* between sex and procreation. This helps to explain why, despite having been vindicated by the passage of time, the Pope's warnings about the moral and

social consequences of contraception have been so roundly ignored.

First the encyclical admonishes that artificial contraception will make it easier for people to rationalize sexual immorality. When modern people hear this they are dumbfounded. If there is artificial contraception, how could any sex be immoral? The pill *changed* human nature, don't you see? For old nature the old rules were necessary; for new nature we have new ones. If the new ones too should prove confining, we'll change our nature again, just as we did before. It is the same sort of reasoning that leads some people to propose making future astronauts like tadpoles because on long space journeys they won't need legs.

The Pope's second warning is that husbands who become accustomed to artificial contraception will "lose respect" for their wives; finding it unnecessary to heed the cadences of feminine fertility, they will disregard the cadences of feminine feelings too, finally demanding that their wives be ready for sex at all times. Of course he was right -- but this is turning out to be one of those cases where the new rules too prove confining and we must "change" human nature yet again. Why can't a woman be more like a man? With her husband's Viagra, maybe she can.

Paul's third admonition was that once people view artificial contraception as morally indifferent, it will become an instrument of state policy; governments will interfere in the mission which God has given intimately and exclusively to spouses. And so, of course, they have. The difficulty is that in order to object to the interference, one must believe in the mission. Anyone who regards artificial contraception as morally indifferent has already rejected the mission. But not to worry: Once women become more like men, fertility rates will fall so rapidly that not even the most obtrusive commissar will think the growth of population a threat.

The nature of a thing, said Thomas Aquinas, is a purpose implanted in it by the Divine Art, that it be moved to a determinate end. Human nature is not an object to be manipulated, but a creation to be honored: not just a collection of processes, but an embodiment of purposes. The teleological link between sex and procreation persists even after the causal link is broken, for in the long run, to demand the gift of conjugal love without its accompanying fertility is to demand the impossible. The end of saying "I will give myself to spouse but not to children" is to say "I will give myself to no one; I belong to myself." Deliberate sterility insults the past and destroys the future; it makes us like the animals, who have neither history nor hope.