

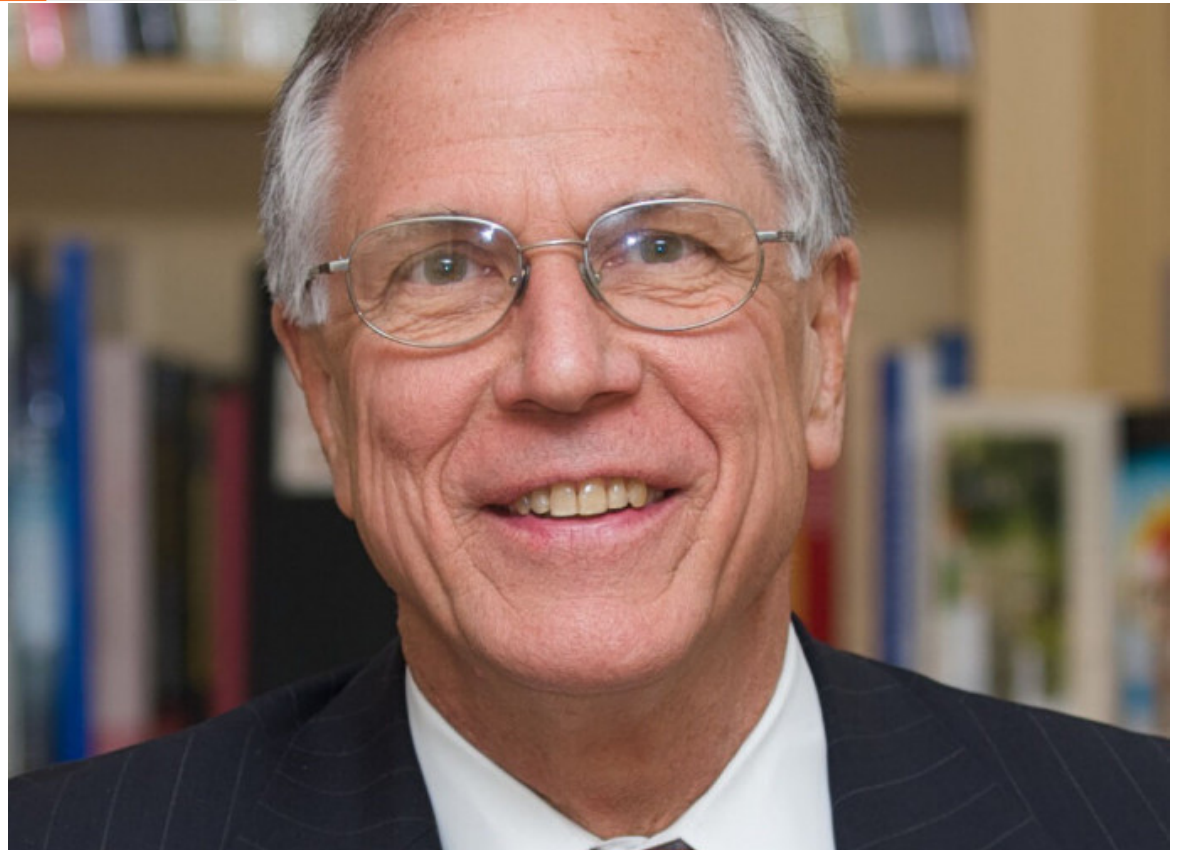
CONFERENCE IN ROME

The Reasonableness and Beauty of the Teaching of *Humanae Vitae*

LIFE AND BIOETHICS

25-05-2023

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Last year a book was published by a Vatican editorial house that called into question the Church's teaching on contraception. The editor of the book wrote of contraception: "The wise choice will be realized by appropriately evaluating all possible techniques with

reference to their specific situation and obviously excluding abortifacient ones.”[1]

There is no “wise choice” with contraception. I would like to show why contraception is unreasonable and why it inevitably leads to abortion.

We know that individuals act for ends which they see as good. In fact, we understand a human being to be acting reasonably when he or she acts for an end perceived as good. Indeed, the end of an act is what defines what the act is. Beyond that, the end is also what makes any act even possible since one only acts for an end. As T. S. Eliot said, “The end is where we start.”[2]

There was admittedly a period when moral theology was dominated by a legalistic approach which did appear to pit abstract norms against individual conscience. However, the more sound approach to moral theology is one that places the emphasis not on laws and norms but rather on the reasonableness of human behavior in pursuit of happiness.

Reasonable human behavior is constituted by the moral agent acting on behalf of ends perceived as goods, and ends, as St. Thomas points out, constitute the principle of human action. Ends define and make possible human acts.

The 1917 Code of Canon Law defined marriage in terms of ends. “The primary end of marriage is the procreation and education of children; the secondary end is mutual support and a remedy for concupiscence.” Marriage is defined in terms of its own inherent ends toward which it is naturally ordered and which, thereby, tell us what it is. As the Jesuit Bernard Lonergan has said: Marriage “is more an incorporation of the finality [or end] of sex than of sex itself . For what is first (i.e., primary) in the ontological constitution of a thing is not the experiential datum but, on the contrary, what is known in the last and most general act of understanding with regard to it.”

St. Thomas and Bernard Lonergan are not the only ones with this insight. In his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, Sigmund Freud wrote: “It is a characteristic common to all the (sexual) perversions that in them reproduction as an aim (end) is put aside. This is actually the criterion by which we judge whether a sexual activity is perverse – if it departs from reproduction in its aims and pursues the attainment of gratification independently.” Those sentences could almost have been written by St. Thomas.

Men and women are drawn to marriage out of love for the goods which it incorporates, first, the good of children, since that, in the final analysis, explains marriage and the marital act. But men and women are also, in a more immediate sense, drawn to the good of mutual support or friendship which the couple finds in marriage.

So, it is the ends of marriage which explain what that institution is and indeed make it possible.

The human person cannot break the bond between the unitive and procreative ends of marriage since they constitute the very definition of what marriage is. And man and woman are naturally drawn to those ends precisely because they are good.

Because human behavior is seen to be reasonable when one acts on behalf of ends seen and understood as goods, it is likewise *unreasonable* to act against a good as though it were an evil. This would, indeed, violate the first principle of the practical reason, it would violate the first principle of morality.

To act against a good as though it were an evil would violate synderesis, the first principle of human action, "Do good; avoid evil". It is here, I believe, that one encounters the immorality, the unreasonableness, the disorder of contraception.

Contraception always involves an act *other than the marital act*, and that other act is directed specifically against one of the goods (or ends) which actually make sense of the marital act, i.e., the procreative good, the child. The name of the act itself describes its malice; it is contra, against, the procreative good. Contraception is a chosen and willed act against a good inherent in the marital act in which a couple has chosen to engage. Every act of contraception is an act OTHER than the marital act: taking a pill or putting on a condom or inserting a diaphragm or surgically cutting the fallopian tubes. Are all these the kinds of techniques which ought to be weighed, as the editor quoted before said, in order to lead us to make a "wise" choice about contraception? But each of these actions is different from, other than, the marital act, and each has no other purpose than to be directed against the realization of one of the ends or goods that make sense of, indeed make possible, the marital act. To engage in an act of contraception is to act in violation of our reasonable nature which is to act on behalf of ends perceived of as goods.

When a married couple engages in marital relations during the infertile period, even knowing conception most likely will not occur, they acknowledge that their act nonetheless retains its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life. Indeed, that is why they are limiting the marital act to the period of infertility in the wife's cycle. However, they do NOT act against the procreative good. They simply realize other goods of marriage without acting against any good.

Since synderesis naturally leads us to avoid evil, when an evil does appear we instinctively act against it to eliminate it. Here we see the inextricable link between contraception and abortion. If we consistently act against the procreative good inherent

in the marital act as though it were an evil, when it does appear, despite our best efforts, we take action to eliminate it. That action, of course, has come to be abortion. It is a natural sequel to induced sterility if the sterility fails and the evil of fertility manifests itself.

In the Fifth Century St. Augustine saw this and wrote of it: “(The licentious cruelty of the marital couple) or their cruel licentiousness sometimes goes to such lengths as to procure sterilizing poisons, and if these are unavailing, in some way to stifle within the womb and eject the fetus that has been conceived. They want their offspring to die before it comes to life, or, if it is already living in the womb, to perish before it is born.”^[3]

In a sense, it was “natural” for Planned Parenthood to go from being an advocate of contraception to being the largest provider of abortion in the world. The child and fertility had come to be seen as evils, as diseases, to be avoided or eliminated. Indeed, there has never been a society which embraced the general practice of contraception that did not go on to embrace and advocate for abortion. There was a pamphlet issued by Planned Parenthood in 1968 entitled “Plan Your Children for Health and Happiness”. The pamphlet at one place posed the question, “Is birth control abortion?” The answer given by the Planned Parenthood brochure was: “Definitely not. An abortion kills the life of a child after it has begun. It is dangerous to your life and health. It may make you sterile so that when you want a child you cannot have it. Birth control merely postpones the beginning of life.” Today Planned Parenthood is the largest provider of abortions in the world as the logic of contraception has worked itself out.

We can look to the Anglican Church to see the progression from embracing contraception to accepting abortion. In 1920 the Anglican bishops of the world gathered at Lambeth Palace in London and condemned contraception in the strongest terms. “We utter an emphatic warning against the use of unnatural means for the avoidance of conception, together with the grave dangers – physical, moral, and religious – thereby incurred.”^[4] Ten years later, in 1930, the bishops of the Anglican Communion were once again gathered at Lambeth. In their deliberations they acknowledged that there were times when married couples should avoid having a child and that the most Christian approach was to abstain from marital intercourse. However, they went on to say, very tentatively, that if abstinence proved impossible married couples might make use of contraception for a limited period. And at the same time the bishops strongly condemned abortion, But by 1967 the Episcopal Church in the United States, a member of the Anglican Communion, supported legal abortion – before it was even legalized in 1973. And just last summer in 2022 the General Convention of the

Episcopal Church passed a resolution which stated: “Addressing the erosion of reproductive rights all Episcopalians should be able to access abortion services and birth control with no restriction on movement, autonomy, type or timing.” It went on: “Resolved, that the 80th General Convention understands that the protection of religious liberty extends to all Episcopalians who may need or desire to access, to utilize, to aid others in the procurement of, or to offer abortion services.”^[5]

In less than 100 years Anglicans went from a reticent approval of contraception to a full-throated demand for universal access to abortion!

I am not suggesting that there is a slippery slope from contraception to abortion. I am maintaining that when one can morally justify the commission of an intrinsically evil act, which the Church has always taught contraception is, we are already at the bottom of the slope and virtually any act can be justified.

To accept the morality of contraception is virtually to accept a false understanding of the human person which leads to the support of other aberrant behaviors which undermine human flourishing.

One challenge to *Humanae vitae* now and in the future is certainly the trivialization of the immorality of contraception, as though it could be a “wise decision”, whereas it is the very gateway to an anti-life mentality and the horrors of abortion.

^[1] *Etica Theologica della Vita*, ed. Vincenzo Paglia, Pontifical Academy for Life.

^[2] Little Gidding.

^[3] St. Augustine, “Of Marriage and Concupiscence”.

^[4] Resolution 68.

^[5] July 8 – 11, 2022, in Baltimore Maryland at Resolution D083 at the 80th General Convention of the Episcopal Church.