

Doctrinal Originality *Humanae Vitae*

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Abstract

This article highlights one of the difficulties encountered in the reception of *Humanae Vitae* and *Familiaris Consortio*: the depth of the meaning of every conjugal act, its beauty and its explicit link with the Creator. This paradox provokes in the first place the faith of the baptized in the mystery of God, who is love and life, and in the second place the moral conscience. Would it not be too beautiful to be true? However, the union of spouses is first a religious act. The main doctrinal statement involves the union of the spouses and their parental responsibility. The true anthropological “cradle” of every human being is an act of interpersonal love. This act, rich and complex, has a double meaning: unitive and procreative. These meanings amalgamate with each other and translate the unity of persons who give themselves to each other. It is

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the great mystery that unites the spouses and God; and it is the place of a revelation.

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Introduction

This text of Paul vi was published on July 25, 1968: a period already agitated in several western societies. Refusal of all authority and individual liberty were fashionable (May 1968). The editing of the encyclical started new stormy winds, mostly inside the Church. The encyclical had however been prepared by much work, lots of research and debates which stretched over a long period of time.¹ The document was welcomed in an atmosphere of conflict in God's people: theologians, episcopal conferences, Christian homes. How was it possible to account for a moral posture about contraception, while biological evidence showed no contradiction in separating the two purposes of sexual union? Debates and comments were and still are many: the moral norm focused all the attentiveness.

The focus of attention shifted then towards various themes, pointing to the consistency or the lack of consistency of the text: double meaning of the conjugal act, responsible parenthood, conscience of the couple, principle of totality, nature of all acts, openness to life, uniqueness of any act vs. the principle of totality, link with the contents of the sacramental consent, etc. The ethical issue was crucial, however,² as if a layer of new guilt weighed on the couples; the use

¹ See the numerous references of the genesis of the encyclical in a reference book Mattheeuws A. *Union & procreation. Developments of the doctrine of the ends of marriage.* Paris: Cerf; 1989.

² "The Pope says non to the pill", wrote the newspapers. "Paul vi's audacity was underlined, when he resisted pressures aiming at approving the use of hormonal contraceptives in sexual relationships within Catholic marriages. In my opinion, however, the encyclical has even deeper true boldness. It is anthropological, and in this

of the word “nature” remained ambiguous, until it received a new interpretation by the personality of John Paul ii in his catechesis on *Catechises on human love in divine project* and in his exhortation *Familiaris consortio*. A recent commentary by Mgr. L. Ladaria clearly shows the continuity of the Church’s teaching in this matter:

The encyclical *Humanae vitae* addresses issues like sexuality, love and life, all three being closely linked. Those questions concern all human beings, of all times. This is why its message remains relevant and topical nowadays. Pope Benedict expressed it in this way: “Whatever was true yesterday stays true today. The truth stated in *Humanae vitae* doesn’t change; precisely considering the new scientific discoveries, indeed, its doctrine becomes more vividly newsworthy, and it presses us to reflect on its intrinsic value (2).

In his post-synodal exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis, in turn, invited us to rediscover the message of *Humanae Vitae* (3) of Paul vi as “a doctrine not only to be preserved, but a doctrine offered us to be lived through. It is a norm that transcends the field of conjugal love and is a reference to live in truth the language of love in all interpersonal relationships” (4).

1. Origins of the difficulties in comprehension

There was great difficulty in comprehending the text, and the difficulty gave rise not to debates but also to fundamental research. And the crisis had a final positive result thanks to the many works and reflections it had provoked. They justify the efforts of the 1980 Synod on the family tasks, the editing of the exhortation *Familiaris consortio* by Pope John Paul ii, and the short doctrinal confirmation of Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia*.

sense this encyclical can help us today to face anthropological challenges presented to our society” (1).

The following issues arise: did the misunderstandings and poor welcome of a magisterial document come mainly from a lack of accurate arguments or from presenting the moral object of an act too partially? Do the doctrinal refusals originate in the demanding moral and spiritual quality of the encyclical? Or in an idealistic expression of conjugal love, or in blinded consciences? Or from a subtle commitment of liberty in a common act performed in conscience, or from a lack of confidence in divine presence at the heart of human history? Would they originate in a purely subjective definition of liberty as cut from all reality or prior to any decision making? Perhaps the trigger is even deeper than we perceive? (5).

According to us, the hesitations in welcoming the doctrine of *Humanae vitae* are not only due to its language, or to the clearcut magisterial statement, or to John Paul ii's theology seen as outdated or idealistic. They probably also come from a deeper surprise, and from an unexpected discovery of God's design about human acts, especially about the union of man and woman in the sacrament of marriage. The causes of those misunderstandings can be explained rationally, but such a refusal of the theological truth of the document has its main roots, seemingly, in the *underestimation, so far, of the greatness and breadth of conjugal union and union with God Creator and Saviour in welcoming life.*

After centuries of development and theological research, the newness of the original divine mystery within the love of man and woman, is now clarified in a new way, clearer and more surprising than ever in today's technical and more scientifically developed environment (6).³ That newness opens unique perspectives for language and Christian practice, so much so that we toil to enter into this new tradition in our time, a time that better knows human sexuality and the processes of procreation. Yet, with mind and heart, let us get into that process, and with a new and deep anthropological boldness (7).

³ In several instances of the Old Testament, the "how" life began (biological knowledge) is rather sketchy, but the theological statement of the divine initiative and of its causality are well marked. Our time seems to think the contrary (6).

This is not the first time in Church history, however, that we can notice an evolving continuity in faith and morals when an apparently new proposition appears. The deposit of faith does not change, but some aspects and expressions enrich it. Within a continuum of tradition, it seems that a new and old feature of true human love according to divine design is revealed to us under a new light. This light may have taken by surprise, it may seem too strong, so that the eyes of many close for a certain time, even for a rather long while. In other words, we plead for a rediscovery of such an anthropological treasure contained in the union of woman and man, in an evolving continuity of faith and morals; and we seem to still be striving to find better idioms or words to shed light on this treasure. John Paul ii's efforts to speak of the "objective language of the body" are only the first steps on the way to this improvement, but they are decisive; as he replaces the word "nature" (present in *Humanae vitae*) by the words "objective language of the body" (present in *Familiaris consortio*), the Pope continues to preserve us from any subjectivism or from all anthropological reduction on this theme, while respecting the moral and subjective call launched to the spouses.

From an anthropological viewpoint, that newness arises, still nowadays, when we think of an act with double meaning linked together structurally, or an act where God is present, an act common to both spouses, an act keeping its meaning in a period of biological infertility, an act that remains true and pure after the period of biological fertility; this is particularly meaningful in our time when the hope of life for spouses has increased. The conjugal act is not just about procreating children. These are all prospects beyond faith or reason, they are all features of an act belonging to human sexuality, but which reach beyond it, in fact, or an act that gives a transformed significance that links humans time and their eternity. In fact, the encyclical reveals the greatness of a human act in which we could not sense the harmonics of goodness and moral and spiritual fruitfulness.⁴ An attitude of faith here should shed light on our reason

⁴ The encyclical addresses the issue of the use of contraceptives, and it sets its moral judgment into a wider anthropological perspective, with an integral view of the

and stimulates it. The encyclical unfolds that greatness and thus stimulates intellect and emotion towards the beauty and richness of such an act. The fullest meaning of this act is granted to us to make us grow in thanksgiving and gratitude for God's work since the origins.

To better appreciate that originality, let us first recall: 1. The teaching of HV. 2. Conditions to conceive and receive every child. 3. We will then go on to the discovery of the real 'cradle' of every human being. 4. We will highlight the intrinsic link of the two significances of the conjugal act. 5. We'll finally show the new greatness we can admire in the specific act of marriage. That act is called to be a genuine act of human love, associated with divine love for humankind.

2. The main doctrinal formulation of *Humanae vitae* (9,10)

The encyclical writes that "each conjugal act must remain open to human life transmission (HVnb.11)". The couple is required not to break "on their own initiative the unbreakable bond between the two meanings of all conjugal act: union and procreation" (HVnb.12).

human being and of his divine vocation. (HVn7). The encyclical bases its doctrine on the truth of the conjugal love act, on the unbreakable link God has wanted which humans cannot break on their own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: its "unitive meaning and its procreative meaning" (HVn12). Upon this base, the prevailing anthropology, which sees human being as builder of meaning through his own acts, is to be challenged. In the field of sexuality, this comes to state that humans don't have to be reduced to passive subjects of the laws of their own body but must be the ones giving sense to their own sexuality. It is anthropology that sets liberty before nature, as if they were two irreconcilable elements. Paul VI, however, warns that there are, before liberty, significances that reason can comprehend, that men have not chosen, and that direct and rule his behaviour. If man can recognize and interpret the unitive and procreative dimensions of the conjugal act, he will be able to carry out his own life correctly to its end. For the encyclical, nature is not in conflict with liberty, it rather gives freedom meanings which give truth to the conjugal act and enable it to come to its fullest achievement. This is, in my opinion, the real boldness of *Humanae vitae* and its radical relevance (8).

The Church does not ask to renounce all conjugal union, if in “for reasons independent of the will of the spouses, it becomes foreseen that they (conjugal acts) would be infertile (HV nb.11). The objective and spiritual intent is as follows: the couple “don’t position themselves as masters of human life, but act as ministers of the design established by the creator” (HVnb.13). The subsequent documents, indeed, (*Familiaris consortio*, *Donum vitae*, *Evangelium vitae*, *Amoris laetitia*)⁵ will confirm it: the Church doctrine is demanding, it sets the human act in the design of God Creator and Saviour. It is not exclusively restricted to procreation. Such a doctrine gives conjugal union a new dimension, in greater communion with divine action; as such, it should be understood and proposed within the frame of the sacrament of marriage and of conjugal relationship.

2.1. *An act that unites spouses to God*

The conjugal act is tied to the spouses’ responsibility, arising from their hearts, from their wish to do good and conscience engraved. What does that responsibility consist of? The knowledge in Biology of Procreation, acquired by now, cannot delete the fact that conjugal union is a responsible and free behavior, a *common action with God*. It is really performed by free beings, it is natural and religious, too.⁶

In HVnb.12, Paul VI speaks of the conjugal act as “ordered to the high vocation of mankind to fatherhood”. By naming God, the spring of all love, “the Father in whom all fatherhood drives its name in heaven and on earth” (nb.8), he highlights the responsibility

⁵ *Amoris Laetitia* n.68. “Blessed Paul VI, in line with Vatican II, has deepened the doctrine on marriage and the family. In the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, he particularly highlights the intrinsic link between conjugal love and life-giving: “conjugal love requires from spouses a conscience of their mission in responsible parenthood, so rightfully taken into account, and that is to be correctly understood” (nb.68).

⁶ According to some authors, one could rightly say that this act is religious through the sacramental consent given by spouses in marriage. In that case, some state that the act is good and demanding because of their bond with the sacrament, not with the purely natural feature of the sexual act. The demand does not concern sexual acts that are not within marriage (ex. for a prostitute).

of spouses in passing on life. Paul vi speaks of “responsible fatherhood” to frame his reflection. Through the specific work of marriage, the spouses have received the mission of being “responsible of divine fatherhood”.⁷ Such is God’s confidence in the spouses. That task has positive aspects: missionary, free, which does not diminish its demanding side, just showing the importance of life transmission at the heart of the conjugal act. God is not the excludes third party in that relation: God founds it and stays present in it. Both the fact and the manner of life transmission are tied to the conjugal nature of the bond as to the received sacramental grace. In addition, this act has a wide range of harmonious meanings. In fact, the union of the spouses is the place where a divine presence lies. As the Creator and Saviour of all love, the Lord is present to the mutual gift of the spouses. He resides within their mutual gift and accompanies their liberties that choose the good: every good act aims at carrying out God’s will. Love is called to be expressed in conjugal union: it makes the spouses one and united to God. The sexual act is not a *no man’s land* of divine presence. On the contrary, it expresses physically how much God loves those who love each other and how their love can glorify God on earth.

In numerous religions sexuality relates to the sacred, particularly with the divinity. In the act of union, man and woman are in intimate communion. Whether they are conscious of it or not, the Creator is not absent from what they experience together. In a materialistic and sometimes scientifically strengthened horizon, the sexual act has its own describable dynamism, as well as its body, physiological and hormonal dimensions. But some anthropological reflections have led us to forget that man is not self-shaped, spouses don’t “make” a child. They fulfil —or do no fulfil— the personal conditions allowing fertilization and the advent of an embryo, then of a child. But the unity of a child —body and soul— does not depend on his parents only. God Creator is the One who animates the body cells of the embryo, who gives the child his unique and personal status of

7 Beautiful unifying expression often used by the Belgian moralist A. Chapelle+ (11).

individuality for now and forever. See the greatness of the conjugal act, which independently from the spouses' intentions in all circumstances, keeps those significances for their own unique being. This specificity of the act has ethical and spiritual consequences: it gives the spouses a new commitment, it makes them responsible for their act. Responsible motherhood and fatherhood are being responsible for divine fatherhood. God speaks through the performed act, which unites them in love and for love's sake. Thus, it is in virtue of these great meanings, of these wonderful values, of the objective responsibility of the spouses that we argue and reason.

2.2. Responsible fatherhood

Responsible fatherhood doesn't focus in the first place on avoiding or spacing births, nor does it seek to have only the children wanted and desired. It rather opens to God's loving plan to bring to being new humans forever.⁸ The couple take part in the radically new emergence of new children of God. It is their mission. This emergence is ordained to God, God-aimed, for His glory. Conceived children exist for eternity: once they were not, and now they are, and will be human beings forever. The momentum that drives the spouses to unite as free and responsible cooperators is lifegiving, it allows God to welcome new children. Children are not only what the parents see, they are as well what they believe: "an infinity of mystery and love which would dazzle us if we could see it face to face".⁹

Such a responsibility is to be exercised under some conditions in the mode of continence, that means a decision not to generate new human lives. The conjugal act is not just about begetting children. Abstaining from sexual relations in due reason includes a decision not to generate children, or not to distort the truth of the love language in conjugal acts. It is called to stay unitive and procreative. The

⁸ "Called to give life, the spouses take part in the creative power and fatherhood of God" (CEC n° 2367).

⁹ Paul VI, "Address to the "Equipes Notre-Dame"", in DC n°1564 (7 June 1970) n° 10.

act is to keep its internal structure. The way man and woman look at each other always remains “conjugal and parental” in sexual acts: this is a condition of mutual love. The moral object is not in the first place a ban, but it highlights the truth and goodness of the act of union for spouses.¹⁰

The issue for them is then—in deep mutual accord— to regulate children’s births in the family and to respect the meanings of the conjugal act. In the way they unite or not, the spouses always aim at staying open to God’s love and life design, since He, the Creator, has placed trust in them. They make themselves vulnerable to each other. Abstaining from conjugal relationships can also mean love. If freely chosen, it is an act of love in line with God’s confidence in the free responsibility of spouses. Continence is also a language of love. The couple must learn that language, to enrich each other with their experiences, to share the meanings of those experiences, whether bodily, psychological, spiritual, for themselves or for their family. The will to respect the conjugal act in the integrity of all its meanings will be confirmed by the many expressions of their love and fruitfulness. Love can indeed be enriched and keep all its gift fruitfulness whether in accomplishing the conjugal act or in freely and wisely abstaining from it.

As we can see, there is a difference in moral object to make the acts willingly unfruitful (technical and moral contraception) and the will to respect the integral human truth of those acts. This doctrine is a positive and respectful view of the conjugal act. What is put forward here is not so much a prohibition, but the promotion of missionary love acting through or without sexual union. When couples are wisely informed by the sacramental love promise and by God’s creative design, they are in full responsibility of birth control, since birth control involves knowing and respecting the two meanings of conjugal acts. These two meanings belong to the objective language of sexual bodies. The body ‘speaks’ and delivers a double

¹⁰ We ought not to focus more on legality of contraception than on the goodness of the mutual gift of sexuality of spouses.

significance, a meaning that liberty is invited to assume and welcome to be in the truth of its love.

In considering responsible fatherhood and the spouses' liberties, we can discover and admire with the psalmist how present God is to their act and remains its source and truth: "You have created my being, you sheltered me in the womb. I admit that I am a true wonder" (Ps. 139,138, 13-14).

God's presence is the privileged place for communion between God and creatures (man-woman-child), and besides, it's a place where God's way of acting is revealed in covenant with the spouses. The act of the spouses is truly a matter of communion and of procreation, because it is the way God has 'structured' it, God who takes part in it. Human love is saved and strengthened by God himself: the spouses' act is a true image of God's own action, as it is particular and interpersonal, unitive and procreative per se. That double significance is not in the first place biological, but rather anthropological and ontological. "These two essential aspects" (HV nb.12) belong to the very being of the spouses and to their act.¹¹ They are to interpret God's creative intent and to carry it out in love, with their body just as it is. "For the encyclical, nature is not in conflict with liberty, it gives liberty the meanings that make possible the truth of the conjugal love act and allow it to be fully achieved" (12).

3. Discovery of the true 'cradle' of every human being

Focusing on the spouses' act enables them to better perceive the greatness of every man. This specific act is decisive to conceive and identify every human being.¹² To be conceived, worn and be born through a woman: these are human acts of great worth. The double

¹¹ We agree with the old doctrine of the essential purposes of marriage: union and procreation of children to be raised.

¹² Other acts are particular to humans, but not as dense in condensed values, as drive a car, nail, write, speak, feed or care.

meaning of the conjugal act highlights the spouses' love, but also the 'anthropological cradle' of every human being.

We presume spontaneously that a child should rightly and normally emerge from a love act in the Creator's presence: this is how we react about the spouses' intent—or man and woman's intent—when they unite with the wish to have a child.¹³ We believe that this subjective desire for a child must show in the spouses' bodies a real welcome to the one who might come. A child resulting from rape has not been respected and wanted for his own sake. Therefore, whether at the level of intentions or in the conditions of the conception of a human being, it is appropriate that both elements be adapted harmoniously to the greatness and dignity of the child. Conceiving a human being does not happen anyhow: it arises from an act whose love gets clarified in its double meaning: unitive and procreative, this act is specific to marriage, moreover.

From the viewpoint of the child-to-come, not presuming all the subjective intentions of a couple, we ought to say that the most appropriate cradle of origin is an interpersonal act, that act witnessing a mutual physical and spiritual gift of the couple. It is not just a technical act. The creative act is God's. The procreative act is of the spouses. They act on God's behalf, with Him and for Him: they open up to welcome any new otherness, respecting whatever it is. Sexuality means giving oneself totally and for good. Man and woman represent personally a love covenant tied between God and every new being. In that conjugality all the performed acts are unique, engraved in time and in flesh.

These acts are neither built on domineering nor on production relationships between parents and children. Moreover, they are not aimed solely at begetting children. In the conjugal acts in which parents offer a gift of themselves, (with the great variety in the spouses' motivations and feelings) they also receive the gift of a child created

¹³ There is no such thing as a right to child, but rather rights of children: a child has the right to be the fruit of the specific conjugal love act of his parents, also the right to deserve respect as a person from his conception" (CEC nb.2378).

by God. The parents do not fashion the child, they get ready to welcome him/her.

Only this act enables one to recognize a child as unique in his origin, not repeatable. Only this act enables the child to be respected and acknowledged as equal in personal dignity to those who give him life. Human begetting is “the fruit of mutual giving, and this takes place within the conjugal act where the spouses cooperate, not as masters but as servants of the Creator’s Love”.¹⁴ The main objective aspect of that relational act is the donation. Outside giving, no truth in any conjugal act. The spouses are ministering the ‘gift’, as servants and referees to the ultimate Spring of life. In this act, the child is not submitted to measures of control and domination which would ensure technical efficiency. Coming to existence is not subdued to technical conditions, nor to other various motivations: it is focused on the relational conjugal act of the spouses, in their own time and flesh, a real parable of God’s creation act and their union with God.

We ought to start our reflection from what a child is as a human person. Since children are persons aimed at loving, at being loved, then their arrival among us cannot be made of any kind of label. For indeed, our strength to being and our identity as unique persons, loved as well as loving, both arise from a conscious and unconscious certainty that we are not here by mere chance nor by an automatic process of generation, as it happens with bacteria, neither by a special method of technical built.¹⁵ We know and live by this: at the very origin of our being, a personal act of union took place between two humans. Loving the child is in tune with a real communion between two human beings. It’s our personal ontological DNA: a precise act. The conjugal act accomplishes two functions: child welcome and mutual welcome of the spouses with their respective differences. Union and procreation occur in the one same act. The union of the spouses is a decisive factor.

¹⁴ Guidelines *Donum Vitae* n°7. Quoted from *Gaudium et Spes* n° 50.

¹⁵ The issue will be more and more massively on the minds because of artificial intelligence.

That personal act has its ontological density, its emotional importance, its simple symbolism, strong, dense, unique... It is also a religious act, before the Creator. We owe it to God. We all dream to be born of a total gift of a man and woman; we fancy that their mutual offer was in lovesick desire that we would come to being... What we hope for and expect is to be wanted for ourselves, not only by chance and unconsciously. None has been born without God's will. Our parents' conscious intent has been expressed objectively in a concrete act, in their flesh. At the origin of our being human, there has to be a sexual act of love and mutual gift. The stake of procreation is anthropological: it affects mankind. The beauty and the good of that foundation act should not be taken away from a child. He comes from there, so it would be unfair to replace that base by a technical act. We know the difference between a child who has been "wanted, wished, loved" and a child "fashioned, machined, frozen, sorted out or selected".

Testimonies of couple's state that no sexual act is the same. Each act is specific, intense in gift, unique in joy and pleasure quality. Each one has an own purity and takes on various shades of tenderness, of physical and spiritual union. These personal motives cannot delete the objectivity of the sexual act: it always means both union and potential procreation: the two meanings call for each other and get integrated into the spouses' conscience. The beauty and perfection of that act require respect for its double aim and call for a resolute will. They also need to be expressed subjectively by the spouses for the sake of the objective truth (not biological) of the act. Human procreation is linked to a degree of perfection of an act which is not neutral. If a person has not been conceived in love, a unique and personal love, he risks feeling "cold, wounded, hurt" and to "disappear". The vocation of the spouses' act in its purity and in what the spouses make of it, is to certify the humans that they are love in gratuity since their origins, for themselves, for what they really are: human beings. The conjugal act expresses a gift from human persons and from God. It contains a whole ethical programme: each

one of us is given to himself and we can only realize our own human destiny in giving ourselves. This debt of being is a debt of love.

That way of acting provides the best conditions to ‘personalize’ the child. It can even work as an ethical appeal and norm. However, it must be nuanced, starting from the difference between God Creator’s act and the parents-procreators’ act. Coming to the consciousness of one’s identity, to the peaceful and joyous consciousness of having been wanted and loved for oneself is not conditioned absolutely and decisively by the moral quality of the procreative relationship. God saves love and its expressions. A child is not doomed to a dead-end about his identity and his life, whenever he hears through his mother (or guesses the fact) that he is the child of an alcoholic father, or that he was conceived in a state of drunkenness, or that he comes from a rape situation, if he knows that his parents did not get along well, that he was conceived by chance during one night, conceived more by sexual passion than pure love. Those children have access to a real self-consciousness, although sometimes in pain. If the conjugal act is important at the origin of each human being, yet the access to self-consciousness is not hindered radically. God, Father and Creator, is at the origin of all human beings. Parents might sometimes hamper or disturb this process of personalization: however, each one, ultimately, depends yet more fundamentally on the God Creator and Saviour.¹⁶

4. Double significance of the conjugal act

The conjugal act is particular and personal, not in any way to be compared to other ordinary human acts such as walking, singing, writing... God is surely present to our lives and in an interior way to

¹⁶ “Let’s not be surprised at the intimate link between the divine and sexuality, a connexion acknowledged by all cultures. Sexuality is indeed a religious phenomenon. It creates the bond inside humankind by warding off death devastations, but also the link with the cosmos and with nature. Man doesn’t master the gift of life; he has recognized in that abundance shown in sexuality a parable of divine fruitfulness” (13).

all our acts. But the conjugal act has a greater density of being quality. The conjugal union utters in the flesh the public promise made by spouses in the Church, it tells of the beautiful consent before God and with God. It tells of God's desire to save every love at the root of its expression.

4.1. The unity of the human being

There is much debate about the personal status of father and mother. How are they persons within their bodies? What are the demands of the personal being of the spouses? Those demands find an expression in the whole field of their life, but how are they expressed within the conjugal union, as linked to procreation?

Man and woman are fashioned in a personal scheme of gift-love that does not ignore the body. Man comes from and takes part in a generational mystery which remains personal from start to end. Every human being has to emerge from another or has to cooperate in the emergence of another in an act that stays personal: an act of giving through his body, his heart and his mind.

The sexual union, lived in a humane way and sanctified by the sacrament, is in return a journey of growth in the life of grace for the spouses. It is the 'nuptial mystery'. The worth of body union is expressed in the words of mutual consent by which they have accepted each other and have given themselves to each other to share their whole life. Those words give meaning to sexuality and free it from all ambiguity (*Amoris laetitia* n^o 74).

Corporeality is the specific mode of being and of acting of the human mind. It shapes a language which is 'significance' and which 'speaks' of the self-giving of the persons in the conjugal act. That body language exists within liberties that are incarnated in the presence of the couple. These liberties welcome that meaning and enrich it by their person. It is important for this subjective language to match and harmonize with the body language, which is more objective per

se. Such an unbreakable bond of the two meanings expresses a basic personalistic data: the concern not to introduce any division in a person and in love self-offered. Every conjugal act is to respect inside the body language a real match between the “signifying” and the “signified”, avoiding thus all misrepresentation/falsification of the truth of conjugal love, of its *conversatio*¹⁷ between spouses. The conjugal act is a particular place of unity and for unification. It strengthens the spouses and their union. The person gives himself totally in the body. It is so important, because body union in a loving gesture is an expression, a pledge, a certification and a promise of truth of the persons’ union. That objective meaning, engraved in the flesh, is crucial for the faithful union of the spouses at all moments: before, during and after the act. That meaning also unites the spouses to their child if he comes. If a child cannot come, the unitive meaning remains in the act of union which stays open and strengthened in its procreative aim, too. Uniting outside biological fruitfulness is still and always an original gesture of creatures united to God.

That gesture certifies at a personal level, for the spouses and for the potential child, that what is willed is true. Bodies united testify to generosity, self-giving and love from the spouses. They give themselves intimately to love each other better, to know each other better. Other gestures do this, too, but the potential emergence of a new being, not totally submitted to arbitrariness, belongs to the essence of the act of union. Outside the fertile periods, the unitive act remains open to life, even as it is impossible biologically. That love act expresses each time that man and woman love each other as spouses

¹⁷ Something interesting to note in *Amoris Laetitia*: a reminder of the key sentence on unconditional respect of the double meaning of the conjugal act: this is said in a firmer or in a more ontological way as it speaks of the intrinsic bond between the 2 meanings in the conjugal act. Besides, blessed Paul VI, in line with Vatican II, has deepened the doctrine on marriage and family. His encyclical *Humanae Vitae* highlights the intrinsic bond between conjugal love and life generation: “conjugal love demands from the spouses to be conscious of their mission of responsible fatherhood, a consciousness so much stressed today, and which must be correctly understood” (n° 68).

and parents. Even at a psychological level, we could say that they beget each other to the sexual beauty of their masculine and feminine bodies, as they are. In other words, the husband does not unite with an organ-amputated wife or with a person ceasing to be a mother, just because the children have left home. The husband still gets united to his wife, their children's mother forever.

This is their reality, old or lifelong reality: the body union is the privileged place where each one's personal unity is highlighted and respected, whether within the couple or for the prospective child. The conjugal act in which the spouses show each other their mutual gift also expresses the openness to the possible giving of life. It always takes part in God's creative reality, God who, out of love, sustains spouses in their most intimate being: male and female, father and mother through their initial consent. To respect the body language and the free generosity of the spouses, the conjugal act is to be performed with (due) respect for the bodies of the spouses as they are.

4.2. Unity of significances

In the conjugal act, both unitive and procreative meanings are intrinsically made one. To the unity of the human being corresponds a particular act: an act that contains, combines and unifies both unitive and procreative meanings of human love. That one common act takes on two personal meanings which are to the image of the man and woman in action. This conjugal act performed in love, is 'one' in its two meanings. The act cannot be reduced to a single finality. It is the earthly link between creatures and the Creator. Performing this act in all truth is making unity grow unity between man and woman, with the expected child and with God. The unitive meaning is always intrinsically tied to the procreative meaning. In one single act, whatever touches one touches the other at the same time. One might separate the two meanings on the level of body or biology, but the act would then be changed as well as its consequences. In that case,

the ‘sentence’ or the ‘word’ said by the body would have a different content.

The meanings of the act performed together by the spouses are not interchangeable. They are not external to one another, as if they could freely unite ignoring the procreative status of either spouse.¹⁸ Those meanings cannot be separated from each other to give an ‘external’ priority to one or the other. It cannot be said that the union aims solely at procreation. That act would not then be the same as the conjugal act. “Always in its end, but never humanly reduced to it, the fully conjugal language of love –if love is real– goes through the biological phrasing of an act which is not of fruitfulness, but of fertilization” (14). The very definition of the conjugal act is linked to its double signification, which structurally belongs to the performed act. We can see that unity is enacted when the spouses unite in conjugal relation during infertile periods. That possibility is often an obstacle to understanding the depth of the act, because we reflect and reason from a technical or biological point of view of the reproduction.

As we have already seen, fertility is not to be measured either by fertilization or by child procreation. It includes the whole person who performs this act. If the couple does not separate by itself the link between the two meanings of the conjugal act, that act remains measured by the truth of the bodies and of the persons, a relation that unites and procreates. The conjugal act stays open to the whole reality of the other, as spouse-and-father, as spouse-and-mother. The conjugal act “stays ordained to express and strengthen the union of the spouses” (HVnb.11). A couple unable to conceive children won’t have to renounce all sexual union. They must be able to comprehend the conjugal relationship as the place of a human task that is being pursued till the end: through this act a woman begets man to be himself (and vice-versa). In fact, the conjugal act sets woman and man at the origins of creation sacramentally, at the source of their creation, and of the potential creation of a child. The bond

¹⁸ Let us recall that males remain “fertile” biologically his whole life.

that unites them makes them both ‘children of faithful love’ for each other.

John Paul II has a wonderful way to express that transforming and creative momentum which is transmitted by the conjugal act: man and woman:

Rediscover, so to speak, each time and in a particular way, the mystery of creation, and so return to the union in humankind (‘flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones’) which enables them to recognize each other and, like the first time, to call one another by name. In a certain sense, this means reviving the original virginal worth of man emerging from the mystery of his aloneness before God and in the midst of the world. The fact of becoming ‘one single flesh’ is a powerful link established by the Creator through which they discover their own humanness, either in its original unity or in the twofold mysterious mutual attraction (15).

Through conjugal union God progressively introduces the spouses into his own look. Union purifies and strengthens. It is the very place of a human task: through that act woman begets man to himself and vice versa. The spouses learn to see the other, to see the child and the world with the very eyes of God who created the world and who keeps on creating it. As a child cannot emerge from such a relationship biologically, yet he remains at the heart of the relationship by both his inalienable meanings, symbolic and ontological. The spouses do not unite while ignoring their fathering condition. Moreover, the transformed look of the spouses gives birth to each other’s feminine and masculine identity. Each one is returned to the rightful source of his being, hoping to be a child for whom and by whom love always exists. The fruitfulness of love directs the spouses’ hearts beyond the child of their own flesh to enter a contemplation of personal life. Conjugal union always witnesses the “mysticism of creation” of *the* person. It is already true that the positive look of others transforms us, but the experience is even more radical within the

conjugal relation when lived under God's project and under his look. Every union can be a recreation of the partner to whom all is given and offered for free.

The body speaks and shows the person. It manifests the invisible: it always refers to the soul that inhabits it and the personal unity that has arisen from it. The body is the space for love to be self-given and to be expressed in different states of life, in the 'spousal' structure of every human being. The body is for our personal life, here on earth as in heaven. In the conjugal union, it always means both union and procreation. The purpose of that act is to strengthen the fruitfulness of 'spousal'¹⁹ love, which is inseparably body and spirit. Its double significance reminds us of that vocation at every age of the couple's life.

4. Conclusion: which is the greatness of the conjugal act?

There is a deep link, indeed, between marriage and its specific act, sexual and conjugal. Saint Augustine already in his doctrine about the goods of marriage—and later Saint Thomas reflecting on the ends of marriage—both linked deeply the goodness and end-goal of marriage through the corporal exchange sealed by a mutual promise. The fact that the unitive and procreative goodness of marriage could be reflected in the marriage's specific act shows the consistency of that act located in a permanent sacrament throughout the spouses' life.

It has the power to unite men and women intimately. It also unites them to God and in God. It has the creative power that can make itself the cradle of new life, that makes the spouses contemporaries of the creating act. They are procreators. "Conjugal sexuality is the expression of the final gift made by the one spouse to the

¹⁹ A particular word that is dear to the language of John Paul II in his catechesis on human love as part of the divine plan.

other; it so feeds and strengthens a total and unbreakable communion between them.

Because of its own intimate truth, conjugal sexuality has a call, precisely in the specific conjugal act of spouses' union, to a "special participation in the very creative work (of God)" (*Gaudium et spes* n°50,1). Christian tradition has always understood the spouses' conjugal act and mission as a form of cooperation in God's creative action. They are "cooperators", "coworkers", "ministers" of God's design. The union between the spouses is thereby strengthened.

It is fruitful: openness to life is one of its intrinsic features. But the act is not aiming solely at procreations: it remains open to all other manifestations of conjugal love fruitfulness. Fruitfulness "widens and gets enriched by all the fruits of a moral, spiritual and supernatural life that father and mother are called to give their children, and through them, to the Church and to the world" (FC n°28). Without being exhaustive, we can point out a few expressions of a couple's fruitfulness: mutual enrichment of personalities, a capacity to welcome and to accommodate one's own people as well as strangers, material comfort such as cultural and educational enrichment offered to close people, social or possibly political commitments. Fruitfulness also belongs to the spiritual realm. The spouses' self-perception of divine presence in their lives gives a clue to the growth of their love, a love that is more and more like the love of God-Trinity: personal prayer, prayer in couple and in family, joyous transmission of the faith to loved ones, a humble testimony of God's marvels in them and around them: these are signs of fruitfulness born by grace.

The spouses' spiritual and physical gift of self is always expressed in an act with double meaning: unitive and procreative (FC nb.32). That act is unique each time. The technical possibility of artificial procreations forces us to add that it can't be performed by someone else: it cannot be delegated. It realizes what it says: it is performative, while not always fruitful (performing from a biological point of view!). Conjugal love keeps, expresses, develops and strengthens the double meaning of the conjugal union. Such love enables the double

meaning to remain the “matrix” of every new gift, fruit of the spouses’ mutual gift. It is the pledge of the fruitfulness of the couple.

This specific conjugal gesture is the human voluntary act of spouses united by a love promise in the frame setting of marriage. Whenever procreation is not wanted as the fruit of the conjugal act, it is then not in line with its own perfection (the view of man and woman), it does not fit God’s creative design. Whereas here is an act of communion of the creatures performed with the Creator: free, conscious, with discernment, with the desires to do the divine will and to give God glory. That act, being perfectly human, is assuredly a place of the presence of God Creator and Saviour.

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