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The question of responsible Christian matrimonial parenthood according to natural law and morals.

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Introduction

It is very important for the man and woman to be consistent in their understanding of the meaning and purpose of sexuality *before* their marriage. When they have married and started their sexual life together, they soon realize that some issues are difficult and new to them. So if it was important to agree in principle on the conjugal ethics before consenting to marriage it becomes even more important for the couple during the first year of the marriage to be able to talk through with confidence and respect the new issues that come with the experience of sharing everyday life. It is easy in the preparation period before the ceremony to speak with the "big words" about the requirements of absolute fidelity and the indissolubility of marriage and on its call to holiness. What these words really mean will come through in the school of conjugal experience.

The prospective bride and groom and the priest or deacon in charge of preparative talks before the wedding may readily agree on the elementary views of marriage but still not see the factors leading the spouses to a deeper human and spiritual union.

It is not always clear whether it helps that both are true believers. It is not always the case that both believe in the same way at first. Much will therefore depend on human characteristics. However, it is always certain that the Creator himself, through his loving support of the couple, conveys his blessing on them as a protective roof over their future home.

When you enter into the inevitable reality with all the expectations of a successful and happy marriage things must turn out slightly different. The common life requires housing, income, continued relationships with parents and siblings, old and new friends, colleagues, supervisors, all the everyday logistics.

Then over time other aspects of the couple's characters will be obvious and noticeable. The result of the education they received at home will be reflected, generally as good common assets, in some cases however as unacceptable "peculiarities".

The well-prepared couple manages to deal successfully with such experiences and know that they start to grow together. The more naive and over-enthusiastic couple who believed blindly in the forces of infatuation may have to go through a purgatory of small and large problems. It is for this reason that a real period of engagement is better - and more worthy of baptized people - than a premarital life together, when often enough the proper understanding of *the Christian meaning and purpose of sexuality* is missed.

This is also where cultural traditions play in. In some cases the tradition at home objects to any form of cohabitation before marriage, in other cases parents see no grave fault with their children "trying out" marriage before they wed. The Church speaks of the need to *discover one's vocation* and to verify the authenticity of the vocation, not to find out what married life is in advance. Stories of the saints show that a given background is not essential for all good and Christian marriages. There may be so many different ways. With God all things are possible!

How to get relationship to work?

The new couple's first and most important common task is to find out how the human relationship between them is to work out in harmony. After the engagement period the couple knows better and benefit greatly from the factual knowledge they have about each other. They are beginning to fit well together. Although the couple feels the love strongly during their first time of shared life they are not accustomed to each other's everyday behavior around the clock.

They have not been so close to each other nor shared the practical tasks together. They have not had any single economy. If both are wage earners at the ceremony, it is easy to continue with two parallel economies, each one deciding independently for oneself. But the union of marriage with its shared responsibility is realized more clearly with a single economy, no matter how

much each one contributes to the joint. To be agreeing on expenditure strategies may be difficult and become sources of strong opposition.

Similarly, loans, property or heritage that you bring into the marriage may create imbalances. There may be many tears and much anxiety after the first small fractions or exchanges of words. It is therefore important to have a particular talent for bridging differences of various kinds.

Sometimes it can be simple things such as voice or a tone of voice that you have not heard earlier that give a fright. One suddenly finds the other part unexpectedly stubborn, grumpy, moody or bitchy. In early adolescence, this is often enough to put "an end" to a relationship. In marriage this cannot "become final" any longer but must be overcome and marriage must continue, despite the anxiety over what will happen.

However, what makes it "continue" and become the most important thing in life are the characteristics that attracted the man and the woman to each other in the beginning. There is a life-giving joy just to see and hear one another. Nothing comes close to the admiration and pride one feels towards the other. Nothing comes close to being "seen" by the beloved and to be with the other. Through the other part one finds oneself and understands oneself more and more. No one else can be as complementary to oneself as the beloved. And it so happens over time that *the loneliness and rootlessness* experienced so strongly before marriage in younger years is almost completely forgotten.

To get that consistency to work in marriage is the couple's task and *duty*. The word *duty* or *obligation* may sound a little cooling and formal in the context but should always be part of both persons' examination of conscience. It means something beyond the emotional relationship - a kind of "confirmation" of the good in human life that a family and kids are as is the attention to one's fellow human beings. When the days when real trouble comes, they are already prepared for the necessary sacrifices and can sort out the difficulties. Goodness pursued as an obligation is *fundamental*. Duties and obligations prevent a relapse into self-satisfaction of egoism.

You get the relationship to work when you have discovered what is

good for the other's personality and talent, and when you always try to be fair. You allow the other to develop in freedom according to his or her personality and find simultaneously a joy in encouraging and supporting the husband's or wife's individuality. At the same time we know that any form of "exploitation" of the other's goodness is alien to love.

What are the more serious dangers to the stability of the relationship?

It may seem shocking enough to take the word "contempt" in one's mouth as a "first risk" example because one cannot see at all how the word could belong in a text on marriage. It thus requires an explanation. It is of course a progressive deterioration with small, almost imperceptible events that sign up with increasing regularity. "Contempt" means devaluation of the other person's characteristics which, when it has become a constant feature, undermines any attempt to reconnect to the first years of love and high hopes. When the contempt leads to harsh words or condemnations, the relationship has ended up in an acute critical situation and needs strong action to remedy.

The first and best advice one can give is to take up the beginnings of contempt in confession and try to understand what causes it and what one's own responsibility may be. In such a threatening crisis confession should not be an isolated event to express one's disappointment and frustration at the experience of being somehow violated, but should focus on the very properties that have allowed the relationship to deteriorate and possibly one's own guilt. It may help but it is not necessary to try to find a "spiritual adviser" or always go to the same priest for confession. It may become a little too easy to go to someone who knows one's situation and to whom one can complain. But it is important to go regularly to confession as to *the Sacrament of Reconciliation*, where Christ meets and restores one's dignity and confidence.

Once the husband and wife come to terms with themselves and understand how they themselves have contributed to the unhappiness both are experiencing, it may also be wise to seek professional help from a family

therapist who values the coherence of marriage even in a serious crisis. The advice should help the couple to consider the situation with fairness. Contempt may kill love, make it disappear and create a feeling of shame. Good advice may save love.

Perhaps the worrying sides of the marriage will start with categorical condemnations of the other's opinions or decisions as "silly" or "stupid" without really understanding what the other person wants or trying to be helpful. What will do much harm are all those "hasty judgments" and harsh accusations, especially if they begin to make up the everyday tone of a home. The spouses who then share their dissatisfactions with others and find support will soon be in an even deeper crisis of relationship.

The mutual adaptability is part of the spouses' struggle for security in the relationship. It needs to develop during that decisive time when love feelings are tender and reactions quick and spontaneous. Those who are in love do not want to hurt or be the cause of anger or disappointment. They often are anyway, but find that they suffer tremendously every time it happens and learn for that reason to adjust, understand and listen more and better.

It may be that people who have lived a long time alone and without intimate relationships, find it more difficult to adapt and are more likely to be categorical in their judgments or accusations without any such bad intention. The deeper the longing for love the more people with that history of life are of course motivated to come to terms with themselves and learn the necessary adjustments.

For that reason, but also for other reasons, one could say that one should not wait too long, not more than necessary, to get married. Being young and vulnerable also means being more malleable. Of the two they shall become one, a dual unity of two unique individuals. For the same reason one can say that the engagement period is the best beginning of a long and faithful marriage, since is then that one discovers with such great sensitivity what affects the love of the other and the appreciation of the other's personality.

The serious dangers that may appear due to personal qualities can be avoided by the couple's own efforts - in principle – through love because love is healing in itself.

But in our modern lifestyle and its job and work structure there are also dangers that are beyond the individual's ability to cope with the common situation for a family with children. These dangers are stress factors caused by changes in the family by accidents or diseases. Couples who have experienced such stress for a long time and are struggling to make it all work often suffer from chronic stress, which is a mental illness.

The important thing is that the spouses - maybe the young couple – are able to deal with changes at an early stage, discussing problems together and making decisions together concerning the common good. If it can be seen that serious stress symptoms have arisen they should seek help partly to have the situation confirmed and partly to receive advice on treatment or consultation.

A common beginners' problem that one should be on guard against is to devote more time and effort in planning the home, with all the wishes one may have, than to the relationship itself. Young newlyweds may, in their enthusiasm to discuss renovations and purchases, loans and funding to such an extent that there is little time for the relationship of love. It may even be that the spouses mask an uncertainty in the relationship by focusing on the material and economic aspects. All the energy this requires affects the emotional closeness and means spending less time on the human relationship.

The emotional adjustment and the time of the conjugal act.

What has now been said about the important question of what makes the relationship work also applies to the interior spiritual and physical union

between man and woman through the conjugal act. It is very important that the couple takes into account each other's differences in preparation for the sexual union.

Also in this case the experience of the first meetings and possibly the period of engagement are important to be able to adapt to each other and find the right time for the intimate union of body and soul. Both the man and the woman long deep inside to be happy together and express their mutual love. You can put it rather simply saying that it is more important to plan to be happy together than to plan to have sex. Just to like to have sex without the love will never be a full expression of affection on the deeper personal level. It remains rather a plain consent to sexual desire and satisfaction of sexual desire.

In fact, the essence of love is far deeper than lust and desire for sex. *Love* is to give oneself with one's whole personal reality, spiritual, physical and sexual as an unconditional gift. God has meant this act of mutual gift of a man and a woman in love to be the secret of the creation of new human life.

The meaning of love is to experience a true joy. This human love belongs exclusively to the married couple who share a communion of life. No other human being on earth has the right to go between the two united by the bonds of marriage. In this love's highest expression a new human being may be born to continue the human race throughout history. For God blessed them and said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" (*Gen 1:28*).

Therefore man has, in the love between man and woman, been given the divine mission to bear children and, as we shall see later on, bring them up as children of God.

How many children?

The preparation of the conjugal act and the planning of the number of children that the married couple wish to have in the family requires their maturity and wisdom as Christians. The key issue for many married Christians is precisely the

question of how many children they dare take responsibility for and how often they want to engage in the conjugal act. The problem in the beginning is that newlyweds do not know how children affect their lifestyle and social functioning. At the same time the experience of parenthood gives them a wholly new outlook on life, changing presumed difficulties into true blessings. On the one hand parents with demanding work both in and outside the home wonder if the happiness of many children will be too burdensome or complicated for them. On the other hand those who accept a larger number of children feel that each child is a blessing and a treasure through which they fulfill their lives.

Those who try to have children but are not given any have a very different situation to accept and bear with patience. They will bear fruit in other ways. Whatever the reality of the marriage Christians know that they live the sacrament of marriage through their faithfulness in love before God.

Having children is always a good thing and cannot be a burden. Nevertheless, children require parents to adapt to them and their needs. It is necessary above all to have time for them and to give them a social and economic security. In most cases, in spite of the fact that children give their parents great happiness, there may have to be a limit to the number of children that responsible parents discuss between themselves. Every child is a new responsibility, a new life story and a serious good to expect.

The order of creation, woman's fertility and conjugal union.

The order of creation is given by God for Christians to live with. Love determines whether you can say yes to more children, or not. Every conjugal act is a possibility for a new human life and must in principle be open to this new

life. It is the love of the parents that gives birth to a unique being in collaboration with the order of creation. If the parents knowingly exclude the possibility of such a new life in that act, the act is deprived of its meaning and purpose. There is a connection here between the intimate sexual union and the creation of new life that the spouses are not entitled to break. Love's intention is associated with a unique life, with a new person who will live, think, search and find the same God that the parents have found through their love and begun to love.

When is it permissible for the spouses to try to avoid another pregnancy under the divine plan?

The problem with the presentation of what is called "natural family planning (NFP)" is that it is often offered as a method to *prevent pregnancies* without using birth control pills and condoms or other agents. Family planning organizations and family therapists like to talk about NFP as a *safe and natural method of contraception*.

What the married man should try to think about is what a woman's natural fertility rhythm means for the woman and consequently for himself and the family. Firstly, there is a natural but not always predictable stable rhythm during the woman's entire procreative life span. When the time of fertility begins to fade out towards the middle of the life span the rhythm is still there but less and less noticeable until eventually it will cease completely. During this time of life when one no longer counts on a new pregnancy and yet is aware that a late pregnancy may occur, the couple will still want to meet in the sexual union to be able to enjoy each other's presence and love. The gift of a child late in married life is particularly welcome and cherished.

In the end it will no longer feel good and respectful to try to unite body and soul so the time of sexual union will slowly be over for ever by the law of nature. The lack of physical and sexual intimacy will not deprive the spouses of their continued love. Only the memory of the unifying act lives on, and the couple understands with gratitude the importance it has had on the

spiritual level of their personal union.

As long as fertility remains as a biological fact the rhythm swings regularly from a possible conception of new human life to an absolute impossibility when the days of ovulation have not yet started or when they have passed. For the man's part there is no such rhythm. Nor are there any of the emotional swings typical of the woman. It may happen that the woman answers the man's courting and overtures even though she knows that the strong experience of the conjugal act for her part will be missing for many of the infertile days. The woman may agree to the act in order not to disappoint her husband.

In the love language of the body there is much to learn on both hands at this point in life. In particular, the husband should learn what kind of consideration the woman will appreciate and be able to show his love and affection in other ways. The wife also needs to show signs of her love differently. This creates a dialogue between the spouses that bears a loving touch (cf. *Humanae Vitae*, § 13).

This considerate language of the body will prove to be a very important component of responsible parenthood. Both know that the unifying act is not intended to exclude deliberately the possibility of conception. Yet the possibility of sexual union during the infertile time (the direction toward complete impossibility) may maintain and deepen the expression of the couple's mutual love for each other. The couple still has to consider carefully their behavior and appreciate their role as God's co-workers in the creation of new human life ("Be fruitful and multiply", *Gen* 1:28). Man and woman are created sexually different for *the divine purpose* of multiplying ("Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves" (*Gen* 1:26) and so to fulfill God's will for man to "fill the earth and subdue it" (*Gen* 1:28).

If the man and the woman in a Christian marriage are sure from experience that conception is not possible during the major part of the month but still want to express their love in the sexual act, they must have a serious reason. They always have to allow for the norm of procreation, "the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act" (cf. *Humanae Vitae*, § 12). This norm, rooted in the order of creation, is man, God's child, created by the Trinity to attain eternal life in communion with God. The norm binds man to respect the will of God in

obedience. Man does not have this norm at his disposal and cannot in good conscience change it or re-interpret it subjectively. For that reason there is no justification for interpreting the norm of *openness to life as* an overall standard over the lifespan of the married couple since the norm is applicable to each individual conjugal act (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, § 34).

If then the Christian couple desires to have recourse to the infertile period for the sake of their own love during the month, their intention must not be to rule out completely every possibility of conception. If we say that the spouses, *for some good and morally acceptable reasons*, have decided to unite sexually in mutual love, it is ethically righteous for them to *try to avoid a new pregnancy*, since they have already in their minds accepted another child with love and responsibility, should it be given them against the presumption that procreation was unlikely to occur for reasons of periodical infertility. This means that the foundation of *their intent is not contraception but the expression of love*, and that sexuality therefore is not abused and the dignity of the marriage is not violated.

The acceptable reasons for such a desire to engage in the conjugal act while trying to avoid a new pregnancy may be related to the health of the wife, to the social and economic situation of the couple or to the overall unity of the family. There may also be national or social reasons, as when a country is at war or when a natural disaster has occurred. One could for example imagine a situation when a nuclear power plant accident occurs and radioactive and carcinogenic radiation affects a whole population. In such a case, with many dead, seriously ill and contaminated survivors, there may be good reasons to bring many children into the world for the sake of the country and the people, but also serious reasons for not bringing any child into the world at all because of radiation effects on human embryos. In all such and similar situations, married couples must weigh in the unifying nature of sexuality with the responsibility to feed, entertain and educate children in accordance with the moral norm.

What is the biological knowledge needed to identify the regularity of woman's fertility?

The principle is briefly as follows: the cervical mucus of the vagina changes character and indicates ovulation and therefore the optimum time for fertilization. To examine the texture of the mucus the woman easily draws out the mucus with her fingers and holds it between thumb and forefinger. When thumb and forefinger are drawn slowly apart the mucus will follow and extend between the finger tips and can be seen and felt. The change is described as follows: the cervical mucus becomes increasingly transparent, thread-like and slippery. The fertility peak will be identified on the last of the fertility days when mucus is extremely slippery, transparent and pure.

Women may even before marriage learn to recognize the texture of the mucus and match it to other changes related to the ovulation like shifts in emotions, mood swings, etc. Women will soon become experts on the signaling system of the body and are able to determine the appropriate time for the conjugal act with their husbands. At the same time the husband learns from his wife when the time is optimal for him to become a father. After some six months both will have become experts in the field of fertility signals. The husband also finds it easier to understand his wife's fluctuations in mood or other changes generated by nature.

What is the biological knowledge needed to identify the regularity of woman's *infertility*?

The principle is the same as when a woman looks for signs of her most fertile days: the cervical mucus of the vagina changes character, signaling that ovulation is over and that therefore the optimal time for conception is over. Conception is no longer possible because no egg is released from the fallopian tubes. The change is described as follows: the mucus becomes crisp and sticky or disappears in the vagina which will feel dry.

Is it hard to live in marriage with regard to nature and morals?

Of course it depends on individuality and on how strong the sexual drive is. Abstinence may not be mastered without some difficulties but perhaps not so hard throughout the fertile life span as a whole. The couple must surely be in agreement on certain periods of restraint and accept a certain moderation of sexual behavior. In fact the natural demand of sexual lust will not express itself in the same way all the time, especially during the early phases of pregnancies or after children are born. These variations are hard to know in advance, but it certainly helps to be prepared to show restraint. It is also good for the closeness of the relationship that emotional life takes on other forms. Love is always to be lived with changes and nuances of different kinds. The couple matures through their experiences and adapt easier. One way to begin an exercise of moderation would be to agree to make the seasons of Advent or Lent periods of abstinence since Christians anyway normally look for forms of voluntary sacrifices and are willing to do penance for sins during these times.

If the couple also wants to make spiritual progress they will be wise to pray regularly for the grace to develop spiritual virtues, especially patience and chastity. If, during the early years, a person on the other hand thinks that marriage will prove too demanding it is always possible to consider another vocation than that to marriage, i.e. a celibate life for the kingdom of heaven.

In our time, however, a longing for marriage is more widespread than earlier and more people are married than ever before in history. It then becomes all the more important to recognize marriage as a true vocation from God and to see the family as an image of the Holy Trinity. It is from *this divine unity* between Father, Son and Holy Spirit that we have the explanation of the *indissolubility of Christian marriage*.

What factors influence the choice of vocation?

If one still has a difficulty in finding one's vocation verified and feel assured to live safely in the role as husband or wife one may listen to what the old Doctor of the Church, St Jerome (347-420), once said in a written defense against a

certain *Helvidius* in Rome who had attacked the doctrine of the Mother of God ever Virgin. St Jerome makes a comparison between virginal life and life as a married man and woman. What this Doctor of the Church takes up will show that Christians have precious assets in the virtues conveyed in the Sacrament of Confirmation, in particular the virtue of chastity. Christian spouses need this spiritual force as much as they need the Eucharist to let the Holy Spirit lead them in the task God has given them:

"And when I'm going to lay the groundwork for a comparison between virginity and marriage, I implore my readers not to understand it in the sense that I downgrade marriage because I praise virginity, or make a difference between the saints of the Old Testament and those of the New Testament, i.e. those who had wives and those who completely abstained from the embrace of women.

I do not deny that there are holy men, both among those who were widows and those who have spouses. But there are those who are no longer wives or those who, even within the strong ties of marriage, imitate a virgin's chastity. The apostle testified briefly, and it is Christ who speaks to him about this when he said in *1 Corinthians 7:34* "So, too, the unmarried woman, and the virgin, gives her mind to the Lord's affairs and to being holy in body and spirit; but the married woman gives her mind to the affairs of this world and to how she can please her husband". He lets us free to practice common sense in the question. He will neither make it a necessity for anyone nor lay a trap to anyone. But he persuades us as to what is appropriate, when he wishes everyone to be like himself.

Paul certainly had no message from the Lord to observe the state of virginity, for that grace surpasses man's own power, and it would have looked rather rude to force people to escape the demands of nature, and in one word or another to say, *I want you to be like angels*.

It is this angelic purity which assures virginity its highest reward, and the Apostle might for that reason seem to despise a way of life that does not involve any guilt. Nevertheless, he immediately adds, commenting this in *1 Corinthians 7:25-26*, "About people remaining virgin, I have no direction from the Lord, but I give my opinion as a person who has been granted the Lord's mercy to be faithful. Well then, because of the stress which is weighing upon us, the right thing seems to be this: it is good for people to stay as they are". (From the book *Against Helvidius*).

Jerome himself was called to the special ministry "for the kingdom of heaven" and became a priest and finally a hermit. But since he declares that this choice of virginal life does not mean that marriage is a less dignified or exalted vocation, it is clear that chastity in itself may help the married couple to welcome the number of children they believe they are able to raise together with love. The virtue of chastity makes it possible for them to live their love between the births according to the law of divine nature and in respect of the moral norm which the Church has the responsibility to explain in her teaching.

What Paul says may also have its great value in particularly difficult times and circumstances when spouses do not dare think about children. Marriage still continues, sanctified by God's assisting grace. The spouses may then devote more attention to prayer and to the love of all their brothers and sisters in Christ, precisely like those men and women who for a just reason never marry.

Pope Paul VI writes the following relevant words in his encyclical "*Humanae Vitae*" (§ 25): "For the Lord has entrusted to them the task of making visible to men and women the holiness and joy of the law which united inseparably their love for one another and the cooperation they give to God's love, God who is the Author of human life".

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