

The Immorality of Contraception According to *Love and Responsibility* of Karol Wojtyla

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Summary

This essay will try to summarize the arguments concerning the immorality of contraception as presented in *Love and Responsibility* of Karol Wojtyla (later Pope John Paul II), starting from the anthropological basis (ch. II), unfolding then the ethical implications of this anthropological view (ch. III) and applying the ethical principles to the discussion on contraception (ch. IV).

As Wojtyla says, “in the order of love a man can remain true to the person only insofar as he is true to nature,”¹ thus “deliberate exclusion of this possibility [of procreation] conflicts not only with the order of nature but with love itself.”² Contraception therefore is an act against nature and consequently against the Author of nature, as well as an act against what he calls the *personalistic norm*. It degrades love to reciprocal sexual exploitation, and deprives the conjugal intercourse of its openness to life, of its fruitfulness. Going against the two ends of marriage (*procreation* and *union of the spouses*), contraception goes against marriage itself. There can be no justification for it: contraception is an intrinsic evil, since it is directed *as such* against fundamental ethical values. To accept contraception would mean to lose the meaning of person, therefore *to lose the meaning of life*.

I. INTRODUCTION

The word *contraception* comes from the Latin *contra* (against) and *conceptio* (to conceive), thus it literally means "against conception." In a general acceptance of the term, *contraception* is defined as a “*deliberate prevention of pregnancy*.” However, this definition is still not sufficiently precise. The best definition of what we call contraception can be found in the Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* of Pope Paul VI: “*an action that aims, whether as end or means, to make procreation impossible, either in the anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences*” (§ 14).

On the other hand, the term “*immoral*” means, in a general acceptance of the word, “*deviating from what is considered right or proper or good*.”¹ In other words, something is morally wrong when it deviates from the standard of morality (the *ethical norm*). But this standard is often debated, and there are many schools of ethics that define it in different ways. Since we cannot enter this debate in this essay, we will

¹ Most of the English dictionaries define the word in this way.

content ourselves with defining our view, which is that of the Catholic Church. Thus, the *ultimate* (or *remote*) *objective standard* is the *eternal law*, and the *proximate objective standard* is *human reason*,² in which the eternal law is reflected. There is also a *subjective standard*, which is the *conscience of the individual*.³ Moreover, there are *three elements* of the human act that morally specify it, defining its conformity or non-conformity to the ethical norm, thus making it good or bad: the *moral object*, the *relevant circumstances* and the *intention*.⁴ The principle according to which one should judge the human act defined by these three elements is: “*Bonum ex integra causa, malum ex quocumque defectu.*”⁵ In other words, it suffices for one of these elements to be inappropriate and the entire act becomes bad. There are even acts that are *intrinsically evil*, that is, they are *always* wrong as such, and as we shall see, this is the case of contraception.

In this essay we will try to summarize the arguments about the immorality of contraception as presented in *Love and Responsibility*, starting from the anthropological basis (ch. II), unfolding then the ethical implications of this anthropological view (ch. III) and applying the ethical principles to the discussion on contraception (ch. IV). We will end of course with some conclusions.

II. ANTHROPOLOGICAL BASIS – WHAT IS A HUMAN PERSON

Intending to write a book that would “put the norms of Catholic sexual morality on a firm basis, a basis as definitive as possible”⁶ Karol Wojtyla aims in fact to find the *raison d'être* of these norms. He considers that sexual morality is “within the domain of the person” and that “it is impossible to understand anything about it without understanding what the person is, its mode of existence, its functioning, its powers.”⁷ In fact, all ethical norms are based upon the anthropological truth, for ultimately they derive their *raison d'être* from man's very nature. Anthropology is therefore this “firm basis” for ethics, and Karol Wojtyla will try to trace continually his arguments to this fundamental truth: *sexual morality springs from and is justified by the fact that the human being is a person.*

² “Regula autem et mensura humanorum actuum est ratio, quae est principium primum actuum humanorum” - St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae, q. 90, a. 1.

³ See Dominic M. Prümer, O.P., *Handbook of Moral Theology*, translated from Latin by Rev. Gerald W. Shelton (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1957), p. 20.

⁴ The so-called “three-font principle”.

⁵ “The good from the entire (uninjured) cause, the evil from whatever defect.”

⁶ Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), p. 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

The task of anthropology is then to define what person is. Thus, the first observation to be made is that this reality cannot be contained wholly within the concept “individual member of the species.” Something essential has to be added, and this can be found in the definition of Boetius : a person is “*individua substantia rationalis naturae.*”⁸ Reason make human beings different from animals,⁹ endowing them with that specific *inner self*, giving them the power to live an *inner life*,¹⁰ which is specific to persons. Thus, because of its inwardness, a person “has the closest contacts with the whole (external) world and is most intimately involved with it.”¹¹ These contacts take place precisely *through this inner self*, and they go far beyond the material and visible world; in this way man is also *capax Dei*, capable of communion with God¹² through his inner self, and this is the reason of his *high dignity*.

The inner life of man means *spiritual life*, and it revolves around *truth* and *goodness*; more precisely, the natural inclination of the intellect to know the truth and the natural movement of the rational appetite towards the good are *the principles* of any activity specific to rational natures. Furthermore, these principles make possible what is commonly called “free choice”, through which a person has the power to be *sui juris*, to be the master of its own actions. This gives the moral value of the human acts, this accounts for the moral responsibility of human beings. It is also on account of this freedom, on account of this interior life *unique* to each rational individual, that person is *alteri incommunicabilis*; in other words, a person is *unrepeatable, irreplaceable, inalienable*. It has its own end, freely chosen, to which it moves itself according to its understanding. Nobody can choose or understand instead of it, and of course then that nobody can enjoy the possession of the end pursued instead of it. A person enjoys a *participated autonomy*,¹³ which is also at the heart of human dignity.

Finally, a person is an *objective* entity, that is, it exists not only as a subject, but also as an object, an objective “something” or “somebody”. In other words, a person exists *as such* not only for itself, but for the others as well, being capable to be the object of their actions. This relationship between persons has to respect their autonomy and dignity, therefore it has to be governed by specific ethical norms.

⁸ “An individual substance of a rational nature.” The definition of Boetius includes *not only human beings*, but any other individual substance of a rational nature (angels, for example).

⁹ Although human beings are “rational animals”, that is, they share in similar vegetative, sensitive and locomotive powers.

¹⁰ Karol Wojtyła, op. cit., p. 22.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 23.

¹² Of course, by *capax Dei* we mean “capable to be raised *through grace* to the union with God.”

¹³ We use here the expression employed by Rhonheimer, one of the best Catholic moral theologians. Human autonomy is not absolute, for man depends completely on God's power and will; his autonomy is limited, and in fact man shares in the freedom of God inasmuch as he loves Him and does His will, that is why he is autonomous by participation only.

III. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS – THE PERSONALISTIC NORM

The Vatican II Council says that “human beings are the only creatures on earth that God has wanted for their own sake.”¹⁴ This affirmation, explicitly or implicitly found in many works of Karol Wojtyla (who seems to have contributed to the composition of *Lumen Gentium* as well), stands at the basis of his ethical argument. In other words, this means that nobody can merely use a person, that is, employ it as a means to attain his end,¹⁵ for this would mean to do violence to that person. The means are subordinated to the end and to some extent to the agent as well. But human beings have their own ends, being ultimately destined to the union with God, their final and infinite end. Even God the Creator respects this freedom with which he endowed the human persons,¹⁶ up to the point that He is even rejected by them for all eternity. Much more than should the human persons respect one another in their actions, and respond to the other with the proper and adequate attitude, which is *love*. “Love is exclusively the portion of human persons,”¹⁷ writes Wojtyla, and this affirmation completes what the future Pope calls the *personalistic norm*. The *negative aspect* of this norm forbids the utilitarian approach to the interpersonal relations, and its *positive aspect* affirms love as the only right attitude in this relations.

In order to go deeper into the meaning of this personalistic norm as applied in the field of *sexual ethics*, we should inquire upon what love *is* and *is not*. This word – love – is very often used with *different meanings*: friendship, emotional attraction, sexual intercourse, gift of self, etc. The truth is that the love between a man and a woman grows continuously, evolving from a mere sexual instinct to a complex set of emotions, to friendship and finally to the betrothed love, which asks the complete gift of oneself to the other. Love begins in the individual, through attraction and good will, but it is perfected through reciprocity, becoming a mutual love. This reciprocity leads to the *unification of persons in love*, effecting the transition from “I” to “we”, from “my good” to “our common good”. As Wojtyla says, “man's capacity for love depends of his willingness consciously to seek a good together with others, and to subordinate himself to that good for the sake of others, or to others for the sake of that good.”¹⁸ This implies an internal¹⁹ surrender of oneself, an *ekstasis*, a gift of self to the other, which in a

¹⁴ Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.3.

¹⁵ Karol Wojtyla, op. cit., p. 26.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ By internal we mean “which originates in the inner self, not merely external”. We do not exclude the external surrender of oneself.

paradoxical way reveals even more the person to oneself. This anthropological truth mirrors the intra-trinitarian life, as Vatican II Council affirms:

“there is a certain similarity between the union existing among the Divine Persons and the union of God’s children in truth and love. It follows, then, that if human beings are the only creatures on earth that God has wanted for their own sake, they can fully discover their true selves only in sincere self-giving (Lk. 17: 33).”

Man is made for love (to love and to be loved), and when he enters this dynamic of love he finds his deepest identity, he discovers himself as made in the image and likeness of God, who *is* Love. Self-giving love enlarges and enriches the person rather than diminishing or lessening it, for the lover goes outside himself *to find a fuller existence in another*. The paradoxical perfection of a person through giving itself to another proves that “the person has a dynamism of its own” and “what is impossible and illegitimate in the natural order and in a physical sense can come about in the order of love and in a moral sense.”²⁰

As the words of the Council Fathers quoted above say, the union in truth and love between God's children – in our case between man and woman – is somehow similar to the union of the Divine Persons in the Trinity. The betrothed love requires a complete gift of self to the other, somehow similar to the complete gift of self of the Father to the Son and of the Son to the Father.²¹ With respect to the spousal love, this “completeness” refers to the body as well, for it belongs to the human person substantially, in an intrinsic way. Spousal love requires a total gift of self, soul and body: “I gave myself to him/ *Keeping nothing back*.”²² This is essential to any ethical considerations concerning sexuality in marriage.

Turning our attention to body and sexuality, we should say that love needs to be educated, so that it may integrate all the aspects of human love in an harmonious way. Spousal love *assumes* and *elevates* the sensual and emotional enjoyment that accompanies the marital intercourse, subjecting it to the reverence for the person. In order for this to be possible, “the unification of the two persons must first be achieved by way of love, and sexual relations between them can only be the expression of a unification already complete.”²³ The language of the body has to express a truth, otherwise it becomes a lie that hides behind a beautiful mask a utilitarian attitude.

²⁰ Karol Wojtyla, op. cit., pp. 96-97.

²¹ Of course that within the Holy Trinity we speak of a substantial and not a merely moral union, like in the case of the betrothed love. That is why we said “somehow similar”, and the Council Fathers used “*aliquam similitudinem*.”

²² Saint John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*. The writings of Karol Wojtyla are deeply rooted in doctrine of Saint John of the Cross, and the passage quoted encapsulates the essence of what betrothed love means.

²³ Karol Wojtyla, op. cit., p. 127.

However, very often there is a tension between the dynamic of the sexual urge and that of the will, for “since the 'person' is not the content of an impression, but only the object of conceptual knowledge, it follows that a reaction to the value of a person cannot be as immediate as a reaction to the sexual value connected with the 'body' of the specific person.”²⁴ That is why “love in the psychological sense must be subordinated in man to love in the ethical sense,”²⁵ that is, to the personalistic norm. The *virtue of chastity* is a great help in this sense, and its function is to free love from utilitarian attitudes. This virtue gives the interior transparency towards a person of the other sex and gives love that *integritas*, for “there is no possibility of psychological completeness in love unless ethical completeness is attained.”²⁶ In fact, “the virtue of chastity and love of the person are each conditional upon the other,”²⁷ for on its turn continence cannot be an end in itself. When love harmoniously integrates all the responses to the values of the other person (sexual, emotional, spiritual), there comes to be a certain *feeling* of the value of the person, value which “must not be merely understood by the cold light of reason but felt.”²⁸

Another important insight regarding sexuality within the spousal relations is related to the end of the sexual urge itself. Thus, sexual urge is directed not simply to *reproduction* – a word that seems to reduce it to the biological order, but to *procreation*, to the begetting of a *new person*; that is why it “is not purely 'libidinic' but existential in character.”²⁹ Through their spousal love the parents cooperate to the work of God, namely, to the creation of a new human being. This connection of the sexual urge with the divine work of creation gives it (i.e., to sexual urge) an objective importance, which “vanishes almost completely if our way of thinking is inspired only by the biological order of nature.”³⁰ Unfortunately, many contemporaneous thinkers tend to reduce sexuality to its biological aspects, considering it a raw material that can be shaped by an absolute human freedom, introducing in this way a dualism within human nature itself. Thus, sexuality would have no existential character – it would not have as end procreation, it would be just a source of sensual and emotional gratification, just something to *use* for oneself.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 122.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 199.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 63.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 57.

However, the truth is that freedom is not an end in itself, it is just *the means to love*,³¹ it is not above, but part of the human nature, and the end of this nature is perfection in love, that is, in the complete gift of self. Freedom cannot *create* an end for the sexual urge, but it has to *recognize the end that is already there* and integrate it harmoniously with the other human ends. That is why, as Karol Wojtyla observes,

“in the sexual relationship between man and woman two orders meet: the order of nature, which has as its object reproduction, and the personal order, which finds its expression in the love of persons and aims at the fullest realization of that love. We cannot separate the two orders, for each depends upon the other. In particular, the correct attitude to procreation is a condition of the realization of love.”³²

IV. CONTRACEPTION – AN ACT AGAINST MARRIAGE

It is clear from the very definition of contraception given above (see chapter I) that this is an act directed against procreation; but procreation is the end of marriage, according to the order of nature, thus contraception is an act directed against marriage itself. Moreover, when procreation is excluded from the conjugal intercourse, the act is centered upon the affirmation of the value “sex” and not upon the affirmation of the value “person”. Procreation belongs to the person, that is why a rejection of the one implies necessarily a rejection of the other. The intention of a such act shifts from the unification in love in the direction of mutual, or rather, bilateral, 'enjoyment'.³³ This is in fact a reciprocal sexual exploitation, which destroys the very essence of love, leading to *hedonism*. Wojtyla rightly observes that the sinfulness of such 'love' is due “to the fact that the will puts emotion before the person, allowing it to annul all the objective laws and principles which must govern the unification of two persons, a man and a woman.”³⁴ This is a *subjectivism of emotions*, which very easily leads to a *subjectivism of values*; the latter declares the value of pleasure to be above the value of the person and of the loving personal union, and it ends in a fixation on pleasure alone, treating it as a distinct aim of activity and as a norm of behaviour. “This is the very essence of the distortions which occur in the love between man and woman,”³⁵ says Wojtyla, and that is why “‘authenticity’ of feeling is quite often inimical to truth in behaviour.”³⁶

Man's sexual feelings and emotions need to be integrated through love into a responsible behaviour, and this requires a mastery of self and often periodical or even

³¹ See *ibidem*, p. 136.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 226. These two orders (the order of nature and the personal order) have two distinct ends, which are consequently said to be *the two ends of marriage: procreation and union of spouses*. These ends are intrinsically united, for they depend completely on one another.

³³ See *ibidem*, p. 235.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

perpetual continence. In fact, to master the sexual urge means *to accept its purpose* in marital relations. This is primarily a positive and not a negative attitude. The relationship between husband and wife “is not limited to themselves but necessarily extends to the *new person*, which their union may (pro-)create,”³⁷ and without this openness to life the marital relationship will not be internally justified. The result of refusing procreation can be dramatic:

“Take away from love the fullness of self surrender, the completeness of personal commitment, and what remains will be a total denial and negation of it. This subtraction, taken to its conclusion, leads to what we call *prostitution*.”³⁸

However, the spouses cannot be demanded that they must positively desire to procreate on every occasion when they have intercourse, for this would reveal another kind of utilitarian attitude, namely, treating the other as an 'instrument' or 'means' of procreation. According to the laws of nature, not every sexual intercourse results in procreation; moreover, conjugal union during the infertile periods subtracts nothing to the value of the person, rather, it affirms it, provided that there is a sincere disposition to procreate. That is why periodic continence as a method of regulating conception is permissible, if it guards an attitude of openness to life. Continence, as a virtue, cannot be regarded as a contraceptive method. As Wojtyla observes, “the love of a man and a woman loses nothing as a result of temporary abstention from erotic experiences, but on the contrary gains: the personal union takes deeper root”³⁹ During the periods of continence the spouses are pushed to find other ways to express their love, ways which do not so easily incline them to use the other for one's own gratification. Experiencing this gratuity of love they depart ego-centrism and learn altero-centrism, the true *ekstasis* of love, the gift of self.

Finally, one can easily see that refraining from sexual intercourse during the fertile periods is very *different from contraception*. The latter acts contrary to the laws of nature, depriving conjugal relations of their 'naturalness'. The former respects this order, this temporary continence being just an adaptation to the dynamism of nature. On the other hand, contraception opposes directly the good of procreation, treating it as an evil, trying to stop it by all means. Periodic continence implies a willingness to accept conception, although in a particular instance the spouses do not desire it, for just and grave reasons.

V. CONCLUSIONS

³⁷ Ibid., p. 227. The emphasis is ours.
³⁸ Ibid., p. 129. The emphasis is ours..
³⁹ Ibid., p. 241.

As Wojtyla says, “in the order of love a man can remain true to the person only insofar as he is true to nature,”⁴⁰ thus “deliberate exclusion of this possibility [of procreation] conflicts not only with the order of nature but with love itself.”⁴¹ Contraception therefore is an act against nature and consequently against the Author of nature, as well as an act against the personalistic norm. It degrades love to reciprocal sexual exploitation, and deprives the conjugal intercourse of its openness to life, of its fruitfulness. Going against the two ends of marriage (*procreation* and *union of the spouses*), contraception goes against marriage itself. There can be no justification for it: contraception is an intrinsic evil, since it is directed *as such* against fundamental ethical values. To accept contraception would mean to lose the meaning of person, therefore *to lose the meaning of life*.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 229.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 236.