

The Sanctity of Fertility and Coition and its Impact on Contraception, Abortion and the New Birth Technologies

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SPEARHEADED by Pope John Paul II, the “theology of the body” (particularly the “nuptial meaning” of the body) is a theological development especially important for allowing us to situate key moral issues within the parameters of a “participated theonomy” that avoids both the relativism of autonomous moral methodologies and the moralism of heteronomous ones. This paper examines the Trinitarian dimension of the theology of the body, and then provides a pastoral method for explaining that theology by focusing on a particular connection: the interplay of two biological phenomena—fertility and coition—and how they are infused with a profound transcendent meaning. It is at this interplay that the creation of new life takes place. The paper suggests new ways to teach respect for this sacred interplay and shows how the practical results of such respect affect three contemporary concerns for those dedicated to the sanctity of life: the relationship between contraception and NFP, the problem with certain new birth technologies, and the relationship between contraception and abortion.ⁱ

PART I: THE TRINITARIAN LANGUAGE OF THE BODY

A. THE PERSON/BODY RELATION

As John Paul II notes in *Veritatis Splendor*, “it is in the unity of body and soul that the person is the subject of his own moral acts” (VS 48).ⁱⁱ Catholic anthropology and moral theology posit a close interrelationship between man’s spiritual/rational nature and his physical dimension. It resists a dualism that separates our personhood from our bodies. We are not souls imprisoned in a body; we are embodied spirits. One should not say “I am a soul occupying a body” but “I am an embodied or incarnate spirit.” Given this unity, part of God’s will for us is revealed in and

through the dynamism of the body, or what John Paul II and others mean when they speak of the body as the “expression of the person.”

Our biological dynamisms, while not yielding complete answers to moral questions, nonetheless exist as basic starting points for the moral life. “The person...discovers in the body the anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of self, in conformity with the wise plan of the creator” (VS 48). Hence, the body “speaks a language,” a language of anticipatory signs, providing parameters within which we live the moral life. It is not as if the body were mere raw material “out there,” over and against us, upon which we exercise our moral decisions. Rather, the body is integral to us as persons and its language contributes to those decisions. St. Thomas speaks of our “natural inclinations” as including a bodily element but also a spiritual and rational element that distinguishes us from the animals.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was the mistake of a truncated scholastic natural law theory to locate moral truth directly in the physical dimension alone, yielding a kind of “physicalism”: here are the natural ends of bodily organs, now follow them.^{iv} Rather, the body provides “rational indicators,” “reference points,” or “anticipatory signs”^v that require the individual person to grasp or “mine” the meaning of the body, and then to freely align himself with that meaning. Then, the transcendent truth that the Creator has infused into the body is not a heteronomous imposition (yielding a “biological fundamentalism”) but is something that each person participates in: the truth is carried in each person’s own body, and each person must freely grasp and live that truth, making it his own.

To dissociate God’s plan from our biology is to posit a dualism of person and body. It is precisely such a dualism, a separation of person and body, to which revisionist theology succumbs. It accuses the teachings of the Magisterium and the natural law of “physicalism” or “biologism” in an affirmation of false personalism (VS 47-53 deals with the accusation of biologism). It claims that the Catholic moral tradition forces us to be slaves to the body, rather than exerting our personal freedom over and against the raw material of the body. While this critique is somewhat appropriate for the truncated natural law tradition noted above, the critique seems oblivious to the newer advancements of

the natural law tradition, especially the theology of the body.

The separatist dualism of the revisionist position resonates with that inveterate error of mankind, gnosticism, by which the body is inherently incapable of bearing transcendent meaning—incapable of speaking the language of the person. When revisionism falls into such a dualism with respect to our maleness and femaleness, it operates in tandem with certain strains of radical feminism that likewise wish to separate personhood from the body. Ironically, it is the revisionist position itself that betrays a deterministic view of the human person at the mercy of biology. Man is free—unlike animals—to let his passions control him or to control his passions, and this freedom yields the most ennobling view of the human person; this is true personalism. To maintain that man must completely liberate himself from his body or that he can treat the body however he likes is to reduce the body to a mere instrument of the person rather than recognizing that it is a part of the person. Thus revisionism treats the body as a merely physical entity and not as a part of the person revealing of and fully amenable to the values of the person. It is the traditional view that is truly personalistic, for it sees the body not just as an instrument but as a part of the person— a part that shares in and reveals human goods that man is free to embrace or reject.

In sum, the traditional natural law does not reduce to an anti-personalist brute physicalism/biologism. If the traditional natural law emphasis really succumbed to a brute physicalism that reduced man to the animal level, then why did it not allow man to simply follow his “instinctive” passions? A physicalistic natural law theory, for example, would allow or even demand the following: man should mate with whomsoever he felt so inclined; he should defend his own bodily integrity at all costs (never give one’s life for another or for one’s faith); no technological changes are to be made to the body; and the like. The genuine natural law tradition embraced by Catholicism always places the physical dimension within the broader context of man’s personhood.^{vi}

B. THE LANGUAGE OF SELF-GIFT

Consider a prime example of the body’s theological “language.” Anyone

possessing a human nature ought to be respected as a person with a right to life. “Human nature” is a biological category—a biologist can tell us that an unborn baby, an elderly person with a debilitating disease, people of other races, are all human. This humanity speaks a kind of language: “I am human, I ought to be treated as a person.” It is wrong arbitrarily to treat some humans as persons and some not—this arbitrary discrimination is what links the issues of abortion, slavery, and genocide. Too often people claim that pro-life views entail forcing a religious view on everyone, but in fact the sanctity of all human life is easily determined, first, by establishing that the being in question is human, and second, by noting that all humans should be treated as persons. The “language” spoken by the biological category “human” is the basis for the dignity of the human person, and this dignity is the foundation stone of every aspect of Catholic morality, from sexual ethics to social ethics.

As long as this biological humanity lasts in us, we ought to be treated as persons. At some time or other, nature’s “clock” runs down and we die. Until that time, there is in us a thread—however slender at times—of health, of life. According to traditional natural law theory, we ought never deliberately cut that thread of health. It speaks a language to us: we ought never decide to end life at a time that we determine on our own, regardless of how good our intentions might be for so doing. God is the arbiter of life and death, and through the secondary cause of nature He alone appoints the time of death. To interfere is to misuse our intellects and wills, playing God rather than assenting to His will as manifested in the language of the body. We may, of course, use our intellects in the discovery and the application of scientific/medical means for enhancing or healing the body, although even this can be misused in situations where life is “forced” on a terminally ill person with disproportionate treatment.

To ignore the personal language of the body is to treat ourselves and others as objects, as mere means to an end, rather than as persons who are ends in themselves. When we treat each other as persons, we are treating each other as gifts as opposed to objects. Hence, we might say that the language that inheres in the body is the language of self-gift. The gift of self is made in, through, and by means of actions that respect the

transcendent meaning of the body. Let me explain these claims.

C. TRINITARIAN MEANING OF THE BODY

The language of self-gift that inheres in the body is none other than the Trinitarian language of the God in whose image we are made. As noted in *Gaudium et Spes* 24:

The Lord Jesus, when he prayed to the Father “that all may be one...as we are one” (Jn 17:21-22), opened up vistas closed to human reason. For he implied a *certain likeness* between the union of the divine persons and the union of God’s children in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for its own sake, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self.

Put another way, a person can only have the full substance of personhood by nurturing the relational side of personhood. To be a person is to be relational. This dyadic notion of being involves a *substantial* pole and a *relational* pole:

For the very meaning of relation implies that it is *between* two terms that it is connecting, between two *relateds*. A relation cannot relate nothing.... No relation can be self-supporting by itself. If what it relates is itself a relation, then we must look further for a grounding of that.... There must be an *in-itself* somewhere along the line to ground the betweenness. This is the ontological role of substance in a being: to provide the abiding unifying center for all the being’s relations and other attributes. This is too often forgotten by phenomenologists and personalists who tend to stress so exclusively the person as constituted by its relations to others that the inner depth and interiority of the person tend to get swallowed up in its extraverted relationships. The inseparable complementarity of *in-itself* and *towards-others* must be maintained: to be is to be *substance-in-relation*.^{vii}

The self-giving through which persons truly find themselves is imaged after the *dyadic* kind of self-giving that occurs in the Trinity. When the Father loves the Son, He also desires for the beloved to become the lover. When the Father loves, he would not want this love to be accepted as a matter of duty, as an inferior accepting the extrinsic imposition of the superior. Rather,

given that self-donation is essential to being (being as relation) he would want his beloved to have the fulfilling experience of self-donation also. “If one contends that loving (*agape*) is the noblest...loving act, since the lover wishes only (and all) the best for the beloved, then it stands to reason that the lover would likewise desire the beloved to have the same joyful experience as he, the lover, already possesses.”^{viii} Otherwise, self-giving turns into a heteronomous form of self-aggrandizement, whereby the giver enjoys a sense of superiority over the passive receiver. Instead, giving must be dyadic, with the giver receiving the receptor’s own self-gift:

...the radical dynamism of being as *self-communicative* evokes as its necessary complement the active, welcoming *receptivity* of the receiving end of its self-communication. Authentic love is not complete unless it is both actively given and actively–gratefully–received. And both giving and receiving at their purest are of equal dignity and perfection. The perfection of being–and therefore of the person–is essentially dyadic, culminating in *communion*.^{ix}

This is precisely what happens in the relation between the Father and the Son. This is the “proof” for the dyadic dimension of self-giving.^x As Walter Kasper has put it:

The Father as pure self-giving cannot exist without the Son who receives. But since the Son does not receive something but everything, he exists only in and through the giving and receiving. On the other hand, he would not have truly received the self-giving of the Father were he to keep it for himself and not give it back. He exists therefore insofar as he receives himself wholly from the Father and gives himself wholly back to the Father....^{xi}

D. A TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

It is precisely this profound transcendent meaning about the communion of persons that is written into the body itself and that the body itself “speaks.” John Paul II’s exegesis of Genesis 1-3 shows the original solitude of Adam, a solitary individual, transformed into the “original unity” between man and woman. As Walter Schu notes: “It is precisely the experience of solitude that leads man and woman to recognize their uniqueness as persons and to reach out

to one another to form a communion of persons (*communio personarum*) that is an image of God's own communion in the three persons of the Blessed Trinity.^{xii} Or, in the words of John Paul II:

Man became "the image and likeness" of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons which man and woman form right from the beginning....Man becomes the image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion. Right "from the beginning," he is not only an image in which the solitude of a person who rules the world is reflected, but also, and essentially, an image of an inscrutable divine communion of persons.... Obviously, that is not without significance for the theology of the body.^{xiii}

The fundamental language that the body speaks is the language of need for another for completion, of the centrality of making a gift of oneself in order to find oneself. Rather than using the body to treat ourselves and others as objects—think of rape and slavery as quintessential examples—the actual giving of self occurs in and through the body. Hence, the body carries or manifests "the call to give oneself in love to another person, and to receive in turn his or her gift of self."^{xiv} "The human body, with its sex, and its masculinity and femininity...includes right from the beginning the nuptial attribute, that is, the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift and—by means of this gift—fulfills the meaning of his being and existence."^{xv} John Paul II gives a name to this language of dyadic self-giving that is infused into the body: the nuptial meaning of the body. He goes so far as to claim that "the awareness of the meaning of the body...—in particular its nuptial meaning—is the fundamental element of existence in the world."^{xvi}

E. FROM DYADIC TO TRIADIC SELF-GIFT

The dynamism of dyadic self-giving contains within itself another key moment: it opens outward to a "third," allowing a triadic kind of giving as well. In the Trinity, this is found in the role of the Spirit. As noted by Hans Urs von Balthasar:

Only in holding-onto-nothing-for-himself is God Father at all; he pours forth his substance and generates the Son; and only in holding-onto-nothing-for-himself of what has been received does the Son show himself to be of the same essence of the Father, and in this shared holding-onto-nothing-for-themselves are they one in Spirit, who is, after all, the expression and personification of this holding-onto-nothing-for-himself of God, and the eternal product of this ceaselessly flowing movement.^{xvii}

As Kasper says, the “reciprocal love also presses beyond itself; it is pure giving only if it empties itself of, and gives away, even this two-in-oneness and in pure gratuitousness, incorporates a third in whom love exists as pure receiving, a third who therefore exists only insofar as he receives his being from the mutual love between the Father and Son.”^{xviii}

As human persons, we image this triadic dimension in at least two distinct ways. First, the love of two people, if truly dyadic, also is triadic, opening outward to a “third.” Although we often think first of spouses being open to a child, this openness to a third happens in numerous other ways as well, both for spouses and in other forms of friendship. Note that in this first way, we find ourselves modeled after the love of the Father and Son, from which spirates a third, the Spirit.

In a second mode, we are modeled after the Spirit, who (using Kasper’s phrasing again) exists as pure receiving, who exists only insofar as he receives his being from another source. We recognize that our very being (as “relational substance”) comes from a higher source that includes our own parents, but our parents as a vehicle of the Creator.^{xix} In every finite (created) substance—for substance is intrinsically relational—there is a more primordial relation of receptivity constitutive of its very being before it can pour over into relation/action. It (each substantial person) has already received its very act of existence from another, and ultimately from God, the Source of all existence. In this sense we are all receptive in relation to God. Precisely to allow both the dyadic and the triadic dimension, the term “relational substance” is preferable to “substance-in-relation”

(which focuses more on the dyadic dimension). “Relational” then refers both to the relationality intrinsic to dyadic giving and the relationality intrinsic to the person because it recognizes his more fundamental relation to a higher source.

According to the “theology of the body,” the “nuptial meaning of the body” is best explained not just with the dyadic but with the triadic notion of person. The very triadic structure of creation is the transcendent meaning infused in the body—consider respectively the two “modes” of the triadic, adumbrated just above. In the first mode—sketched in full in the next part of the paper—there is written right into fertility and coition the dyadic self-giving of spouses opening outward to a “third,” to a potential child. Fertility and coition are not biological raw material over which we arbitrate; they are infused with a profound triadic personal meaning that is reflective of the triadic giving in the inner-Trinitarian life.^{xx}

In the second mode, in which we receive our full relational being as a gift from the Creator, who is pure self-giving love, the very existence of the person as incarnate spirit is a gift and the body pulsates with the language of gift. Made in the Trinitarian God’s image, we are capable of self-gift, a self-gift that includes the way we live and give with our bodies. Such giving is an echo of the gift that is all of creation.^{xxi} And in the first mode, just as God pours himself outside of himself, so too do we. The creator enables this possibility in and through the biological gifts of fertility and coition, and it is to those transcendent gifts written into biology that we now turn.

PART II: THE SACRED INTERPLAY BETWEEN FERTILITY AND COITION

Before discussing the transcendent meaning infused into fertility and coition, let me make a brief comment on the impetus behind the thesis I wish to advance. I have found, in my own reading and teaching over the past two decades, that many of the explanations for the differences between contraception and natural family planning are strained. As a result, many are quick to focus on the consequences, negative and positive respectively, of these two practices. While such arguments are

vital, they should follow upon explanations of the intrinsic difference between contraception and NFP—for contraception is not wrong because it has bad consequences; it has some bad consequences because it is wrong. Likewise, NFP is not right because it has good consequences; it has some good consequences because it is right. In searching for explanations that were not strained, I was inspired by a comment made by Prof. Janet Smith in her popular talk “Contraception: Why Not?”^{xxii} regarding the biological means that God uses to create new life. From that starting point I have worked out the thesis that is advanced below and have cross-applied the thesis to two other issues also included below.

A. THE SPECIAL MISSION OF COUPLES

The creator could easily have chosen to create new human lives by divine *fiat*. But instead, He works in, through, and by means of human beings, particularly couples. God has given them, through nature, a set of instruments for married couples to use on their special mission (what *Humanae Vitae* calls *munus*) to help Him in the creation (pro-creation) of children. As noted in EV 42, “[a] certain sharing by man in God’s lordship is also evident in the *specific responsibility* which he is given *for human life as such*. It is a responsibility which reaches its highest point in the giving of life *through procreation* by man and woman in marriage.”

The instruments given to couples for the procreation of children should be respected and not thwarted. These instruments are the fertility cycle of the female, the fertility of the male, and their use of the generative faculties. These instruments are all biological, but they are not merely biological—they are infused with a profound human and near divine meaning. They are the unique instruments that couples will use to participate in God’s plan for them to procreate.^{xxiii} It is important to respect these instruments and to respect the “language” they speak. I believe that when John Paul II speaks of the “genealogy of the human person” in *Evangelium Vitae* 42, he is naming this language:

By speaking of “a certain special participation” of man and woman in the “creative work” of God, the Council wishes to point out that having a child is an event which is deeply human and full of religious meaning, insofar as it involves

both the spouses, who form “one flesh” (Gen 2:24), and God who makes himself present. As I wrote in my Letter to Families: “When a new person is born of the conjugal union of the two, he brings with him into the world a particular image and likeness of God himself: the genealogy of the person is inscribed in the very biology of generation. In affirming that the spouses, as parents, cooperate with God the Creator in conceiving and giving birth to a new human being, we are not speaking merely with reference to the laws of biology. Instead, we wish to emphasize that God himself is present in human fatherhood and motherhood quite differently than he is present in all other instances of begetting ‘on earth.’ Indeed, God alone is the source of that ‘image and likeness’ which is proper to the human being, as it was received at Creation. Begetting is the continuation of Creation.”

Let us “zoom in” on the equipment for begetting that God has given the couple, through which He can create new life if He so wills. The conjugal act during the fertile part of the cycle is the most important part of that equipment—call it the “sacred interplay of fertility and coition,” or “sacred interplay” for short.^{xxiv} If He wills to create new life, that is the only place wherein He can so act. The couple must, then, treat this time with the highest respect. All uses of the generative faculties should be compatible with this sacred interplay, that is, should have nothing inherent in them that would render this interplay impossible.

B. TWO WAYS TO RESPECT THE SACRED INTERPLAY

The sacred interplay can be respected in two ways: by making use of it and by keeping a certain distance from it. Consider this analogy. As a lover-of-mountains, you are headed toward a favorite national park/forest with a fine mountain in order to hike or backpack. As you approach the region, mountains gradually come into sight and a sense of awe overwhelms you. When you actually arrive at the base of the mountains, you will either climb or not climb, depending on numerous contingencies, not least of which is the weather. If prudence dictates that you climb, off you go, but with caution and with a profound sense of awe. If prudence dictates that you not climb—perhaps you will have to wait a day, or come another time—you are still filled with a genuine awe at the power the mountain holds, and you spend your time hiking the numerous other splendid paths that this special region holds for you.

Either way, you have shown respect for this special, sacred space. Likewise with the instruments of fertility. Whether the couple enters that sacred space or not, there should be a reverence for it as God's special territory—if He is to create a child, it will be in and through the sacred interplay of coition and this sacred space of fertility.

Unfortunately it is all too easy—and convenient—for us to arbitrate over this sacred ground. Again our analogy can serve us: it is possible to wreck a mountain. One can actually turn a beautiful mountain into a *different kind of place*. We would all agree that certain mountains ought to be largely left as they are. Of course, we can use technology to make improvements that respect the basic nature of the mountain—for instance, we can blaze a trail and do all sorts of things that protect against erosion, etc. But these improvements do not change the nature of the mountain. Technology is wonderful, insofar as it works within and not outside the parameters of things sacred.

C. ARBITRATING OVER THE SACRED INTERPLAY #1: NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING AND CONTRACEPTION

Just as it is possible to destroy the environment, it is also possible to arbitrate over the “sacred interplay” by turning it into something of a very different kind. It is possible—and may seem convenient—to treat this sacred interplay in such a way as to refuse God the opportunity to make use of His special place, to place God outside of the conjugal relationship that then becomes the couple's own territory over which they alone arbitrate.^{xxv} God wants the couple to cooperate with Him in regard to this sacred interplay. Since this cooperation involves the couple's own conscientious decisions about family size, it is expected that couples will, to greater or lesser extent, avoid the conjugal act during the fertile period. When they do so, in good conscience, they are respecting the profound role that God plays when it comes to the sacred interplay of fertility and coition. They never deny this sacred interplay—rather they affirm it, either in trying to conceive or deciding that conception would be imprudent in certain circumstances. Put another way, they affirm the sacred interplay by commission or omission. They avoid treating the conjugal act as a different kind of act, an act that denies this sacred interplay, a

contraceptive act.^{xxvi}

In the use of natural family planning, the couple is like the people in our analogy who are headed toward the mysterious mountain, watching for it to appear. They are watching for the “sacred space” to appear, aware that this will be a time either to ascend the sacred interplay between this space and coition, or not to so ascend. They are not so much watching for the “danger zone” or the “unsafe time”—common terminology used by teachers of NFP—as they are watching for a unique time of sacred mystery.^{xxvii} It should be noted that the entire arena of conjugal love is infused with transcendent meaning, a broad meaning that itself is in the service of that more specific procreative meaning.^{xxviii}

D. ARBITRATING OVER THE SACRED INTERPLAY #2: SOME NEW BIRTH TECHNOLOGIES

Those couples struggling with infertility engage in the sacred interplay knowing that, barring a miracle, it will not yield a child. Eventually, this becomes the case for all couples due to menopause. Those with homosexual inclinations who are living chastely recognize courageously that the sacred interplay is not theirs to engage. In all these cases, the omission can be a profoundly positive phenomenon of deep homage to the sacredness of this interplay, inversely proportionate to the pain experienced. Hence, instead of focusing exclusively on prohibitions regarding new birth technologies and homosexual acts, it is best to place those prohibitions within the positive ambit of respect for a great good.^{xxix}

To repeat the cardinal principle regarding technology: it is good insofar as it remains within the parameters of the meaning of the body, and evil insofar as it disturbs or destroys that meaning. Various new birth technologies that circumvent the sacred interplay might produce a good end but they subvert the mutual self-giving that respect for the sacred interplay involves. The child comes to be considered, materially if not formally, a commodity to which one has a right, instead of a gift granted in the context of the spouses’ self-gift (note the triadic view of the person at work here).

E. ARBITRATING OVER THE SACRED INTERPLAY #3: THE CONSISTENT

CONNECTION BETWEEN CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION

The methodology of the sacred interplay serves finally to illumine the consistency of the natural law prohibitions regarding abortion and contraception. John Paul II called them “fruits of the same tree” (EV 13). Many have argued that opposition to abortion should necessarily entail affirmation of artificial contraception, since they assume that the prevention of an unwanted pregnancy is the best path to avoid the temptation of abortion in the first place. But resisting abortion requires perceiving the child as a gift, and to see the child as a gift requires a respect for the sacred interplay wherein that gift would be given by the Creator. As Paul Quay has noted, “a woman who repudiates contraceptively her partner’s power over her body gradually slides psychologically to a point where she becomes willing to repudiate the fruit of that power if in fact it has begotten a child within her.”^{xxx} Contraception destroys respect for the sacred interplay, materially if not always formally, and hence the child becomes an unwelcome guest in an inhospitable environment.

The volatility of the abortion debate is rooted in this linkage: to emphasize the right to life of the unborn child is simultaneously to affirm the sacred interplay. Once one begins to arbitrate over the sacred interplay, however, each aspect of it becomes something over which to arbitrate, be it the nature of the conjugal act or the nature of fertility or the potential fruit of the two in interplay. The connection is affirmed sociologically: whenever contraception is legalized and widely practiced, the rate of abortion climbs rather than declines, pointing to the intrinsic link between the two.

PART III: THE CONNECTION BACK TO THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY AND SELF-GIFT

A. SELF-GIFT AS THE NUPTIAL MEANING OF THE BODY

The great mystery of the sacred interplay is a clear and practical entry into the “theology of the body.” As limned in Part I, biology is not merely raw data on which we exert our free personal choices; it is a carrier of the great mystery of the sacred interplay, it speaks the language of this

mystery. Contraception, certain new birth technologies, and abortion are not wrong because they involve technological manipulation. They are wrong because the artificiality interferes with and subverts the language of the body, the inherent meaning of the sacred interplay. As VS 50 notes, technology is good, except when used to deny the meaning inherent in the body. “Natural” family planning doesn’t mean “natural” as opposed to “artificial.” In fact, there are all sorts of technologies available for helping women to chart their cycles accurately. Rather, “natural” family planning means family planning in accord with the *nature* of the body, or more precisely, the natural truth about the sacred interplay between fertility and coition; likewise for “natural” procreation juxtaposed to new birth technologies.

What is happening when a couple deny or destroy the sacred interplay? True enough, they are denying (usually unintentionally and with mitigated culpability) something that God has arranged. But left at that, the teaching remains partly heteronomous: God built it this way, so I shouldn’t have wrecked it. A critical personalist step needs to be taken: our personhood (which God designed) is adversely affected when the sacred interplay is destroyed. To be a person means to have an inviolable dignity, and simultaneously to find that dignity in the gift of self, the opening outward to another. “We only find ourselves in the disinterested gift of self” (GS 24). “Disinterested” implies a selflessness inherent in the gift, a selflessness that will entail death to self, self denial, the way of the cross. Jesus reveals to us the relation between the cross and self-gift. “Christ reveals man to himself” (GS 22). Jesus also makes it possible for us to give a true gift of self—by his redemption he heals and elevates our natures.

An essential component of truly giving the self to another is, with that other, to respect the sacred interplay. Destroying that interplay also damages the mutual gift of self. The couple marry for a variety of reasons, included within which should be the commitment to engage that sacred interplay together and treat it respectfully, for that commitment is a great mutual gift, one to the other. Not to respect the sacred interplay is to withhold a substantial portion of that mutual gift of self.

Our sexual energy is indicative of a longing, a thirst, within us, a

desire for fulfillment. If this appetite is forged correctly, it will be on the trajectory of self-giving, which will begin with a decision to treat the sacred interplay respectfully. But due to concupiscence, this is an arduous effort for human beings. It is immensely easier—for people who are very mature in other areas and who are highly competent individuals—to pursue this longing in a way that recoils back upon the self. This recoiling is often thought of as happening outside of marriage, as indeed it does, but it also happens easily right within a marriage. Then our sexual energy will involve not a giving but a taking, even if the taking takes place mutually (a “mutual accommodation of two independent egos,” to use George Sim Johnston’s phrase,^{xxxix} or “mere simultaneous taking” rather than true mutual giving, to use Cormac Burke’s phrase^{xxxix}). Such uses of the generative faculties, because they involve partial goods like pleasure and togetherness, can easily deceive us into thinking that we are pursuing something good. That is why many claim that contraception or certain new birth technologies have not created any difficulties in their marriages. They are stealing these other goods from their proper place within a larger context that is respectful of the sacred ground. They are using the body to speak some of the body’s truth, but not all of it—some theologians thus speak of lying with the body, or sexual lies.^{xxxix}

B. PROCREATIVITY AS OPENNESS TO A “THIRD”—AN EXPANDED MEANING

Respect for the sacred interplay involves a profound sense that, whether or not a couple engage in that interplay, they are aware that their marital adventure is a mutual self-gift that spills over into something beyond themselves. They give to each other in a modality that opens outward to another (a third), and *they do this insofar as they tread on, or around, the ultimate sacred interplay respectfully*. The giving of the two people is referred to as the unitive meaning of sexuality, and the opening outward to another is called the procreative meaning of sexuality. This meaning has a profound link to the triadic view of the person: the gratitude nurtured in the third part of the triad allows the dyadic relation to break out beyond itself; received as a gift, it proceeds in a giving or procreative way.

Note the fresh new meaning of procreativity, now integrally linked

to the sacred interplay. Although the procreative meaning is connected with the having of a child, it is not to be identified with the having of a child, or even necessarily with the intention of having a child. Rather, we can assign the word “procreativity” to the notion of uniting in such a way that there is “an opening outward beyond the two” *and constitutive of this opening outward is the deep respect for the sacred interplay*. Hence, we can distinguish “procreative kinds of acts” from “child-creating kinds of acts” or, if you will, “baby-making kinds of acts.” Many procreative kinds of acts will not be baby-making kinds of acts—think here of legitimate or proper uses of NFP and of infertile couples. And, sadly, many baby-making kinds of acts will not be acts that are procreative in kind—note sadly here the path toward abortion and various reproductive technologies.

In light of the mystery of the sacred interplay, the great insight of *Humane Vitae* is illumined: these two meanings—union and procreation—while distinct, are inextricably linked. One cannot have the unitive meaning (giving to one’s spouse) without the procreative (opening outward to the third), or the procreative without the unitive. The unitive without the procreative is not properly unitive, and the procreative without the unitive is not properly procreative. The error is often made that all acts of coition may be unitive, but that only some, by nature and human choice, will be procreative. Then, it is argued, since nature makes some such acts non-procreative, for us to so choose is just an extension of nature. But one need only realize that all acts of coition can be and should be both unitive and procreative. The two may be distinguished but never separated.^{xxxiv}

The broader notion of procreativity, with the distinction between procreative kinds of acts and baby-making kinds of acts, has some liberating effects. Think for a moment of the infertile couple, or the post-menopausal couple. Too often when they hear the beautiful truth of *Humane Vitae* that there is a simultaneously unitive and procreative meaning to the conjugal act, they feel left out—after all, they can unite but cannot procreate. It won’t do to tell them: “But you have done nothing intentional against procreation, so you still retain the procreative meaning.” That is true, but not adequate. They really can have the

procreative meaning, as much as and sometimes more than a couple having children. They don't have that meaning only negatively, in the sense that they aren't intentionally denying it. Rather, they positively possess the procreative meaning. Procreativity is present: their unitive acts open outward beyond the two. Let us learn from these couples something about genuine self-gift and how it respects the sacred interplay.

In sum, the trajectory of mutual self-giving begins with a triadic view of the person, is infused into the dynamism of the body as the nuptial meaning of the body, and is made especially manifest in and through the sacred interplay of fertility and coition. A merit of this understanding is that, while being intellectually responsible, it is also pastorally useful. Very concrete biological phenomena are a helpful entry into the theology of the body, and that theology is something that resonates with the deepest needs (not just the wants) of the person. The truth is friendly to us—that is the essence of participated theonomy, the moral vision that can steer the Church (in her own present crisis) and culture toward a new personalist horizon.

NOTES

i. Thanks to Prof. Janet Smith for reading the manuscript and offering helpful suggestions. Parts of I.C appears in similar form in “Trinitarian Foundations for Subjectivity, Solidarity, and Subsidiarity” in *Catholic Social Science Review* (2002) 95-105. Parts of II.A and II.B appear in similar form in “Not Sure About NFP?” in *Envoy* 6.3, pp. 22-23.

ii. All Magisterial documents are cited within the text by article number. Official Vatican translations are used. The documents are available from Pauline Press, Boston, and at www.newadvent.org. The standard abbreviations will be used: VS for *Veritatis splendor*, EV for *Evangelium vitae*, GS for *Gaudium et Spes*, and HV for *Humanae Vitae*.

iii. See *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2, and q. 93, a. 6. In the latter text

Thomas speaks of an “inward motive principle” that animals have, allowing them a participation in the eternal law. Human persons have this principle as well, but have in addition a rational nature by which they *know* the eternal law. When Thomas then speaks of human persons as having, in addition to this rational knowledge, a “natural inclination to that which is in harmony with the natural law,” I take that to mean a combination of the inward motive principle and the rational dimension. Then, “natural inclinations” are virtually identical to what *Veritatis Splendor* calls “anticipatory signs” or “rational indicators.”

iv. The “new natural law” theory of Germain Grisez and John Finnis is a reaction to this part of the scholastic natural law theory.

v. Three terms used in VS 48.

vi. This point is elaborated in VS 50. For example: “Indeed, natural inclinations take on moral relevance only insofar as they refer to the human person and his authentic fulfillment, a fulfillment which for that matter can take place always and only in human nature.”

vii. W. Norris Clarke, *Person and Being* (Milwaukee: Marquette Univ. Press, 1993) pp. 16-17, also see pp. 4-5. Also see “Person, Being and St. Thomas,” *Communio* 19 (Winter 1992) 608: “The dynamic polarity between substance and action-plus-relations was submerged and almost forgotten in the post-medieval period from Descartes on.” He discusses Descartes, Locke and Hume. “Because these emasculated versions of substance were the only ones familiar to them from classical modern philosophy, a large number of modern and contemporary thinkers have simply rejected substance entirely as a nonviable mode of being.... As a result, the person tended to be reduced to nothing but a relation or set of relations.”

viii. C. T. Murr, *A Psychology of Personalism: The Phenomenology of Maurice Nedoncelle* (M.A. thesis, New York University, 2001) p. 14.

ix. Clarke, “Person, Being and St. Thomas,” p. 613.

x. “The proof that this welcoming, active receptivity is a mode of actuality and perfection, not of potentiality and imperfection, is seen clearly when we turn to the intra-Trinitarian life of God. Here it is of the essence of the personal being of the Son as such that it be totally and gratefully receptive to the gift of the divine nature from the Father; the personality of the Son might well be called ‘subsistent gratitude’” (*Ibid.*, p. 613).

xi. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1996) p.

309.

xii. This is from a highly recommended forthcoming book by Walter Schu, LC, *The Splendor of Love. John Paul II's Vision for Marriage and Family* (New Hope KY: New Hope Press), ch. 5, section 1.b.

xiii. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Press, 1997) pp. 46-47 (Nov. 14, 1979).

xiv. Schu, *The Splendor of Love*, chapter 5, section 1.d.3.

xv. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, p. 63 (Jan. 16, 1980).

xvi. *Ibid.*, p. 66 (Jan. 16, 1980).

xvii. *Theodrama* III, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998) p. 519. Also: "So too with the Holy Spirit as the love image of both Father and Son, receiving its whole being from them as gift and reflecting that back as the pure essence of actively receptive love" (Clarke, "Person, Being and St. Thomas," p. 613).

xviii. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, p. 309.

xix. David Schindler and W. Norris Clarke, "Norris Clarke on Person, Being and St. Thomas" and "Response to David Schindler's Comments," *Communio* (1993) 580-98.

xx. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, pp. 81-82 (March 12, 1980).

xxi. Schu, *The Splendor of Love*, chapter 5, section 1.d.4.

xxii. Available from *One More Soul* (1995), 1-800-307-7685. In a future paper, I hope to compile the numerous instances of imperfect explanations I have found that often quickly resort to excellent arguments based on consequences.

xxiii. It may seem as if we are now relying on divine Revelation, but in speaking of God as the creator of human persons, we remain within the purview of the natural law. A hallmark of the Catholic tradition is that God's existence (though not His Trinitarian nature), the existence of the incorporeal soul (though not the nature of the after life and the beatific vision), the nature of the human person (though not the full truth about the indwelling of grace), and the natural law are all accessible to us without divine Revelation.

xxiv. An important question raised during the discussion of the paper had to do

with the prudence of using the term “sacred,” insofar as many people may have an emotional aversion to the very term as it conjures up images of a religious “system” with its rules, disciplines, and authority structures. The very word “sacred” has been hijacked by *heteronomous* understandings of transcendence, wherein truth is extrinsically imposed without a personalist framework, which in turn drives people into an *autonomous* mindset in which the self is cut off from the transcendent altogether. (We might say that *modernity* is intelligible as a reaction against heteronomous religious configurations, and *postmodernity* is intelligible as a reaction to the facile individualistic autonomy left us by modernity.) The solution is to place transcendence and the sacred in the context of what John Paul II in VS 41 calls *participated theonomy*, by which God’s law (truth) is built for the human person and is friendly to our being.

xxv. Couples who have gone through some or much of their marriages without a correct sense of this sacred ground and the sacred interplay to which they have been entrusted may sense the deepest regret for having damaged it, at least in part. It is at this realization that couples must remember Christ’s all-encompassing forgiveness for all sin, and that in our age many couples may have been invincibly ignorant, for they were taught virtually the opposite of Catholic doctrine (“Here’s the official teaching, but the Church also tells us to follow our consciences, so...”) and those taught the doctrine often caught a heteronomous rendition of it (“it’s true because the pope said so”—true in this case but hardly sufficient). In sum, the truth about this great mystery must always be accompanied by the truth about forgiveness.

xxvi. The approach here might provide a fresh insight into the debate as to whether contraception is primarily a sin against life (insofar as it exhibits a “contra-life will”) or a sin against chastity (and I thank Prof. Kevin Miller for raising this question during the discussion of the paper). Contraception may be both simultaneously: it is a sin against life insofar as the destroyed sacred interplay is built precisely for the possible creation of new life, and it is a sin against chastity insofar as chastity means living in such a way that the sacred interplay is by habit respected.

xxvii. This method serves as a response to the best arguments against *Humanae Vitae*, which see no substantive difference between contraception and NFP. For instance, as Gilbert Meilaender and Phillip Turner have written: “The encyclical seems mistaken...in holding that intentional use of infertile periods and use of contraceptives are essentially different in that the one ‘uses a faculty that is given by nature’ and the other ‘impedes the order of generation from completing its own natural processes.’ If a husband and wife want, as they ought, to hold together within their marriage the love-giving and life-giving purposes of sex,

they must ‘make love’ not as the other animals mate but in ways that will fittingly and appropriately realize and sustain each of the these purposes within a union of one flesh. Hence, the use of technique to assure the spacing of children and to enhance the shared love of spouses should be understood not as a violation of the natural law but as a right use of reason in support of the divinely intended purposes of marriage” (“Contraception: A Symposium,” *First Things* [Dec. 1998], p. 23).

xxviii. Thanks to Elizabeth Ring-Cassidy for noting during the discussion of this paper the importance of attending to this point. From one perspective, the whole of conjugal life exists on the same plane as the procreative dimension—hence, the recent *Catechism* and the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* speak of the twin ends of marriage, the good of the spouses (*bonum coniugum*) and the procreation and nurture of children. From another perspective, fully complementary to the first (though a matter of great debate) the procreation and nurture of children is the primary end toward which conjugal life is ordered. These two formalities under which marriage can be considered are both included in GS 47-52. I have explored this issue in an unpublished paper presented at the 2001 meeting of the *Society of Catholic Social Scientists*, “The Nature and Ends of Marriage.”

xxix. This positive focus is a central feature of *participated theonomy* outlined in note 23.

xxx. Paul Quay, *The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985) p. 83.

xxxi. “Preparing for Marriage,” *Crisis* (May 1998) p. 13.

xxxii. “St. Augustine and Conjugal Sexuality,” *Communio* 17 (Winter, 1990), p. 555.

xxxiii. See Paul Quay, *The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality*, chapter 6 on sexual lies, pp. 64-84.

xxxiv. Hence, a response to Meilaender and Turner, who noted “we simply cannot find in [HV’s] reasoning any coherent rationale by which to reject contraceptive intercourse within marriage as long as procreation is not excluded *in principle* from the overarching good of the one flesh union” (“Contraception: A Symposium,” p. 24).