

the family according to the criteria of prudence. In this light, in which one must examine and decide the question of “responsible parenthood,” what remains central is “*the objective moral order established by God, of which a right conscience is the faithful interpreter*” (HV 10).

6. The couple observe in this area “their own duties towards God, towards themselves, towards the family, and towards society, in a correct hierarchy of values” (HV 10). Thus, one cannot speak here of “proceeding at will.” On the contrary, the couple must “conform their activity to the creative intention of God” (HV 10).

Beginning with this principle, the encyclical builds its argumentation on the “innermost structure of the conjugal act” and on the “inseparable connection between the two meanings of the conjugal act” (HV 12), which was already presented earlier. The relevant principle of conjugal morality is thus faithfulness to the divine plan manifested in the “innermost structure of the conjugal act” and in the “inseparable connection between the two meanings of the conjugal act.”

122 *General Audience of August 8, 1984* (*Insegnamenti*, 7, no. 2 [1984]: 169–226)

1. WE SAID EARLIER that the principle of conjugal morality taught by the Church (Vatican II, Paul VI) is the criterion of faithfulness to the divine plan.

In conformity with this principle, *Humanae Vitae* strictly distinguishes between that which constitutes the *morally illicit* method of the regulation of births, or more precisely of fertility, and what constitutes a *morally correct* method.

In the first place, the following are morally illicit: “the direct interruption of the generative process already begun” (“abortion,” HV 14), “direct sterilization,” and “every action which, either in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible” (HV 14), and thus all contraceptive means. Morally permitted, by contrast, is “*recourse to the infertile periods*” (HV 16). “If, then, there are serious motives to space

out births, which derive from the physical or psychological conditions of husband and wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that it is then licit to take into account the natural rhythms immanent in the generative functions, for the use of marriage in the infertile periods only, and in this way to regulate birth without offending the moral principles" (HV 16).

2. The encyclical highlights especially that "there is an essential difference," that is, a *difference of an ethical nature*, between the two cases. "In the former [that is, "making use of the infertile period"], the married couple make legitimate use of a natural disposition; in the latter [that is, "the use of means which directly prevent conception"], they impede the development of natural processes" (HV 16).

Two actions flow from this difference that have, in fact, completely opposite ethical qualifications: the natural regulation of fertility is morally right; contraception is not morally right. This essential difference between the two actions (or ways of acting) concerns their intrinsic ethical qualification, even though my Predecessor Paul VI affirms that "in the one and the other case, the married couple are concordant in the positive will of avoiding children *for plausible reasons*" and even writes, "seeking the certainty that offspring will not arrive" (HV 16). In these words, the document admits that, although those who make use of contraceptive practices can also be inspired by "plausible reasons," still this does *not change the moral qualification founded on the very structure of the conjugal act* as such.

3. One could observe at this point that the couple who have recourse to the natural regulation of fertility can lack the valid reasons spoken about earlier: this, however, constitutes *a separate ethical problem* when one treats of the moral sense of "responsible fatherhood and motherhood."

If we assume that the reasons for deciding not to procreate are morally right, the *moral* problem of the way of acting in such a case remains, and this mode expresses itself in an act that—according to the Church's teaching transmitted in the encyclical—possesses its own intrinsic moral qualification, positive or negative. The first, positive, corresponds to the "natural" regulation of fertility; the second, negative, corresponds to "artificial contraception."

The Truth of the “Language of the Body” and the Evil of Contraception

4. The whole argument presented above can be *summarized in the exposition of the teaching* contained in *Humanae Vitae*, bringing out the normative and simultaneously pastoral character of the encyclical. In the normative dimension, the point is to specify and clarify the moral principles of action; in the pastoral dimension, the concern is to throw light on the possibility of acting according to these principles (“possibility of observing the divine law,” HV 20).

We should spend some more time on the interpretation of the encyclical’s content. For the sake of such an interpretation, one must see this content, this normative-pastoral whole, in the light of the theology of the body that emerges from the analysis of the biblical texts.

5. The theology of the body is not merely a theory, but rather a specific evangelical, Christian pedagogy of the body. This pedagogic character comes from the character of the Bible and above all of the Gospel as a salvific message revealing *what man’s true good is* for the sake of shaping—according to the measure of this good—his life on earth in the perspective of the hope of the future world.

Following this line, *Humanae Vitae* answers the question about man’s true good as a person, inasmuch as he is male and female, about what corresponds to the dignity of man and woman when one is dealing with the important problem of the transmission of life in conjugal life.

To this problem we will devote further reflections.

123 *General Audience of August 22, 1984* (*Insegnamenti*, 7, no. 2 [1984]: 227–30)

1. WHAT IS THE ESSENCE of the teaching of the Church about the transmission of life in the conjugal community, the essence of the teaching recalled for us by the Council’s pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* and the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* by Pope Paul VI?

The problem lies in maintaining *the adequate relationship* between that which is defined as “*domination...of the forces of nature*” (HV 2) and “*self-mastery*” (HV 21), which is indispensable for the human person. Contemporary man shows the tendency of transferring the