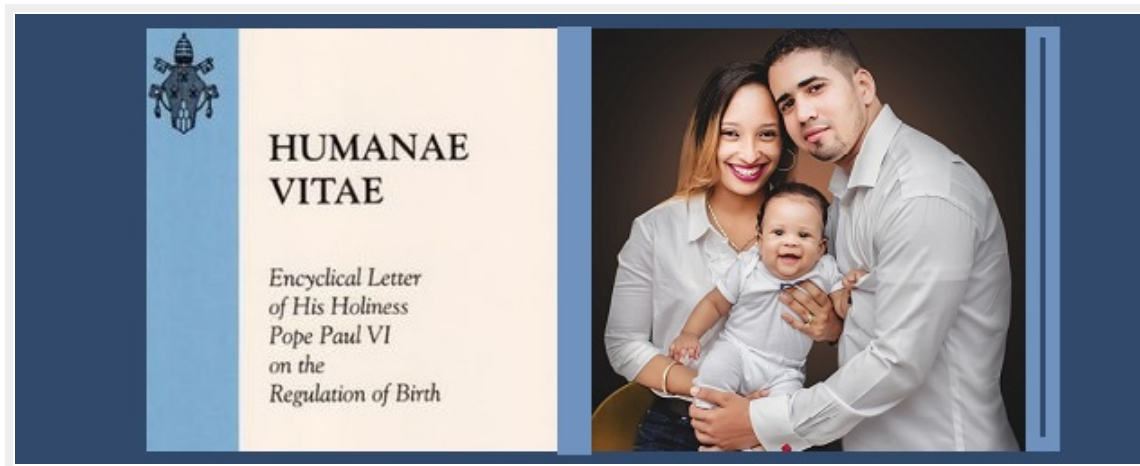


The Centrality of Love to the Teaching of *Humanae Vitae*

JULY 21, 2017 BY DR. MARIA FEDORYKA, PHD



Introduction

The approach of the 50th anniversary of *Humanae vitae* gives us the opportunity to once again meditate on the Church's teaching on human generation, and on the magnificent articulation of this teaching in recent decades, coming from both magisterial documents and from the writings of many religious and lay faithful. For while the Catholic Church's stance on contraception is perennial, over the last century an entirely new light has been shed that illuminates aspects of marriage and the conjugal act previously remaining in the shadows. Perhaps one could cautiously suggest that this new light might even constitute a development of doctrine in the Church's moral teaching. ¹ The new reflection on this old subject arose in the face of an unprecedented challenge from the modern world, a challenge which included the accusation that the Catholic teaching posed a threat to the love between the spouses. In response, the Church sought to pronounce more clearly on the dimension of love proper to marriage. The result was a great deposit of writings yielding a breathtaking depiction of the grandeur and sublimity of spousal love, which yielded, paradoxically, a new and deeper grounding of the essential fruitfulness of marriage, and of the conjugal act.

In spite of the countless resources now available on the topic, objectors to the Church's teaching continue to misunderstand and misrepresent it. ² Just like the early dissenters, they interpret the prohibition against contraception as having its foundation in the person's biological dimension, as forbidding a disruption of the natural end of the act (a position which has come to be called "biologistic"). This subordinates the love of the spouses to the natural, animal structures beneath them as persons, and thus denies the great scope it would otherwise have if the life of the spirit were allowed free play. But recent orthodox writing on the issue makes clear that the prohibition against contraceptive acts derives from the nature of love itself—the very thing the dissenters are so anxious to guard—rather than from the biological structure of the human person.

The central point of the teaching's new cast is found in a more precise interpretation of the traditional "two ends" of the conjugal act, the unitive and the procreative: Firstly, they are both together affirmed as making up conjugal *love*, and secondly, they are declared to be *inseparably united*, ³ and more precisely, as *co-implying* each other—such that rejecting the procreative dimension is not merely to deny a possible consequence of the conjugal act, but would amount to a dismantling of the act as an act of love. What the Church, up to this point, had referred to as the two ends of marriage—without speaking of the organic connection between them—turns out to be more precisely two dimensions of *one and the same reality*: the reality of *love*. ⁴

What I offer here is not a technical/philosophical analysis, but a philosopher's meditation on the centrality of love in this new vision reflected in recent Church instruction on human generation. Since so many of the misunderstandings of the teaching on contraception center around a misunderstanding of the place of the bodily dimension in that teaching, I will focus on showing the particular way that the body has moral significance in the equation, demonstrating that the Church's view is in no way biologicistic. On the contrary: not the *natural biological end* of the act but *the law of love* governs the spousal act, giving rise to the prohibition against contraception. It is because the bodily act is formed and shaped by the spiritual reality of love, and therefore in some mysterious, but real way, participates in it, that the bodily act of conjugal union is subject to its laws.

General remarks on love and creation

We begin by noting some essential truths about the nature of love. Firstly, love is made up of two dimensions: union—brought about through the mutual self-giving and receiving of two persons—and fruitfulness. The second dimension cannot be "logically" proven, but can easily be seen by anyone who has experienced love. It shows itself in the superabundance that "radiates" from the union, consisting in growth and life and vitality— first, within the soul of the one who loves and is loved; but secondly, in the generosity inherent to it, whereby it seeks to go beyond itself, benefitting another for his own sake. In fact, many authors have observed that the explanation of all new life is in love, Plato being the most conspicuous among them: only love goes out of itself beyond the confines of its own being to grant to another being its own existence. ⁵ John Paul II writes of this essential connection between love and creation:

The Creator is he who "calls to existence from nothingness," and who establishes the world in existence, and man in the world, because he "is love" (1 Jn 4:8). Actually, we do not find this word in the narrative of creation. However, this narrative often repeats: "God saw what he had made, and behold, it was very good." Through these words, we are led to glimpse in love the divine motive of creation, the source from which it springs. Only love gives a beginning to good, and delights in good (cf. 1 Cor 13). ⁶

This dimension of love becomes clearer when we consider how impossible it is to associate love with destruction, diminishment, negation, or even a self-directed, self-enclosed sufficiency. No, love is by its very nature superabundant, paradoxically always greater than itself.

Moreover, the giving of love is not merely a giving of *something*, but is always simultaneously—and even more centrally—a giving of *self* to the beneficiary. This, too, is impossible to "demonstrate" in any deductive way, but is clear to anyone who has experienced love. In a beautiful passage in *Dives in Misericordia*, John Paul II refers to this essential, self-giving character of love, particularly in the gift of man's creation. There he tells us that the concept of "fatherhood" captures the sense of a creative act that is much more than a simple positing in existence:

God, as Christ has revealed him, does not merely remain closely linked with the world as the Creator and the ultimate source of existence. He is also Father: he is linked to man, whom he called to existence in the visible world, by a bond still more intimate than that of creation. It is love which not only creates the good, but also grants participation in the very life of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For he who loves desires to give himself. ⁷

Even more, the Church, in its document *Donum vitae*, on *in vitro* fertilization, makes clear that because of the great dignity of the human person, the coming into existence of new human life in strict justice requires a love-origin.

We have laid the groundwork for considering the creation of new human life. Now, we know that God is always faithful to these laws governing creation in love. But by a free decision, he does not bring about new human life directly, but associates human agents in his creative act. How can this be? How can all the above conditions apply in the case of a creature?

The first question is about the love-origin of human life: how is that to be preserved? Firstly, God has ordained that a child come into existence in an act of loving union between two persons, wherein the child constitutes the fruitful dimension of the parents' love. That is, the child is truly incorporated into a real act of love, as its second integral dimension.

The second question is how it should be possible for a creature to bring a new being into existence, for only an omnipotent God can bring something out of nothing. It is here that we begin to see the significance of the human body. If a contingent person is somehow to take part in the creation of a new person, since he cannot bring it into existence out of nothing, his creativity would be about sharing something he already has. An angel, as pure spirit, does not have anything of himself to give away. But the human person, who has a body, does: he can share some of his own bodily existence with another.

But thirdly, the love-origin of human creation would require one more element, as we have seen, which is a love-origin, requiring a transmission of self to the other, and not merely the giving of existence. How can this occur since a creature cannot transmit the life of his soul to another, as can God the creator? The answer lies in the special nature of the personal body: since the human person's body is, in some important sense, truly identical with his being as person, in giving a share of his own body to another. The person does not just give the "stuff" of his body, but truly gives himself. And thus do the human progenitors truly participate in God's *Fatherhood*, truly becoming "parents" (and not just "efficient causes," to use philosophical language) of the child, giving their very selves, in and through, their bodies.

In the creature that is the human person, then, we find that matter gives love a new power; in virtue of it, the superabundance of spousal love can take on a new dimension. The contingent person is metaphysically incapable of creating a new being, much less a personal being. And yet, man is truly incorporated into the creative act of God, by virtue of the intrinsic generosity of love itself, which acquires a new ability in the life-generating capacity of the body.

The point at which we find the highest expression of love between human persons, we find the deepest meaning of the human body, in the sense of its "inner *ratio*" or "reason for being"—because of the body, the contingent person's spiritual act of love is able to bring a new person into existence. As we have said: no angel can co-create. And while it would be speculative, we can perhaps go farther. Perhaps we can say that the vast cosmos, the whole expanse of material reality as such, was created for one reason: so that some bits of this matter could become integrated into a

personal soul in order that this bodily person could enter into a way of loving that affords him a participation in God's fatherhood.

It thus becomes clear that to reject the coming to be of the child would be to destroy the love itself between the spouses, for the child is the embodiment of one of the two essential dimensions of that love, as found in this particular embodied expression. In what follows, I offer a deeper explanation of these truths about love and procreation.

Deeper Reflection on Love and Procreation

John Paul II's illumination of the special nature of the body-soul unity, and his bringing to light the body's centrality in issues surrounding marriage, sexual morality, and bio-ethics, is to my mind one of the most important philosophical contributions of his pontificate. In his *Theology of the Body*, he makes it clear that the human body is more than matter inhabited by a soul. Rather, it is the personal soul expressing itself in physical dimensions. This reality is difficult to put into language, but here are some of the ways that John Paul speaks about it: the body is "penetrable and transparent...in such a way as to make it clear who man is"; it alone "makes visible the invisible." In his *Letter to Families*, he speaks of the soul as "embodied," and of the human body as "spiritualized." All of these ideas are meant to express that the human body is, as it were, the very incursion of a personal soul into the realm of matter, in such a way that the body truly *is* the person. We could say that the human person is one being existing in two dimensions.

Since the body is an extension of the person himself, John Paul emphasized that the body participates in the human person's *subjectivity*—and is not merely an "object" or instrument that he uses. ⁸ It is co-subject with the person in his performance of bodily acts. We can see how it is that in giving "merely" of their bodies in the creation of the child, the spouses give themselves in virtue of their presence *in* their bodies.

However, this mutual "indwelling" of body and soul, found in the incarnate person's way of being, is not all that underlies the gift of self in the case of the spousal act. According to Dietrich von Hildebrand, there is a uniquely deep intersection of body and soul in the sexual sphere. Because of this, the bodily experience of sex is never merely bodily, but is, by its very nature, connected with deep spiritual and psychological experiences in the human person. ⁹ Sex occupies a most deep and intimate place within the person, so that "When [sex] speaks, it is no mere *obiter dictum* {casual expression}, but a voice from the depth, the utterance of something central, and of the utmost significance." ¹⁰

Now, based on this unique character of sexuality, the spousal act itself is a special kind of bodily act: it is a bodily act with an "interior space," fashioned to be "animated" by a spiritual reality, specifically by the spiritual reality of spousal love. Compare this with other bodily actions—such as a wave of the hand. This bodily behavior has no "inner side" and, therefore, has no intrinsic meaning. Its meaning is given to it from the outside, by convention, and can therefore legitimately be changed, and the act used to mean something different. The bodily act of sex, by contrast, by its very nature "speaks" the language of spousal love in unison with the soul, as a kind of "second dimension" of the act of love. The depth at which this act takes place—based on the unique structure of sexuality described above—means that a unique degree of self-giving is accomplished, which is often referred to as a "consummation" of spousal love. Because of the inherent love-meaning of this bodily act, it cannot be separated from this interior dimension without suffering violence.

All love is, at its heart, self-donation. Spousal self-donation takes on a particular, concrete nature or form, insofar as it incorporates the bodily dimension of the human person. But we must go further: the body augments the human act of love, adding something that it would otherwise not possess. Thus, we must say that the body "acts on" the soul, deepening the experience of communion between the spouses. Benedict XVI refers to this marvelous exchange in

Deus caritas est: “Christian faith ... has always considered man a unity in duality, a reality in which spirit and matter compenetrates, *and in which each is brought to a new nobility*.” 11

We must note the significance of the fact that it is by means of just such an act that the human person is created. We are so accustomed to this that it no longer makes us pause. But it is not something that should be taken for granted—since God could have arranged for the creation of the human person to happen in any number of ways. In fact, however, the child is conceived in an act of love that takes place *between the spouses*; it is not created by an act that has the child’s conception *as its direct end*. 12 It is, furthermore, an act of tremendous depth and significance for the spouses themselves, involving their most intimate being; it is the consummation of the longing for union to which their spousal love for one another has impelled them; it is an act in which it is imperative, on pain of immoral behavior, that the spouses be truly conscious and aware, focused on one another and on nothing else...

While we can say that the final end in the sense of the full meaning of marriage is achieved in the family, in the coming to be of a child, that is at the origin of the child’s being. In the case of human generation, quite unlike animal generation, we find that the coming to be of the child is an overflow of an act distinct from the event of its creation: an act between the spouses of mutual self-donation. 13

In this concrete instantiation of love in its two dimensions, the mutual self-donation of the spouses that occurs in the spousal act ends up simultaneously effecting *the spouses’ transmission of self to the child*—as the *overflow* dimension of their union. And so the coming into being of the child is the completion of the union between the spouses, insofar as the child is the highest instance of the *fruitful* dimension of their love. The union of the spouses “flowers” into a new being which is a “living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of conjugal unity.” 14 As a new agent of love, drawn into and expanding the already-existing circle of love between the spouses, the child is truly the “ultimate crown” 15 of their union. Having discovered this ultimate fruitfulness of the spousal act, we see that even if conception does not result from every act of intercourse, the full meaning of the spousal exchange is found in the concept of parenthood. At the same time, we see how the spousal act, understood in this way, safeguards the love-origin (required in justice) of the child. The child is truly incorporated into the equation of love, as a kind of “incarnation” of the superabundant aspect of the union of the spouses.

Here, in the fruitful dimension of love, as in the case of union, the body affords the spirit a new power: through it, the spouses can be co-agents with God the Father in the creation of a new human person. The spirit is indeed “brought to a new nobility” through the human person’s bodily being.

We said above that the love-origin of the child is safeguarded by the fact that the act in which it is conceived is an act of love between the parents. Now we can add, it is this fact which also grounds the Church’s prohibition against contraception. The coming into being of the child is organically wedded to the union of the spouses: the child is the *superabundance* of the union of spousal love *in this particular expression*, that is, in its deepest, embodied manifestation. Just like all love, the conjugal act “embodies” *both* dimensions of love, the unitive and the fecund. And it does so in an extraordinary fashion: the total self-giving found in the union between the spouses is absolutely unsurpassed by any other human relationship of love, and the fruitfulness characteristic of love is, in this case, the coming into being of a substantial human being with an immortal soul, a person in his own right. Even though God could have arranged matters differently, it is clear that there is a deep correlation between the kind of union of persons taking place in and through the bodily spousal act, and the kind of fecundity into which it flowers.

Once we have discovered the connection between the two, in this particular incarnation of love, we see that to directly make impossible the overflowing of this expression of love into physical fruitfulness is to attempt to *rend love asunder*,

and thus (to one degree or another) to destroy it. Paul VI writes that the Church's teaching that man *may* not separate the two is based on the fact that they *are* inseparable:

This particular doctrine, often expounded by the magisterium of the Church, is based on 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.

Now we understand why: union and love are inseparably intertwined to make up the single reality of love. We have seen how embodied spousal love is a particular expression of this law of love. Just as this act of union is wholly specific and concrete—in virtue of its bodily nature, of the special faculties employed, of its specific gestures, of its specific dynamism, of the specific spiritual and psychological experiences, of its tremendous depth—so also is the highest fruitfulness flowing from this union of a wholly specific nature.

We note that both dimensions are deeply related to the body: the body in its sexuality provides a new totality and depth of union, the body in its fertility provides the possibility of a new substantial being. And so just as any union which rejects its specific fruit is by definition corrupted, so the direct rendering infertile of the spousal act is an infallible witness to the fact that the act was not entered into as an act of spousal union, that is, that the act was vacated of its intrinsic meaning; for *this* expression of love has tied to it *this* expression of fruitfulness, at least as its highest possibility. It is to witness that the bodily act, now vacated of its soul, was used as an instrument for the achievement of some end external to the act itself—perhaps pleasure or some other end. 16

The fact that the act is not in every individual instance fruitful in the highest possible way does not change things. Its “occasional” fruitfulness in this particular way has to do with the particular conditions of human fertility—one of them being the direct action of God in creating the soul; another is the bodily rhythms that God put in place by his free decision. But the fact that the conditions of fertility make it so that not every act culminates in conception in no way obscures the deep connection between the union, and the fruitfulness, and its moral implications.

It is because the spousal act is the expression of the spiritual reality of love that truly participating in it is subject to the laws of love. Because spousal love is the “interior soul” of this bodily act, to alter the bodily dimension is not to alter only it, but it is to alter the act of the spirit that it is fashioned to embody. This allows us to understand the words of Paul VI, in *Humanae vitae*, that only “if each of these essential qualities, the unitive and the procreative, is preserved, the use of marriage fully retains its sense of true mutual love...” In prohibiting contraception, the Church in her wisdom is safeguarding the love between the spouses.

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1. Some examples of norms brought into focus in a new way in the course of recent reflection: see how *Donum vitae*, the 1987 document giving the Church's teaching on *in vitro* fertilization, illuminates the child's right to be conceived in an individual, concrete act of love of the spouses for each other; see the way in which Karol Wojtyla's *Love and Responsibility* shows with new clarity the absolute demand that each spouse approach the other as an end in him/herself in the conjugal act; see the way in which the *Theology of the Body* gives a deep grounding to the need for chastity within marriage – and we could give many more examples.
 2. A secondary impetus for the writing of this article is a recent statement put out by the Wijngaards Institute, which repeats many of these misinterpretations: wijngaardsinstitute.com/statement-on-contraceptives/.

3. "This particular doctrine, often expounded by the Magisterium of the Church, is based on 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." Pope Paul VI, *Humane Vitae* (July, 1968): 12. (vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html)
4. Paul VI in *Humanae vitae* does not speak of "ends" but of the two "meanings" of the conjugal act.
5. Maximilian Kolbe is known for the famous phrase, "Only love creates".
6. *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), audience of January 2, 1980.
7. *Dives in misericordia* (Vatican: The Holy See, 1980): 7. (w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html)
8. *Theology of the Body* 7:2. "Man is a subject not only by his self-consciousness and by self-determination, but also based on his own body. The structure of this body is such that it permits him to be the author of genuinely human activity. In this activity, the body expresses the person; it is thus, in all its materiality...penetrable and transparent as it were, in such a way as to make it clear who man is..."
9. *Purity: The Mystery of Christian Sexuality* (Franciscan University Press: Steubenville, 1989), p. 5. A little later von Hildebrand writes, "In virtue of its profound centrality and intimacy, as also of its mystery, sex is capable of a particular relationship with love, the most spiritual and the deepest of all experiences."
10. *Purity*, p. 5. This depth of sexuality explains the privacy that surrounds the sexual sphere, as well as the salutary shame associated with it.
11. Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* (December, 2005): 5. (vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html) Emphasis mine.
12. This is perhaps one of the reasons that the Church has never to my knowledge spoken of the parents as being required to *aim* at the coming into existence of the child, but only of the requirement for them to be *open* to its coming into existence. The argument of *Donum vitae* rests wholly on this dimension of procreation: that the conception of the child is not something that the parents "*do*", but a reality of which they are the *recipients*. See William May's insistence on this same point in "Begetting vs. Making Babies," *Christendom Awake* (2004): christendom-awake.org/pages/may/begetting.htm#_ednref8.
13. This very important point is at the heart of the *Theology of the Body*, namely, that sexuality in the case of the person is spousal in its character, and thus has love as its form. Far from being simply a "procreative faculty" in a straightforward manner, sex is a faculty for love – from which then springs its fecundity, as another dimension of love. John Paul writes, for example, that "The human body, with its sex – its masculinity and femininity – seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and of procreation, as in the whole natural order, but contains 'from the beginning' the 'spousal' attribute, that is, *the power to express love: precisely that love in which the human person becomes a gift* and – through this gift – fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence." 15:1
14. *Familiaris consortio* 14
15. Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes* (December, 1965): 48 (vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-

[spes_en.html](#))

16. All of this indicates the gulf – both moral and anthropological – that exists between the use of “natural family planning” and contraception in the regulation of birth. In technical philosophical language, they are two different acts with two different moral objects.

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About Dr. Maria Fedoryka, PhD

Dr. Maria Fedoryka is associate professor of philosophy at Ave Maria University. She works in the field of the philosophy of love, focusing on its role at the center of the relationship between God and creation, and on its meaning for human existence, especially in marriage, family and sexuality. Among her publications are the popular booklet *The Special Gift of Women for God, the Family and the World* published by the Catholic Truth Society in England, and the scholarly article on the teaching of *Humanae vitae* in the American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly titled *Finis superabundant Operis: Refining an Ancient Cause for Understanding the Spousal Act*.

Comments

John F Kippley says:

July 22, 2017 at 7:49 am

As Dr. Fedoryka wrote, this is “a philosopher’s meditation on the centrality of love in this new vision reflected in recent Church instructions on human generation,” and it is a beautiful reflection, for which I thank her. But for some of us, philosophy is abstract and difficult. In his 1994 “Letter to Families,” St. John Paul II also referred to the marriage act as a renewal of the marriage covenant: “In the conjugal act, husband and wife are called to confirm in a responsible way the mutual gift of self which they have made to each other in the marriage covenant” (n.12). By focusing on the marriage act as a renewal of the marriage covenant, we can ask married couples to reflect on what they have done in committing themselves to each other in marriage, for better and for worse. With open hearts, it is not difficult for married couples to see that the contraceptive act contradicts their marriage covenant. It says, “I take you for better but definitely not for the imagined worse of possible pregnancy.” Thus, the act is intrinsically dishonest (HV 14). In my opinion, some couples who might not object to thinking of themselves as lustful may not want to think of themselves as dishonest. In today’s culture, we need this sort of simple reflection as well as advanced philosophical reasoning. They complement each other.

Fr. Meconi, SJ says:

July 23, 2017 at 5:54 am

Great comment, and THANK YOU, John and Sheila Kippley for your heroic witness to the TRUTH of married love! All blessings on you, Fr. Meconi

Thomist1 says:

July 26, 2017 at 7:59 pm

I'm sure Dr Fedoryka means quite well when she claims: "Just like the early dissenters, they interpret the prohibition against contraception as having its foundation in the person's biological dimension, as forbidding a disruption of the natural end of the act (a position which has come to be called "biologistic")"

However the teaching of the Church is something a bit different. The teaching on contraception is rooted in the natural law and a teleological view of nature. Pius XI in *Casti conubii* states:

54. But no reason, however grave, may be put forward by which anything intrinsically against nature may become conformable to nature and morally good. Since, therefore, the conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious."

This certainly sounds like the language of nature and teleology. And Paul VI affirmed *Casti Conubii*'s teaching: just applying it to the case of the Pill.

I would love to see a Thomist like Dr Steven Long at Ave Maria or Dr Michael Pakaluk at CUA address some of the philosophical troubling parts of this piece- namely its suggestion that the Church has abandoned its teleological underpinnings of its ban on contraception.