

Humanae Vitae and the Perfection of Love

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contraception . . . will only be as good
as our theology of marriage.

Given the “great commandment,”¹ it has always been held that all are *commanded*, not just counseled, to perfect love.² However, the Second Vatican Council has again emphasized this—and given it a new accent—in the form of a “universal call to holiness.” *Lumen gentium* tells us that “all the faithful, whatever their condition or state—though each in his own way—are called by the Lord to that perfection of sanctity by which the Father himself is perfect.”³ Or again, “The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life (of which he is the author and maker) to each and every one of his disciples without distinction: ‘You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Mt 5:48).”⁴ It is important to note in these passages that this “universal call to holiness” is explicitly and repeatedly related to the “perfection of love,” to being “perfect” as the “heavenly Father is perfect,” and not to some lesser standard such as merely leading a moral life or avoiding serious sin. All of

¹Mt 22:36–40; Lk 10:25–28.

²See e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2–2.184.3.

³*Lumen gentium* (=LG), 11.

⁴LG, 40; See also, *Familiaris consortio* (=FC), 16.

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the saved must strive for and eventually attain this “perfection”—that is, fullness, completion, even consummation—of love. Indeed, this perfection of love, which finally means nothing other than sharing in trinitarian love, would seem, when all is said and done, to be the whole point of human existence.⁵

Because this “call” is first related to baptism, without respect to the two “states of life” mentioned in *Lumen gentium*, the married and the consecrated states, an initial question arises: What specific value is added or what specification is brought to the universal baptismal call to holiness by a “state of life”? There is much in the tradition to explain what is added to the call to perfect love by the state of “evangelical perfection,” and this teaching is strongly reaffirmed by *Lumen gentium*.⁶ There has been, however, less development of what the married state might add. Indeed, a question arises as to whether marriage adds anything at all to this basic, baptismal call. Suárez, for example, concluded that it does not: “speaking simply and only with respect to eternal life, [matrimony] does not exceed the common state of Christian life.”⁷ This approach has made it difficult to see marriage as in itself constituting a call to the perfection of love or as providing any particular specification or shape to holiness. The universal call to the perfection of love, because it *is* universal, clearly applies to the married as well as to the consecrated. Indeed, given that most of the baptized do not receive a vocation to the consecrated life, the majority of those addressed by use of the term “universal” are married. Is this perfection of love to be seen as something to which husband and wife are called *qua* individuals, as something simply added extrinsically or “accidentally” to their status as married? Or is this perfection of love, the very *holiness* to which husband and wife are called, given its specific form or shape from within marriage? Is marriage itself, in other words, in some sense ordered to the perfection of love?

The answer we give to these questions will largely depend on how we understand the tradition’s teaching that marriage is ordered to the “procreation and nurturing of children.” *Humanæ vitæ* reaffirmed this ordination, teaching that there is an “inseparable connection” between the procreative and unitive “meanings” of the “conjugal act.” Thus, we are necessarily led to another question: If marriage *is* in some way ordered to the perfection of love, as I will argue that it is, how does this ordering relate to the constant teaching that marriage is ordered to procreation? In the first part of this essay, I will discuss the sense in which marriage may be said to be ordered to perfect love. In the second part, I will apply the results of this discussion to the question of how marriage’s procreative end relates to the

⁵For a rich development of this theme, see H. U. von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 25 ff.

⁶See *LG*, 43–47.

⁷Francisco Suárez, *Opus de Religione, pars secunda, De Statu Perfectionis*, bk. 1, chap. 2, sec. 2, quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 240.

call to perfect love and, in particular, how this call may shed light on *Humanae vitae's* teaching with respect to the inseparability of the “unitive” and “procreative” meanings of the conjugal act.

I. Marriage and the Perfection of Love

A. Man's Eternal Vocation and the Transmission of Life. Since the middle ages, marriage has been defined as a “sacrament” (in the technical, scholastic understanding of that term, and before that, in the less technical sense) of Christ's nuptials with his Church. Still, while those who receive the sacrament receive sacramental grace and are thereby advanced in sanctity, and while it has always been taught that, as a sacrament, marriage images and is a participation in the union of Christ and his Church, marriage has generally not been considered ordered in itself, in its very nature, to perfection. Garrigou-Lagrange, for example, tells us that “holy virginity is immediately ordered to the good of the soul, to the contemplative life and union with God, whereas marriage is ordered to the conservation of the human species and the active life.”⁸ That is to say, while no Catholic theologian would argue that the perfection of love is in principle unavailable to husband and wife, the natural structure of marriage itself has generally been considered “accidental” to this perfection. Marriage could very well offer the *locus* and circumstances for the practice of the virtues and for carrying out charity, but the very nature and structure of marriage have generally not been considered to offer the particular *form* or *content* of the perfection of love. Indeed, marriage has often been considered (like involvement in the active life or the secular order) a “hindrance” or “prevention” of (although not an “obstacle” to) the perfection of love.⁹ We are therefore not surprised to see, at the outset of Vatican II, that an early schema on marriage condemned “the opinion which declares matrimony to be a specific means for attaining that perfection by which man is truly and properly an image of God and the most Holy Trinity.”¹⁰ The contribution

⁸Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Love of God and the Cross of Jesus*, vol. 1, trans. Sr. Jeanne Marie, O.P. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1947), 348. According to this older theological formulation, of course, marriage was also said to possess, besides its procreative end, the two secondary ends of “mutual help” (*mutuum adiutorium*) and serving as a “remedy for concupiscence” (*remedium concupiscentiae*). However, these secondary ends were not generally interpreted in relation to man's eternal destiny, but were understood as merely “temporal.” See Cormac Burke, “Marriage: A Personalist or an Institutional Understanding?” *Communio* 19 (Summer, 1992): 278–304, 293.

⁹See *STh* 2–2.184.3.2; Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*, trans. Sr. Timothea Doyle, O.P. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1937), 183.

¹⁰“Reprobat etiam sententiam qua assertur matrimonium esse medium specificum attingendi perfectionem eam, qua revera ac proprie homo sit imago Dei et Sanctissimae Trinitatis” (*De castitate, virginitate, matrimonio, familia* [Schema Propositum a Commissione

of marriage would seem to arise primarily at the “natural” or intra-species level, more or less untouched, in any deep way, by man’s concrete call to *caritatis perfectionem* and his invitation to share in divine life.

It is now generally agreed that this understanding of marriage is inadequate. This development can only be understood as part of a historical trend. Beginning especially in 1930 with Pius XI’s promulgation of *Casti connubii* (which appeared shortly after the Lambeth Conference decision to allow contraception among Anglicans), the Church increasingly emphasized the “sacredness” and “dignity” of marriage. This became especially true in the Vatican II documents (which stress “the dignity and supreme sacred value of the married state”¹¹) and, more recently, has been a major theme in the writings of John Paul II. The Council Fathers affirmed marriage as a “state of life” and, borrowing from Augustine and Chrysostom, called marriage the nucleus of the “domestic Church”¹² (or, as we sometimes hear, the first “cell” of the Church). Much of this development has occurred in response to the modern tendency to undermine the Church’s teaching with respect to the procreative end of marriage and more generally to the crisis marriage faces today: contraception, divorce, and the related issues of abortion, homosexuality and the growing sense that marriage can mean anything and therefore must, in fact, mean nothing. *Gaudium et spes* tells us that the “dignity” of marriage is often “overshadowed by polygamy, the plague of divorce, so-called free love, and similar blemishes,” as well as “hedonism” and “unlawful contraceptive practices.” It is for this reason that the Council “intends to present certain key points of the Church’s teaching in a clearer light.” By doing so, the Council “hopes to guide and encourage Christians and all men who are trying to preserve and to foster the dignity and supreme sacred value of the married state” (*GS*, 47).

While emphasizing that “authentic married love is caught up in divine love and is directed and enriched by the redemptive power of Christ and the salvific action of the Church,” and that husband and wife thereby “further their own perfection and their mutual sanctification” (*GS*, 48) and “glorify the Creator and perfect themselves in Christ” (*GS*, 50), the Council Fathers also took care to reaffirm marriage’s ordination to the transmission of new life: “By its very nature the institution of marriage and married love is ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory” (*GS*, 48). “Married couples should regard it as their proper mission to transmit human life and to educate their children; they should realize that they are thereby cooperating with the love of God the Creator and are, in a certain sense, its interpreters” (*GS*, 50). Finally, the Council Fathers made a crucial point with respect to this natural ordination: “Let all be convinced that human life and its transmission are realities whose

Theologica, 7 May 1962], Pars Altera, chap. 1, pt. 16, in *Acta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II Apparando*, Series 2 [*Praeparatoria*] vol. 2, pt. 3, 910).

¹¹*Gaudium et spes* (=GS), 47.

¹²LG, 11; see also FC, 21 and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2204.

meaning is not limited by the horizons of this life only: their true evaluation and full meaning can only be understood in reference to man's eternal destiny" (*GS*, 51).

It was against this background that Paul VI addressed the question of contraception in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae vitae*. Clearly our understanding of the wrongfulness of contraception—a wrongfulness affirmed by the entire tradition¹³—will only be as good as our theology of marriage, and so it certainly is not surprising that the Church's teaching on contraception has in this century been accompanied by a deepening of her teaching on marriage. Part of this deepening has been a greater emphasis on the "personalist values" of marriage and its ordination to the transmission of life. In *Humanae vitae* this took the form of underscoring the "inseparable connection . . . between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning."¹⁴ This "inseparable connection" preserves the intrinsic value of marital love, which is nurtured by the "unitive meaning" of the "conjugal act," and therefore addresses the charge of some that the older theology simply instrumentalizes marriage and marital love to their procreative end. Not only are these two meanings contained in the conjugal act and therefore, more broadly, in marriage itself (surely a fairly uncontroversial point), but also (and more controversially) they are inseparable and intrinsically related, each being a feature of God's plan for marriage and marital love.¹⁵ Finally, like the Council Fathers, Paul VI situates the question of marriage and married love, and their ordination to the transmission of life, within the context of man's eternal destiny. We must look "beyond partial perspectives," the encyclical tells us, and consider the transmission of life "in the light of an integral vision of man and his vocation, not only his natural and earthly, but also his supernatural and eternal vocation."¹⁶

Here, as in *Gaudium et spes*, we have the express claim that marriage and conjugal love, the transmission of human life to which they are ordered,

¹³See John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1986), 6.

¹⁴*Humanae vitae* (=HV), 12. The absoluteness of this inseparability is expressed in the encyclical's teaching that "each and every marriage act (*quilibet matrimonii usus*) must remain open to the transmission of life" (HV, 11). It should be noted that this absolute inseparability moves in the other direction, as well. Thus the encyclical uses as evidence for this "inseparable connection" the wrongfulness of a sexual act imposed on one's spouse outside of love, and therefore violating the "unitive meaning," even though such an act might be "open to the transmission of life" (HV, 13).

¹⁵HV, 13.

¹⁶HV, 7. It may be noted that the so-called "Minority Report" (issued by Paul VI's Commission for the Study of Problems of the Family, Population, and Birth Rate) also made the important claim that the Church's teaching on contraception "is not based principally on philosophical arguments. Rather, 'It depends on the nature of human life and human sexuality, as understood theologically by the Church'" (Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* [Washington, D.C.: University of Washington Press, 1991], 22).

and therefore the vexed question of contraception, must be considered in view of man's supernatural end, his "eternal vocation" to the perfection of love.¹⁷ How then does the "transmission of human life" relate to this "supernatural and eternal vocation"?

B. Marriage as Ordered to Perfection. As Pius XI had done in *Casti connubii*, the Council Fathers placed considerable emphasis on marriage's relationship to, and what *Lumen gentium* calls the husband's and wife's "signification" of and "participation" in ("significant atque participant"), the nuptials of Christ and his Church (the "great mystery" of Ephesians 5:32).¹⁸ Or, as *Gaudium et spes* tells us, marriage "is an imaging and sharing in the partnership of love between Christ and the Church" ("imago et participatio foederis delectionis Christi et Ecclesiae").¹⁹ This teaching of the Council has been amplified and elaborated in significant ways by the writings of John Paul II. Echoing *Gaudium et spes*'s declaration that Christ reveals man to himself,²⁰ the pope tells us in his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio* that Christ reveals "the original truth of marriage":

¹⁷Much theological discussion has been generated by the Church's teaching on contraception, and the emphasis on personalist values has been used both to support and to undermine this teaching. To what extent, it may be asked, has this discussion adequately taken into account the relationship between humanity's destiny in God's trinitarian love and marriage's ordination to bringing forth and nurturing new life? Consider for example the fact that, while we typically place great value on the personal richness and fulfillment marital love and indeed conjugal union bring the husband and wife, it is generally argued only afterwards, and as a secondary point, that this fulfillment plays a positive role or reaches its fulfillment in perfecting the spouses' charity. Moreover, if the older theology tended to instrumentalize marriage to procreation, personalism seems often to turn marriage inward and thereby to instrumentalize it in another way, namely to the personal enrichment of the spouses. One suspects—despite all its protestations to the contrary, despite all its emphasis on "self-gift"—that personalism may at times reduce the core of marriage to a kind of nuanced (because mutual) self-love. Like the older theology described above, more recent approaches often tend to see marriage and its procreative end as part of a "natural" or, as it is more often put nowadays, "social, cultural and historical" reality to which a further sacramental significance has been added. That is to say, although personalism has made genuine progress in recognizing the role of marriage, marital love, and the union of husband and wife in the cultivation of their charity and perfection, it has at the same time often tacitly carried over the earlier presupposition that the nature of marriage and its procreative end are fundamentally extrinsic to (because they are not given their very form and structure within) the call to *caritatis perfectionem* and union with God.

¹⁸*LG*, 11.

¹⁹*GS*, 48.

²⁰"In reality, only in the mystery of the incarnate Word is the mystery of man illuminated. For Adam, the first man, was the figure of the one to come, that is, of Christ the Lord. Christ, the new Adam, in revealing the mystery of the Father and his love also fully reveals man to himself and makes known to him his most high calling" (*GS*, 22).

This revelation reaches its definitive fullness in the gift of love which the Word of God makes to humanity in assuming a human nature, and in the sacrifice which Jesus Christ makes of Himself on the Cross for His bride, the Church. In this sacrifice there is entirely revealed that plan which God has imprinted on the humanity of man and woman since their creation; the marriage of baptized persons thus becomes a *real symbol* of that new and eternal covenant sanctioned in the blood of Christ.²¹

It is important to note here that marriage is not considered by the Council Fathers or the pope to be merely an external image or signification; rather, in constituting an *imago* or *significatio* of Christ's nuptials with his Church, it also constitutes a *participatio* in or "real symbol" of those nuptials. In no way can the relationship between the two pairs, Christ/Church and husband/wife be reduced to the relationship between moral exemplar and moral action. The relationship is not simply extrinsic or juridical. Rather, what is indicated here is an ontological relationship. The higher reality of Christ and his Church is the "prototype" and indeed offers the *form* of the husband's and wife's marital relationship.²² Receiving itself from—because participating in—the eschatological nuptials, marriage becomes an effective sign of grace. This is of course the basis for its sacramentality. And thus, as the Council Fathers remind us, the fundamental distinguishing characteristic of marriage considered as a "state of life" is that it is "sanctified by a special sacrament" (LG, 35).

However, recent teaching also highlights marriage's fundamental relationship to man's very nature. *Familiaris consortio* begins its exposition of marriage by considering its relationship to the *imago Dei*: "God created man in His own image and likeness: calling him to existence *through love*, He called him at the same time *for love*" (FC, 11). This identification of man as existing "through" and "for" love is then specifically related to God's trinitarian life. Since "God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion," humanity precisely *as man and woman* has the "vocation" of "love and communion." This love is therefore "the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being" (Ibid.). Man as "incarnate spirit, that is a soul which expresses itself in a body and a body informed by an immortal spirit," is "called to love in this unified totality."

²¹FC, 13 (emphasis added); see also HV, 25.

²²Matthias Scheeben points out that Ephesians 5:32 cannot mean that marriage simply symbolizes the supernatural union between Christ and the Church since, "in that case marriage itself would not be mysterious, but would only be a figure, itself empty of content, that would serve to call up before our minds a mystery extrinsic to it, that is, the union of Christ with his Church. Hence matrimony would be the sacrament of a mystery rather than [itself] a mystery, and a barren sacrament at that. . . . Christian marriage, on the contrary, has a real, essential, and intrinsic reference to the mystery of Christ's union with His Church" (*The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert [St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1946], 601). Marriage must really participate in and communicate the "great mystery." Marriage's participation in and *re*-presentation of the mystical union of Christ and his Church is such that this eternal bond is the source of marriage's sacramental meaning, its abiding inner reality, its *res et sacramentum*.

But how is this “married love,” ordered as it is to the specific marital community, and from there outward to the family community (and therefore to the universal community of the Church and mankind), related to the specific formality we have called, following the tradition, the “perfection of love”? Here, we are back to our initial question of whether marriage adds anything positive to the universal baptismal vocation. What is only touched upon in prior documents is richly developed in *Familiaris consortio*: “The sacrament of marriage is the specific source and original means of sanctification for Christian married couples and families. It takes up again and makes specific the sanctifying grace of Baptism . . .” (FC, 56). Or again, “Christian spouses and parents are included in the universal call to sanctity. For them this call is specified by the sacrament they have celebrated and is carried out concretely in the realities proper to their conjugal and family life” (Ibid.). What needs to be brought into sharp focus here is this notion that marriage is a “specification” of the baptismal call to perfection.²³ In doing so, we seem to have come upon the basic resources necessary to answer our initial question. The pope tells us that “Christian revelation recognizes two specific ways of realizing the vocation of the human person, in its entirety [i.e., as a bodily creature], to love: marriage and virginity or celibacy” (FC, 11). He tells us that “[e]ither one is, in its own proper form, an actuation of the most profound truth of man, of his being ‘created in the image of God’” (Ibid.). By placing the married and the consecrated states in a parallel and complementary, albeit hierarchically ordered, relationship, the pope has indicated the significance and indeed the decisive role the body plays in the self-gift of both states. In order for the human person to give himself totally he must give himself precisely as a bodily creature.

An important point may be drawn from what has been said thus far. The pope’s own work suggests that marriage and consecration are not just two human activities or experiences among others. They are intrinsically related to what is most fundamentally human.²⁴ As we saw, love is the universal vocation of the human person; man and woman are both loved into existence—they are called into existence “*through* love”—and they are simultaneously called into existence “*for* love.” Baptism is—as reception into the Church and, therefore, as a rejection of sin and the works of Satan, that is to say, of everything that is opposed to God—an acceptance of this call

²³See also *Humanæ vitæ*, 25: “[husband and wife] must remember that their Christian vocation, which began at baptism, is further *specified* and reinforced by the sacrament of matrimony” (emphasis added).

²⁴Indeed, John Paul II has elaborated a theological anthropology based on what he calls the “nuptial meaning of the body.” According to this teaching, marriage is the “primordial sacrament” and the very touchstone for the development of an “adequate [theological] anthropology.” This teaching was mostly delivered in the pope’s weekly general audiences (the so-called “Wednesday catechesis”) between September 1979 and January 1983, and is now collected in *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1997).

to love. It is a *fiat* given by (or on behalf of) the baptized to the truth of being essentially and existentially “*through* love” (or *from* love) and “*for* love.” Marriage and consecration therefore add distinct specifications, and therefore *specific forms*, to the existential realization of this *fiat* or letting be. As states of life, marriage and life according to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience are parallel, but hierarchically ordered, forms of *fiat*. Either of these forms is a “state of life” only insofar as it constitutes a “total self-gift,” that is to say, a gift of everything that one is. In this way either is a “specification” of the one fundamental human vocation, the “vocation to love.” Marriage (like consecration) is not “accidental” or related only extrinsically to what we would call the “nature of man,” but radically informs and discloses that nature. And as such, marriage (again, like consecration) is not simply accidental or extrinsically related to man’s call to *caritatis perfectionem* and his “most high calling.”

Some precautionary points need to be made. First, to argue, as I have here, that marriage offers the form and content for the perfection of love is not to give marriage some type of equivalency to the consecrated state. What I have said merely indicates the essentially analogous relationship between the states. To understand this point we should keep in mind that both states of life are modes of participation in the one nuptial relationship between Christ and his bride, the Church, which relationship embraces all Christians and, in a real way, all of creation. It is within this fundamental unity that the two states are properly distinguished without losing their intrinsic relationship. It should be stressed of course that in the fallen world the two states cannot be confused or collapsed into each other. Indeed, use of the word “analogy” indicates an irreducible *dissimilitudo* between them. However, notwithstanding this irreducibility, “analogy” also indicates a fundamental and literal *similitudo*. Stressing this *similitudo* (as I am for purposes of the present discussion) does not amount, however, to an equation of the two as mere alternatives on the path to holiness. The relationship between the states, and part of their irreducible dissimilarity, is indicated by their hierarchical relationship; the Church has always affirmed the objective “superiority” of consecration. The vocation to the consecrated state is a unique and “special” sort of vocation to a higher state of life. For all that, however, the two states are “complementary” and intrinsically related, such that, if one possesses a hierarchical and absolute priority, the other nonetheless possesses its own perfection (1 Cor 7:7), and indeed therefore, its own subordinate priority.²⁵

²⁵That is to say, each state discloses what in some sense is most essential to the other state. In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on what the consecrated state reveals to marriage about marriage’s own deepest meaning. But because our task here is not *per se* to explore the question of the relationship between the states of life, I will only note without further elaboration that since the consecrated life is essentially nuptial in meaning (because it is essentially a nuptial giving of oneself *wholly* to God), marriage stands as the objective and visible analogy for consecration, revealing iconographically what the consecrated state most essentially is. It is in this sense that the married state possesses

In everything that is said below, therefore, we must keep in mind that this discussion presupposes that the relationship between the states is analogous and that, as such, there is an irreducible *dissimilitudo* (this side of the eschaton) between the two states denoted by that analogy. If the directness of consecration in a sense by-passes the particularistic and *sacramental* form of marriage by participating in the nuptials of Christ and his Church in an “unmediated” way, Christian marriage is constituted within this sacramental, “mediated” form. That is to say, marriage’s participation in the nuptials of Christ and his Church is mediated by the particular marital union of *this* man and *this* woman who then receive as their fruitfulness *this* child. The vocation to the counsels, on the other hand, brings about a transcendence of marital particularity, thereby enabling the consecrated to hold themselves available for a “universal” fecundity. If the married state begins in the particular and moves outward toward the universal, the Church and the world as a whole, the consecrated state begins in an unbounded and universal mission and moves toward the particular, the lives of people in the Church and the world.

Second, this analogy is consequent upon the division that has been introduced between the two states by the Fall. Here, I presuppose, in accordance with much of the tradition, that in Paradise the states of marriage and consecration were one, although the nature of this paradisaical unity must, at a deep level, remain a mystery to us. Sin has deeply wounded nature and indeed seems to abound all the more prolifically the closer it approaches what is most essentially and profoundly human. Thus, if man is “made for love,” and if this very ordination is inscribed in his nature as a bodily creature, it is precisely in the disordering of the passions and desires which should be directed to this love that sin exacts its greatest penalty. It goes without saying that we humans love only with great difficulty. I will have further occasion to discuss this below, but perhaps I can anticipate by saying that if authentic love is characterized as a kind of total self-gift and a Yes (*fiat*) to the call (vocation) to make such a self-gift, the substance of sin is a No (*non serviam*) to this call. Not only does this No constitute an alienation from God, but also an alienation from what is most essentially human—it is a kind of self-alienation. It is here that we can perhaps see the perennial validity of the notion of marriage as a *remedium concupiscentiae*, a term which admittedly has fallen out of favor. If marriage is a specification of, and is ordered to, the baptismal call to the perfection of love, it is only because it offers the *form* of self-gift, a form to which husband and wife, if they are to perfect their love, must conform.²⁶

what I have called a “subordinate priority.”

²⁶Pius XI tells us: “This mutual inward molding of husband and wife, this determined effort to perfect each other, can in a very real sense, as the Roman Catechism teaches, be said to be the chief reason and purpose of matrimony, provided matrimony be looked at not in the restricted sense as instituted for the proper conception and education of the child, but more widely as the blending of life as a whole and the mutual interchange and sharing thereof” (*Casti connubii*, [Boston: St. Paul Books & Media],14). See also, St.

It is marriage that first brings “perfection” to the spouses, not the spouses who first bring perfection to marriage. In other words, the spouses do not achieve the perfection of love extrinsically from marriage. Sanctity is not something added to one’s status as husband and wife. Rather one’s status as husband or wife is precisely the form (or “specification”) of one’s “total self-gift,” and as we shall argue below this self-gift ultimately must mean a christological abandonment to the Father. But this in turn can only indicate marriage’s fundamental role in progressively remedying the wounds inflicted on human sexuality (precisely in view of the profound meaning sexuality bears for the “perfection of love”) by the Fall.²⁷

With these qualifications in place, perhaps we can press our point a bit further. Because man is made *for* God and finds his true finality *in* God,²⁸ and because marriage discloses and specifies the human vocation to love, marriage has been given a certain *form* from within this finality. This form cannot be something that is simply added to the nature of marriage “from the outside”; rather it is intrinsic to that nature. Marriage is not simply a natural institution that has been raised to the level of a sacrament, as though its sacramentality were something extrinsic to it which did not radically shape its very structure and meaning.²⁹ Such a view

Thomas Aquinas, *STh*, Suppl., 49.3; Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 235 ff.

²⁷Because consecrated virginity also progressively remedies a wounded sexuality, there is a sense in which it too may be said to constitute a *remedium concupiscentiae*, but further discussion of this topic exceeds the scope of our present task.

²⁸See Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 1998). This *being for God*—man’s supernatural finality—poses, in de Lubacian terms, a “paradox.” Because God wanted to give himself as absolute love to man, he created man’s spiritual nature to possess an openness or *capacitas* which is not yet, however, in any way a positive claim on God’s divine life. The “paradox of man” therefore consists in the following: although man possesses a “desire” for the vision of God, a desire that is consequent upon this *capacitas* and is therefore a desire for the one thing that will finally fulfill him (but which, however, is not necessarily *consciously* a desire *for God*), he is unable himself to call upon grace to achieve this end. The term “paradox” denotes that nature possesses a final end which exceeds nature’s own grasp. In short, nature cannot achieve or earn, cannot even aspire to, this end operating from its own resources; nor can it be said to possess the supernatural by way of anticipation. The supernatural end of human nature nevertheless is intrinsic to that nature; indeed it orders nature, from the beginning, from within. In everything that is said below, it is vital to keep in mind the tension or “paradox” just outlined. “Concrete nature” (that is nature as it really was created) possesses a single final and supernatural end, which is intrinsic to that nature, but which cannot be reached without the further gift of God’s elevating and sanctifying grace.

²⁹“[T]he sacrament of Marriage is not some sort of neutral supernatural blessing on a ‘natural institution’; rather, it contains within itself the true meaning, the true substance of marriage, made living by Christ himself as the subsistent covenant; and this reality of marriage draws men into that relationship between the Lord and his Church which is the foundation and justification of every marriage” (Balthasar, *Theology of History* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995], 96). Also, “Christian marriage cannot be understood if it is regarded as a natural institution with a particular form of natural love that was later

is an abstraction of the nature of marriage from its sacramental destiny as a “real symbol” in which husband and wife “signify and participate” in the nuptials of Christ and the Church. Even non-sacramental marriage, that is marriage between two non-Christians, is, following the logic of *Gaudium et spes* 22,³⁰ a “figure” of sacramental marriage and finds its end, its full realization, formally as sacramental, within Christ’s revelation of man to himself.³¹ Non-sacramental marriage is called and, because called, cries out ontologically from within (*desiderium naturale*) to be purified and to become sacramental (and thereby fully a sign of Christ’s nuptials with his Church, conferring grace *ex opere operato*) through the baptism of the spouses. For sacramental marriage is not only more *supernatural*, it is also more true to what marriage really *is*—and is therefore more *natural*. We might even venture to say that the most “natural” marriages are the marriages of saints *because* they most fully resemble and participate in the nuptials of Christ and the Church.³² If we want to see most clearly what marriage is, we must look to its “model,” that which is ontologically prior to it.

Of course, marriage’s particularistic and sacramental form will finally be transcended, that is to say the exclusive and closed *communio* of “this age” (Lk 20:34) will blossom into the radically universal and virginal *communio* of the next, a form of *communio* lived proleptically and visibly within the consecrated state: “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Mt 30; see also, Mk 12:25; Lk 20:34–36). But even this radical, universalized *communio* has hiddenly fructified sacramental marriage “in this age.” Christ is the one Bridegroom, and his body, the Church, is the one Bride; but paradoxically, at the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rv 19:7–8),

‘raised’ by the sacrament to the state of grace” (Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 244).

³⁰See n. 20, above.

³¹As Balthasar tells us, the sacrament of matrimony is the “true substance of marriage” (*A Theology of History*, 96).

³²Of course this does not mean that such marriages are necessarily peaceful or even “happy.” It is sometimes true that difficult and outwardly unsuccessful marriages exhibit starkly and disturbingly the heart of conjugal love and the marital form, that is to say, the kind of love that Christ has for his Church. Chrysostom, for example, instructs husbands as follows: “[Christ] gave Himself up for [the Church] that ‘He might cleanse and sanctify her . . .’ (v. 26). So the Church was not pure. She had blemishes, she was ugly and cheap. Whatever kind of wife you marry, you will never take a bride like Christ did when He married the Church; you will never marry anyone estranged from you as the Church was from Christ. Despite all this, He did not abhor or hate her for her extraordinary corruption” (“Homily 20: On Ephesians 5:22–33,” *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. C. Roth and D. Anderson [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986], 47). Sometimes it is in the outward rupture of a marriage that witness to this attitude of husband and wife is most effectively given. This attitude is clearly shown when a husband or wife awaits the return of a wayward spouse, a return which from a worldly point of view will likely never occur. Such a situation may appear rather pathetic to the world, but if lived properly it is here that the marital form may stand out in its most radical and pristine clarity.

all the saints will be married within the one Bride.³³ Marriage contains analogously the same paradox as man: its finality is utterly beyond the reach of its nature—indeed is of an entirely different order—and can only be reached, in the end, through its own death.³⁴

II. The Perfection of Love and the Procreative End of Marriage

In the quotation from Garrigou-Lagrange, marriage's primary function seemed to be limited to its service of humanity at the level of the species. That is to say, the end of marriage seemed to be confined to a "purely natural" order while its sacramentality seemed to come to it from the outside, rather than ordering it *from within*. It is of course clear that marriage and marital love indeed *are* "ordered to" the generation and nurturing of new human life. The original commandment, still governing, was to be "fruitful and multiply" (Gn 1:28); from the beginning and,

³³Hugh of St. Victor, for example, tells us: "In the house, the brides are made ready for the wedding; but in the chamber the nuptials are celebrated. The present Church is, as it were, the house in which the betrothed of God are made ready for their future marriage; the heavenly Jerusalem is the king's chamber in which those marriages are celebrated." *The Soul's Betrothal-Gift*, trans. F. Sherwood Taylor (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1945), 31; see also Dominique Poirel, "Love of God, Human Love: Hugh of St. Victor and the Sacrament of Marriage," *Communio* 24 (Spring, 1997): 99–109, 108. And cf. St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 40 (Commentary), *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 630

³⁴However, perhaps it is true that there is a sense in which marriage—far from being merely nullified and left as a blank space in the heavenly *communio personarum* which is, in some significant way, the consummation and transformation of the ecclesial *communio personarum*—*does* survive into the kingdom of God: "Although the Church does not condemn remarriage, she shows her predilection for souls who wish to remain faithful to their spouse and to the perfect symbolism of the sacrament of marriage. . . . Far from destroying the bonds of human and supernatural love which are contracted in marriage, death can perfect them and strengthen them. It is true that legally, and on the plane of perceptible realities, the matrimonial institution does not exist any more, but that which constituted its soul, gave it strength and beauty—conjugal love with all its splendor and its eternal vows—lives on just as the spiritual and free beings live on who have pledged themselves to each other" (Pius XII, "Christian Widowhood: An Address to the World of Family Organizations," *The Pope Speaks* 4 [Winter, 1957–58], 289). See also, Sr. Paula Jean Miller, F.S.E., *Marriage: The Sacrament of Divine-Human Communion*, vol. 1, *A Commentary On St. Bonaventure's Breviloquium* (Quincy, Ill.: Franciscan Press, 1996), 221–22, who points out that for Bonaventure marriage's "participation in the total Mystery of Marriage is everlasting," although not the "sacramental sign which makes that mystery visible in time, in and through a union of sexually-distinguished bodies." One might also legitimately ask what a deeper understanding of "person" than was available to the scholastics might add to this sense in which marriage perdures. See e.g., Ratzinger, "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology," *Communio* 17 (Fall, 1990), 439–454; Balthasar, "On the Concept of Person," *Communio* 13 (Spring, 1986), 18–26.

significantly, as integral to the *imago Dei* and man's capacity for participation in God's trinitarian fruitfulness, man was made male and female. In fact, we might say, "human beings were made *for fecundity*."³⁵ How then does the Church's constant teaching that marriage is ordered to the generation and nurturing of new life, that indeed it *does* serve the absolutely vital function of "conserving the species," relate to the rich sense of marriage's sacramentality that the magisterium has begun to articulate?

As we have seen, man's end, "beatification," the final perfection of his love,³⁶ calls forth and gives shape to marriage and its core, the one flesh union of husband and wife, as a sacrament of Christ's nuptial union with his Church, and as a gift of self, in which erotic love is called to allow itself to be transfigured by and subordinated to agapic love. The absolute norm for all love is revealed in Christ's obedience to the Father, his complete reception and abandonment of everything that he is, his very substance and will, for the sake of his Bride, to the Father. This finally is the norm that discloses the inner form of the union of husband and wife as a total availability to the Father's will and activity. Because their love is called to take its shape within the agapic and kenotic love of Christ and his Bride, husband and wife cannot claim as their own their sexuality or fertility any more than the consecrated virgin can claim as her own the spiritual fruitfulness to which she gives birth in her self-abandonment as a "bride of Christ."

A. The Conjugal Act as an Objective Fiat. The theology outlined at the beginning of this article tends to see marriage as precisely that state of life which does not entail the genuine self-renunciation implied in giving oneself wholly to God. Given this basic view, it would indeed be difficult to see marriage as the pope does, that is to say, as a specification of the basic baptismal call to holiness and the perfection of love. As Christians, husband and wife would of course be called to "move beyond" this "merely" natural form and to live (as best they could) according to a "spirit of the counsels." But the demands of sanctity and the perfection of love would seem to come to marriage from the outside, as it were, and therefore to impose themselves as a necessarily alien form. What I have argued suggests, on the other hand, that living the "spirit of the counsels" is intrinsic to marriage as *in se* ordered to the perfection of love and therefore that it must also mean living marriage in its absolute fullness. As I argued above, the relationship between marriage and consecration is not fundamentally one of opposition or dialectic but of analogy. Marriage is concretely and primitively *for* God (without nullifying, of course, the fact that it is simultaneously for *this* man and *this* woman and *these* children, as well as for society, etc.), even when considered specifically from the standpoint of its nature.

³⁵Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 226–27 (emphasis added).

³⁶See St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Religious State; the Episcopate; and the Priestly Office*, trans. F.J. Procter, O.P. (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1950), 11ff.

Therefore, in no way can marriage be seen as a zone of resistance or unavailability to God, as though the married, in contrast to the consecrated, do not give themselves totally to God, but keep the “temporal goods” of wealth, sexuality, and freedom for themselves and their own private use; in short, marriage in itself cannot be seen as a “hindrance” in the sanctification of the spouses or in the spouses’ union with and “belonging to” God, at least not in the sense that marriage constitutes some neutral space that exists outside of, and therefore subtly in competition with, God or the order of grace.

If marriage’s own particular and sacramental form is ordered to the perfection of love, this can only be because marriage *also* constitutes the form and content of a total self-gift (*fiat*) to God—sacramentally—through one’s husband or wife. As with the evangelical counsels, whose direct (non-sacramental) and eschatological act of giving oneself *wholly* to God constitutes a superior form, so too marriage, as a subordinate form or specification of the vocation to love, is most fundamentally a *fiat*. To give themselves to God, husband and wife must give themselves to each other; and to give themselves to each other, they must give themselves to God. Chrysostom tells us: “When love unites the spouses in order to unite them more fully to God, its principle lies not in nature but in God; they are exactly like Jesus Christ who, united to his spouse the Church, was not less one with the Father.”³⁷ In this sense, it can be said that husband and wife *do* (analogously) give themselves—sacramentally, as “one flesh,” as having given themselves *wholly* to each other—*wholly* to God.³⁸

To see this radical call of the gospel as also at the heart of marriage, it is necessary to see that marriage (analogously) takes the form of “leaving everything” behind: “Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Eph 5:31; Gn 2:24). This is the specific *form* that revelation gives to marriage. Marriage means the spouses’ receiving themselves anew from God as husband and wife, which in itself implies a priority of poverty in the nuptial form. The richness of the sacrament, authentic marital love and its consequent fruitfulness are received realities, beyond the powers of the spouses to possess on their own. Husband and wife must hold themselves in chastity, in an utter availability to God’s fecund initiative and activity, whatever joy or hardship, whatever fruitfulness, whatever children they receive into their care. They must receive everything day by day in loving obedience from the Father’s

³⁷St. John Chrysostom, *III Homily on Marriage*, 3, quoted in Paul Evdokimov, “Conjugal Priesthood,” in George Crespy, et al., *Marriage and Christian Tradition*, trans. Sr. Agnes Cunningham (Tehny, Ill.: Divine Word Publications, 1968), 92.

³⁸See Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 246: “For now the spouses are no longer opened only to each other—and hence closed to all others: they stand primarily in openness to God and, from this stand before God, give themselves to him and, at the same time, expect to receive from him the unexpected: the fruit of his grace.”

hand. This receptivity means not “grasping,”³⁹ not trying to take their lives into their own hands, not trying to take control of, or delimit, according to their own dictates, the terms of the reception of their fecundity. And it means receiving these things precisely within the marital form, rather than as a form imposed from the outside.

Christ’s self-abandonment to the Father, his agapic love for his Bride, and the self-abandonment of the Church to her Lord, impress themselves on the form of total self-gift entailed in marriage. But because nature’s supernatural end is intrinsic, this eschatological form is not something alien to marriage, but discloses itself as marriage’s very heart and core, its very meaning. This entire movement, as we have seen, is most fundamentally centered within Christ’s *fiat*. And this shapes not only marriage but also the one-flesh union of husband and wife. Everything “natural” to marriage, most especially the “conjugal act,” is impressed with this form. Like Christ’s fruitful union with his Bride, this “one-flesh union” possesses the *objective form* of Christ’s and the Church’s *fiat*.

Before addressing the light this “objective *fiat*” sheds on the “inseparable connection” between the unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act, we should consider four important points:

First, identifying the core of marriage’s one flesh-union as an “objective *fiat*” does not deny the complex nature of this most fundamental human act. Reason, passion, pleasure, emotion and so forth each have their role in marital love. Assuredly these are worthy and noble elements of the union of husband and wife precisely because this union is fully human and personal. But these elements are ordered by the underlying identity of the objective *fiat* for the very reason that they receive their value and shape within this *fiat*. It is this *fiat* that makes the union of husband and wife, with all of its values and goods, something beautiful.

Second, what has been said does not deny the necessity of “responsible parenthood” (*HV*, 10). For “serious” (*HV*, 10: “seriis causis”) or “grave” (*HV*, 16: “honesta et gravia argumenta”) reasons husband and wife may (even must) resort to periodic abstinence in order to “space” (*HV*, 16: “intervallandi”) the births of their children. It is important to note that according to both *Gaudium et spes* (50) and *Humanae vitae* (10) “responsible parenthood” in the general case means receiving a large number of children.⁴⁰ But also it often means heeding such “serious reasons,” which cannot be *a priori* defined, but must be left to the spouses’ discernment, a discernment which of course involves the use of human intelligence and an honest evaluation of the concrete circumstances in which husband and wife find themselves. Indeed, abstinence—normally for temporary, but sometimes for periodic or even indefinite, periods of time—is clearly

³⁹For a meditation on the antithesis between chastity and grasping, see Jean-Pierre Batut, “The Chastity of Jesus and the ‘Refusal to Grasp,’” *Communio* 25 (Spring, 1997): 5–13.

⁴⁰See also, John Paul II, General Audience, 5 September 1984.

inseparable from the lived reality of marriage. But either in “one flesh” fruitfulness or in the discerned need for abstinence, marriage and marital love must receive themselves lovingly from the Father’s hand. As “received” from the Father, such abstinence will itself constitute a *fiat* and therefore a total availability to the Father, and as such, will be open to a genuine spiritual fruitfulness. Unlike contraception, periodic abstinence does not violate the objective meaning of the nuptial *fiat* because it does nothing to deprive the conjugal act of its *objective* form. In fact abstinence must be characterized, in this case, as a refusal to do anything that *would* violate the objective form or structure of this *fiat*. The spouses remain open to whatever fruitfulness they are granted when they do come together; their union continues to constitute the structure and meaning of their one-flesh self-gift to the Father.

Third, the notion of an objective *fiat* does not deny the distorting and self-alienating effect of sin or the underlying ambiguity of human behavior which it produces, an ambiguity which often seems to increase the more closely it involves what is intended to be sacred and pure. Indeed, it is sin which tends, for example through the use of contraception, to destroy the objective form of this *fiat* in our fallen state. The *fiat* embodied in marriage as a state of life sets an objective context in which spouses can allow their relationship, including their sexuality, to be healed of the wounds of concupiscence and to become transparent to the nuptial union of Christ and the Church.

Finally, it is important to safeguard against a possible objection to what I have said with respect to nature’s graced end: viz. if the only final end of nature is supernatural, then it would seem that either the natural law is impossible (because nature now seems to have been rendered unintelligible from within its own order, that is to say without the explicit aid of supernatural revelation) or relative and provisional (because the natural ends upon which it is based would seem to be relative and provisional with respect to the supernatural end). In either case, this would spell the end of “absolute moral norms” arising within the natural law.

Since nature takes its form and meaning from within the “concrete universal and personal” form of Christ (Christ *is* the concrete form for the whole of history and nature: he is universale concretum et personale⁴¹), even the natural law, and in particular our analysis of the “inseparable connection,” receives its shape from within the one human “supernatural and eternal vocation” (*HV*, 7) in Christ. Clearly, nature possesses a certain “legitimate autonomy” and “intelligibility” within its own order. This legitimate autonomy does not, however, require that nature be abstracted from the order of grace.⁴² It is true that, because nature is “contained within” and “perfected by” grace (“the *ordo gratiae* contains and perfects the

⁴¹Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 92–93.

⁴²On this point see, *GS*, 36.

*ordo naturae*⁴³), because it is given its “innumerable individual forms in time and space”⁴⁴ within the *fiat* of Christ, our natural law survey of the intelligible order of nature will be of a nature that has been priorly structured within this intrinsic relationship. But this does not mean that the structures and forms of “nature” are unintelligible in their own order, or that they are “provisional” or “relative”⁴⁵; it means, rather, that the nature we are discussing in our natural law analysis will always be “concrete” nature, a nature whose structures and forms, as naturally knowable and intelligible as they are in their immanent ends and goods, are contained within the priority of the order of grace.

It is within this context that the natural law teaching on the procreative end of marriage and against contraception finds its absoluteness. Any attempt to locate the absoluteness of the natural law in a nature conceived of as possessing its own purely natural end will ultimately founder because the resulting “absoluteness” will be purely hypothetical and abstract. The natural law must be based on concrete nature, on nature as God really, actually created it. The natural law is absolute, first, because it is contained within man’s destiny in the Absolute.

⁴³De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 34.

⁴⁴Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 101.

⁴⁵Charles Curran serves as an interesting contrast to what I am saying here. Curran accuses *Humanae vitae* of having an “unnuanced view of the relationship between nature and grace.” Indeed, for him, the entire natural law would seem to be based on a faulty, or “incomplete,” understanding. This is because moral theology must make thematic the “fivefold Christian mysteries of creation, sin, incarnation, redemption and resurrection destiny” (*Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology* [Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1985], 6). Curran argues that the natural law approach of *Humanae vitae* is “incomplete” because it only takes into account “nature” and “incarnation,” that is to say, only two of the “fivefold Christian mysteries,” without properly taking into account sin, redemption and resurrection. Sin, Curran points out, has injured nature and therefore made clarity in reason and the natural law problematic in the concrete world. Because of the debilitating consequences of sin, Curran proposes a “theology of compromise” (Ibid., 123–124, 192–193.) Aside from the obvious pessimism about the efficacy of grace entailed in this “theology of compromise,” it may also be pointed out, as Janet Smith has done, that it is precisely this darkening effect of sin that necessitates the Church’s teaching, guided as it is by the Holy Spirit, in areas which are in principle knowable to all through the use of right reason (*Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, 172–73). For our purposes, however, it is important to note that for Curran “in the total Christian perspective there is a place for the ‘natural,’ but the natural remains provisional and relativized by the entire history of salvation” (Ibid., 122–23). Despite protestations to the contrary, Curran still seems to view the relationship between nature and grace in an extrinsic way. While seeing that the relationship between nature and grace is not simply additive, he assumes that this must mean that nature (and therefore the natural law) is incomplete (“provisional” and “relativized”). That is to say, Curran fails to see that the supernatural end already “contains” nature in its integrity. The point I am arguing here is that nature can be seen to gain its own genuine (if subordinate) priority and indeed “absoluteness” precisely because of the intrinsic (and paradoxical) relationship it bears to its supernatural destiny.

B. The Inseparability of the Unitive and Procreative Meanings. It is the very nature of love to be fecund, and it is the very nature of fecundity that its absolute source is never the creature itself.⁴⁶ Indeed, the most *fecund* human love is that of the consecrated—a love which is constituted by a total, bodily self-gift which is given *directly* to God in the form of consecrated virginity. Nevertheless, in a truly analogous way, marital love means the total self-giving of the spouses, in their one-flesh unity, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, to the Father. The “unitive” and “procreative” meanings of marital love possess an “inseparable connection” because, in giving themselves to each other, husband and wife are giving themselves fully to the Father, and in doing so, placing in the Father’s hands infinite possibilities to receive their self-gift and to return it as fruitfulness (of a simultaneously spiritual and bodily nature). We can begin to see the “infinite” quality of the fecundity contained potentially within every one-flesh union of husband and wife when we consider, for example, the infinite variety of missions and charisms, the infinite possibilities for the perfection of love, in short the infinite number of possible lives, that the openness to procreation sets before the Father. Each life, because it is personal, has infinite ramifications. The very term “procreation” of course indicates that husband and wife participate in (their *fiat* is *pro* [=for]) an act of God’s creation, since properly speaking only God can create. But this creative act is always in Christ and his Bride and is therefore within their *fiat* to the Father’s will. The union of husband and wife therefore carries *objectively* (ontologically), although not always subjectively, the form of this *fiat*,⁴⁷ this “perfectly open and boundless consent.”⁴⁸

It is important to note carefully what is being proposed here: to say that the one-flesh union of husband and wife possesses the “objective form” of Christ’s and the Church’s *fiat* is to say that this “form” does not depend solely on the subjective will of the spouses. It is the very nature of the conjugal act to bear “objectively” the form of a christological/ecclesiological *fiat*, and this is true precisely because the nature of this most intimate union of human persons is given to itself and receives its interior meaning and finality from within this *fiat*. In other words, even when husband and wife have not consciously or subjectively intended that their conjugal union constitute a type of *fiat*, so long as it remains open to life it retains objectively and structurally the form of a *fiat*. It is also important to note, however, that even though the union of husband and wife does not depend on their will or subjective *fiat* in order to retain its integrity as an objective *fiat*, the reverse is not true. In using contraceptives, husband and wife deprive their sexual act of its form as an

⁴⁶See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “A Word on *Humanae Vitae*,” in *New Elucidations*, trans. Sr. Mary T. Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 221–22.

⁴⁷For a sense of the conjugal act as a *fiat*, see *Casti connubii*, chap. 2, “Blessings and Benefits of Matrimony,” and *HV*, 10, 13.

⁴⁸Balthasar, *Love Alone*, 101.

objective *fiat*. Such a violation necessarily flows back into their subjective state; it necessarily determines the nature of their free act. It is simply a contradiction to say that husband and wife can exercise their freedom by intentionally doing something to deprive their union of its objective form as a *fiat* and that, at the same time, they have not set themselves in their free act, subjectively, against the objective meaning of *fiat* contained within that act.

Contraception carries the objective claim that husband and wife possess their marriage and their sexual union outside of their relationship with the Father, that the conjugal act is not one of fundamentally and objectively boundless consent. “Each and every marriage act” (*HV*, 11) must remain open to new life because no conjugal act may be “possessed” by the husband and wife as simply their own, as something which can be used or manipulated purely for their own “enrichment,” as outside the dialectic of *fiat* and *non serviam*. Self-gift can only occur in the form of “be it done to me according to thy word” (Lk 1:38). Anything else constitutes a retention of oneself. Without this objective *fiat*, husband and wife cannot truly be said to have given themselves at all, because they have held themselves back from the structural openness which constitutes the very meaning and character of marital union. What makes the conjugal act truly and fully unitive is that it constitutes a *fiat*, and a *fiat* by its very nature is an open and boundless consent. Fundamentally, it is this *fiat* which unites the spouses in God, “specifies” their call to make a fully personal and human self-gift, and directs them toward perfect love.

Perhaps I can conclude, therefore, with a final observation. An important and prominent role is given to the will and self-mastery, both in *Humanae vitae* and in the natural law arguments that have been put forward to defend and support the encyclical’s teaching. The forgoing suggests that this emphasis needs to be understood as subordinate to and indeed ordered by the prior and more fundamental anthropological truth disclosed within man’s supernatural finality. Because husband and wife do not retain the conjugal act simply as their own, extrinsic to their relationship to God, the role of the will and self-mastery can only be validated *within* the prior and foundational, objective structure of marriage as receptive, as bearing within itself the prior objective form of a *fiat*. Otherwise, creaturely activity is given priority over creaturely receptivity and *fiat*, and self-mastery risks becoming simply another form of self-determination and a false autonomy. As such it would violate the underlying christological form of nature and would resemble contraception more than an authentically Christian *fiat*.

Paradoxically, the perfection of love means that husband and wife must find self-mastery only in the reckless abandon of Christ’s love on the Cross. □