

FAMILY AND THE IDENTITY OF THE PERSON

• David S. Crawford •

“If personal identity is not simply reducible to familial relations, it nevertheless is substantially rooted in them. If we are to ‘see’ or to ‘know’ the new marriage and the new family, the fleshly one must make its contribution precisely in its visibility.”

1. *New problems*

In convoking the Second Vatican Council, John XXIII begins with an assessment of the Church’s situation in the modern world:

Today the Church is witnessing a crisis under way within society. While humanity is on the edge of a new era, tasks of immense gravity and amplitude await the Church, as in the most tragic periods of its history. It is a question in fact of bringing the modern world into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the gospel, a world which exalts itself with its conquests in the technical and scientific fields, but which brings also the consequences of a temporal order which some have wished to reorganize excluding God. This is why modern society is earmarked by a great material progress to which there is not a corresponding advance in the moral field.¹

¹*Humanae salutis* (25 December 1961), in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbott, S.J. (New York: Corpus Books, 1966), 703–09; 703. This article was

The document goes on to speak of a replacement of “values of the spirit” with “earthly pleasures” made possible by a modern technocratic culture. In particular, the opening paragraphs express grave concern for a “completely new and disconcerting fact: the existence of a militant atheism which is active on a world level.”² Striking here is the sense that modernity presents new problems for the Church and these new problems will require deep reflection on the part of her faithful.

Nevertheless, the document’s assessment is not entirely negative. The very bitter experiences of the first half of the twentieth century had spurred people to ponder the place of the human person in such a world. Such developments as the lost sense of reality’s depth and meaningfulness, the increasing influence of extreme political ideologies, the experience of the ultra-violent political regimes, the hopelessness hidden just behind the multiplication of pleasures, all initiated a counter desire for genuine reflection. In other words, if the council was born in a desire to engage the modern world, this desire was itself aware of and a response to the particular problems and dangers as well as the opportunities presented by modernity. The new problems and opportunities presented by modernity would require a fresh engagement. This theme runs throughout the council documents.

As the foregoing suggests, the problem of atheism was especially pressing. One might therefore have assumed that the central question to be addressed would have been “Who is God?” Posing the question in this way might have suggested that the point of contention between atheism and the faith was solely God’s existence and, therefore, that they could at least agree on the question of man. In reality, as the council fathers realized, it is equally a question of who and what man is. Indeed, for human beings, the two questions are inseparable. The question of the identity of man, the council recognized, is in its way the overrid-

originally offered as a paper at a conference commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the convocation of the council in *Humanae salutis*: “Keeping the World Awake to God’: The Challenge of Vatican II,” at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., 12–14 January 2012.

²Ibid., at 703–04.

ing question raised by modernity. And it is this question, the fathers also realized, that would require an engagement that would both draw on and be in full “continuity” with the whole of the tradition but would also avoid a simple reiteration of previous formulae.

Gaudium et spes is the center point of the council’s attempt to respond to these questions. It is therefore no accident that the paragraphs dealing explicitly with the problem of atheism (nos. 19–21) are immediately followed in paragraph 22 by the declaration that it is only in Christ that man can be fully understood. The very fact that the response to atheism is not given in the form of a simple condemnation—there are no *anathema sits*—but is rather given in the form of a statement about what Christians believe man to be, also indicates the awareness of the council fathers that at stake is not only a question of moral failings, wavering faith, or intellectual weakness. The questions raised by modernity must be engaged as real questions. As Karol Wojtyła put it in a 1978 article, the Church

has an obligation to the man of today, who in a way perhaps not perceptible to himself succumbs to alienation from his own humanity and, in the name of progress, becomes only the “economic man” or the “technical man,” to call to mind, humbly and firmly, the integral vision of man, through which, so to speak, Christ lives and dies: a vision in which man finds once more and confirms himself as “man the human—*homo humanus*.”³

The council fathers tell us that man is an unsolved puzzle to himself (GS, 21) but that in Christ man truly can know himself (GS, 22). Hence, the central mission of the council would seem to be to place man in Christ so that the former may take part as son in the Son in the latter’s unblemished response to the Father.

The word “identity” is given in the title for our panel. Most fundamentally the word, at least according to its cognate and root (*identitas*), emphasizes the idea of “sameness” or perhaps “self-sameness.” This fact points to the more popular and existential

³Karol Wojtyła, “The Anthropological Vision of *Humanæ Vitæ*,” trans. with introduction by William May, *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, vol. 7, no. 3 (2009): 735–36.

sense of “identity” as the self-awareness of the individual, ultimately signifying something like “who and what I really am.” To have an identity implies a kind of knowledge of oneself. According to this sense of the word, if *a*—or perhaps *the*—central question for the council fathers was *who* and *what* the human person *is*, it was precisely this focus on the question of the *identity* of the human person that gives the fundamental stamp to both John Paul II’s and Benedict XVI’s pontificates. John Paul II therefore famously tells us in his first encyclical—which is largely a declaration that the dominant theme of his pontificate will be the interpretation and reception of the council—that each person if he wishes to know himself can only do so in and through the love of Christ.⁴ Thus, it turns out, our human and personal “identities”—personal self-sameness—are always radically centered at once in themselves and in another.

During the half-century since the council, this question of who and what the person is has sharpened considerably. The issue is less often thematized in relation to promethean atheism—although, perhaps, a new and explicit type of atheism is gaining in both virulence and cultural traction—and more directly in relation to what John Paul II called the “debate concerning the *humanum*.”⁵ The question of who and what the human person is has become all the more pressing in the face of issues falling within certain areas of ethics, especially involving sexuality, biotechnology, the family, and marriage. What is at stake in these questions, however, is much more than arriving at correct moral conclusions, although of course doing so is important. The ethical discussion is in fact *inter alia* a cover for more fundamental questions, which are meta-ethical in nature. These deeper questions center on an increasingly fragmented view of the person. Like *Gaudium et spes*, both John Paul II and Benedict have indicated in their differing ways that this fragmentation comes with a forgetfulness of creatureliness, destiny, and being.

⁴*Redemptor hominis*, 10 (4 March 1979).

⁵John Paul II, “On the Occasion of the Opening of the Academic Year 1996-1997” (8 November 1996), *Nuntium* 1(1997): 15, cited in Angelo Scola, “The Nuptial Mystery at the Heart of the Church,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 25 (Winter 1998): 630–62; 633.

What about the other word in our title: “family”? How does the family relate to the question of the person and identity?

2. *From sacrament to contract*

A well-known history of marriage has characterized the movement from medieval Christendom to liberal modernity and post-modernity as that of a shift “from sacrament to contract.”⁶ Of course the phrase is a play on Henry Sumner Maine’s famous dictum that the movement of legal and social history is one “from *status* to contract.” Maine’s classic formulation has often been criticized. It constitutes, at the same time, almost a truism. Few would dispute that it captures something of the broad movement of Western societies from the pre-modern to the modern world. The play on Maine’s lapidary phrase seeks to tie this broad truth to developing conceptions of marriage during the same period. Part of the shift that characterizes modernity is the movement away from associating social, political, and legal status or identity with birth—that is to say, with the family. Such an association seems to us to represent a fundamental injustice. Thus part of the development of liberal modernity is toward a diminishment in the centrality of the family in social and political life.

Often it is said that the family is presupposed by the new liberal order, that it is necessary for the inculcation of the kind of moral fiber necessary to sustain a free society. But this claim fails to give an account of the inner logic of the emergent contractual model. Here, the idea is that social, political, and legal identity is held by the individual prior to or as distinct from the family. One enters marriage, for example, already possessing one’s personal identity separately from the marriage relationship. Parents therefore advise their children to delay marriage until they have established themselves economically, professionally, and socially. Even children’s sense of self-possession is in principle distinct from their familial position, as can be increasingly verified by reference to any

⁶John Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 12–13.

number of legal and social developments. This rootedness of identity in the individual abstracted from family is expressed in a famous locution of Justice Brennan of the United States Supreme Court, when he described marriage as simply “an association of two individuals.”⁷ The married relation or bond—and by implication the rest of the familial relations—possesses for Brennan little ontological weight. It is essentially a legal or moral category. Similarly, for example, John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* (1971), mentions the family only in passing as one of any number of pre-political associations.⁸

This emphasis on voluntariness tends to coincide or lead to a conception of the person as being free before being anything else, that is to say, as simply possessing himself at the most primitive level and in abstraction from and prior to any relation, or again, as having the relation to self (i.e., “identity,” self-sameness) simply prior to any other-directedness. Indeed, it is not only that the idea of family is changed; it is that the family presents a problem for the modern mind. It presents a problem precisely because it is inescapably an organic and bodily reality. It is manifestly a given entailing factors that precede and determine the person. It is therefore a primal threat to the ideal of being most primitively free.

3. *Gaudium et spes, family, and Christian identity*

Now the Gospel, and much in the tradition of the Church, ameliorates the rigidity that was part of the pre-modern tendency to identify person and family. It does so by deepening the question to an anthropological-metaphysical level and by contrasting the marriages and families of this age with a new marriage and a new family, born of the spirit and not of the flesh. This shift is of course both fundamental and important. Certainly the person is more than his or her familial relations. There is first the relation with God, and this radically precedes and transcends familial relations. The advent of consecrated virginity in the Gospel declares precisely this.

⁷*Eisenstadt v. Baird*, 405 U.S. 138 (1972).

⁸John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 525.

Indeed, the tradition has associated the sexual generation at the heart of marriage and the family with the passing of original sin. If the bodily fruitfulness of the Garden would have been mysteriously virginal, the postlapsarian and sexual family is marked by the specter of death.

Nevertheless, part of the Church's response to the cultural developments indicated a moment ago, as well as the issues that have flowed out of them, has been to emphasize the humanly fundamental character of the fleshly family. If personal identity is not simply reducible to familial relations, it nevertheless is substantially rooted in them. The principle of analogy, after all, suggests that both analogates must be preserved. Both have work to do. If we are to "see" or to "know" the new marriage and the new family, the fleshly one must make its contribution precisely in its visibility.

Now, if we take these developments seriously, they have entailed a deepening of the tradition regarding the place of the family. Indeed, this deepening is a response to the social and legal shift just mentioned. Now the "surface" factors of society and law always represent the deeper question of what we think the truth of things is. This principle holds even when society and law claim precisely not to touch on the deeper questions. If Maine's truism is pitched at the sociological and legal level, therefore, it is nevertheless a marker for a more profound anthropological shift. And it is the anthropological implications that motivate the Church's response.

This response has been developing at least over the last century. It can be seen in such documents as Leo XIII's *Arcanum divinae sapientiae* in 1880, Pius XI's *Casti connubii* in 1930, and the allocutions of Pius XII in the 1940s and 50s. However, it takes decisive form in *Gaudium et spes* and the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It is interesting, for example, to compare an early preparatory schema with the final teaching of the council fathers on marriage and family life's place within the Church. If the schema would have 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,"⁹

⁹"Reprobat etiam sententiam qua assertur matrimonium esse medium specificum attingendi perfectionem eam, qua revera ac proprie homo sit imago

Gaudium et spes tells us that through the sacrament of marriage “our Saviour, the spouse of the Church, now encounters Christian spouses” and “abides with them.”¹⁰ Married love is thus “caught up in divine love and is directed and enriched by the redemptive power of Christ and the salvific action of the Church.”¹¹ Indeed, Karol Wojtyła tells us that in *Gaudium et spes*,

we encounter the bold analogy by means of which the pastoral constitution seeks to respond to the whole tradition of theological anthropology that conceives man above all as made “in the image and likeness of God.” This image and likeness concern not only his spiritual nature, by means of which he is constituted a person in his individual unrepeatableness, but also the dimension of relation, that is the reference to another person inscribed within the interior structure of the person.¹²

In particular, this interior structure of reference to another, is manifested in the familial and marital relations, he tells us. Then a few years later, in *Familiaris consortio*, he says that “Christian revelation recognizes two specific ways of realizing the vocation of the human person, in its entirety, to love: marriage and virginity or celibacy. . . . Either 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.’”¹³

Here, it seems to me, is where we meet up again with our dual themes of “identity” and “family.” If the Savior encounters spouses through the sacrament of marriage, if conjugal love is taken up to share in Christ’s love, and if, as John Paul II says, all the familial loves are rooted in, take their form in, the love of the

Dei et Sanctissimae Trinitatis” (*De castitate, virginitate, matrimonio, familia* (Schema Propositum a Commissione Theologica, 5/7/62), *Pars Altera*, cap. 1, par. 16, in *Acta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II Apparando*, Series II (Praeparatoria) vol. 2, Pars 3, pp. 893–937; 910).

¹⁰*Gaudium et spes*, 48.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Wojtyła, “The Anthropological Vision of *Humanae Vitae*,” 738.

¹³*Familiaris consortio*, 11.

parents,¹⁴ then it would seem that married and family life takes a kind of theologically central position in understanding the person. In effect, then, if marriage and family are a way of being in the world, they are also a way of being in the Church. They are in other words both secular and ecclesial. But this can only mean that for the family members, their *Christian* identity—who and what they are before Christ and each other—is in a real way rooted in the family.

Important for our purposes, then, are the following points. First, Vatican II, especially in addressing the problem of atheism, brings attention to the crucial question of the identity of the person. Second, it focuses attention on the rootedness of the person in love. Finally, it brings these points to bear on the consideration of the family.

4. *The question of identity: who and what the person is*

Gaudium et spes' treatment of the family clearly has implications not only for the family's ecclesial status but for its significance simply as a fundamental human reality. As the council fathers put it, the family is a "school of deeper humanity."¹⁵ John Paul II draws out the implications of this teaching when he speaks for example of the body as a "primordial sacrament . . . , understood as a sign that efficaciously transmits in the visible world the invisible mystery hidden in God from eternity," that only the body makes visible what is invisible, that is to say, "the mystery of the Truth and Love, the mystery of divine life, in which man really participates." Or when he says, continuing, that "through his bodiliness, his masculinity and femininity, man becomes a visible sign of the economy of Truth and Love, which has its source in God himself and was revealed already in the mystery of creation."¹⁶

Notice the emphasis on "sacrament," or "sign," or "visibility." What is its significance? What I take to be the general thrust of

¹⁴Ibid., 18, 21.

¹⁵*Gaudium et spes*, 52.

¹⁶John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 203.

John Paul's thought, here, has been reaffirmed *mutatis mutandis* by Benedict. For example, the latter has lamented that the rejection of creatureliness has resulted in a loss of a sense of the body. This is a loss because, as he puts it, *the body tells us who we are and what we should do*.¹⁷

Of course, passages such as these focus on the idea of familial relations as a paradigm of love; these relations not only represent the freedom necessary for love (the individual family members are distinct and individual persons) but also the inescapable way in which the person's origin and destiny in love precedes and constitutes him. Indeed, this is why they constitute a crucial piece in understanding what a human being is.

Why "inescapable"? If the "visibility" of the person in the body is also a kind of knowledge of what it is to be a person, or *this* person, such knowledge is in some sense inescapable. Clearly this inescapability does not signify spontaneous recognition. If it did, then presumably many of the "new questions" would not have arisen in the first place. Rather the knowledge is "inescapable" in the sense that it is affirmed even in its outward denial or rejection.

For example, even within, say, a homosexual inclination the desire itself depends on and implies the sexualized body, which in itself is only sexualized qua differentiation into male and female. The reality of this differentiation is inescapable; hence the knowledge of being situated within the polarity itself is also inescapable. Sexual acts of whatever kind in fact rely on this sexualized body for their very possibility. But the body is only sexualized qua male and female, and maleness and femaleness depend on their correlation to each other. Even acts, say, between two men imply the possibility of the woman. Similarly, even actions and techniques that seek to bypass the generativity of the polarity—such as cloning—are parasitic on its generative power and by that very fact presuppose it. They presuppose a kind of self-knowledge that includes the primacy of natural generativity. The fragmentation is only possible because

¹⁷Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Difficulties Confronting the Faith in Europe Today," *L'Osservatore Romano* (24 July 1989) (emphases added); see the reprint in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2011).

of the whole. Hence, the inherently familial is necessarily presupposed even in contrary choices and predispositions.

5. Practical reason

What does this “knowledge” mean in relation to the “new questions” mentioned above? As I mentioned, the meta-ethical considerations laid down in the wake of Vatican II imply, it seems to me, a rethinking of ethical starting points. Again, *Gaudium et spes* deepens the sense in which personal identity may be considered familial by rooting the meaning of the person in love. It is the very fleshliness, the embodied and visible character of the familial relations. This visibility is apparent every time we see ourselves in our children or (more shockingly) our parents in the mirror. Visibility is related to the idea of disclosure. John Paul II tells us that the body discloses the person as made for love, because only the body is visible, and the body expresses the person. The body is an expression of form—if we want to know what we are we can, in a real sense, look in the mirror. But the body also discloses the person. Other people know me because I am visible. But what I want to point out is that the body discloses us not only to others, but also to ourselves. The body discloses identity.

Let’s step back for a moment to look at the broader context of these claims. In assessing the state of Catholic ethics, particularly in neo-scholasticism and the manuals prior to Vatican II, certain thinkers have rightly objected to what has been called a “dualistic fallacy.”¹⁸ According to this fallacy, the body is seen as possessing a normative content, placed there by God, to which the acting subject should be obedient. The subject’s freedom therefore confronts the normative content of the body as an external legal standard. Sin would be reducible only to juridical guilt. Unfortunately, this framework would seem to subject human freedom to sub-personal

¹⁸Martin Rhonheimer, “The Cognitive Structure of the Natural Law and the Truth of Subjectivity,” in *The Perspective of the Acting Person: Essays in the Renewal of Thomistic Moral Philosophy* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 158–94; 159.

functions and natural patterns. Moreover, it would fail to capture the fragmentation of the moral subject in his evil acts.

The rejection of this neo-scholastic approach has been manifold and strident. The contagion that spread throughout Catholic moral theology following Vatican II, and especially following the shock to the modern mind represented in the promulgation of *Humanae vitae*, was in part motivated by the “physicalism” or “biologism” represented by this view. Naturally, the counter-revolutionaries in Catholic moral theology responded by arguing that the neo-scholastic view represented a decadent phase, that the authentic tradition’s understanding of practical reason begins with its unique starting point in inclination for goods or the good. There can be no real quarrel with this basic response. It has typically entailed resituating ethical thought or practical reason back in inclination. Practical reason, then, is primarily reason operating within the dynamism of inclination for goods or the good. This approach has the virtue of treating the body itself as part of moral subjectivity, because it is “behind,” as it were, the moral subject’s reason in the form of inclinations that move that reason to goods.

However, little has been offered that takes up in any sustained way the line of thought represented in John Paul II’s and Benedict XVI’s interpretation and reception of Vatican II.

My question is whether the “new questions,” where the *humanum* itself is at stake in an increasing technological fragmentation that always begins by treating the body as only a mechanism, does not raise the stakes a bit. One explanation for the developments in the doctrine concerning family and identity mentioned earlier is that they were simply necessary to move to a new idiom familiar to moderns. This understanding would suggest that nothing new was really being said, that there was, in fact, no real development of doctrine in what *Gaudium et spes*, John Paul II and Benedict XVI have said. This would mean, in other words, that the new questions were not in fact all that new.

If we take seriously the ideas of the sacramental character of created reality, that is to say, the idea of the symbolic or the visible, then it seems to me that we will also have to see these as having implications for practical and not just speculative reason. If they are confined to the speculative, then they will always end up entering

the ethical debate too late. The body will already have been reduced to what is effectively pre-moral matter, to be given form by reason. This is true even when the body is seen as a source of appetite. What John Paul II and, in his own way, Benedict XVI would seem to be calling for is the body as a source of self-knowledge—if I can put it that way—not only as a source of appetite but also as a source of moral self-consciousness, of a knowledge of form and personal relation. In a sense, then, the body does project something like normative content.

Does this simply bring us back to the “dualistic fallacy”? Unlike the neo-scholastic approach, the body is not here tacitly conceived as a repository of norms standing over-and-against a moral subject. Balthasar famously speaks of the mother’s gaze and the awakening of the infant to himself and the goodness of being.¹⁹ If we are awakened to ourselves in the gaze of another, then “identity,” knowledge of “self-sameness” is always self-sameness with or in another. The body offers an understanding of who and what I am in relation to another person who draws this understanding out of me. This means that this primitive knowledge of the moral actor is only possible through the awareness of one’s embodied presence to other people. This means that I am visible to myself, as it were, in my visibility to others.

This originally practical knowledge does not mean that I am simply confronted by a body, but rather that I know myself through my visible body. Hence the body is really not an external limit or law imposed on us by sub-personal and material reality. Rather, the body’s very physicality is a symbolic expression of the person, his origin and destiny, and the objective meaning of his deepest longing. Hence, the body figures in practical reason as more than simply a source of inclination. The subject is present to himself precisely as embodied—but the body understood as a symbolic expression of the whole, the person, in his very visibility.

This expression of who and what I am is made most manifest in the body’s familial composition, which would seem to be the primordial expression of this visibility of the moral actor to himself. In its very familial constitution, the body points to origins

¹⁹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991).

and destiny more primitive than the family itself. If our bodies indicate who and what we are, then this who and what we are precedes any act of choice on our part. Rather, this “identity” shapes freedom, which in turn both depends on and actualizes it.

The perspective adopted here is neither that of classical eudaimonism nor that of modern anti-eudaimonism; it is neither simply a virtue-based theory nor simply an obligation-centered one, although it implies the integration of both these. Rather, it represents the perspective John Paul II said was fundamental in the first chapter of *Veritatis splendor*, when he stated that “*The moral life presents itself as the response* due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man” (10). In this sense, it correlates well with the Ignatian (and Balthasarian) principle that “man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God, and so to save his soul.” It is this destiny—and the blessedness that accompanies it—that is inscribed in the body, with its familial structure, as the visible symbol of the moral subject.

6. Practical reason and culture

Maine’s formula indicates a cultural conception of the person. Thinkers as diverse as Aristotle and Kant have placed practical reason at the foundation of conceiving society and, therefore, culture. John Paul II once said that “[d]ifferent cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence.” A given culture, he continued, may be characterized by the position it takes with respect to “the fundamental events of life,” the most significant of which are certainly birth and death.²⁰ But if *Gaudium et spes* is right to call the family a “school of deeper humanity,” then these “events” are at the center of its curriculum. The family is a school of deeper humanity because it is a school of love. It is only as a school of love that it can be a school of birth and death. If it fails as a school of love, then what it teaches can only be a dark inversion of the meaning of these primal events. Yet, it is precisely these fundamental human realities that are

²⁰*Centesimus annus*, 24 (1993).

made more or less unintelligible by the anthropological displacement of the family as fundamental to personal identity.

By way of conclusion, we can say something about these fundamental events in relation to identity. Clearly the fact of birth—both being born and giving birth—does not fit comfortably with the notion of personal identity as rooted most primitively in the individual's act of choice, the source of identity posited in Maine's "contractual" model for modern culture. The visible expression of the parents in their bodies—their knowledge of each other and their self-knowledge in relation to each other—already bespeaks the fruitfulness proper to their love. It bespeaks the fact that this fruitfulness both requires and precedes their freedom. Their bodies and the implicit fruitfulness of their sexuality are given them prior to any possible act of their freedom, but at the same time the consummation of their love requires freedom's "yes." In being a child, and more concretely in seeing the visible signs of being the child of *this* mother and *this* father, the child's knowledge of himself—his "identity"—is simultaneously a knowledge that his origin is embedded more deeply in reality than any act of his parents' will. The parents did not give themselves their own bodies. Their bodies represent what stands behind them and shapes their freedom. The parents' "yes" simply consents to this deeper origin.

Something similar may be said of the parents' knowledge of themselves in their visibility before each other and of the correlative knowledge of the fruitfulness implicit in their love. Again, this knowledge tells them that the potential fruitfulness inscribed in their bodily correspondence cannot be something they give themselves. It cannot be something they possess. But only something they consent to in their consent to loving each other. One day they will see themselves and each other in the child they conceive. This fact only confirms the rootedness of their love and its fruit in a deeper reality. The family truly is, then, a "school of deeper humanity," because it is a school of birth.

And yet the body's meaning as fruitful is often reduced by cultural and technological developments to a merely evolutionary/biological artifact. As such, this sub-personal part of existence is thought to be open for technical manipulation without affecting the personal domain of freedom. Perhaps the most notable manifestation of this fact can be seen in the advent of "reproductive

technologies,” where the idea of conception and birth are viewed in terms of choice presiding over a set of biological processes. Indeed, it is often said that children born through these technologies are in fact conceived in greater love than children who are the result of natural relations, because the former are conceived through a conscious and mature choice. The implication is that “natural relations” are only part of the mindless processes of the material universe, of *res extensa*, except of course to the extent that they too are viewed entirely in terms of choice (a choice to utilize these processes for a human good).

But this is to misconceive both the meaning of birth and of love. *In principle* the act that causes conception by technical means could occur without there ever having been any sort of bodily communion of the spouses or even without the spouses’ gametic contribution. Hence, the relation between love and the act of choice to have a child is motivational and moral, rather than ontological. The bodily relations of the parents are therefore merely accidental rather than inherent in the conception of the child. This last point is crucial. The child can no longer understand him- or herself as being already implicit in the parents’ bodily composition and the love proper to it, prior to any act of choice on the parents’ part. Rather, the parents and the child must see the child’s origin as the act of choice initiating technical means, rather than in the consent to the fruit already implicit in their acts of love. The conception of the child, then, is radically the result of an act of choice rather than the fruit of love. Hence, the act is restructured on the model of *poiesis* as opposed to the *praxis* of fruitful love.²¹

The symbolic meaning of such a “making” then is that the child does not have a deeper origin than the parents’ freedom, or that, to the extent it is acknowledged that there is such a deeper origin, it amounts to a denial that that deeper origin stands in relation to the child in any way differently from any other sorts of production that begin with materials given in the physical order.

²¹Robert Spaemann, “Genetic Manipulation of Human Nature in the Context of Human Personality,” in *Human Genome, Human Person, and the Society of the Future: Proceedings of the Fourth Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life*, ed. Juan de Dios Vial Correa and Elio Sgreccia (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), 340–50; 342.

That the fruit is at a radical level something the parents give themselves in an act of choice insinuates that the child is subordinated to that choice, that the child is radically a product of the parents' freedom. This is why *Donum vitae* suggests that artificial means of reproduction treat the child as property. Such means generate a fissure in the body's visible signification that the child's origin is both "earlier" and "greater" than the parents' freedom.

Just as the family is a school of birth, so too is it a school of death. As already mentioned, death has always been associated with the family and in particular sexual generation. This would seem to be simply a negative judgment about sexuality and its relation to the Fall. In fact, however, this binding together of the family, life in its sources, and death cannot be understood only as a negative judgment, but must also be understood as the basis for a profound generosity. The family, with its structure of generations, places one clearly within the cycle of life and death. To see our children born, just as to see our parents die, helps us along as we make our own way toward death. At the heart of the family therefore lies both love and tragedy. The parents know all too well that the family they nurtured and gave their lives for will soon enough be scattered. This too is a kind of death. In gradually receding into the background, the parents not only learn the lessons of dying but also, in making space for the flowering of their children's mature gifts, they teach those lessons.

Again, the modern displacement of the family in relation to human identity betrays us. The anthropology implicit in the contractual model, in its displacement of the family as fundamental to identity, in its abstraction of the person from the familial relations and their messages of birth and death, also projects a false ideal of deathlessness. Modern political theory begins precisely in the fear of death and the primitive desire to avoid it above all else. Likewise, as Leon Kass has pointed out, the Baconian shift of reason toward technical production is radically an effort to stymie death.²² In the end, all that can be done is to try to take hold of and control the inevitable. The result is that death becomes the subject of

²²Leon Kass, "L'Chaim and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?" in *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002): 257–74; 261.

individual—and because individual, ultimately competing—rights, as expressed, for example in the right to die movement.

But these developments all have the effect of obscuring death's lessons. As Robert Spaemann puts it:

There is a paradox in the thought of death. If life is tantamount to some form of activity, then death is, by contrast, pure passivity, the “night, in which no one can work” (Jn 9:4). But since we are aware of death and can suffer death in a conscious anticipation, we are able to transform the pure suffering into an *actus humanus*. Accepting death is *the* ultimate *actus humanus*, because it can no longer be understood in terms of merely vital needs. The human being is that being which, unlike all other living beings, does not merely try to escape death until the last moment, only to perish nevertheless, but that being which truly is capable of its death.²³

Like birth, death can only be received and accepted. But it is the body that speaks to us of death, and it does so precisely in what it tells us in relation to our parents and our children, that is to say, the generations. □

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²³“Death—Suicide—Euthanasia,” in *The Dignity of the Dying Person: Proceedings of the Fifth Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life (Vatican City, 24–27 February 1999)*, ed. Juan de Dios Vial Correa and Elio Sgreccia (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 123–31; 124.