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Fertility Awareness and Sexuality

William E. May

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Information on natural family planning aids persons who wish to learn about themselves and their sexuality so that they will be able both to exercise their procreative potential in a morally responsible way and to deepen and nourish their conjugal love. It would be a serious error to consider the art of natural family planning as a mere technological tool that persons can use to enjoy sex without the fear of pregnancy. If natural family planning were to become a regimen for planned *unparenthood* or if the knowledge that it provides were to be welcomed simply as a means of facilitating sexual union and of avoiding pregnancy (for both the married and the unmarried), this would be a terrible human tragedy. To spell out all the reasons why I believe that the foregoing judgment is true would require much more time than is available here. Thus in what follows I simply wish to offer some considerations about the significance of fertility awareness which may be supportive of the judgment just offered.

From the time he reaches puberty until death (or perhaps until disabled by certain kinds of illnesses), the human male is, whether he knows it or not, fertile. This is not true of the human female, who is fertile for only a short period each month from the time she reaches puberty until menopause. These facts are humanly significant. They show us that there are two different manifestations or epiphanies of the human person, the being made in the image of God. These two expressions or epiphanies are the male and the female. Although the facts in question are biological in character, it would be a serious error to regard them as "merely" biological. Our bodies are not tools that "we," who are other than our bodies, use; rather we are personally

embodied beings and our bodies are personally and integrally ours. Thus bodily differences are personal differences; a male is a different person from the female. In short, the human species is sexually differentiated into male and female persons, beings equal in their nature and dignity but different and complementary in their sexuality and personhood.

Just what does it mean to be fertile? It means that one has the power of initiating new human life. This power of the human person is a sexual power, for we possess it by virtue of being sexual beings; and it is a personal power, not a mere biological function. The Christian sees it as a God-given gift enabling the human person to participate in God's creative power to bring new beings into existence. It is for this reason that we can truthfully speak of human fertility as a procreative power, as the procreative dimension of human sexuality. Fertility, moreover, or this awesome power of the human person, is not a curse or a disease; rather it is a blessing, a divine gift. Here, I believe, the words of Shakespeare's *King Lear* are significant and revealing. The ingratitude of his daughter Goneril so enrages Lear that in the white heat of anger he pronounces the ultimate curse upon her:

Hear, nature, hear, dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful:
Into her womb convey sterility:
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her!

There is something quite remarkable about this sexual power of the human person. If a person chooses to exercise it, he or she can do so only with the help of another human person of the opposite sex: he or she cannot exercise this power in isolation. The choice to exercise this power thus of necessity establishes a relationship between one human person, a male, and another human person, a female. Thus the choice to exercise one's procreative power (one's fertility) simultaneously brings into exercise another sexual power of the human person, the power sexually to enter into union with a person of the opposite sex. This human, personal, sexual power is rightly called the unitive dimension of human sexuality or what can also be termed its love-giving power. Human sexuality is, therefore, both procreative or life-giving and unitive or love-giving.

These two sexual powers of the human person, the procreative and the unitive, are inherently interrelated; they are meant to go together. In saying this I do not, of course, mean to say that every time a man and a woman unite sexually they ought to exercise their procreative powers — that every time they give love to one another they ought also to give life to a new human being. But in saying this I do mean to

say just that — namely, that the human powers to give love and to give life are inherently, or by their very nature, interrelated. The link between the unitive and the procreative dimensions or powers of human sexuality is not a mere accident of evolution but is something of critical human significance.

Powers Are a Dimension of Being

These powers are, of course, united in the person whose powers they are. They are a dimension or aspect of his or her being, of his or her sexuality. They are defining characteristics of the person, male or female. In addition, in giving themselves to one another in the coital embrace, a male and a female are giving themselves to one another as sexual beings who are capable of giving love and giving life in sexual union.

There is, in addition, something crucial to the meaning of human existence in the fact that a man and a woman can, in one and the same act, both give themselves to one another in such a way that they become “one flesh” and enter into an intimate communion and at the same time communicate life to a new human person, a new image or “word” of God. Their power to give themselves away sexually in an act of love participates in their power to give life, reaching beyond them to generate a new human being, a person like themselves, a being as irreplaceably precious and priceless as themselves, a being for whom God gave Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. At the same time, their power to give life inwardly participates in their power to communicate love. A meaning of transcendent value and importance for human existence is here disclosed.

The generation of new human life is not like the manufacturing of a table or a car, for a human person is not a product inferior to its producers and subordinate in value to them. Rather a human person is a being equal in nature and dignity to all other human persons, including his or her parents. Human persons are, as it were, uncreated “words” spoken by God Himself — they are the created words that His Uncreated Word became. Thus human persons, like the Uncreated Word of the Father, are to be “begotten, not made,” and they are to be begotten, as the Uncreated Word was begotten, in an act of love. In short, the generation of a new human life is not to be an act of “reproduction” but rather one of “procreation.”

The infant human person, furthermore, is the most vulnerable and helpless of animals. It needs a home where it can take root and grow and develop the capacities that it has by virtue of being what it is, namely a human being and person. This means that it needs a life-giving love, for this kind of a love alone can provide the soil and nurture which can enable it to flourish. The best way to provide infant

human persons with the love they need and to which, as persons made in God's image and destined for life with Him they have a right, is to see to it that they are begotten in acts which by their very nature and inner dynamism are intended to express a special kind of love, conjugal or marital, between the male and female persons who, in those very same acts, give life to new human persons.

This shows us why the unitive or love-giving and procreative or life-giving powers of our sexuality are meant to go together. Our power to unite, in an intimacy of love, with a person of the opposite sex and to share life with that person provides the only meaningfully human context for choosing to exercise our sexual power to give life to a new human person — to exercise our fertility. In turn, our sexual power to procreate a child in love with the collaboration of a person of the opposite sex gives a new and deeper meaning to our sexual power to unite in love with a person of the opposite sex, for it shows that their mutual love for each other, a love properly termed conjugal or marital, is a love that is meant to expand and reach out to others and is not meant to lock them in an *egoisme a deux*. The child whom their mutual love is capable of generating is a living sign of the depth of their love and shows that, like everything truly good, it is a life-giving and life-serving love.

From this we can see that it would be inhuman, morally reprehensible, for one human person to choose to exercise his or her procreative power (his or her fertility) with a person of the opposite sex unless he or she were willing to share life and love with that person and with any child who might come into being in and through their act of love. In other words, only a man and a woman who have given themselves to each other in the covenant of marriage can humanly, rightly, choose to exercise their power of procreation. To choose to exercise this power with any other person is to do an injustice both to that person and to any child who might be begotten.

Exercising Powers of Love, Procreation

Can one rightfully choose to exercise his or her sexual power of giving love (its unitive dimension) with a person with whom one would not choose to exercise his or her power of procreation, either within marriage or outside of marriage? I believe that one ought not choose to do this, and again there are many reasons for this belief, some of them rooted in a consideration of the full meaning of the human sexual power to give life, its unitive dimension. But the reason that I want to pursue here is intimately related to the question of fertility awareness, of our awareness of the fact that our sexuality is procreative in nature.

As noted previously, the male human person is continuously fertile. *He* simply cannot choose to exercise his sexual power of giving love

without at the very same time choosing to exercise his sexual power of giving life. He may not intend that the act he chooses be procreative and indeed he may fervently hope that it will not be, but no matter what his intent or hopes, his choice to exercise his sexual power of giving love by necessity brings into exercise his sexual power of giving life. In him the sexual powers of giving life and of giving love (the procreative and the unitive dimensions of his genital sexuality) are by nature inseparable. Thus the act that he chooses will be, so far as *he* knows, procreative at least in potential and hence an *injustice* both to the woman who may become pregnant as a result of his choice and to any child who might be conceived, *unless* he knows that the woman with whom he chooses to exercise his sexual power of giving love is infertile or *unless* either he or she chooses to sterilize this act of sexual union by contraceptive means.

I believe that it would be wrong for either the male or the female to choose to sterilize their act of sexual union by contraceptive means. To explain fully why would take us too far afield, but briefly put, I believe that it would be wrong for them to choose to do this because by choosing to do so they are saying, in effect, that they regard their awesome power of procreation, their fertility, not as a blessing but a curse: they are rejecting a dimension of their being, their personhood, and are, in fact, refusing to share this dimension of their personal being with each other in an act that is meant to be an expression of their unconditional gift of themselves to one another. This, I submit, would be making their act of giving themselves to one another in sexual union a lie, insofar as they would both be giving themselves away and holding back a dimension of their personal being.

Here I would like to note that in speaking of contraception it is necessary to become specific and discuss precise ways of making sexual union contraceptive. No one can engage in contraceptive intercourse simply by taking thought; one has to do something to one's person. Take first the "pill" and the IUDs. It is now known that the pills currently on the market in the United States achieve their goal by (a) sterilizing the woman by inhibiting ovulation, (b) rendering the woman's mucus hostile to sperm, so that sperm are killed and cannot fertilize in the event that ovulation still occurs, and (c) rendering the uterine wall hostile to the reception of a developing human entity. Thus the "pill" is perhaps an abortifacient rather than a contraceptive. The IUDs are in all likelihood abortifacients. Thus the choice to use them entails a willingness to abort a living human entity. In addition, the "pill" and IUDs pose serious risks to the health and well-being of the woman who uses them. The male, of course, is exposed to no risks, for he will not get pregnant, nor will he suffer from blood clots, nausea, bleeding, a perforated uterus, etc., through the use of pills and IUDs for contraceptive purposes. But can one rightly ask whether a

man who truly loves a woman is expressing love for her in letting her use such devices? Precisely what does he love, the woman or the pleasure she gives him? This is a most serious question.

Foams, jellies, diaphragms, condoms and the like are the other and true contraceptive techniques. Their use is difficult to reconcile with deep, conjugal love. When one wants to caress someone tenderly, does one put gloves on? Yet this seems to be what is entailed in the use of a condom. Contraceptives thus seem to attack the unitive or love-giving dimension of sexuality as well as the procreative dimension.

Because of our awareness that the woman is not fertile all of the time but only for a relatively short period each month, it is possible to choose to unite sexually but non-procreatively when there is a serious obligation to avoid a pregnancy. There is nothing wrong for married persons to do this in order to meet their responsibilities as parents, whether actual or potential. In choosing to do this they are not of necessity acting *anti*-procreatively, *contra*-ceptively. They are not, in effect, saying that they despise their fertility and regard it as a curse, not a blessing. Rather they can be saying that they do honor their fertility, that they regard it with awe, as the God-given gift that it is, and they choose to refrain from sexual union when the choice to engage in it would mean the irresponsible exercise of their fertility.

But if married persons were to use fertility awareness simply as a way to avoid pregnancies, regarding the time when they must forego the great good of the marital embrace as a drudge, a burden, and viewing pregnancy as a disease that must be avoided at all costs, they would be acting *anti*-procreatively and not merely non-procreatively. Were fertility awareness to be used in this way, this would manifest a contraceptive, anti-fertility, anti-procreative, anti-child mentality. It would be a debasing of fertility awareness.

Power to Give Life

Fertility awareness — our realization that we possess as sexual beings the awesome power to give life — ought to lead to an appreciation and a love for that power, for the God by Whom it is given and in Whose image we are created, and for the new human person, the new living "word" of God to whom life can be given by its exercise. Fertility awareness, in short, ought to be pro-procreative not anti-procreative, and it ought to give us a deeper insight into the beauty and the truth disclosed in the fact that our sexuality is integrally and inherently both unitive or love-giving and procreative or life-giving.

Fertility awareness, moreover, since it reminds us of the differences between male and female, ought to make us think more deeply of the kind of love that is meant to be expressed in coital union, namely marital or conjugal love. This is a love between equals, for both male

and female are equally precious, equal in dignity and sanctity because each is a living word of God, although they differ, and differ significantly, in their sexuality, in their sexual personhood. Fertility awareness, *as a way of being procreative responsibly*, requires both the male and the female — and particularly the male — to think about the other and his or her needs. It demands that they know one another, that they be patient with one another, that they respect one another and realize that “there is a time for embracing, and a time not to embrace.”

In this way fertility awareness can be a means of fostering what the Second Vatican Council called a noble and authentic form of human love — the love between a man and a woman joined in the covenant of marriage — a love that is meant to participate inwardly in the love that God has for His people and Christ has for the Church, a love that is ready to be self-sacrificing when this is necessary to serve the needs of the other. Fertility awareness can enable husband and wife to realize that their love for each other is meant to be for life, that it is to grow and deepen. It can help them understand that marital intercourse, while a beautiful and authentic expression of marital love, is by no means exhaustive of that love or, in fact, its deepest expression. While good, it may at times have to be foregone and during those times husband and wife are still summoned to love each other. Fertility awareness can help them to discover countless new ways of expressing their love for each other, sexual yet nongenital, and in helping them to do this it can lead them into a closer union with the loving God Who has blessed them with their sexuality and fertility.
