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Keynote Address — Natural Family Planning Convention at Seton Hall, June, 1987

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Time magazine, in a recent editorial,¹ examines the Constitution as a living document. The Constitution's framers, in other words, wrote so clearly and compellingly because they knew the person who would reside within its structure and ideals. The framers also knew philosophy, politics and history. Thus the Constitution turned out to be a document of balance, prophecy and weakness. It needed a Bill of Rights and several amendments to supply what was lacking, especially if it was to speak for all persons. More amendments might still be necessary.

The Vatican "Instruction on Procreation"² is in some ways similar. It seeks to address particular persons in a specific time and place. In other words, it knows who may reside in its structure and ideas. It knows for whom and about whom it speaks. There is more work to be done, no doubt, in this field, but the Instruction demonstrates the extent of Church teaching and the Christian impulse to care for and respect all persons, especially those weak, in need, without representation. Human life at the beginning and the means of procreation are the primary concerns of the Instruction, and the foundations for its ethical evaluations and principles.

This article will seek to emphasize and clarify three of the principles in the Instruction. Not every one of its points will be examined. Rather this article will draw out the basic impulse of the Instruction and address some of its key themes.

The document is an Instruction. It is a serious articulation of a believing community's moral commitment in the realm of human sexuality and procreation. At least by implication, there is much here about Christian

marriage, family life and social teaching. Any further dialog with science or society must take into account and draw from this critical core of Catholic understanding.

It is not always easy for contemporary society to hear Catholic moral teaching. Joan Frawley noted in the *Wall Street Journal* (4/7/87): "Our society's inclination toward ethical relativism virtually guarantees the unpopularity of Catholic doctrine." This is a moment, however, when the realities of surrogate motherhood and technological skill have brought many people to the point of welcoming — or at least considering — the Vatican guidelines.

It is observed that the spectacular progress of the modern world might also be its worst curse. Unchecked technology or unreasoned therapy in areas so profound as marriage, sexuality and procreation indeed threaten not only the notion of progress, but the very identity and welfare of the human person it purports to serve. Cardinal Bernardin spoke of this when he said:

The work of our minds and our hands is not something unto itself. Rather it is a participation in a power and purpose greater than any one of us and therefore is accountable to that same divine plan or purpose. For that reason all that the human mind or the scientific method is capable of doing is not necessarily worth doing. In fact it may be something that should not be done.³

The Church is not against progress. It does call for accountability in all spheres of life in order to uphold the values proposed by reason and fostered by the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Church's word here is offered because she herself is accountable in her teachers and in her members. That alone makes the Instruction worthwhile.

Moral theology has a special interest in the subjects treated in the Instruction. This is first of all because of the technical debates surrounding questions related to procreation. The moral beliefs and commitments of the document are clearly outlined and provide significant food for thought as well as debate. But moral theology is short-sighted if the technical is its only interest. In fact, moral debates might be better handled — and perhaps with less acrimony — if basic principles were adequately presented. This article will focus on three fundamental principles that should be highlighted in the technical deliberations. With these moral insights there may come a more profound insight into the Instruction and its specific technical conclusions.

- I. Person and Personal Vocation
- II. The Dignity of Newly Begotten Life
- III. Marriage and Procreation: Rights from the Beginning

I. Person and Personal Vocation

"The dignity of human life." "The dignity of the human person." The Catholic tradition has been clear and insistent on human dignity, particularly in this century. A bold social ethic has been born out of the

Catholic Church's effort to protect and articulate the integral development of the human person. This effort does not arise from an undue preoccupation with sexual morality or an unwarranted aversion to science, medicine or technology. It emanates from a deep-rooted conviction about the human person, which science, the State and society must respect: the individual person, singular and unrepeatable, must be acknowledged as inviolable with regard to fundamental rights, and responsible with regard to essential duties and relationships.

Catholic teaching has provided the foundation for the most profound insights pertaining to the truth of the human person. This teaching is at once personal and social. Ethical principles in medicine and sexuality are intimately bound to social teaching. Moreover, the anthropology at work in questions of procreation is the anthropology at work in demands for more equitable distribution of wealth and access to political participation. It is the spectrum of Catholic teaching, then, that is under examination when there is discussion about marriage, sexuality and procreation. It is important to note this unity in the various sectors of Catholic teaching to avoid inconsistency between social goals and sexual ideals, for example, and to provide an adequate basis for evaluating principles applied in a variety of situations. John XXIII emphasized this inherent strength of the Catholic tradition and gave it new momentum when he wrote:

The cardinal point of this teaching is that individual men are necessarily the foundation, cause and end of all social institutions. We are referring to human beings insofar as they are social by nature, and raised to an order of existence that transcends and subdues nature. Beginning with this very basic principle whereby the dignity of the human person is affirmed and defended, Holy Church . . . has arrived at clear social teachings whereby the mutual relationships of men are ordered.⁴

When artificial insemination is criticized for disassociating the "two meanings of the conjugal act", there come into play immediate concerns about the structure of family life and possible social interference in the procreative process.

Catholic teaching holds the person in an exalted position as the "center and crown" of creation, made "to the image of God".⁵ The second Vatican Council insists on human dignity by linking it to the vocation that is each person. The inseparable bond between dignity and vocation is sometimes lost in English translation, "vocation" being rendered, for example, as "destiny." It is the particular, singular calling from the Creator which demands the recognition of the worth and future of human persons. Faith sees these realities in terms of divine purpose, a unique intentionality whereby God's grace invites each created person to salvation. Vatican II states clearly: "For faith throws a new light on everything (and) manifests God's design for man's total vocation and thus directs the mind to solutions that are fully human."⁶ There is no mistake about the divine purpose. Paragraph 22 of the same document notes that the "ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine"

The dynamism of divine vocation demands respect for the means which persons choose to bring about new human lives, since a new individual, a new call from God, will spring from the spousal responses to their own marital vocation. Parents as procreators are never functionally isolated from their identity as lovers. Their vocation includes recognizing God's purposes, being "cooperators with and interpreters" of His love.⁷ The vocation which is each person offers a compelling rationale for a more profound appreciation of the particular purpose of each human life and the significance of human procreation.

Such insights are deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Psalm 8 places the human person at the summit of God's creation, where human beings are exalted as "little less than a god . . . crowned . . . with glory and splendor".⁸ The psalm effectively warns, however, against overestimating our success. It is God's glory which is revealed in human dignity and dominion, contradicting any thought of persons as options or accidents. There is a frailty, even an insignificance, in the honest acceptance of our status as "children" and "babes" out of whom God has fashioned praise. Psalm 8 asks the question, "What is man?" The answer directs any investigation of the meaning of human life and procreation. The human person is the image of God possessed of incomparable worth and dignity. The human person is also, in responsibility and dominion over creation, utterly dependent on the gracious care of the Creator. Who are we that God should be mindful of us, to paraphrase the psalm? The very question testifies to the serious concern for the means of procreating life, the event wherein new persons are respected, welcomed, cared for, and educated in responding to their vocations.

Human procreation is not simply a process; much less can it ever become a scientific or political industry. An experience of great freedom and an occasion of unparalleled duty, it is a moment of mystery, posing the question of human identity, demanding the legitimate ordering of our place in His creation. All ethical questions must be evaluated accordingly. The Instruction and "Gaudium et Spes" highlight the need to appreciate the divine plan and to recognize that ". . . all are called . . . to one and the same goal, namely, God Himself".⁹ It is, after all, not a matter of science, technology, politics or medicine, but a question of vocation, and therefore accountability, which is at stake.

II. The Dignity of Newly Begotten Life

Reverence for the human person has traditionally been linked to the moment of conception. Arguments persist about the accuracy of such a designation. Might it be appropriate, for example, to declare personhood at a later point? And if so, what is to be the measure of "the human person"? It would be unrealistic to move to a point prior to conception for "personal reverence" since the sperm and egg do not bear in themselves new persons. The latter emerge from the union of both. Moving the point

of reverence for personal life beyond conception requires proof which cannot be obtained once the event of conception is understood. Scientific analysis realizes empirically what many philosophers, moralists and parents have long held: that conception inaugurates a new, individual life.

This is not simply a biological fact. It is more than a biological assertion. The conceptus is, in reality, a being destined to occupy a particular place in God's creation. A personal vocation is now at stake. While biology is a significant category for appreciating this reality, called an embryo, the identity of the embryo itself is not exhausted by biological description. The genetic package referred to when sperm and egg unite to form 46 chromosomes is not a fully developed person, but the "package" serves to highlight the complex individuality coming into existence. And such a unique, singular reality can only be treated with the respect and reverence accorded human persons. Not to do so would be to ignore arbitrarily the scientific and religious truth unfolding at conception.

It is only in this century that science has been able to verify that the fusion of sperm and egg initiates life. What we have learned has shown the complexity of activity begun at conception. This relatively new knowledge should caution against presuming that our present knowledge is all there is to know about the beginning of life. Science seems, in other words, to favor an earlier rather than a later date for establishing the critical moment of new life. That alone may be reason enough to avoid a later, more arbitrary designation about life's beginnings and the respect to be accorded embryonic or fetal life. Designating the zygote or the union of two sex cells as worthy of being considered as "person" is significant in a climate ready to experiment on early life or overlook human worth in the fetus.

The Instruction makes it clear that medical diagnosis, particularly with regard to the embryo or fetus, cannot presume abortion as a remedy or expose mother or fetus to unjustified risks. Medical and therapeutic interventions may be necessary for the pre-born or the mother; such interventions must acknowledge the human status of the embryo or fetus, and accord them the full range of personal respect.

Debate Does Not End

This conclusion does not end the debate on the precise beginning of personhood or when the soul enters the body. But it does recognize that science, technology and medicine are not more secure than philosophers and moralists in determining when personal life begins. While at times biological life is critical of defining the status of persons, e.g., when an individual's brain ceases to function, it must be contextualized within the total meaning of life itself, i.e., the meaning given to it out of our beliefs and commitments.

The embryo so respected cannot be regarded as an object to be handled capriciously. It cannot, in other words, be treated without regard for its own particular worth, identity and vocation. (These concepts of

themselves may explain why the document shies away from using the term “status” in reference to the embryo. It could foster “objectification” of this pre-born life.) Explicitly stated is the rule to be followed in questions of therapeutic procedures: treat the embryo as a child would be treated. Parental consent is required, and the therapy in question must be directed toward healing without undue harm to the individual or his life.

In the cases of research and experimentation, the document clearly upholds the personal worth of the embryo or fetus by stating the normal canons of medical practice: do no harm and acquire consent. Any research procedure which in method or effect is unduly harmful to fetus or mother is unwarranted. Secondly, parents must give informed consent to any such procedure. Research is defined separately from experimentation as a process of observation or verification based on previous observation.

Living embryos may, under certain limited conditions, be the subjects of experimentation, defined as any research where embryo, fetus, child or adult becomes the object or means of verifying the effect of a particular procedure. Whereas adults, for example, may submit to clinical experimentation for the benefit of society, the embryo or fetus has no opportunity to engage freely in such activity. Nor can the parents speak as surrogates in this instance. To do so would be to presume a freedom which parents do not have over the life of the embryo or child. The only valid reason for experimentation is a therapeutic one. Experimental therapy may be applied, keeping in mind the canons of avoiding harm and acquiring consent, only in situations of “last resort”, where no other treatments are available. Certainly to be ruled out is the notion of keeping embryos alive for the sake of experimentation. The seriousness of the Instruction’s call to human respect for the pre-born is evident in its call to regard the dead embryo or fetus with the same respect accorded any individual. At no time can early human life be treated as less than personal.

Dignity and Rights Upheld

The question is asked about the status of the “in vitro” embryo, at times even the status of the child brought about through scientific intervention. The personalist basis of Catholic thought unfailingly upholds the dignity and rights of those brought into being “in vitro”, and sees them as living gifts of God. The dignity and rights at stake must be stressed especially when “in vitro” fertilization is seen as producing biological or experimental material, at once available and expendable. To envision the embryo in such a fashion is to overlook the inherent worth of another life and to misunderstand the prerogatives of medicine or science. The latter can never act “in loco Dei”, as if medical knowledge or technological expertise bestows a competence to decide on the life of another, indeed of his or her entire destiny.

Can life be brought into being, in other words, if it is not offered the means necessary for its integral development? Called into question, but

not treated at length in the document, is the issue of parenthood. Who is the parent, and what is the true function of parenthood when "spare embryos" are utilized for specific scientific or personal purposes and not nurtured to life? The document makes it clear that it is not opposed in an "a priori" way to science, medicine or technology, but that these fields cannot take advantage of the early stages of personal life by usurping power not rightfully theirs, or overlooking the personal worth and dignity of the pre-born.

The beginning of individual human life must be situated within the conjugal union of husband and wife. This is not a religious urging or pious counsel. It is a concrete recognition of the right of a human being to come to be from the love of human parents expressed physically, emotionally and spiritually. The embryo *can* be produced "in vitro"; however, it has the *right to be conceived and born* in the unique setting of the marital bond where the parents provide for and respect its life from the start. To expose the embryo to the possibility of threat, interference or risk is to overlook its equal personal worth. The Instruction distinguishes itself by speaking of rights with reference to the newly conceived. Such language demands the recognition of the question behind the issue: in an age of individual rights and personal freedom, why is there reluctance to envision the embryo, even the newly conceived, as worthy of personal respect? While compassion for human suffering and idealism in science and medicine may account for some current practices and attitudes, there may be, in addition, an unwillingness to acknowledge duties and limitations. There are duties as well as limitations in human knowledge and within the sphere of procreation. A reconsideration of both is required if the climate which controls conception and accepts abortion is to offer a credible welcome to those chosen to live when so many of their peers are not chosen to succeed.

III. Marriage and Procreation: Rights from the Beginning

Traditional Catholic moral theology has been accused of preoccupation with the biological or physical aspects of human procreation. As a result there has been, especially in this century, an effort to recognize and emphasize its unitive or covenant dimensions. "Gaudium et Spes" notes:

Thus a man and a woman, who by the marriage covenant of conjugal love are 'no longer two, but one flesh' (Mt. 19,16), render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions. Through this union they experience the meaning of their oneness and attain to it with growing perfection day by day.¹⁰

Thus marriage is not divided into primary and secondary ends. It is a bond that finds expression in life beyond itself, beyond the individual persons joined in that bond.

John Paul II noted in an audience on Jan. 9, 1980:

Genesis 2:24 speaks of the finality of man's masculinity and femininity, in the life of the spouses — parents. Uniting with each other so closely as to become 'one

flesh', they will subject, in a way, their humanity to the blessing of fertility, namely, 'procreation', of which the first narrative speaks (Gen. 1:28). Man comes 'into being' with consciousness of this finality of his own masculinity-femininity, that is, of his own sexuality.¹¹

These teachings on sexuality are essential for safeguarding the identity of human persons, the significance of sexuality and marriage, and the vocation inherent in each individual as man or woman. Without these there is a danger of overcoming past preoccupation with procreation by an exclusive emphasis on the personal bond of love. Procreation then becomes secondary to the primary end of unitive love. When this happens there is an isolation and a devaluation of human sexuality. Procreation becomes a functional mode of expression devoid of its essentially personal character.

The human act of procreation is not simply biological, nor does it exhaust the meaning of personal sexuality. What may have happened, however, is that for a variety of reasons — societal, technical or scientific — the procreative act, which should always be by definition a unitive act, may have lost some of its meaning. In a sense, it may have become desacralized. What makes human procreation distinctive and sacred is its insistence that new life — a new, individual, human life — is more than the "sum of the procreative partners". The unitive and procreative are inseparably — even if mysteriously — linked in the bond of husband and wife, although the actors are two separate subjects. The sacred nature of such mystery emanates from the dignity of man and woman who, as free individuals, realize the meaning of their deepest identity as husband and wife in a single act. John Paul again states:

In Gen. 4:1, becoming 'one flesh,' the man and woman experience in a particular way the meaning of their body. Together they become, in this way, almost the one subject of that act and that experience, while remaining, in this unity, two really different subjects.¹²

Human procreation is not simply the byproduct of unitive love, or an arbitrary element within the marital bond. It is the unique expression of two individuals manifesting radical and reciprocal self-donation. Such mutuality embraces the spouses' limitations as well as the unlimited promise and risk of life and love larger than their embrace.

Procreative Over Unitive Love

Catholic teaching in the past held for a priority of procreative over unitive love. The act of procreation frequently dominated all discussion of marriage and sexuality. Coming to grips with the Instruction and other church documents since Vatican II requires not the reversal of priorities, of unitive over procreative, but the profound vision of a single reality: a love that joins man and woman together in that reciprocal bond from which springs a "third person . . . in whom both of them, man and woman, again recognize themselves, their humanity, their living image."¹³ Here the

marital act is neither idolized nor idealized. It is taken as the truest statement of human relationships, as a word that is spoken and not disowned.

The inseparable reality of unitive-procreative love embodied in the conjugal bond is the foundation for the Instruction's teaching about marriage. Procedures or interventions in the procreative process are not evaluated in themselves, their purposes or results. They are evaluated morally from the vantage point of the marital vocation, the dynamic of conjugal love and the dignity of persons involved in and emanating from this love. Reason and faith provide guidance and motivation in offering the child to be born the full range of human care in its most profound sense from the beginning.

The Instruction boldly acknowledges the rights of the pre-born, namely, to be conceived, carried in the womb, brought into the world and brought up within marriage (II, A, 1). In these rights is a recognition of the child's vocation, the parents' identity and the stability of society. Procreation is a setting, as well as a moment of spousal intimacy and self-expression. It is, as such, the only context worthy of speaking the word of a new life. In particular, the Instruction warns against practices which involve the sperm or egg of a third party or a situation of maternal surrogacy. Each instance violates the meaning of personal dignity and overlooks the essential, objective characteristics of marriage and family life.

A more painful question is raised in the case of a couple unable to have children. Might not there be some legitimate recourse to artificial intervention in the context of a marriage bond seriously desirous of a child? The answer to this difficult dilemma must be found in the meaning of the human person as body and spirit.

Body is Vehicle for Soul's Expression

The body is not distinct from the soul. It is, as it were, the vehicle for the soul's expression, the means of manifesting one's commitments and deepest freedom. The Instruction emphasizes the reality of the human body without absolutizing it. Perhaps its views find sympathy with the observation of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (speaking of the spread of hatred in the West):

This deliberately nurtured hatred then spreads to all that is alive, to life itself, to the world with its colors, sizes and shapes, to the human body. The embittered art of the twentieth century is perishing as a result of this ugly hate, for art is fruitless without love. In the East art has collapsed because it has been knocked down and trampled upon, but in the West the fall has been voluntary, a decline into a contrived and pretentious quest where the artist, instead of attempting to revise the divine plan, tries to put himself in the place of God.¹⁴

The body is symbolic of the deepest meaning of the individual. What has happened to the body in art may be a reflection of what may become of the individual — body and soul — in society. The human body is revered

because of the human spirit, and because of it may never be misused. In the case of marriage, the spouses unite bodily to speak a word that is greater than their love, a word that will acquire its own ability to speak. Only in the bodily union expressing the spiritual and corporal dimensions of human love does the new child find adequate regard for his dignity and destiny. The procreative act cannot be replicated in or substituted by scientific intervention. Both the meaning of the act, its very identity, and consequently the dignity of the child to be born, are diminished by external procedures. This area, perhaps more than any other, gives the reader of the Instruction pause. The words of the document indicate the need for compassion and a ministry of science as well as pastoral care which must be extended to those suffering from infertility.

The problem of embryo wastage further calls into question the reasonableness of some “in vitro” practices. Extra or spare embryos produced to be frozen or discarded manifest in the extreme the unraveling of conjugal dignity. The Instruction looks to the embryo itself, even in the case where abuses are eliminated. Human persons have the right to be brought into being and sustained by parental, rather than technological solicitude. Only the former provides the personal environment where the child is fully vested with human rights and dignity, and is protected from being compromised or objectified even by the desire to have a child. While the Instruction acknowledges the reduced “ethical negativity” (II, B, 5) in interventions involving only spouses as opposed to “third party” cases, it can only maintain and urge greater effort at recognizing the unique, radically personal identity of human procreation as the unique setting for newly begotten life.

Specific concerns are raised in the Instruction precisely because they fail to coincide with its understanding of marriage and procreation. In a sense, the document places the burden of proof on demonstrating the legitimacy of particular procedures. This moral reasoning is significant. While earlier church teaching is recalled, the Instruction is not mere repetition. Rather it articulates an anthropology of human persons as the starting point for ethical discussion. Any actions or procedures, e.g., artificial insemination using the husband’s sperm, must be seen from the vantage point of the identity of person and the meaning of human sexuality. This not an “act-centered” morality, but a prophetic insight challenging the reader to grasp the significance of human behavior and specific human activity. The foundation of such teaching includes a personalist view of the human body, an affirmation of human dignity at all stages of life, and an emphasis on the profound reality of marriage including its social implications.

Conclusion

The human person properly considered is the centerpiece of the Instruction — both the human persons that come to be and those who choose to generate them. This centrality of the person includes, but does

not absolutize the human body, the very basis of identity and participation in human life. The human person as body and spirit is charged with pursuing the goods of human life with care and responsibility, especially when new members are brought into our midst.

The Instruction asks us not to sever the bond between procreating new life and that unique moment of personal intimacy which makes human life so distinctive. Life born of human lovemaking is not better life. But its "makers" demonstrate a dependence on the source of life, and mark the newly begotten with the ineradicable character of an identity inseparable from the name and the promise of human love.

William Barrett, in *Death of the Soul*, reflects on the last 200 years of Western philosophy. In wondering about the effects of the computer on modern life, he pleads for a recognition of the full meaning of life and persons. His reflections coincide with the essential insights of the Vatican's Instruction:

The dreamers of the computer insist that we shall someday be able to build a machine that can take over all the operations of the human mind, and so in effect replace the human person. After all, why not? There should be no 'mystic' obstacle that should impede the progress of our technology. But in the course of these visions they forget the very plain fact of the human body and its presence in and through consciousness. If that eventual machine were ever to be realized, it would be a curiously disembodied kind of consciousness, for it would be without the sensitivity, intuitions, and pathos of our human flesh and blood. And without those qualities we are less than wise, certainly less than human.¹⁵

The secret of human life has already been revealed in Christ. It is no longer mystery to be solved, but mystery to be lived. Vatican II was clear and challenging:

By suffering for us He not only provided us with an example for our imitation. He blazed a trail, and if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on new meaning.¹⁶

The Instruction draws out some of that meaning.

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