

NEW QUESTIONS OLD ANSWERS

CATHOLIC MORALS AND
NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING



Eamonn Clark, STL

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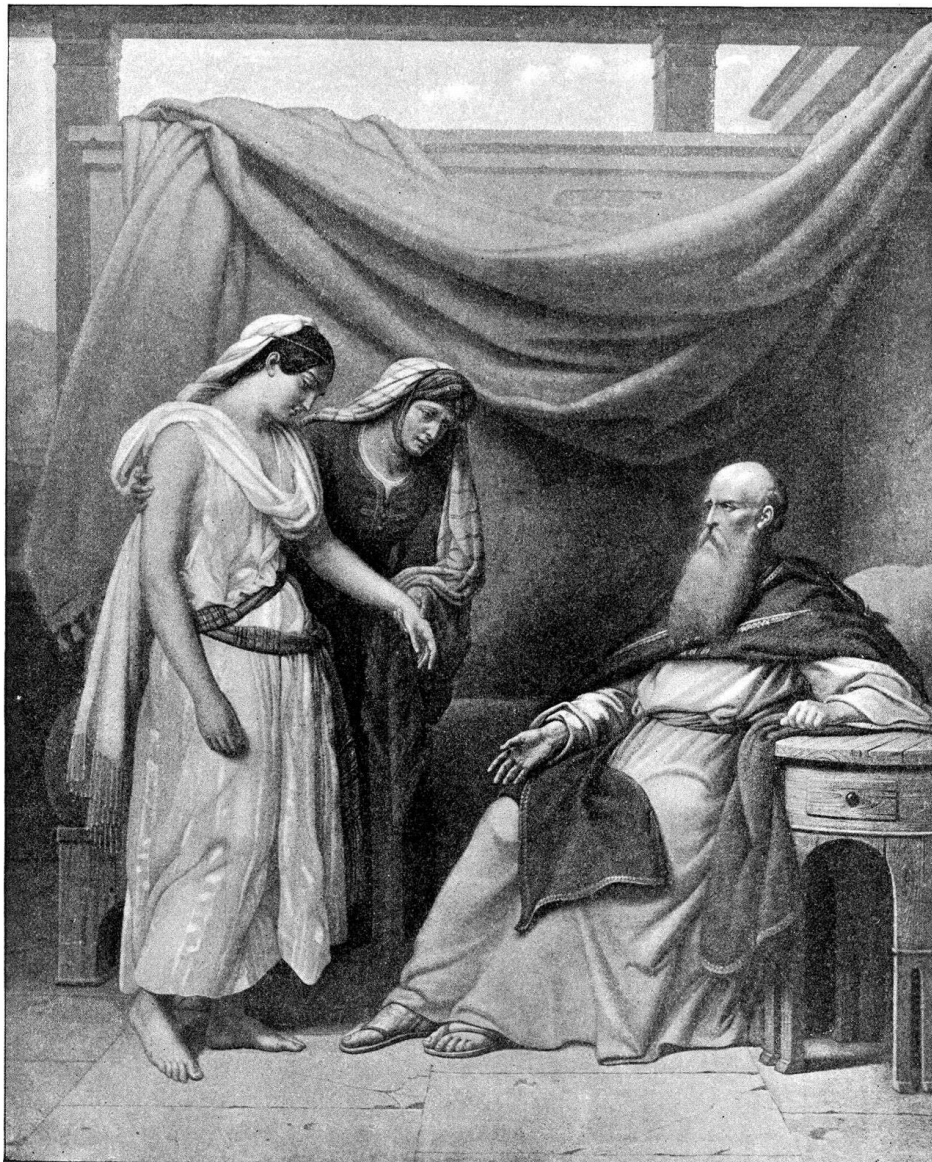


Image: *Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar* (1897), unknown artist

***“But let him say, I indeed am not better than Abraham, but
the chastity of the unmarried is better than the chastity of marriage;
whereof Abraham had one in use, both in habit.”***

-St. Augustine-

On the Good of Marriage, 27 (trans. C. L. Cornish, 1887)

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PREFACE

There is no shortage of interest in 6th Commandment studies today, albeit those who do take up the task involve themselves in various risks. First, they risk teaching error about points of great moral weight with grave spiritual consequences. Second, they risk occasioning sin by frequently dwelling on items that easily lead to unchastity and drawing others to do the same. Third, they risk being labeled and derided in various ways and criticized without mercy for laxity or rigorism, even simultaneously. It is a task that few people are able to undertake wisely.

Mindful of all these considerations, relying on the help of God, this author has chosen to take the risk.

Another risk, already overcome, is to be convinced that with respect to true moral questions related to chastity there is already a binding consensus on all points of interest, that there is little left to say, and that anyone generally renowned for learning and orthodoxy – or even someone who simply has a big platform or a reputation as a “chastity guru” – surely has the right answer about “what the Church teaches” on the little that seems controversial. These opinions are foolish. Charismatic speakers with dramatic life stories that are closely related to the practice of chastity have their place, and that place is rhetoric; it is the keynote speech at the youth conference, the podcast interview, the “witness talk.”

Trusting someone like this to be a guide through the thornier questions related to marriage ethics is a bit like trusting an actor who survived a bad car accident because they were texting or drinking to give you advice on spark plug upgrades for your engine block – it makes no sense, as it does not correspond to their expertise, even though they know very well the importance of driving safely and can convey this better than almost anyone. Instead, even though it is more boring, if you want expert advice on spark plugs you should go to a mechanic.

I came into the study of the 6th Commandment somewhat by chance. It has never figured very large in my formal academic study at any point in my career. Rather, when choosing a theme for a paper I would write and present at a conference at my university in Rome (the Angelicum), I decided to investigate what St. Thomas Aquinas would think about “NFP.” (This explains some of the structure of the present text; were I to begin again from nothing, probably I would not begin Chapter One the way I do, for example.) After receiving high praise and much interest from peers on this topic subsequent to the presentation of the original paper, I endeavored to dig more deeply into the subject and found an entire world of complex questions and puzzles, many as yet unsolved. Given the great import of sexual ethics, it amazed me that there could be such disagreement among the classical authorities on so much related to chastity, and it dawned on me at some point that there had been very little serious extended moral examination of NFP in part due to the fact that there was no true scientific consensus about the mechanics of female fertility until the mid-1800’s. This text is the first attempt at such an examination in some time, perhaps since Dr. N. Orville Griesse’s very helpful and interesting text printed in 1944, *The Rhythm in Marriage and Christian Morality*.

Griesse’s text is a good guide through the early academic history of the question of NFP (then called by other names), such as the teaching of Cardinal Gousset, Fr. Lavaud, O.P., Fr. Salsman, S.J., and some of the major moralists of the time (especially Vermeersch and Merkelbach). He lays out a very rigorous position of his own, which largely tracks the teaching which will be presented here, though the book has its lacunae; these include a failure to engage seriously with the teaching of St. Thomas and St. Alphonsus on the use of conjugal acts, little

discussion of the complexity of the controversy around Innocent XI's doctrine, and a seeming lack of awareness of the 1932 responsum of the Sacred Penitentiary. The suspicion of motivations for couples who wish to use NFP – and in particular, the way clergy ought to treat the topic in counseling the faithful – is perhaps slightly too severe, and is at least unworkable today. However, I strongly recommend those especially interested in the pastoral work related to NFP to read his considerations with open minds.

The hope for this book is not only to begin (or restart) a serious conversation about the morality of NFP but also to inaugurate a renewal of the study of sexual ethics more generally. Deeper study in the controversy around Innocent XI's condemnation of *solam voluptatem* would be particularly helpful, as would be a full translation and reprinting of Sánchez's magnum opus on marriage. Studies in Gratian and the treatment of marriage in early to late medieval canon law would also potentially be fruitful – I decided to remove from the text the little content on this that I had written, as this dimension of the discussion deserves a kind of treatment which I cannot at this time undertake properly.

In my research I came upon some rather obscure authors with helpful opinions somewhat by chance – much more swimming in the ocean of older manuals is warranted. There are doubtless many more treasures to find in long forgotten ships, sunk in the deep waters of centuries past.

The reader is asked to consider the arguments carefully and with the understanding that much more could and should be said. This is only the beginning of the work. The author is aware of the immense interest in this topic and no doubt the immense attention which this text will receive, and he apologizes in advance for the errors which he has no doubt made and for his lack of clarity in exposition in his sincere effort to understand and to promote the fullness of chastity among married couples.

I wish to thank my professors and all the friends with whom I have had conversations about the content of this book over the past few years and who have been encouraging in its writing and the broader project to which it is attached. Particular mention must be made of Christian B. Wagner, Thomas Mirus, Michael DeMarco, and Louis Knuffke. I also thank Anne Stephens for her assistance in transcribing and translating the text from Fr. Steinhuber which I cite and will publicly present in some time in connection with this work.

I have provided this material free of charge, for those who cannot afford to pay. I humbly ask those who can manage it to make a donation by scanning the QR code or following the link found in the frontmatter and backmatter of the text. Even if you ultimately do not find my arguments convincing, hopefully you can appreciate that you have been provided with what will certainly become the text of reference for the serious moral discussion on NFP moving forward through the dedication and risk of a mere Roman doctoral student with meager temporal resources.

-Eamonn Clark, STL
Albano Laziale, Rome, Italy
July 17, 2025

INTRODUCTION

Setting the Scene

Think of a typical adolescent boy. He is just discovering things which have been well-known to others for a long time, unaware of how such things have been seen throughout history; he is experiencing a sort of freedom which was not previously available to him, and he longs for more; he is trying to fit in and be “trendy” according to the present cultural norms; he thinks himself to be misunderstood by his parents, whom he does not think to have very much wisdom at all compared to himself, which is obviously untrue, despite his good intentions and sincerity. He often thinks his parents are being “harsh” and “old fashioned”; he doesn’t really understand some of the more sophisticated language that his elders use or references they make to people and events, while his own vocabulary is full of neologisms and warped usages of older words, and his discourse in general is limited to simple topics and is sloppy when it isn’t. His attention is taken by celebrity gurus. He has a lot of energy, enthusiasm, and zeal for life, but he has few tools with which to solve serious problems and so often has to try to invent things on the fly – only when a true crisis occurs does he ask his parents for help, often without much thanks, and then he returns to his supposedly independent lifestyle. He is proud to have the last name that he has, and he does really love his family and will definitely stick up for his mother, but his filial piety is not always so evident, except maybe with a favorite uncle. However, it is true that his adolescence is different than it was for his parents, and he faces unique circumstances and problems which are largely unknown and sometimes inconceivable to his elders. New technology and social realities are a fact of his young life that were not for the generations preceding him. He is not interested in many of the same things which the older folks are, and this is his right insofar as taste admits of no disputation. However, he can be quick to call their tastes “lame” or “boring.” He doesn’t necessarily mean to be disrespectful, but it can seem that way sometimes; he is certainly unaware of the significance which those tastes have in the memory of those from earlier generations – how they acquired them, under what circumstances, and how they have shaped their lives. He does not realize that their tastes are, in some way, objectively better as well, having been acquired after much experience and cultivation.

This image gives one a decent picture of Catholic sexual ethics in the past 60 or so years, especially as presented in much of the popular literature. While there are exceptions to this rule, and rarely does one author exhibit all or even most of the negative characteristics just listed, the overall sense one gets when surveying the popular and even plenty of scholarly literature on Catholic sexual ethics is that, beyond reiterating a few completely uncontroversial or definitive positions on the major topics, the literature is a bit lost in itself. By this I mean that it infrequently grounds itself in the major extra-Scriptural sources of the theological tradition prior to the 1960’s or so except to make a passing mention of *Casti Connubii* or *Arcanum*, and it does not even seem aware that there is much to find before then. In a way, one might say that *Humanae Vitae* and *The Theology of the Body* have been to Catholic sexual ethics what Descartes or Kant were to Western philosophy: a turning point which people struggle to see beyond into the past, which make it so that everything must be reimagined and begun anew from the point of view contained therein – whether in agreement with the doctrines or not.

Perhaps all of this is somewhat of an exaggeration, but it is nevertheless quite evident that there is a great need for an authentic renewal in Catholic sexual ethics today. This book is a small step in that direction, and it focuses on only one of several topics which need a serious

reappraisal in light of the wisdom of the Doctors and great manualists, especially St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Alphonsus Liguori, and Tomás Sánchez, SJ. So many authors do not even seem to be aware of what sorts of questions ought to be asked, let alone how to give the correct answers. What is more, some authors presume to give moral advice on less-than-clear issues without any serious education in moral theology, which is unwise both on the part of the authors and on the part of the readers who heed their uninformed (and usually seriously lax) advice. This problem is quite common in the contemporary popular literature.

Some of the issues within the world of Catholic sexual ethics today seem to stem from a decontextualized reading of St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. What is able to be loosely categorized as "personalist" sexual ethics generally takes its cue from the phenomenological aspect of John Paul's teaching without serious advertence to the Thomistic foundations of his anthropological and ethical assumptions. This leads to a fixation on experiences and psychology, without much grounding for true moral judgments other than average subjective tastes coupled with some kind of fittingness. For example, one might consider the question, "Why should one not fornicate?" The "personalist" sort of answer might be: "Because marriage is an external sign of spiritual unity which is contradicted by the dishonesty of extramarital sexual encounters, and the bonding which accompanies sex cries out for a partnership which endures." The better answer: "Because a child conceived will in principle lack a mother and father committed to each other for life, which is uncharitable towards the child as it is so risky to his welfare, and if contraception is used then the sexual faculty is perverted by essentially subverting its proper intentionality, thus undermining God's design for the propagation of the human race, which is even more uncharitable and is so directly against God as Creator."

The late Pontiff's work on marriage and sexuality was in fact deeply informed by the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas in particular, and it is therefore a grave mistake to see the two authors as alternatives to each other.¹ There are rhetorical advantages to John Paul's treatment of marriage and sexuality, but jettisoning "hardline" virtue ethics and the casuistry which evolved to draw definite conclusions on particular points of conscience is not only unnecessary but undermines the integrity and value of the Pope's entire project.

Another cause, perhaps the central occasion of the derailment of the traditional casuistic treatment of chastity, is the death of traditional courtship and the rise of dating. This seems to have occurred somewhat in conjunction with the advent of the car – suddenly it was no longer necessary to restrict one's marriage prospects to one's immediate vicinity where both families could and would be deeply involved in searching out the fittingness of a potential marriage. One didn't need to plan travel by train either, leaving and arriving at precise places at scheduled times, though the rise of the railroad in the 1800's began the erosion. From the 1920's onward in the West, young men and women could go around quite easily by themselves and be far from home – anonymous. Then the expectation that one would build a family in one's hometown began to fade as well; travel is easy enough, good opportunities could be far away... so be it. While the families of young men and women grew less relevant in their judgment of a partner, their emotions grew more relevant, and marriage slowly became more about one's own personal existential fulfillment and less about fulfilling a public role in the community. With this new kind of relationship came several questions; there came especially an immediate need for precision on questions about remote expressions of affection – of the "how far can we go" variety – which had been treated by earlier authorities in a way that seemed to take for granted

¹ See Fr. Thomas Petri, OP, *Aquinas and the Theology of the Body: The Thomistic Foundations of John Paul II's Anthropology*, CUA Press, 2016.

the non-existence of a body of social expectations which would force one to navigate this minefield so deeply.² Gone was the safety of the courtship paradigm, where a “couple” would hardly ever be alone together except by conscious deviance, deliberate disobedience, or by chance in the street – it eventually became normal and finally expected to spend long evenings together without supervision. From here we begin to see things unravel after World War II with the pill (1960), removing a major biological inconvenience to the working woman’s playtime – habitual fertility. Once this line was crossed, it was only a matter of time before the indissolubility of marriage became illusory; after all, if sex was not for producing children to such an extent that women can even disrupt the entire ovarian-uterine system’s well-functioning to maintain a career while “having fun,” why would marriage need to be forever? No-fault divorce came down the line quickly enough (1969 in California), followed shortly thereafter by movement towards abortion in the form of “privacy” in view of Sartrean self-determination, at least in the USA (1973). With the Supreme Court declaring that human nature did not exist,³ marriage was more than merely faltering as a coherent institution, evidently detached from conception and subject rather to the whim and pleasure of the man and woman who themselves allegedly do not have an inherent human nature. Therefore, it made no sense that a man would need to marry a woman and vice-versa. Once “same-sex marriage” became a widespread phenomenon (2004-2015 in the USA), it was not a large leap to accept that biological sex is actually ephemeral and can and should be changed to match one’s interior feelings about how one wants to be perceived and interact with others; or else, perhaps biological sex is not even real at all.

The most cursory study of attitudes and opinions of marriage throughout history and across cultures reveals that Westerners of the 21st century have an extraordinary fixation on romance. However, it must be noted that even St. Pius V was eager to point out that one of the principal motives for marrying is in fact the companionship contained therein: “We have now to explain why man and woman should be joined in marriage. First of all, nature itself by an instinct implanted in both sexes impels them to such companionship, and this is further encouraged by the hope of mutual assistance in bearing more easily the discomforts of life and the infirmities of old age.”⁴ By God’s design, men and women tend to enjoy being around each other in an exclusive relationship to help one another through their difficulties. While not a promotion or endorsement of *marrying for* “romance” or for “love,” we see that the saintly and ascetic Pontiff knew in the 1500’s that boys like girls and girls like boys, and he thought that this was a good thing. He continues: “If to these [aforementioned motives] we add other causes which induce to contract marriage, and, in choosing a wife, to prefer one person to another, such as the desire of leaving an heir, wealth, beauty, illustrious descent, congeniality of disposition, such motives, because not inconsistent with the holiness of marriage, are not to be condemned.”⁵ Later in the same chapter, however, he cautions against marriages driven by youthful desire: “But above all, lest young persons, whose period of life is marked by extreme indiscretion, should be deceived by a merely nominal marriage and foolishly rush into sinful love unions, the pastor cannot too frequently remind them that there can be no true and valid marriage unless it be

² This book will not address the topic of “remote signs of affection.” It is simply noted in passing as a topic that deserves a serious treatment.

³ See the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973) authored by Justice Blackmun.

⁴ *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests* (“The Roman Catechism”), promulgated by order of Pope St. Pius V (1566), translated by Fr. John McHugh, OP and Fr. Charles Callan, OP (1923), 16th edition (1962), p. 343-344.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 344-345.

contracted in the presence of the parish priest, or of some other priest commissioned by him, or by the Ordinary, and that of a certain number of witnesses.”⁶

Yet there is much to condemn in prevalent attitudes toward marriage today. In much of the United States, as elsewhere in the West, the average couple showing up for marriage preparation at their local parish is almost entirely unchurched, has little to no understanding of the Faith or commitment to practice it, is “living together,” and is using contraception of some sort (and perhaps practicing other unnatural vices) with no intention to stop doing so once married. Marriage for such people is seen more as being a rite of passage rather than as a fundamental change in the way they live their lives that brings distinct rights and obligations. Thus, the focus of such couples is so frequently on “the wedding” rather than on “the marriage.” Soon enough, the focus will be on the divorce proceedings and who gets to “keep the kids.”

This is the current state of things. Where we might go is a worthy topic of conversation but is not the conversation here, which is moral-ethical analysis rather than cultural-sociological speculation. My guess, however, is that the widespread use of “AI girlfriends,” including “deepfakes,”⁷ and perhaps a marked increased acceptance of polyamory are the next steps.

The moral literature of the mid to late-1900’s is somewhat anemic compared to previous eras, despite some standout exceptions. This is not only due to the decline of casuistry in general and pollution of the field by the spirit of modernism and laxity, but it is also the case that after the explosion of interest in family life in the second half of the 1800’s in the run up to Italian unification (1870), the world and the Church of the 20th century were swept up by the practicalities and moral questions related to World War I, the Roman Question, World War II and the atomic bomb, the Second Vatican Council and its reforms, the reform of the 1917 Code of Canon Law (1983), the fall of Communism in Europe (1989), the invention and rise of the cell phone, the invention of the internet – hardly a moment to pause and think about how marriage had been subtly undermined by advances in transportation technology, beginning in the 1800’s and maturing in the 1920’s.⁸ The literature related to marriage ethics came largely as a response to *Humanae Vitae*, itself a response to the creation of “the pill” and the subsequent so-called “Sexual Revolution,” more or less taking place from the late 1950’s to the late 1970’s, which constituted a particular kind of crisis in its own precise context. Without the technological advancement of oral contraceptives, the ethical reflection would have likely remained at the level which Pius XI had left it with *Casti Connubii* when addressing the same general question in response to the Anglicans’ approval of contraception at Lambeth in 1930. Note that *Casti Connubii* is an attempt at playing catch-up, just as *Humanae Vitae* would be almost four decades later.⁹

Now, with the decline of dating, the ubiquitousness of pornography, (including the startling applications of AI to such degeneracy,) and the “Tinderization” of relationships, a

⁶ Ibid., p. 353.

⁷ To have an avatar who is designed according to one’s tastes; who will say and do whatever one wants, whenever one wants, however one wants; who has no needs and will never grow old; who will never offer rejection and can be discarded and regained easily, without any consequence – this is alluring. Eventually there will likely be physical machines capable of simulating human interaction in a similar way, though this is perhaps a long way off.

⁸ Pope Gregory XVI (d. 1846), a noted luddite, once exclaimed, “Chemin de fer, chemin d’enfer!” (“Road of iron, road to Hell!”) He prevented the construction of a rail system in the Papal States during his reign. While certainly too cautious about new technology (he also disliked gas lamps), we can note that his famous utterance was in a way prophetic.

⁹ The topic of contraception had already preoccupied Pius XI’s close friend and advisor, the famous Fr. Gemelli, but we find relatively little treatment of it at the Roman level before *Casti Connubii*.

whole other range of psychosocial problems has arisen which preoccupies authors. Nowadays, young people are asked unironically by casual semi-romantic partners to “DTR” – “define the relationship.” This is often in an effort to avoid languishing in what is called a “situationship.”

While the psychosocial trends are no doubt an important field of inquiry, the literature leaves unexplored the specific on-the-ground problems which “dating” poses and leaves unsolved any number of vexing casuistic puzzles related to the use of marriage¹⁰ that were never definitively settled in the manuals or by Roman authority. (When authors do seek to treat these topics, they do so rather poorly.) Since it is all but impossible to recover courtship, “dating” is now seen as something traditional and ideal, as opposed to aggressive patterns of fornication or ill-defined non-committal long-term semi-romantic partnerships. The moral aspects related to dating therefore need to be treated more surgically.¹¹ What is more, the field of inquiry of the life of chastity for the married couple remains ripe for the intellectual harvest with great pastoral benefits awaiting, including, in the present author’s view, providing the correct point of departure for understanding chastity and purity (its annexed virtue) between potential spouses, especially including the integration into the evaluation of “romantic acts” of a thorough treatment of the concupiscible passions in relation to various objects of love, desire, and delight, but also perhaps including the irascible passions of hope and daring.

The Scope of This Book

The present text does not seek to provide an exhaustive treatment of particular questions related to chastity, nor does it evaluate the contemporary literature of Catholic sexual ethics in detail; rather, it is focused exclusively on proposing a teaching on the use of what is commonly called “Natural Family Planning” (NFP) with respect to the motives for the marriage act itself which is more rigorous than what is commonly found in any number of books, websites, journal articles, or parochial and diocesan programs. It does not advocate for an abandonment of the practice of using NFP to avoid having children, as some in their misguided zeal for chastity mistakenly think is necessary, but instead argues in part that there are moral rules for its right use beyond simply having a justification for avoiding having more children in the first place. A mechanism is also proposed for how to evaluate whether avoiding having children is justified, a principle which is admitted by every author but is explained in serious and morally useful detail by exceedingly few.

The doctrines laid down here are, of course, only safe and probable, in the technical sense of these terms; one remains free enough to disagree and pursue his or her own way, possibly without actually offending God unless his or her conscience is truly convicted by the arguments

¹⁰ The euphemism “using marriage” refers to conjugal relations.

¹¹ The major lacuna in the classical literature appears to be a failure to integrate a robust treatment of how the passions are related to lawful but remote natural union. This problem afflicts both the treatment of the unmarried (“6th Commandment”) and the married (“Use of Marriage”) – in fact, the pathway to a fuller understanding of what is lawful “to feel” and “to want” when unmarried will likely only proceed from an accurate vision of what is lawful for spouses. Unfortunately, apart from totally uncontroversial points, there is a shocking amount of inconsistency on the latter topic among the older authors when there is not silence. The case of the *amplexus reservatus* (intentionally incomplete natural union) is paradigmatic in this regard (although it is now indirectly condemned as at least venial sin by Pius XII). Some older opinions about chastity in marriage are also founded upon faulty biological assumptions about the mechanics of conception. These discussions exceed the scope of the present text but lurk in the background nonetheless.

set down.¹² Furthermore, the subject matter is arguably complicated enough that in following and using the laxer opinion one might do what is venially sinful according to its structure but without any guilt (so-called “material sin”), or have only very slight guilt. However, the motivation remains to propose the theses, along with any number of disputed questions of casuistry. Why?

As for the more rigorous doctrine on NFP vis-à-vis the use of marriage which will be presented, it is necessary for two reasons. First, because many devout couples have the strong suspicion that something is not quite right with the thought that one’s marriage is fully chaste by merely abstaining from relations for a week each month and doing whatever they like the rest of the time, *specifically in the context of trying to avoid having children*. They feel like they are somehow “cheating the system,” and they are right in their intuition, despite their lack of an ability to articulate their reasoning. This text seeks to help bring those couples to the “next level” and introduce them to the discipline which is proper to marital chastity, which they will find to be a welcome challenge. Such a way of living conjugal life will be found empowering to the soul, and it will even likely enhance the experience of the marital act itself on account of the act’s purified significance and less frequent use. This doctrine also evades the overly rigorous error into which many people fall, namely, that the use of “NFP” to avoid conception is “diet contraception” (or is simply contraceptive strictly speaking) and is therefore immoral in itself.¹³ Second, because if my thesis is correct the vast majority of couples who are sincerely trying to live out the Christian duties of married life are engaged unwittingly in at least material venial sin. True enough, material sin does not actually offend God – only formal sin does (that which is known to be sin or that which one is obliged to know is sin but does not) – but material sin nevertheless sets the individual on a path towards formal sin by weakening the will’s perception of what is truly good and possibly occasioning other acts which are indirectly or directly occasioned by material sin. This is especially true with regard to sexual matters, towards which humans are violently inclined by the intensity of pleasures, which pleasures God placed in our nature so that we would keep the human race in existence. Furthermore, one can rarely be sure that material sin is merely material sin except in special cases. In any case, as just noted, taking on the proposed *modus vivendi*, the couple will experience the interior freedom which will improve their spiritual lives and their marriage.

With regard to the motive for elaborating a clearer mechanism by which to evaluate the legitimacy of avoiding children, one need only ask any group of pious couples what exactly a “just cause” is to use NFP, and one will see the problem in the discussion which ensues. In the best case, the discussion will end with, “Be prudent and generous.” This is not untrue, but it is not particularly helpful either.

¹² Moral science does not admit of the same degree of certitude as dogmatic theology, which itself admits of disputes, even on important matters; the reality is uncontestable that many points which refer to sin, even mortal sin, are not settled doctrine, despite being closely related to moral data which are settled, whether by direct revelation or authoritative determination. Sifting through opposing opinions on conclusions in moral theology on finer points, often called “casuistry,” is the bulk of the work in St. Alphonsus Liguori’s *Theologia Moralis*. Readers should not be disturbed by such disputes, nor claim that such-and-such is “Catholic teaching” when significant dispute exists and no definitive decision has been made by the Holy See, or at least a decision which binds one to religious submission of intellect even without being fully definitive.

¹³ Some even make the claim that NFP is “Modernist” – not only is this to misunderstand what Modernism is, but it also is hilariously ignorant of the fact that Fr. Andreas Steinhuber, SJ, the individual who gave the major positive consultation on NFP as reflected in the 1880 *responsum* of the Apostolic Penitentiary, was also a principal ghostwriter for the great anti-Modernist encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*. (In some months after the release of the present text, I will publish the full text of Fr. Steinhuber’s consultation – however, while cautiously positive, the text is mostly interesting from a historical point of view rather than for its moral analysis *per se*.)

This book is not meant as an introduction to the topic of NFP, especially its biology, psychology, or practicalities. It is not a survey of the history of NFP, as it has been treated in older popular literature or in broader “cultural” and ecclesiastical contexts (though such a book should be written). It is also not an introduction to Catholic sexual ethics in general, though some explanation is given on the most relevant points. It takes for granted that the reader is at least somewhat familiar with the topic already, especially the incompatibility of Catholic morals with consequentialism in its various forms.¹⁴ It furthermore takes for granted the value of synthesizing and reconciling the major authorities in Catholic moral theology, in particular papal magisterial texts, St. Thomas Aquinas (the Common Doctor), and St. Alphonsus Liguori (the patron saint of moral theologians). It is assumed that the popes and great moral doctors of the Church generally have serious extrinsic authority and are therefore much more important guides than the latest trends in popular Catholic literature on the same topics, and so a goal to reconcile “the authors” as far as is honestly possible has been adopted.¹⁵ Readers who do not intuitively appreciate such a goal or method will probably not like this book. Finally, this text does not present in any rigor the historical context of or developmental narrative between major sources except in a single case (viz., the Sacred Penitentiary decisions). This is because the development of the literature on the role of pleasure in conjugal life and the particulars of the tradition’s treatment of the marital debt is largely irrelevant to the point being made, and other authors have done some of this kind of work already, such as John Noonan in *Contraception*.¹⁶ There is, however, some serious discussion of the *solam voluptatem* (“pleasure alone”) debate by way of offering my own solutions to this rather vexing, relevant, and complicated problem.

Readers who are entirely unfamiliar with the concept of the “marital debt” will find only a brief introduction to the topic in Chapter One; they may be startled to learn that such a principle exists and is in fact strongly rooted in the greatest authorities, including Sacred Scripture. They ought to allow themselves to be challenged by the discussion. For a relatively recent text which gives some more explanation, I recommend the fine volume prepared by Frs. McHugh and Callan¹⁷ which addresses this topic with great clarity and marvelous efficiency, though much more could be said (and is said by many older authors). I do not bother to defend the legitimacy of the principle of the marital debt in this book at any length – once again, to dismiss something which has been held by so many weighty authors, and which rests so squarely upon Sacred Scripture (1 Cor. 7:2-5) as well as upon the natural logic of marriage is extremely temerarious at best and possibly next to heresy (*proxima haeretica*) or worse. (An extended discussion of the marital debt also exceeds the scope of the purpose of this book, which is quite

¹⁴ The way in which a good is obtained potentially matters in an of itself; to steal money and to earn money are both “taking money from someone” but are very different kinds of acts. This is the beginning of the critique against those who say that NFP is contraception because both “stop conception.” It matters what one does, not only what happens because of what one does.

¹⁵ I do not here enter into any discussions regarding the “doctrinal weight” of propositions or “extrinsic authority” of texts. Overall, common sense informed by piety will suffice for the purposes of the present argument.

¹⁶ Noonan’s research is excellent, though his theological reasoning is not always the best. He is also helpful as a guide through the history of the topic of pleasure in the use of marriage. I do not present any material about the shift in perspective between St. Thomas and St. Alphonsus but instead point to Noonan’s work as a starting point for this kind of research.

¹⁷ Fr. John McHugh, OP and Fr. Charles Callan, OP, *Moral Theology: A Complete Course Based on St. Thomas Aquinas and the Best Modern Authorities*, #2614-2616; see also #2622 for their treatment of periodic continence (wherein they also reference an interesting text by Cardinal Hayes, of September 8, 1936); the famous moralist Fr. Dominic Prümmer, OP also gives a helpful summary in his one-volume *Handbook of Moral Theology*, #860-861. Both texts are easily found online.

narrow.) Instead of seeing the highly unpopular and little-discussed positions of our famous elders in theology – decorated war-heroes, as it were – as primarily constrictive, we ought to see them as helpful guides towards the infinite freedom and perfect goodness of union with Christ. Even though we face new problems which many of them never faced themselves, they offer us powerful tools with which to solve those problems. We do not need to reinvent the wheel, even if we need to repurpose it.

Furthermore, despite the fact that we are today freer than in past centuries to publish books and articles with all sorts of questionable positions even on settled doctrine, such as on consummated unnatural vice (i.e. contraception, homosexual acts, self-abuse), this is not a good use of our time. We ought to be orthodox, and we ought to be thorough. In fact, there is much to the world of sexual ethics which is left practically untouched which would be more theoretically and pastorally useful than is commonly imagined. We ought to use the guidance of our elders for all it is worth; there is no need to walk alone when they have already largely done the work for us. Finally, we should take a genuine interest in the methods and focus of the older sources. While we need not imitate their style, or speak exclusively about the same topics, we ought to take them as cues for what the important issues are. The matter of theology, especially sexual ethics, is not simply a matter of taste – souls are on the line, more than with any other matter, and they are threatened by distinct and identifiable errors. While it can be interesting and even very profitable to meander through the psychology or cultural significance of various sexual behaviors, as is so common today in the popular literature, in the end, moral theology includes judgments about what is right, what is wrong, and what is wrong enough to lose one’s soul to the pains of unending Hell. One might even conclude that such considerations ought to take center stage, albeit without limiting the entirety of moral science thereto; after all, one can do more than simply not offend God, one can positively please Him in various degrees.

In this book I will argue for two principal theses, fully aware that the first in particular is extremely unfashionable and that both are possibly wrong. First, contrary to St. Thomas and St. Augustine, but in line with both St. Alphonsus and modern papal magisterial literature, I will argue that the request for the marital debt can be without sin when not intending procreation; however, I will conclude that it is only licit under a certain condition, namely, the legitimate need for the relaxation of concupiscence on the part of the one making the request, rather than for “sexual recreation,” no matter what other non-procreative goods are being pursued thereby (i.e. increased bonding, health, honor, expressing affection, settling a dispute, etc.) so long as the couple is not attempting to have children. As will be discussed, this thesis is in sharp contrast to the thought, seemingly originating with Gury’s manual (1852) and today left practically unchallenged, that the use of marriage is sufficiently justified by the exclusive intention to “express affection” or provide some kind of affective or social good.¹⁸ Second, I will argue that the intention to avoid pregnancy by recourse to using marriage during infertile periods alone must be evaluated by a method of evaluation that is analogous to the judgment which ought to be made in giving alms. Finally, as a conclusion, I will offer some limited observations about the spiritual significance and pastoral application of the doctrines presented herein.

¹⁸ Of course, the thought that conjugal relations have to be excused at all in the first place is almost totally alien to mainstream contemporary Catholic sexual ethics. This is a sign that something is wrong with the literature’s framing of the entire topic.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MARITAL DEBT AND THE USE OF MARRIAGE

Marital Debt?

The marital debt is the duty to have intercourse with one's spouse upon request, usually said with respect to such an act as a means to prevent the strain of the concupiscible passions from becoming psychologically painful or even from growing into a nearly uncontrollable urge to sin, whether through self-abuse or infidelity of some other sort.¹⁹ Each spouse owes this debt to the other, at least in proportion with the seriousness and reasonableness of the request, as a fundamental part of married life.²⁰ This debt is better characterized as a "legal debt" rather than a "moral debt," meaning it is owed in strict justice rather than merely according to a kind of fittingness. It is not simply "the appropriate thing to do," like signs of respect toward superiors we are not subject to, it is the strictly necessary thing to do under terms of commutative justice between spouses.²¹ According to St. Thomas, the payment of the debt is even more formally significant as to the good of fidelity (*bonum fidei*) than the duty to refrain from adultery.²² In other words, it is a worse sin to deny one's spouse his or her rights (understood correctly) which were positively promised ("I will") than it is to commit adultery, which was merely negatively promised ("I will not"). She owes him, and he owes her, in virtue of their marriage, unless the most serious problems obtain.²³ (Adultery implicitly renounces this right.)²⁴ The relaxation of "concupiscence" (here meaning "sexual desire," especially when occurring unwillingly,) is one

¹⁹ Sometimes "marital debt" or a similar phrase will be used simply to indicate conjugal relations.

²⁰ The ability to pay the marital debt is so important that those who are perpetually impotent are unable to marry for the reason that they cannot pay it if requested, failing to fulfill a basic part of what it means to be married. See Canon 1084, §1 in the *CIC* (1983); see also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Suppl., q. 58, a. 1. (Hereafter cited as *ST*.) Note that the debt may not be extracted by force.

²¹ See *ST*, I-II, q. 80; q. 102, a. 2, ad. 2.

²² *ST*, Suppl., q. 49, a. 2, ad. 3: "Just as the marriage promise means that neither party is to have intercourse with a third party, so does it require that they should mutually pay the marriage debt. The latter is indeed the chief of the two, since it follows from the power which each receives over the other." (All translations are from the Second and Revised Edition [Blackfriars: Westminster, UK, 1920]. Online edition transcribed for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2017.) In the exchange of consent at a wedding, one promises (implicitly) both not to have relations with anyone else and to be available to the other – and not simply based on one's own feelings about having relations at a given time.

²³ In the young St. Thomas' *Commentary on the Sentences*, we find a protracted casuistic examination on the use of marriage, including the following case: suppose a man contracts leprosy, a contagious and hideous skin disease which can even kill. The leprous man requests his wife to sleep with him. Is she bound to acquiesce? The answer given is a resounding, "yes," though he clarifies that she is not bound to live in the same house with him, lest she contract the disease by prolonged exposure. See *ST*, Suppl., q. 64, a. 1, ad. 4. (The content of the *Supplementum* is essentially identical to the *Commentary on the Sentences*; I use the *Supplementum* references for the convenience of the reader.) In the Response to the Third Objection in the same Question, we are told, however, that the request for the debt is excessive in various ways and therefore unnecessary (or even immoral) to pay, such as being asked for repeatedly or in a case where it would be physically harmful.

²⁴ See Canon 1152 (*CIC*, 1983); cf. *ST* Suppl., q. 62 – St. Thomas is here using the ecclesiastical jurisprudence and law of his time and place. Note in Article 3 his explicit reference to the fact that the Church could compel a spouse to pay the debt by the sentence of an ecclesiastical court. (Contracting a spiritual relationship with one's spouse also has implications for the marital debt in the ecclesiastical law of St. Thomas's world. See *ST* Suppl., q. 56, a. 1.)

of the classical motives for marriage,²⁵ with direct Scriptural foundations in 1 Corinthians 7, verses 2 and 9, annexed to the good of fidelity, the *bonum fidei*, as a secondary good or end of marriage and its act.²⁶ St. Paul's explanation of the marital debt conveniently falls in between these same verses (3-5).

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote. It is well for a man not to touch a woman. But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control. I say this by way of concession, not of command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.²⁷

The use of the marital debt protects the uniqueness of the couple's union: the availability of sexual goods from one's spouse removes or at least diminishes the felt desire to seek such goods elsewhere. The "one flesh union" of marriage is a major renunciation of the control over oneself as a sexual being; one is giving that control in large part to one's spouse.²⁸

If the marital debt is a category belonging to commutative justice, among the spouses as equals, rather than to domestic justice which is distributive from husband to wife, then it appears that it cannot be a sin in and of itself to request the marital debt, including to avoid sin, which is a good end.²⁹ This is because one cannot sin in asking for what one is truly owed. However, the *Commentary on the Sentences* does directly imply that requesting the debt to relieve concupiscence is venial sin, in line with the doctrine of St. Augustine, but it does not explain very deeply why this is the case.³⁰ In Article 8 of Question 64 we read on whether it is a mortal sin to ask for the debt at a holy time. The Answer: "To ask for the debt on a feast day is not a circumstance drawing a sin into another species; wherefore it cannot aggravate infinitely. Consequently a wife or husband does not sin mortally by asking for the debt on a feast day. It is however a more grievous sin to ask for the sake of mere pleasure, than through fear of the weakness of the flesh."³¹ Given the lack of an explanation, including elsewhere in the Question, we are left wondering why making use of marriage at least to avoid sin is itself imputable as

²⁵ See *ST Suppl.*, q. 54, a. 5; Interestingly, the fact of the usefulness of marriage for concupiscence as a natural motive for marriage seemingly implies that those who fully reach the acquired virtue of chastity while unmarried in fact ought to presume themselves to be in possession of the charism to live in celibacy unless otherwise evident.

²⁶ The three "goods" ("blessings") of Matrimony are children, fidelity (or faith), and sacrament. See *ST Suppl.*, q. 49.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:1-9 (NSRVCE).

²⁸ Another major source for this discussion is St. Thomas' *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (§320-329). Yet another is found in the *De Malo* q. 15 a. 2, where St. Thomas urges against "unnecessary" uses of marriage due to such acts being venial sins. The doctrine presented in the *De Malo* is largely a reiteration of what is presented in the *Commentary on the Sentences*.

²⁹ See *ST II-II*, q. 57, a. 4.

³⁰ For some examples, see St. Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, Book I, ch. 16, and *On the Good of Marriage*, §6 and §11.

³¹ *ST Suppl.*, q. 64, a. 8, resp. Note that St. Thomas distinguishes between the request being "for mere pleasure" and being "for relief of concupiscence to avoid sin." Evidently, these are not quite exactly the same thing to him, a distinction with relevance for the deeper discussion which this book takes on later.

sin.³² The best direct response to this comes much earlier, in Question 49, Article 5, in the Reply to the Second Objection:

If a man intends by the marriage act to prevent fornication in his wife, it is no sin, because this is a kind of payment of the debt that comes under the good of “faith.” But if he intends to avoid fornication in himself, then there is a certain superfluity, and accordingly there is a venial sin, nor was the sacrament instituted for that purpose, except by indulgence, which regards venial sins.³³

The Question does not address the issue of the possibility of concupiscence hindering the ability to pray or do good deeds by a kind of distraction. In the so-called *Catechism of St. Thomas*, (specifically the sermons constituting the *Commentary on the Ten Commandments*), written in the last period of the saint’s life, we will see a similar treatment of the matter which provides a very succinct formula for the evaluation of the motives for the use of marriage.

A natural reading of 1 Corinthians 7:6, the verse regarding allowing the use of marriage for the removal of temptation by concession or permission (συγγνώμην) rather than by command (ἐπιταγήν) is that the Apostle is saying that he is not imposing an obligation on married persons to use their rights to conjugal acts in order to remove temptation; rather, he is merely allowing them to do so, indicating that it is not necessarily sinful in itself. In fact, this helps to make more sense of the following verse in which the Apostle explains that he wishes all were continent like himself, not needing such assistance but rather disciplining oneself through total continence; this regards a higher pursuit of perfection, rather than merely avoiding sin. Were St. Paul speaking of venial sin in the use of marriage to remove temptation “by concession,” it seems he would have contrasted this with the use of marriage to procreate rather than with perfect continence and celibacy.

Of course, Christ Himself counsels celibacy. The apostles decline from the Lord’s words forbidding divorce and remarriage and thus lead themselves to the conclusion – “It is better not to marry.” (Matthew 19:10) Their selfish motives for desiring celibacy are the upshot of their selfish motives for marriage, yet they are valid motives nevertheless – it is easier to absent oneself from such trouble as might lead to the desire for divorce and then be unable to do so in view of marrying again. The propensity for a spouse to misuse their rights to conjugal acts, in favor of children or not, is in fact a similar reason why it is better to avoid marriage. One must realize that marriage is a true renunciation of self – a risking of one’s whole life.

It must be noted that the fundamental concern of St. Augustine and St. Thomas – and essentially the entire body of classical authors, ancient, medieval, and baroque, even up to the 1900’s – is about the suspension of the act of reason by which we know, love, and serve God. Because of its intense pleasure, the sexual act inhibits the reason’s proper functioning, like drunkenness. This is why there is a need to excuse the marriage act.³⁴

³² Article 7 of Question 64 also seems to imply the opposite by specifying that it is not lawful to ask for the debt on holy days when one must be specially given over to prayer; were it never lawful, the more appropriate formulation of the Article’s thesis would be whether it is mortal sin rather than whether it is “lawful,” which we are given in the following Article (8), which then proceeds to presume sin in the asking of the debt by arguing circumstance cannot aggravate the sin into grievous guilt as it does not draw the act into a new species. Evidently, for St. Thomas, that a request for the debt is “lawful” in this sense does not mean free of moral guilt but rather that it exercises a binding claim over the other such that it would be immoral to refuse – “legal” debt.

³³ *ST* Suppl. q. 49, a. 5, ad. 2.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, a. 1.

Natural Family Planning and Sexual Vice

The two genera of sexual vice are the “natural” and the “unnatural.” Natural vice is procreative (or “integral,” “natural,” “unitive”) sexual intercourse outside of the bonds of marriage, principally deriving its immorality from the risk to potential children proceeding from the act by the absence of the protection of a stable household such as is provided in principle by marriage. Unnatural vice is *essentially infertile* sexual activity, whether inside of marriage or not, deriving its immorality from a corruption of the right end of the sexual faculty in the very use of that same faculty, which is a direct affront to the Creator Who designed that faculty for the weighty purposes of keeping the human race in existence and bringing souls to Himself.³⁵ Using the sexual faculty’s associated external organs in a way that makes use of the pleasures which are designed to incentivize and complete natural sexual union but either does not dispose gametes (sex cells, viz. sperm and ova) for procreative union according to the natural design of the body (i.e. sodomitic acts, autoeroticism) or actively impedes the well-functioning of gametes in view of preventing procreative union (contraception) is unnatural vice.

Of course, there are many objections to the claim that these latter acts are “unnatural” by appealing to false analogies – “using a straw,” “walking on one’s hands,” “spitting,” “running on a treadmill” – which presume to show that many acts which seem unnatural are morally unproblematic and so the claim that unnatural sexual vice is true vice is indefensible.³⁶

These sorts of arguments also fail to make proper distinctions about how diverse faculties actually work. For example, the digestive faculty is an “inward facing” faculty – it takes matter (food) and uses it to do something to oneself (deliver nutrients). To “pervert” or fundamentally undermine the digestive faculty would not mean using indigestible food, or even to purge oneself of digestible food; rather, it would mean somehow hijacking the digestive system *as such* to do something other than pass nutrition into the cells of the body. The use of the digestive faculty’s organs which are by their nature directed to a certain end by making them act upon something which *is not and cannot be conducive to its natural end of delivering nutrients to the body*. For example, to create a kind of “human battery” which somehow saps away the nutrients and calories prepared for the body’s use by the act of digestion accomplished by the digestive organs insofar as they are exclusively designed to deliver nutrients to the body. (Of course, this would quickly end in one’s death if not reversed.) Breathing is much the same – if one’s lungs could somehow be rewired to filter the air in a room rather than oxygenate one’s bloodstream, we would see the perversion of the faculty of breathing. The faculty of communication is “outward facing,” as it terminates in something other than oneself, namely, another person’s mind. The sexual faculty is also an “outward facing” faculty. Its object is “another,” first being its

³⁵ See *ST* II-II q. 154, a. 11; it is true some conceptive sexual relations are arguably categorized by St. Thomas as “unnatural,” but these are unnatural in a secondary way, viz., as to mode rather than as to end, and they are not as grave as sins against the end. It is unfortunate that St. Thomas was as ambiguous as he was about what he was exactly referring to. See *ST* II-II q. 154, a. 11; a. 12, ad. 4. I propose later on in this work that IVF is unnatural vice by way of “excess,” that is, by conceiving outside the natural order. Of course, there is no treatment of such things by St. Thomas.

³⁶ St. Thomas actually addresses the example of walking on one’s hands in *SCG* III, ch. 122: “Nor, in fact, should it be deemed a slight sin for a man to arrange for the emission of semen apart from the proper purpose of generating and bringing up children, on the argument that it is either a slight sin, or none at all, for a person to use a part of the body for a different use than that to which it is directed by nature (say, for instance, one chose to walk on his hands, or to use his feet for something usually done with the hands) because man’s good is not much opposed by such inordinate use. However, the inordinate emission of semen is incompatible with the natural good; namely, the preservation of the species.”

procreative pair as a primary agent (man acting upon woman) and second its procreative pair as a secondary causes (sperm acting upon ovum). Third, there is the final terminus itself, namely, the child which results from the union of gametes. The terminus being “another human” is what makes the sexual faculty’s intentionality “outward facing” even in the woman, whose principal act is a direct function of the vegetal soul (rather than the animal soul, as with the man).³⁷ More will be said momentarily about the importance of “secondary causes” in the sexual faculty’s structure. The point is that making proper distinctions about what is actually occurring in “abnormal” uses of various faculties is critical to having a clear way to explain what is at issue.

Without an exhaustive “debunking” of objections based on false analogies about “perverting” or “opposing nature,” we can say such analogies always at least miss the core of the argument, over and above what has been said about the structure of faculties: the matter being disposed for the infusion of a rational soul meant to benefit the earth and ultimately to worship God forever in Heaven (rather than maintaining one’s own equilibrium or good pleasure) is not rightly subjected to the direct control of a mere individual human being the way bodily motion or other such things are,³⁸ and the order of human generation and its act are essentially and primarily related to the aforementioned weighty purposes, which purposes are thwarted by subverting that order by using wrong matter (i.e. homosexual acts, autoeroticism, etc.) or by actively impeding generation (contraception).³⁹ This is an affront more or less directly against the Creator Who designed the order of human generation to work in a certain way through particular organs and acts, which order is being opposed by the practitioner of unnatural vice. Mere human beings are not set over the matter into which God wishes to infuse a rational soul insofar as that matter is part of an unfolding process which God designed for Himself to use; the matter regards what is equal to man (another human being) and what is above man (the creative power of God); sex cells are not like a normal plant or animal in this sense.⁴⁰

³⁷ The “vegetal soul” is the “part” or “dimension” of a human being’s soul which is “plant-like” – its powers are augmentation (growth), nutrition, and reproduction (the production of gametes and their fundamental disposition for procreative union). The “animal soul” is the part of a human being’s soul which is “animal-like” – its powers include especially sensation and locomotion. The man’s sexual act is principally animal in that it requires movement and sensation in a way that the woman’s principal sexual act (ovulation and reception of male gametes) does not, as it is fundamentally involuntary and passive, though of course normal sexual acts involve the use of the rational soul (the free choice to engage in the act), and sensation and motion on the part of the woman. The point is that the most fundamental structure of human reproduction does not include these as necessities.

³⁸ We have a special kind of authority or discretion over faculties and powers which directly affect ourselves because of our own natural knowledge and love for our own being and good. So long as we respect the principal of totality (the good of the whole) and avoid indecency and scandal, we enjoy great freedom – i.e., to walk on our hands.

³⁹ There is no shortage of ways to misunderstand the point. What must be grasped is that Christian moral science fundamentally concerns order rather than consequences. God put an order into human generation’s act and its secondary causes, which order must be respected. To disrespect the design of the Creator, especially in such a serious matter, is to offend Him as its architect. Beyond this, it is relatively easy to see the social contagion of unnatural vice together with its catastrophic social effects. For a historical study on general laxity in sexual morals and the resulting tendency towards civilizational collapse, see J.D. Unwin’s monumental study documenting this phenomenon, *Sex and Culture* (1934).

⁴⁰ The older theory of “delayed ensoulment” in which a “second conception” occurs (viz., the infusion of the rational soul into pre-human matter resulting from the “first conception”) is a helpful foil; here, to kill the pre-human matter is treated as the sin of abortion on account of that which God will do to that matter, that is, give it a rational soul, even if the juridical consequences might have differed at times. The killing takes away this matter from God, Who designed the process of human generation. It would perhaps be appropriate to call the killing of conceived pre-human matter “supercontraception.” (Note that John Paul II leaves space for the “delayed ensoulment” position, even though this opinion is presently out of favor. See *Evangelium Vitae*, §60.)

The average presentation that is made in parochial environments for natural family planning (“NFP”) leaves many people wondering whether and how it differs from contraception. To summarize, NFP involves monitoring the fertility cycles of the woman, usually in view of using the infertile periods for relations which will not result in children or are at least minimally likely to. (NFP can also be used in order to specify the most fertile periods of the woman in view of maximizing the chance of conception, which use does not concern us here – the term “NFP” in this book means “continence during fertile times combined with conjugal acts during infertile times in view of avoiding conception.”) The rigorist objection raised against the use of NFP is that it amounts to contraception, insofar as it uses and presumes upon infertility as a condition for the marital act. The typical rigorist supposes that one forms an intention against having children, then acts in the course of using marriage to guarantee this, with the interior disposition summarized by the statement, “I would not use marriage if it would result in conception,” and thereby sins against the nature of the marriage act and therefore against God just the same as “normal contraception.” It is also sometimes said that a “contraceptive mentality” animates this practice.⁴¹ The argument appears strong – the same result is obtained as with artificial contraception, and the same condition is set down, namely, that there is no reasonable possibility of conception. The couple appears to “use” the infertile period of the woman as a contraceptive means. What difference is there between NFP and artificial contraception which does not reduce to “physicalist” morals?

The familiar rejoinder is twofold: first, that merely abstaining from sexual activity when there is fertility is not a sin, and second, that NFP trains the couple in virtue and communication. Both of these statements are (mostly) true, but they largely miss the point. The first argument does not address the reality that the *commission* of the sexual act during infertile periods specifically depending upon the infertility of the woman is not merely abstaining from sexual activity during fertile periods, it is *to do something*. In other words, the default state of an individual person is not conjugal activity; to use marriage requires a positive choice. Therefore, this particular choice of a conjugal act must find a justification for itself within the context of trying to avoid conception in the same act, and, if we are to save Catholic moral theology, this justification must somehow avoid collapsing into a justification of artificial contraception. The second argument does not respond to the central objection at all but merely gives a probable good consequence of the discipline. Unfortunately, one does not often find much discussion beyond these two points in the popular literature. There is a marked failure to grapple with the objection seriously, when in fact this point confuses an enormous amount of people.

St. Thomas definitively rejects natural relations which happen to be naturally infertile from the category of unnatural vice:

It is evident from this that every emission of semen, in such a way that generation cannot follow, is contrary to the good for man. And if this be done deliberately, it must be a sin. Now, I am speaking of a way from which, in itself, generation could not result: such would be any emission of semen apart from the natural union of male and female. For which reason, sins of this type are called contrary to nature. But, if by accident generation cannot result from the emission of semen, then this is not a reason for it being against nature, or a sin; as for instance, if the woman happens to be sterile.⁴²

⁴¹ This phrase lends itself to many meanings, such that it is not particularly useful for precise moral discourse.

⁴² *Summa Contra Gentiles* (hereafter *SCG*), III, 122, 5: “Ex quo patet quod contra bonum hominis est omnis emissio seminis tali modo quod generatio sequi non possit. Et si ex proposito hoc agatur, oportet esse peccatum. Dico autem modum ex quo generatio sequi non potest secundum se: sicut omnis emissio seminis sine naturali coniunctione

The fundamental order of the sexual faculties of the man and the woman are preserved in the material order in the case of infertility, they are simply inhibited on account of a defect in the functioning of the sexual faculty itself, in this case, of the woman. It is the system itself which constitutes the sexual faculty whence the defect comes which renders the woman infertile. To make use of the sexual faculty when it is thus defective is not a deliberate frustration of the sexual faculty's end, like contraception; the latter introduces something alien to the sexual faculty in order to subvert its end in an otherwise natural and voluntary sexual act⁴³ (such as an "intrauterine device" or "IUD") or removes something from the sexual faculty by force in order to subvert its end (such as a hysterectomy done for the sake of sterility). Otherwise, even to pay the debt in the case of a spouse who is known to be habitually sterile would constitute a grave sin against nature, which is untrue on St. Thomas' account of the duty to pay the debt.

The core of the difference between NFP and contraception regards the role of secondary causes with their own proper finality towards fructification or attainment of the naturally indicated end, namely, procreation. The point reduces to the distinction between the *intentional occasion of failure* and the *prevention of success*. This distinction is subtle and easily missed.

Secondary causes (gametes) set in motion by the principal agents (the man and the woman) are not the same as the principal agent itself.⁴⁴ Gametes (sperm and egg) have their own causative power ordered towards the end of procreation and thus have a kind of "natural intention" or inclination. This inclination is worked toward by exterior dispositions flowing from the nature of the male and female reproductive systems, including locomotion (self-movement) on the part of the sperm. Due to the design of nature, subsequent to natural completed sexual union, gametes are "supposed to" meet and cause procreation by principles belonging to their own constitution as cells, and to do so is their "responsibility" so to speak, which responsibility is not to be usurped by any other cause. This is because in fact the sexual faculty is designed to work by means of the disposition of gametes for meeting their procreative pair by the natural union of man and woman through the exterior reproductive organs. Therefore, the only responsibility that a man or a woman has with respect to gametes insofar as gametes are causative of procreation is to dispose gametes to causing procreation by such natural bodily union, and to usurp the role of the gametes themselves in finding their procreative pair is itself to do something unnatural by excess, such as with IVF or other artificial insemination procedures.⁴⁵ What this ultimately means is that if the gametes do not meet and cause procreation after natural union, it is not primarily the case that the *man* or the *woman* failed to cause procreation, it is primarily the case that the *gametes* failed to cause procreation. The question is then whether the man or woman did something to interfere with the well-functioning of the gametes or the

maris et feminae; propter quod huiusmodi peccata contra naturam dicuntur. Si autem per accidens generatio ex emissionem seminis sequi non possit, non propter hoc est contra naturam, nec peccatum: sicut si contingat mulierem sterilem esse." Note that "accident" here is referring to the nature of a thing itself as distinct from its essential characteristics; it is not about one's knowledge of infertility, but rather the condition of infertility inhering in what is designed to be fertile.

⁴³ Non-abortifacient retroactive contraception can be justified when the act was not voluntary or was in and of itself illicit – one is certainly not bound to will the natural consequences (viz., resulting procreation) of what is immoral in itself according to its species (i.e. adultery) – but in so contracepting one must also at least implicitly repudiate the act itself. A voluntary natural act of adultery is actually made more evil by the use of retroactive contraception if the evil act itself is not repented of, as one consents both to the adultery and to the perversion of its act. In fact, one is bound to use contraceptive means to expel seed from such a union, just as one is bound to repent of the act.

⁴⁴ The "principal cause" or "primary cause" is the being which reproduces its like, in this case a human.

⁴⁵ It is probably advantageous to speak of IVF and similar procedures as "unnatural vice *by excess*" and non-procreative acts as "unnatural vice *by defect*."

processes which affect their reproductive disposition, somehow impeding their natural intentionality toward each other. Interference with the well-functioning of gametes or the process by which they are disposed for reproductive union in view of restricting or eliminating the possibility of conception is contraception properly speaking.⁴⁶

This intermediate step in the chain of causation in the procreative use of the sexual faculty is absolutely critical to understand. It bears repeating: *the sperm and the egg* fail to cause procreation when they do not meet or otherwise do not unite to form a new individual life when the principal agents (the man and the woman) engage in the exterior act which nature ordains for the procreative disposition of gametes (conjugal union). The man and the woman only fail to procreate by way of extending to them what is properly said of the gametes. If something is added or removed which is part of the natural system in which gametes are disposed for union (the entire reproductive system) so that they fail to unite, the gametes are *prevented from procreating*; if the gametes are simply foreseen not to unite because of infertility, and that infertile condition is chosen intentionally to accompany the act yet without the will to cause infertility by an intervention if needed to procure it, the gametes are merely *intentionally occasioned to fail to procreate*.

This intentional occasioning of failure could be due either to an intrinsic problem with the gametes themselves (viz., unhealthy sperm or eggs which cannot cause procreation due to that condition), or more frequently some disposition of the reproductive system (usually in the woman) towards not facilitating procreative union of gametes. With NFP we are concerned with the condition characterized by the lack of a fertile egg having been released from an ovary within a certain timeframe which would allow for natural union of that egg with a sperm cell. This condition of “periodic natural infertility” is one which would not allow for the gametes to reach their natural end of procreative pairing following a normal use of the sexual faculty (viz., a conjugal act). To engage in conjugal acts during known periodic natural infertility so that the meeting of gametes will not occur is merely to occasion the failure of procreation rather than to prevent it.⁴⁷ To add something to the reproductive system, or to remove something from the

⁴⁶ This would include the use of chemical agents which directly impede gametes (like spermicide), and it would also extend to the use of chemical agents that reduce ovulation (“the pill”) specifically in order to prevent conception. Inducing functional hypothalamic amenorrhea (excessive stress or exercise interrupting menstruation) to prevent conception would also seem to come under this category, albeit without introducing a foreign substance into the body; the point is that the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian system *is supposed to work a certain way*, namely, producing regular menstruation, according to its nature in relation to the whole person, which well-functioning is being interrupted in view of preventing conception. Even though it is natural “as a reaction,” the stress is the kind of thing which *should not be there*, just like blood *should be in the extremities* but if shock is induced then it is natural that blood gathers in the torso. Such inflictions upon oneself can only be justified under the principle of totality, to which the inhibition of the proper functioning of a faculty in its very use would never correspond. (Of course, the pill and extraordinary amounts of exercise could theoretically licitly be used for other reasons without the desired effect of infertility, which risky and harmful behavior calls for its own justification through the principle of totality but would not be contraceptive strictly speaking except materially. To be formally contraceptive, the will must specifically incline to interrupting the well-functioning of the reproductive system *in order that gametes are prevented from meeting their reproductive pair* in a freely chosen sexual act. Accidentally obtaining such a state would become formally contraceptive when a woman has the will “to have achieved this state in order to avoid conception in conjugal acts” – merely delighting in the lack of fertility in a given act on account of the abnormal state of her body, while likely immoral in many or even nearly all cases due to a lack of generosity in procreation and an excess of desire for carnal union and even lack of love for one’s own health, is not itself contraceptive strictly speaking – it is only toeing the line.)

⁴⁷ Habitual infertility can also be such a condition, but it is not the main concern with respect to NFP.

reproductive system, either of the man or the woman, so that conception will not occur *is to prevent conception*, not merely to occasion its failure.⁴⁸

In other words, contraception is a *means* or a *method* which is *applied to the man or the woman*⁴⁹ to make a conjugal act infertile. Simply using marriage when it will be infertile when such infertility is insisted upon as a condition for the act is not a means applied to make a conjugal act infertile; this would amount to saying that the act was used upon itself – an absurdity.

Other Errors Discussed

One of the great problems with the way the problem is set up is that rigorist critics of NFP wish to jump into analyzing the avoidance of conception in a given conjugal act before asking the question, “What is the motive for the act in the first place?” As already mentioned, conjugal activity is not the default state of a person. Not attempting to conceive at the present moment is certainly not immoral – it is the habitual state of all human beings most of the time – and few people would argue that there are no circumstances which would justify a couple from intending not to have children for a considerable amount of time (i.e. war, famine, serious health problems, etc.) Given that intending not to have children is certainly not morally problematic in itself, nor is abstaining from relations, the question of motives for individual conjugal acts is then perhaps a better starting point for the conversation than “conjugal acts as desired to be infertile in the context of periodic continence.” If a couple is habitually intending not to have children, this is one object of moral evaluation – if they use conjugal acts, why they are doing so in each instance is a separate albeit connected object of moral evaluation. “NFP” actually refers to a bundle of conditions, acts, and non-acts, in relation to contrary ends (achieving conception or avoiding conception); caution is warranted in speaking about “NFP” as if it was clear what one is actually talking about, especially with respect to an individual person’s will, which is the fundamental subject of sin, not “acts” and certainly not “non-acts and conditions,” even if united around a single intention. Each conjugal act is in fact its own choice requiring its own moral evaluation, including an evaluation of the motivation for that particular act. These acts and non-acts based on various circumstances are informed by the more general or universal intention of

⁴⁸ Beyond an actual intention to create infertility by a positive intervention in the present (i.e. the normal case of using a birth control pill), the key question is whether an intervention into the reproductive system to prevent conception is virtually intended, whether by having previously created habitual infertility and continuing indirectly (or mindlessly) to will its efficacy in preventing conception, or a *willingness* to cause infertility by a temporary or permanent intervention in the reproductive system if it was actually necessary in order to prevent conception (as opposed to there being presently a condition making procreation unlikely or impossible, such as illness, age, or periodic natural infertility); this is to say, if one *would contracept if needed to prevent pregnancy*, then one’s sexual act is contraceptive by a conditional (and normally virtual) intention and comes under the same kind of moral judgment. This is the most appropriate use of the phrase “contraceptive mentality” from a casuistic point of view. The will for naturally occurring processes to cause infertility, whether cyclical (ovulation, etc.) or permanent (menopause), is equivalent to willing the woman’s health, up to the point where one is too desirous of sexual activity done on account of that infertility but it will not be contraceptive absent a willingness to intervene positively if necessary to prevent conception (virtual intention). Desiring injury or sickness that causes infertility, yet without actually intervening to cause injury or sickness, is indeed a perverse will insofar as one wants injury or sickness and insofar as the infertility caused by it is willed out of immoderate desire for conjugal acts which would be done on account of that infertility, but if there is no will to make a positive intervention by causing injury or sickness (actually or virtually) then there is not contraception properly speaking.

⁴⁹ Or, one might say it is a means applied *to the gametes* of the man or the woman, even if applied through affecting an organ of the man or the woman.

“such-and-such kind of family situation.” As long as the intended result is itself good and just to pursue, and as long as each act will be in itself morally upright, there is good moral order towards such an end in those various acts which converge thereto, even if other ends are pursued besides.⁵⁰ Some skeptics of NFP might be very confident that the overall “planning” of the family while using conjugal acts during infertile times is immoral, but they might not be able to say *which particular act is a sin* – either this or that conjugal act (by commission), this or that non-act (by omission), or the intention of this or that end (such-and-such a family situation). Simply because an infertile time was specifically chosen for a conjugal act a few days ago, and there is a conscious choice not to engage in a conjugal act now during a fertile time on account of fertility, and an intention to engage in another conjugal act once infertility returns, does not mean one is acting against nature; it means one is attempting not to conceive through one’s natural conjugal acts. There is not some mysterious piece of the moral puzzle in between the acts with their intended secondary goods, the non-acts to avoid conceiving, the circumstances of fertility and infertility which accompany these, and the greater intention being sought of a particular family situation. There are simply these things, no “planning” or “system” which is somehow itself a distinct object of volition and therefore subject to its own moral analysis.

The reality of gametes as secondary causes helps to explain why it is not obligatory to will conception in a sexual act – a topic which will be discussed in particular in Chapter Three. It is the gametes which have the immediate (or proximate) natural inclination towards conception, not the primary causes (human beings). All that nature insists upon from the primary causes is the proper disposition of gametes according to the natural order of human generation through the use of the body according to its design (“natural union”). It is the “responsibility” of the gametes to achieve conception, whereas it is only the couple’s responsibility to use their bodies in a natural (“integral”) way. The parsimony reflected by this principle is echoed in the minimal duty of one who speaks to tell the truth without necessarily willing that it be understood or believed by anyone (an example to be discussed momentarily) – the secondary cause (the statement itself in words) has its own causative power, in cooperation with the intellect of the hearer. In a sense, with the use of faculties involving secondary causes we are only absolutely responsible for willing what we can ourselves achieve by the means of our rationally coordinated action, as a matter of natural ethical parsimony. Conception in the natural way goes beyond this ability (unlike artificial conception). With the use of faculties whose use *just is* to achieve their purpose we see that this principle is not at work – for instance, to use the faculty of locomotion really is the same as to move, the logical distinction notwithstanding. With such faculties there is also not a duty that they achieve their end, because the achievement of their end is the same as their use. Even with inward-facing faculties like digestion or breathing, which have unconscious and essentially involuntary processes which work to achieve the proper end, it seems one is only bound to will the end be reached insofar as it relates to the principle of totality (namely, doing good to oneself overall). The stomach and the lungs as designed by God are “responsible” for achieving the end, not the one eating or breathing.

Frequently, one hears that it is required to be “open to life” in a conjugal act and that using NFP means one remains “open to life.” It is important to note that this phrase can be used in different ways and that only one of these senses addresses the bare minimum requirements for a licit conjugal act. The first sense is with respect to the act itself being “open to life” in that there remains some probability of conception in a conjugal act. This is not a very helpful criterion, as acts which are contraceptive simply speaking can and do sometimes result in

⁵⁰ See *ST* I-II, q. 18, a. 2; a. 6; a. 7.

pregnancy by accident, and acts which are totally sterile on account of some physical condition (i.e. the absence of a uterus) can still be licit. The second sense is with respect to the individual being “open to life,” and it is to say that one must will that conception be achieved, or at least not find its achievement to be repugnant. This is false, as explained above, and as taught by St. Alphonsus, as we will see. One is not bound to desire conception and may even will that it not occur. The third and correct sense, or at least the most useful sense, is said with respect to the physical integrity of the act being “open to life,” that is, according to its externalities and circumstances willed there is not anything which would impede the well-functioning of gametes in view of procreation. (A fourth sense, which confuses the issue further, is to speak of being “open to life” as a matter of habitual disposition – a sort of positive attitude toward having children in general.)

The objection that NFP violates the “hierarchy of ends” of the use of marriage is an understandable error. This claim confuses the *finis operis* (the “end of the work”) and the *finis operantis* (the “end of the worker”) by collapsing them together. The *finis operis* of a natural sexual act is primarily the generation of offspring, and secondarily it has a natural tendency towards causing other goods (i.e. mutual affective inclination, relief of concupiscence).⁵¹ I propose that the more dependent upon special rational or physical dispositions the more “secondary” these goods are.⁵² What is most important to understand is that the hierarchy of ends of the moral agent (indicating the *finis operantis*) does not in principle need to match the *finis operis* in order for the hierarchy of ends of the act and its *finis operis* to be maintained. Rather, the *finis operis* must have equality with (or “match”) its principle, namely, the sexual faculty, which has the generation of offspring as its *exclusive* end. (The sexual act may have several naturally ordained ends, but the sexual faculty as such only exists for procreation.) This is to say that the act which one does when using the sexual faculty (viz., any sexual act of any kind) must have a natural hierarchy of ends which includes human generation by not acting on undue matter which of its essential nature does not admit of conception in the act (homosexual acts, barriers, self-abuse, etc.).⁵³ Human generation is both the greatest good able to be obtained by any sexual

⁵¹ Here we are speaking of a *per se* order, rather than an order *per accidens*, which in this author’s view is best summarized by the connection between a choice to act upon a particular substance and effects which actually occur in that substance, and to some extent those effects which would occur without intervention. To light a tree on fire has a *per se* order with respect to the production of ash, smoke, heat, and light from the tree, but it has a *per accidens* order with these same things in an adjacent tree which is foreseen and even intended to be lit on fire by means of the fire of the first tree. A classical Aristotelian-Thomistic example illustrating *per accidens* order is theft to give alms or to commit adultery. (See *ST* I-II, q. 18, a. 6; a. 7.)

⁵² Later we will also see a treatment of “extrinsic” goods of conjugal acts, as opposed to “intrinsic” goods.

⁵³ Like onanism (withdrawal), the use of barriers (condoms) would be better construed as acting on undue matter rather than as contraception strictly speaking. This is because the man acts on inanimate matter (rubber), with the woman consenting to this and cooperating in it. All sexual contact properly speaking is mediated contact. This means in the order of depravity the use of barriers lies somewhere in between invasive chemical contraception (i.e. the pill, a temporary intervention harming the well-functioning of the body) and self-abuse, and it likely exceeds mutilation (a habitual intervention harming the well-functioning of the body) and certainly exceeds invasive physical intervention (such as an “IUD,” an “intra-uterine device”). It seems the least depraved kind of contraception would be non-invasive physical intervention (such as attempting to remove all male gametes from the birth canal after an act), followed by non-invasive chemical intervention (i.e. spermicide); lighter than this would be various interventions meant to reduce but not eliminate the chance of conception, even if biologically misguided (i.e. certain spatial modes of natural union, certain kinds of diets, etc.). Intentionally partial penetration in natural completed union stands between contraception and the *amplexus reservatus* (intentionally incomplete natural union) in terms of depravity. (To me it seems that medical use of a perforated condom – i.e. to collect sperm to study them

act through a *per se* order, and the good toward which everything about any use of the sexual faculty and its directly annexed pleasures are ordered: by incentivizing union, preparing the body for union, and by disposing gametes for procreation – the man immediately, actively, and (normally) indirectly voluntarily in the sexual act itself; the woman habitually, passively, and (normally) involuntarily irrespective of the sexual act itself (she will ovulate regardless of whether or not there is union). Therefore, as long as conception is possible according to the matter acted upon (*viz.*, man and woman as such) and the gametes are not impeded from pursuing their own ends (*viz.*, procreative union/conception), procreation will be the primary end of the act itself, the *finis operis*, both as to its goodness and its order. To summarize, the completed union of man and woman through the generative organs *just is* to be doing an act that has procreation as its primary end, as the man does what is necessary to allow for male gametes to pursue union with their female pair, and the woman cooperates and consents to such disposition, while her own sexual faculty's use is essentially involuntary in its principal act (the release of ova). There is no other primary end of the marriage act.

Opposing the primary end of natural union by contraception does not render the *finis operis* non-conceptive, as interfering with the well-functioning of gametes in view of their pursuit of conception does not change the matter that is acted upon from due to undue. The act of contraception is an opposition to the intentionality of the secondary causes of conception within the male-female reproductive complex by intentionally rendering them unable to pursue their proper ends. The contraceptive hysterectomy ensures that ova cannot be prepared to receive a sperm cell, and that a sperm cell cannot survive past the birth canal and cervix. The use of “the pill” interferes with the normal well-functioning of the process of ovulation (among other things) so that an ovum will not be released when it otherwise would be in order that it is prevented from meeting its reproductive pair. The use of a spermicide kills male gametes as they attempt to pass through the birth canal and the cervix in their act of seeking an ovum to fertilize. And so on.

The use of marriage during a known infertile period on account of its infertility is also not an “unnatural act” by acting upon undue matter, as it is the exterior generative organs themselves which constitute “due matter” for sexual acts. This is the matter the primary causes (humans) act upon as objects, whereas the secondary causes have matter beyond this, namely, their procreative pair. In searching for an ovum, sperm cells attempt to make use of the matter of the woman's body (*i.e.* moving through the uterus); if the conditions of her body are *made* bad, or an ovum is *made* unavailable, or sperm cells are *made* unable to pursue an ovum by blocking them or making them unhealthy, this is contraceptive, as it has created matter unsuitable *for the secondary causes to pursue their ends or has harmed the secondary causes themselves*. It is not, however, the creation of “undue matter” for a sexual act, except in a metaphorical sense. In fact, it is only because there is due matter that such an act can be properly called “contraceptive.”

If a contraceptive act is not “acting on undue matter,” much less will an act without such an intervention be an act on undue matter. Rather, a conjugal act done together with the condition of infertility not caused by a positive intervention is simply a natural act, even if the infertility is desirable and chosen as a condition for doing the act itself. This is what is involved in NFP.

To reiterate: *contraception is a positive intervention which intends to harm the well-functioning of the secondary causes of procreation as such and the processes which dispose them for union with their reproductive pair in view of restricting or eliminating the possibility of*

for therapeutic reasons – is legitimate if it is sufficiently clear that male seed can still substantially access the cervix and that no substantial reduction of access is intended.)

*conception in a freely chosen sexual act between a man and a woman as such.*⁵⁴ This definition is altogether unsuited to describe NFP.

We are left then concluding that “NFP” – as individual acts, and as a bundle of acts, non-acts, and circumstances united by a more general intention towards a particular family situation, is not and cannot be included under the heading of “unnatural vice.”

As it stands, the normal case of using NFP is that a particular couple wishes to have relations for various non-procreative goods (affective/social goods, health, pleasure, etc.) and wishes these acts not to result in conception. It is simply to choose not to have relations during fertile times to avoid having more children, and to choose to have relations during infertile times to pursue other goods. Abstinence from relations during fertile times is unobjectionable in itself. Having relations during an infertile time very much seems conducive to the end of avoiding conception from a conjugal act and also conducive to the pursuit of other goods which can be procured from relations. The hierarchy of ends within the act itself remains unaffected, as it is a natural act, even though the hierarchy of ends in the moral agent (the one doing the act) does not match. So – what is the problem?

The questions which remain are whether the pursuit of such non-procreative goods are sufficient to excuse the marriage act, and whether the motivations for avoiding children are sufficient. These questions are taken up in subsequent chapters. However, given how widespread is the error of conflating NFP with contraception in diverse ways, and given how damaging that error can be, more time is warranted in explaining the difference both in causal structure and in relation to the faculty’s end.

An Analogy with Agriculture: NFP’s Causal Structure

An additional example of acts with different causal structures which have similar outcomes can help to elucidate the distinction between preventing conception and occasioning the failure of conception.

Trees have their own natural intention toward growth, like gametes have toward procreative union. If a farmer were to plant a tree in good soil found in a climate that he knew was ill-suited to its growth (such as not enough sunlight or rain) so that the tree would fail to grow due to the lack of good weather, we would not say that the farmer prevented its growth so much as we would say *the tree failed to grow* because of the bad climate. We would also say that its lack of growth was *intentionally occasioned* by the farmer. Suppose further that his goal was simply to enjoy planting trees but did not desire them ever to grow, and so he repeated this many times, always avoiding planting trees in good weather, until one day he knew it was the right time to plant a tree that would grow. This is like NFP, which disposes the sexual act to fail to achieve what nature intends by using the condition of infertility until such a time as it seems right to attempt conception by using marriage during a known fertile time.

⁵⁴ Note that a woman might lawfully take a “contraceptive pill” not only for reasons aside from preventing conception which actually have nothing to do with ovulation (which decision would require sufficient motivation, especially given the temptation to begin tacitly willing the effect of infertility in conjugal acts as instrumentally caused by the pill, thus drifting into sin), but she might even use such a pill *in favor of conception*. Suppose a 42-year-old woman’s husband goes away for months at a time working on a fishing vessel; she wants to have one more child, and so she takes a “contraceptive” pill when he goes away for work in order to prevent ovulation in view of attempting to conceive later. Such a practice may not be advisable for medical or practical reasons, but this use of “the pill” would not be contraceptive.

On the other hand, if the farmer planted the same tree in good soil found in a climate conducive to growth but then covered the tree with a tarp so that the necessary amount of sunlight or water could not reach it, or he poured acid on the tree so that it became sick and therefore could not grow, we would say that *the farmer prevented the growth of the tree*; it is not merely that the tree failed to grow, the farmer intervened in the system in which the tree is naturally supposed to grow so that it would be unable to do so, instead of an internal principle of the tree failing to achieve its purpose merely due to something inside of the ecosystem not being conducive thereto. This is analogous to contraception, which is a positive intervention that prevents the success of what nature intends for the gametes in the sexual act.

The point of this analogy is to help illumine the difference between preventing success and intentionally occasioning failure. Of course, trees can morally be covered with tarps, poisoned with acid, planted in cement, or even cut down. The moral difference with procreation is that humans are not set over other humans or the means by which they are generated to the extent we are set over trees and their growth.

An Analogy with Communication: NFP’s Pseudo-Frustration of a Faculty

An additional case of using a faculty in a natural way while willing its failure to achieve its natural purpose by targeted action can help to explain how NFP is not a perversion of the sexual faculty. It will also help us to begin exploring another important aspect of the problem which will preoccupy us in the following pages.

The sexual faculty can be compared to the faculty of communication. Each has its associated organs and powers and natural, proper ends, and they regard “another” rather than oneself. Each also has its misuses and its perversions. A misuse of communication would be idle speech – speaking when there is insufficient reason to speak such that it is undue, speaking simply for the immoderate pleasure of speaking. Obvious misuses of the sexual faculty would include having relations at an inappropriate time or in an inappropriate place. Contraception, insofar as it is the perversion of a faculty, is analogous to lying. In a lie, the use of the communicative faculty is perverted by introducing falsehood into one’s communication in order to subvert that faculty’s purpose, viz., the communication of truth. Contraception perverts the sexual faculty by destroying the possibility for procreation, the proper and primary end of the sexual act and the exclusive end of the sexual faculty as such.⁵⁵

The presumption upon natural (or non-contraceptive) infertility seems to be like telling the truth, perhaps in an obscure way, to gain some good, meanwhile hoping and even knowing that the listener will not understand what is said (a “broad mental reservation”), as opposed to staying silent (abstinence) or telling a lie (contraception or other unnatural vice). One can certainly wish the listener not to understand the truth which one tells, and one can even use deceptive language to avoid this from occurring. Of course, broad mental reservations may not be used indiscriminately: they require sufficient justification. In some cases, one has a clear right to be told the plain truth.

⁵⁵ It seems an extension of this analogy to “frivolous contraception” is also possible – where one uses a contraceptive method when it would not be necessary to prevent conception (i.e. using a pill when the woman has had a hysterectomy). This would be like lying for fun, knowing the listener would misunderstand the truth and believe the same falsehood which is communicated by the lie. It seems that one may not presume upon misunderstanding in this way, nor presume upon infertility in this way.

Is NFP the sexual version of ineffective communication, or even of broad mental reservations – licit, despite the intention for the faculty not to achieve its purpose, but requiring sufficient justification? Or is it like “idle speech” of some sort, unjustifiable due to a natural sort of excess and inordinateness? Does the good being sought have anything to do with the act’s lawfulness, unlike with speech except insofar as justification is needed for the use of broad mental reservations?

The position I propose here is that intentionally infertile natural conjugal acts are analogous to broad mental reservations and are in some cases analogous to idle speech. This subsequently requires a double justification for the use of such acts. On the one hand, there must be a compelling reason for not wanting the act to succeed in its chief purpose (procreation), despite using it without perverting the faculty (by contraception).⁵⁶ On the other hand, there must also be an adequate motivation for using the act in this or that particular instance, which I will later argue is contained only in a legitimate need for the relaxation of concupiscence other than to pay the debt when requested.

An objection might be raised to the analogy with communication, specifically as to its fittingness given that it is not an abuse of the faculty of communication to say something false to “undue matter,” such as an inanimate or unconscious object, or a person who is asleep. However, this simply shows that the analogy has its limitations – speaking to a rock is not actually a use of the communicative faculty on account of communication’s total dependence upon reason, whereas the use of the sexual faculty occurs based merely on biological forces. One could only lie to a rock if he thought the rock could understand him. The communicative faculty is rooted in the intellect, while the sexual faculty is rooted in the body as informed by the vegetative soul. A further difference is that truth-claims have various levels of import (from light to grave) and intentions for lying have varying degrees of goodness and evil (i.e. saving a life, defrauding a bank), while every human life in principle is of equal value in itself and is always of great importance. This is why lies can be venial sins or mortal sins but contraception (and other unnatural vices) are mortal sins.⁵⁷

It is important to note that, while linguistic conventions that are strained by an abnormal use of them, as is done in broad mental reservations (such as using the word “house” to refer to one’s family – i.e., “There are no Jews in my house,” meaning, “There are no Jews in my family,”) this is a dimension where analogy breaks down with respect to NFP. One may be inclined to say that NFP is not contraceptive because there is simply less probability of conception, or that conception is still theoretically possible. While these conditions with respect to fertility do obtain, they are not what makes NFP to be non-contraceptive; rather, it is the lack of any action upon the reproductive system in view of interfering with its well-functioning that is the key. Plenty of chemical and even surgical interventions that are clearly contraceptive can and do fail to prevent conception – yet they are still contraceptive. And as science progresses, one could eventually know with functionally perfect certitude that conception on a given day is impossible short of a miracle. The point is that in NFP there is no intervention which perverts the use of the sexual faculty, preventing it from reaching its natural end, there is simply a use of it which intentionally occasions its failure to do so, as with a broad mental reservation.

⁵⁶ It should be noted that the analogy between sexual activity and language was not unknown to St. John Paul II.

⁵⁷ A more complex difficulty with the analogy relates to the intentionality of words, which are useful only by convention, unlike gametes which have power of themselves, though this does not seem to harm the value of the analogy with respect to the most important aspects. The faculty of communication simply works in a somewhat different way than the sexual faculty.

The Doctrine of *The Catechism of St. Thomas Aquinas*

We return to a central question: what would St. Thomas say about NFP? Several distinctions must be made before providing an answer, after which we will consider the recent magisterial literature and then find a solution for how to reconcile St. Thomas with common teaching. We look now at the text of *The Catechism of St. Thomas Aquinas* on the use of sex within marriage.

Moreover, it must be known that the Commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” not only forbids adultery but also every form of immodesty and impurity. There are some who say that intercourse between married persons is not devoid of sin. But this is heretical, for the Apostle says: “Let marriage be honorable in all and the bed undefiled.” (Hebrews 13:4) Not only is it devoid of sin, but for those in the state of grace it is meritorious for eternal life. Sometimes, however, it may be a venial sin, sometimes a mortal sin. When it is had with the intention of bringing forth offspring, it is an act of virtue. When it is had with the intent of rendering mutual comfort, it is an act of justice. When it is a cause of exciting lust, although within the limits of marriage, it is a venial sin; and when it goes beyond these limits, so as to intend intercourse with another if possible, it would be a mortal sin.⁵⁸

There are these four categories of the use of the marriage bed: virtue, justice, venial sin, and mortal sin.

First there is “virtue,” which is dependent upon direct or “actual” or at least “virtual” procreative intention willed in an act of intercourse.⁵⁹ The generosity of the spouses towards the possibility of receiving children and thus building up the community and raising souls to love and serve God is thereby manifested, making it “virtuous.”

Second, and most interestingly for us, there is “justice,” which is the case of the marital debt. The text here does not give a detailed explanation of the marital debt the way the *Commentary on the Sentences* does. A plain reading of the text, however, in particular due to the word “mutual” in the phrase “rendering mutual comfort,” implies that the request to have one’s concupiscence calmed is *just* insofar as it requests what is rightfully one’s own, which is the spouse’s body in marital union. It could be imagined here that such union is the due means of the preservation of oneself from the possibility of illicit sexual activity or even merely from annoying distraction from the normal pursuit of rational and social goods; to give this to one’s spouse is righteous, for the preservation of one’s spouse from sin and assisting him or her in pursuit of holiness is one of the main purposes of the sacrament of Matrimony. The one who renders the comfort is also comforted him or herself, thus contributing to the overall psychological health and friendship of the spouses. However, this is a deliberate eisegesis – it is

⁵⁸ *The Catechetical Instructions of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 80; trans. Collins, Joseph (1939), made available online by The Catholic Primer, 2004. Cf. *ST Suppl.*, q. 49, a. 4; see also *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, §328-329, which reiterates largely the same doctrine.

⁵⁹ I take here Fr. John Hardon, SJ’s definition of “virtual intention,” aware that there could be other ways to define the term. “An intention that was once made and continues to influence the act now being done. But it is not present to the person’s consciousness at the moment of performing the act. This kind of intention is sufficient for a human act to be voluntary and therefore morally responsible.” See “Virtual Intention,” *John Hardon’s Modern Catholic Dictionary* (Eternal Life), <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=37121>. To interrupt or stop a virtual intention towards children in one’s use of marriage would require some positive mental act or desire for such interruption, even if only vaguely.

quite clearly at odds with St. Thomas's intention. If he was disagreeing with his previous teaching on this point, we would expect him to be clear about it.

Third there is "venial sin," which is mere pleasure seeking (contradistinguished from the need to pay or receive the debt and also from the intention towards procreation), and fourth there is "mortal sin." These two cases are explained in the *Commentary on the Sentences* in the following way:

[If] pleasure be sought in such a way as to exclude the honesty of marriage, so that, to wit, it is not as a wife but as a woman that a man treats his wife, and that he is ready to use her in the same way if she were not his wife, it is a mortal sin; wherefore such a man is said to be too ardent a lover of his wife, because his ardor carries him away from the goods of marriage. If, however, he seek pleasure within the bounds of marriage, so that it would not be sought in another than his wife, it is a venial sin.⁶⁰

The case of venial sin in relation to the case of "justice" is what is most interesting for us in our inquiry. The meaning of "seeking pleasure" seems to indicate the use of sex to "recreate" within the bounds of marriage, and this must also in fact imply an absence of an actual or virtual procreative intention, or else it would be in the category of "virtue." In fact, "sexual recreation" is the very same "excitement of lust" which is spoken of in the *Catechism* text quoted above, and it is treated in the *Commentary on the Sentences* as a movement based on sexual appetite as opposed to a movement of reason which would entail virtue.⁶¹ This sort of sexual activity is an unnecessary and therefore demeritorious momentary inhibiting of the powers of reason and a movement toward the creation of a habit of such activity, together with the onset of a general dulling of the spiritual senses over time.⁶² Thus it is not *eutrapelia* either, which merely relaxes the mind through recreation but does not make one lose the power of reasoning altogether as does sexual union.⁶³ Any social goods which such recreational sexual activity can produce in the couple can and should be pursued by other means – and St. Thomas was certainly not unaware of the social or psychological benefits of conjugal activity, which point functions as the anchor for the contrary argument today, insofar as an argument is even made.⁶⁴

It is clear that for St. Thomas it is always a venial sin to request the debt, unless this be for the sake of procreation, and the spouse is morally obliged to pay the debt, even if the spouse does not presently wish to have children. St. Thomas would say that the one requesting the debt outside of this purpose would be owed its payment by strict or legal debt, and that this is simply a bad use of what one is owed by justice. Only the gravest sort of reason would allow for a spouse to withhold the payment of the debt; the analogy which comes to mind is the example St.

⁶⁰ *ST* Suppl., q. 49, a. 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² See *ST* II-II q. 153, a. 2, ad. 1; a. 5.

⁶³ *ST* II-II q. 168 a. 2 resp.

⁶⁴ See *SCG* III ch. 123, 6: "Furthermore, the greater that friendship is, the more solid and long-lasting will it be. Now, there seems to be the greatest friendship between husband and wife, for they are united not only in the act of fleshly union, which produces a certain gentle association even among beasts, but also in the partnership of the whole range of domestic activity. Consequently, as an indication of this, man must even 'leave his father and mother' for the sake of his wife, as is said in Genesis (2:24). Therefore, it is fitting for matrimony to be completely indissoluble." St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, ed. Joseph Kenny; trans. Vernon Bourke; (Hanover House: New York, 1955-1957).

Thomas gives of the rebel who wishes to claim his deposited sword, which return may be refused him.⁶⁵

While interiorly coherent reasoning, one is still left with the sense that this treatment simultaneously overstates the claim a spouse has on the other's body (viz., to use it for one's sin), and underappreciates the utility of the use of marriage in easing concupiscence insofar as marriage and its act exist secondarily for this end. Yet we should not easily stray from the teaching of St. Thomas, and indeed we see that some have clearly gone too far.

Some contemporary authorities, such as those seeking to popularize and promote the teachings of St. John Paul II on human sexuality, might even go so far as to imply that the marital act is a *spiritual* act or experience, which is utterly foreign to the thought of St. Thomas and to the general moral-ascetical-mystical tradition.⁶⁶ On the contrary, it is noted by Pius XII that the use of mutual abstinence in marriage is helpful for freeing oneself for prayer in a way that is superior to the habitual use of marriage.⁶⁷ Thus we can certainly understand the conclusion of St. Thomas that the desire to use pleasure in the marital act (and to use the marital act itself) is legitimate only when annexed to the payment of the marital debt or to an intention to conceive children by the sexual act, especially given that this is rooted so deeply in the teaching of St. Augustine.⁶⁸ Besides, the more one enjoys an act chosen under the impulse of reason as opposed to passion, the more virtuous that act will be, as one is desiring it with his whole self, rather than forcing a part of himself by a kind of violence.⁶⁹

The exegesis of St. Thomas is simple enough, but the major question which remains for us is this: can the request for the marital debt be licit without at least a virtual intention towards having children?

If we follow the line given in the *Commentary on the Sentences*, the answer is clearly “no” – an actual or at least a virtual intention is required in favor of children, the *bonum prolis*, in every sexual act initiated on the part of both spouses, or else there is sin, including making the request for the marital debt (but not in fulfilling the duty of paying it). This is also essentially the doctrine St. Thomas gives in the *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*. This line would certainly exclude NFP used in favor of preventing conception.

⁶⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 120, a. 1; the treatment of the “bottom line” regarding cases of requesting and refusing the marital debt goes beyond the scope of this book. St. Thomas does treat the issue at some length in the *Commentary on the Sentences*.

⁶⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 186, a. 4: “The religious state requires the removal of whatever hinders man from devoting himself entirely to God’s service. Now the use of sexual union hinders the mind from giving itself wholly to the service of God, and this for two reasons. First, on account of its vehement delectation, which by frequent repetition increases concupiscence, as also the Philosopher observes (*Ethic.* iii, 12): and hence it is that the use of venery withdraws the mind from that perfect intentness on tending to God. Augustine expresses this when he says (*Solil.* i, 10): ‘I consider that nothing so casts down the manly mind from its height as the fondling of women, and those bodily contacts which belong to the married state.’” (The second reason is related to the preoccupation of caring for one’s household, which arises from marriage and offspring.) See also *ST Suppl.*, q. 41, a. 3, ad. 3.

⁶⁷ Pope Pius XII, *Sacra Virginitas* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1954) §38: “Or rather does not the Apostle Paul admit [1 Cor. 7:5] that they have the right of abstaining for a time from the use of marriage, so that they may be more free for prayer, precisely because such abstinence gives greater freedom to the soul which wishes to give itself over to spiritual thoughts and prayer to God?”

⁶⁸ Following on the analogy with communication, an analogy with digestion could also be made, namely, that to eat only for pleasure without any bodily benefit foreseen, i.e., intentional overeating, would also be sin. See *ST II-II* q. 148, and *SCG III* ch. 127, 1. However, the digestive faculty is not structured entirely the same way as the sexual faculty, and this analogy faces the similar problems which are explored in Chapter Three with regards to *solam voluptatem*.

⁶⁹ *ST I-II*, q. 24, a. 3, ad. 1.

However, for the recent magisterial literature the answer very much seems to be “yes,” even though it does not ever address the “request for the debt” as such; if mapped onto the doctrine of the *Catechism of St. Thomas* we would probably want to say “yes” because it is still a matter of justice, namely, asking for what one is due.⁷⁰ We can see a pathway through to accepting the liceity of NFP as a recourse to infertile periods while still substantially saving the teaching of St. Thomas, though the doctrine we find in the *Commentary on the Sentences* and earlier literature on the request for the marital debt being necessarily sinful absent a virtual or actual procreative intention would need to be abandoned. (I have already made a brief argument that the strength of St. Thomas’ argument – which is a summary of all the arguments of earlier authorities, especially St. Augustine – is less than what we would expect, including in terms of Biblical exegesis – commutative justice renders what is due. The claim that it is due by “concession” or is necessarily a sinful “superfluity” is simply not as robust a case as St. Thomas normally makes.⁷¹)

However, this still does not necessarily mean that the marital act, in the context of NFP used to avoid pregnancy, does not require any special justification of its own. This remains yet to be seen, and I will argue that when intentionally avoiding pregnancy the marital act does indeed require a special motivation to avoid venial sin.

⁷⁰ It is perhaps worth noting that St. Thomas never addresses the issue of the marital debt in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* or other writings in the way that he does in the *Commentary on the Sentences*. He does address it at some length in the *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*.

⁷¹ Those tempted to take the pure Thomistic line here are urged to be cautious, not only for the problem stated with the intrinsic weight, but also due to the extrinsic weight of the tradition after St. Thomas, including St. Alphonsus (who makes a similar exegesis on 1 Corinthians 7:6-7 as myself in *De Matrimonio*, §882,) and several popes, as we will see. One obscure but helpful manual which gives an argument against the Augustinian-Thomistic line is Reiner Sasserath, *Cursus Theologiae Moralis*, vol. 4, p. 491 (1771). He argues that, since marriage was instituted partly to help one avoid fornication, to hold that requesting the debt is immoral would actually be counterproductive – it would be a “*laqueus animarum*,” a “snare of souls.” He does, however, uphold a sensible reading of Innocent XI’s condemnation (which we will read momentarily), arguing that pleasure is ordered to procreation and that therefore inverting this order, while remaining an act licit in itself, involves a perverse will, thus rendering the act a venial sin. Sasserath does, however, against St. Alphonsus, think that health alone is a sufficient motive for the marital act.

CHAPTER TWO

MAGISTERIAL SOURCES ON NFP

Early Sources

The investigation into magisterial texts on NFP begins with the famous list of laxist propositions condemned by Innocent XI on March 2, 1679, in the bull *Sanctissimus Dominus*.⁷² The bull includes one opinion seemingly addressing what I have called “sexual recreation.” The bull condemned a list of theses, especially associated with the Jesuits, as “at least scandalous and pernicious in practice,” attaching an automatic excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See to the propagation or defense of the condemned items.

It is the 9th proposition which we must consider. It reads: “The conjugal act exercised only for pleasure (*solam voluptatem*) is completely devoid of all fault and venial defect.”⁷³ This significantly tracks the treatment of the topic by St. Thomas. A conjugal act undertaken not for procreation or not to pay the debt but simply because it is enjoyable does not fit into either of their systems.

Despite attempts to read into Innocent XI (and St. Thomas) a subtle teaching that acts which are altogether void of procreative intent (or the intention to pay of the debt when requested, at least by signs) can still be good if the pleasure desired is for the sake of a social or psychological good, there is a serious dearth of evidence for that position. To suggest that the idea of pursuing “affection” or “bonding” or any similar good is a justification for the act on their account, as if this was distinct from “pleasure” in the context of the teaching of the Angelic Doctor or Innocent XI is simply eisegetical.⁷⁴ While it is clear that for St. Thomas there are only

⁷² Of course, there are earlier magisterial treatments of marriage and the 6th Commandment with indirect bearing on the topic, but the place to start very much seems to be with Innocent XI.

⁷³ Denzinger-H. 2109 (quoted in Robert Fastiggi, *Catholic Sexual Morality*, Wipf and Stock (2018), 40). Original: “Opus Conjugii ob solam voluptatem exercitum omni penitus caret culpa, ac defectu veniali.” (The previous proposition also regards “pleasure alone,” in eating and drinking: “Comedere, et bibere usque ad satietatem ob solam voluptatem non est peccatum, modò non obsit valetudini, quia licitè potest appetitus naturalis suis actibus frui.”)

⁷⁴ See, for example, the undefended assertion made by Dr. Robert Fastiggi in his otherwise generally excellent book *Catholic Sexual Morality*, Wipf and Stock (2018), emphasis original: “On the other hand, he [St. Thomas Aquinas] believed marital intercourse would be sinful if pursued *only* for the purpose of pleasure and not for other goods such as procreation, fidelity, or spousal friendship. In this, he was expressing the common teaching of the Church, which reappears in Pope Innocent XI’s 1679 censure of the following laxist thesis: The conjugal act exercised only for pleasure is completely devoid of all fault and venial defect.” (Robert Fastiggi, *Catholic Sexual Morality*, 40) If Dr. Fastiggi has positive evidence that the pursuit of “spousal friendship” absent both procreative intent and the obligation to pay the debt is the true thought of St. Thomas or Innocent XI, despite neither saying as much, he does not share it. It evidently rests on St. Thomas’s allusion to spousal friendship in the *SCG*, which we have already noted, and which does not say what Dr. Fastiggi seems to imply it says. The first time that “fostering affection” is given as legitimate motive for the use of marriage by a notable moralist comes with Fr. Jean-Pierre Gury, SJ’s *Compendium Theologiae Moralis* (second edition, appearing in 1852), no. 933-934. (See Jordan Olver, “Love and the Sexual Sphere: A Study of the Relationship Between Love and Sexuality in Karol Wojtyła’s *Love and Responsibility*,” University of Saskatchewan, 2006.) Gury tries to avoid the scope of Innocent XI’s censure, viz., *solam voluptatem*, by allowing for a motive such as the expression of affection to modify the act, for then the act is no longer done for “pleasure alone” but for pleasure *and* for another motive, namely, expressing affection. However, it is not clear that the plenary sense of St. Alphonsus’s teaching on the matter, whom he cites in support of his position, would allow for “pleasure and another good” (in this sense) to excuse the marriage act, though this would

two licit motivations for the use of marriage (procreation and to pay the debt), it is less clear that Innocent XI excludes other motivations, as the interpretive tradition of Innocent XI shows, wherein many authors have tried to understand “pleasure alone” as something much narrower, thus allowing for motivations which include pleasure and other goods, or to drive a wedge between pleasure itself and affective goods which in some way depend upon pleasure. We will examine the *solam voluptatem* debate in Chapter Three. Here we simply note that this condemned proposition exists and is in the background as a kind of anchor or boundary.

The 19th century saw a burst of interest in questions related to the use of marriage and to bioethical questions related to pregnancy, following or concomitant with notable advances in gynecology.⁷⁵ It seems France was an epicenter for these concerns, including those related to abortion. The first time Rome spoke on the matter of NFP as such was in 1853 through the Sacred Penitentiary, which has historically dealt with certain questions of how to minister within the sacrament of confession.⁷⁶ The Bishop of Amiens asked, “Should those spouses be reprehended who make use of marriage only on those days when (in the opinion of some doctors) conception is impossible?” The response, from the Sacred Penitentiary: “After mature examination, we have decided that such spouses should not be disturbed [or disquieted], provided they do nothing that impedes generation.”⁷⁷ While this is not a positive endorsement, it does show an openness to the practice of NFP by telling confessors not to correct spouses who are taking recourse exclusively to naturally infertile periods to make use of their marital rights in order to obtain sexual goods without the realistic possibility of procreation as long as they are not practicing unnatural vice.

The second source is also from the Sacred Penitentiary. Three questions were submitted by a priest from Angers, which we find in the notes of the theological consultant, Fr. Andreas Steinhuber, S.J., dated March 17, 1874:

Is it permissible for married couples to avoid procreation only at the time when, due to the amount of time away from menstruation, they assume that conception will not follow, apart from all onanistic practice? What is to be thought of the practice of the confessors who, with spouses making confession, counsel the above-mentioned course of action in marriage, lest they slip into onanism? Is it allowed for the confessor to permit positively if he is asked, or to tolerate negatively by keeping silent about whether married couples should act in this way if he does not otherwise hope to withdraw them from onanism?⁷⁸

Thus, it is first asked if the use of marriage during infertility is ever licit without regard to intention/exclusivity, second if it is licit for confessors to counsel couples to use marriage only during such times from fear of onanism (contraception, specifically by withdrawal), and finally whether this latter method may be passively tolerated or positively suggested to stop onanism.

be a plausible reading of Sánchez, one of St. Alphonsus’s chief authorities on marriage. Furthermore, and perhaps notably, Gury does not discuss the use of marriage in the context of periodic continence used to avoid procreation.

⁷⁵ Most significantly for the present book, scientific theorizing about when conception is and is not possible began in earnest in 1845. See Fehring, Richard J. “A Brief History of Natural Family Planning,” *Natural Family Planning: Current Medical Research*, v. 25, Summer/Fall, 2014.

⁷⁶ See Fr. Brian Harrison, O.S., “Is Natural Family Planning a Heresy?” *This Rock* (Catholic Answers, Inc.: El Cajon, California, February 2005), 12-16.

⁷⁷ Sacred Penitentiary, March 2, 1853 (quoted in Brian Harrison, “Is Natural Family Planning a Heresy?”).

⁷⁸ Sacred Penitentiary, *Archivio del Teologo*, 23, Y.5, p. 24r. March 17, 1874. (Trans. Anne Stephens). Fr. Steinhuber frequently cites St. Alphonsus and Sánchez; his comments are subsequently reflected in the 1880 judgment.

Despite the intricacies of these dubia, the question as formulated in the 1880 responsum reads, “Whether it is licit to make use of marriage only on those days when it is more difficult for conception to take occur?” The reply from the Sacred Penitentiary was this time even more “progressive” in its response: “Married couples who use their marriage right in the aforesaid manner are not to be disturbed, and the confessor may suggest the opinion in question, cautiously, however, to those married people whom he has tried in vain by other means to dissuade from the detestable crime of onanism.”⁷⁹ Here, we see that not only are couples not to be disturbed when using NFP, but they can even be cautiously encouraged to use NFP, albeit only as a solution to onanism. That it is allowed for confessors to encourage this practice means that in the judgment of the Sacred Penitentiary, it does not constitute an evil in itself, even though the permission for such encouragement is here tied to a particular intention, namely, preventing onanism.⁸⁰

There is a glaring absence on the part of the Sacred Penitentiary’s response to address the point in the question about either spouse shrinking from having a large family. It is altogether ignored.

Yet in 1932, two years after the infamous 1930 Lambeth Conference (where the Anglican Communion decided to declare the liceity of contraception) and very shortly after the promulgation of *Casti Connubii* (to be examined shortly), the Sacred Penitentiary somewhat clarified its position on this point in response to a dubium which read: “Whether the practice is licit in itself by which spouses who, for just and grave causes, wish to avoid offspring in a morally upright way, abstain from the use of marriage – by mutual consent and with upright motives – except on those days when, according to certain recent [medical] theories, conception is impossible for natural reasons.” The answer came back simply: “Provided for by the Response of the Sacred Penitentiary of June 16, 1880.”⁸¹ With this responsum, the Sacred Penitentiary taught that it is licit to space births by recourse to natural periods of infertility, provided that there are just and grave causes to avoid children and the spouses possess upright motives. The distinction between these “upright motives” and the “grave and just causes” is unclear on the part of the dubium. However, as we will see, there can indeed be other considerations which would make use of this distinction. What remains unclear on the part of the Sacred Penitentiary is whether avoiding procreation is an item for the confessor to tolerate or to suggest cautiously.

These three interventions of the Sacred Penitentiary can be summarized as follows. Confessors are instructed: first, to tolerate the practice by not correcting it; second, to tolerate the practice and that they may positively suggest it to help recidivistic onanists; third, to allow or even possibly to encourage the use of periodic continence with upright motives to avoid conception for grave reasons.

⁷⁹ Sacred Penitentiary, June 16, 1880 (quoted in Brian Harrison, “Is Natural Family Planning a Heresy?”). It is to be noted that the publicly available information I have been able to find from the records Apostolic Penitentiary does not include the dubium or responsum of 1880 itself or other related materials except Steinhuber’s 1874 notes. More information certainly exists in the archives but is presently not available for consultation.

⁸⁰ The conversation about a confessor suggesting a lesser evil exceeds the scope of the book, and it does not seem to be the case here as to the intrinsic nature of the practice, rather only potentially according to the practice as it would actually be used (that is, excessively). Griese has some discussion of this on a theoretical and practical level. See *Rhythm in Marriage and Christian Morality*, p. 99-111.

⁸¹ Sacred Penitentiary, July 20, 1932 (quoted in Brian Harrison, “Is Natural Family Planning a Heresy?”).

Modern Sources

The papal literature on NFP begins in earnest with Pius XII.⁸² However, a brief note must be made on Pius XI's *Casti Connubii*, as the text has sometimes been interpreted as a condemnation of NFP. The text comes from paragraph 59:

Holy Church knows well that not infrequently one of the parties is sinned against rather than sinning, when for a grave cause he or she reluctantly allows the perversion of the right order. In such a case, there is no sin, provided that, mindful of the law of charity, he or she does not neglect to seek to dissuade and to deter the partner from sin. Nor are those considered as acting against nature who in the married state use their right in the proper manner although on account of natural reasons either of time or of certain defects, new life cannot be brought forth. For in matrimony as well as in the use of the matrimonial rights there are also secondary ends, such as mutual aid, the cultivating of mutual love, and the quieting of concupiscence which husband and wife are not forbidden to consider so long as they are subordinated to the primary end and so long as the intrinsic nature of the act is preserved.⁸³

Paragraph 59 itself comes after a brief discussion of unnatural vice, which Pius XI describes several times in the preceding paragraphs (§53-§58) as frustrating the conjugal act. Onanism is specifically mentioned (§55).⁸⁴

This paragraph first discusses a special case of the matter considered in the foregoing paragraphs. What if one spouse is inclined to practice unnatural vice by using the other? Either party could practice onanism (albeit this is more difficult for the woman) or self-mutilation, or the woman could either prevent sperm from entering the uterus by a spermicide, or she could remove the sperm from the birth canal after the act, or could in some other way make herself infertile, such as by an IUD or by inducing functional hypothalamic amenorrhea. (Of course, she could also take hormonal contraceptive pills, though this method was not available at the time the encyclical was published.) The Pope allows for the unwilling spouse to use the marriage act even given these circumstances or foreseen acts, so long as he or she is not consenting thereto and attempts to dissuade his or her spouse. (This does not include the use of barriers, which are a special case, as they change the object acted upon because there is not an integral one-flesh union of man and woman, rather there is an act upon a third item.)⁸⁵

Pius XI also deliberately excludes the opinion that infertility due to “time” or “certain defects” in themselves constitute grounds for judging a conjugal act as unnatural. This is in line with the doctrine of St. Thomas, as we have seen already, but this does not address clearly

⁸² Oddly, Leo XIII's *Arcanum* is minimally relevant for our considerations here.

⁸³ Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, §59 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1930). What is more, Pius XI was a notoriously precise man, frequently interrupting himself during allocutions to go back and correct a remark to make it more accurate – certainly, had he meant to condemn the use of periodic continence for the spacing of births, he would have simply said so.

⁸⁴ Onanism, or “withdrawal,” is better characterized as a special kind of self-abuse rather than contraception, as the act is, ultimately, not upon the woman but “upon oneself” so to speak. This violates the “intrinsic nature of the act,” in the language of *Casti Connubii*.

⁸⁵ See Joseph M. Arias and Fr. Basil Cole O.P.'s article, “The Vademecum and Cooperation in Condomistic Intercourse,” *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly*, vol. 11, Issue 2, Summer 2011, p. 301-328. In my view, spermicides should not be counted as a barrier properly speaking, as they are better described as being “with” the act rather than as the thing which is acted upon. However, if they were a barrier, there would be implications for the need for active resistance, as Arias and Cole discuss; but the case seems unclear enough that this could not be insisted upon as a grave precept.

whether the choice to pursue relations only during such periods and on account of the infertility which they contain is sinful. It is the last two qualifications, and in particular their distinction, which is sometimes misunderstood as condemning NFP – “so long as they are subordinated to the primary end,” meaning subordinate to the procreative end, *and* “so long as the intrinsic nature of the act is preserved,” namely, there is not contraception of some kind, broadly considered. Why the distinction? Presumably, as Fr. Harrison notes, if Pius XI had wanted to condemn NFP he could have and would have used much clearer language.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the context of the Sacred Penitentiary decisions (especially the one issued very shortly after *Casti Connubii*) makes the anti-NFP interpretation extremely unlikely. How then do we explain this distinction between the act’s “intrinsic nature” and its “subordination to the primary end”?

It turns out the English translation of the encyclical is misleading. We read a much clearer doctrine in the *editio typica*, the text as it is found in the official records of the Holy See (the *Acta Sanctae Sedis*):

Optime etiam novit Sancta Ecclesia, non raro alterum ex coniugibus pati potius quam patrare peccatum, cum ob gravem omnino causam perversionem recti ordinis permittit, quam ipse non vult, eumque ideo sine culpa esse, modo etiam tunc caritatis legem meminerit et alterum a peccando arcere et removere ne negligat. Neque contra naturae ordinem agere ii dicendi sunt coniuges, qui iure suo recta et naturali ratione utuntur, etsi ob naturales sive temporis sive quorundam defectuum causas nova inde vita oriri non possit. Habentur enim tam in ipso matrimonio quam in coniugalis iuris usu etiam secundarii fines, ut sunt mutuuum adiutorium mutuusque fovendus amor et concupiscentiae sedatio, quos intendere coniuges minime vetantur, dummodo salva semper sit intrinseca illius actus natura ideoque eius ad primarium finem debita ordinatio.⁸⁷

The word “ideoque” clarifies the relationship between the “intrinseca illius actus natura” and the “ordination” to the “primarium finem.” A better English translation of this section would read something like: “...as long as the intrinsic nature of the act is preserved and is therefore subject to the primary end.” The “therefore” – “ideoque” – connects the sexual act as integral in its externalities with its very subjection to the primary end, the *bonum prolis*. To have a sexual act whose intrinsic nature is preserved *entails* subordination to the primary end. They are not separate items, one regarding the physical character of the act, and the other regarding the interior disposition of the will. The latter necessarily flows from the former. This is also reflected in the Italian⁸⁸ and Spanish⁸⁹ editions of the text, though the French is as unclear as the English.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ See Brian Harrison, “Is Natural Family Planning a Heresy?”: “For the sake of clarity, he almost certainly would have used the terminology of the theologians of that time: sinful *onanismus* on the one hand and on the other hand *continencia periodica* or *usus exclusivus temporum agenneseos* to refer to what we now call NFP. He would have stated unambiguously that the latter as well as the former was now to be judged sinful and unacceptable.”

⁸⁷ *AAS*, vol. 22 (1930), p. 561. <https://www.vatican.va/archive/aas/documents/AAS-22-1930-ocr.pdf>. The phrase “quos intendere coniuges minime vetantur” is also not translated well – it might be better translated as, “which couples are not forbidden *to intend*.” The hypothesis I propose comes close to running afoul of this formulation but ultimately is in line with it, even if it is a somewhat strained reading – one may certainly intend such ends, as long as one of the two motives apart from procreation is also intended.

⁸⁸ “...fina che ai coniugi non è proibito di volere, purché sia sempre rispettata la natura intrinseca dell’atto e, per conseguenza, la sua subordinazione al fine principale.” https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html

⁸⁹ “...cuya consecución en manera alguna está vedada a los esposos, siempre que quede a salvo la naturaleza intrínseca del acto y, por ende, su subordinación al fin primario.” https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/es/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html

Together with the context of paragraph 59, both in the encyclical and in the broader moment in which the encyclical was promulgated, the *editio typica* suffices to demonstrate definitively that Pius XI is not referring here to NFP but is rather referring to onanism and other unnatural acts which of their nature are not subordinated to the primary end because their structure does not admit of conception, unlike the natural or circumstantial infertility he discusses in the same paragraph.⁹¹

While it is true Pius XI notes that the couple may pursue the secondary ends which he notes, like mutual aid, cultivating love, and relieving concupiscence, while evidently including having recourse to infertile periods to obtain these goods and avoid conception (which is the only natural reading of the text), he does not search out the proper motivation for pursuing those secondary ends in this way (conjugal activity) rather than another (i.e. prayer, fasting, works in the apostolate, etc.) in the context of such recourse. In short, he does not explain why one may engage in a particular sexual act knowing and willing that it will be sterile; rather, he only notes that there are other ends which can be pursued, and that using marriage during a known infertile time for these purposes is not immoral in itself.

Pius XII gives us two speeches to analyze, made within a month of each other. The first is the more famous of the two. It was delivered to Italian midwives:

It is necessary first of all to consider two hypotheses. If the application of that theory implies that husband and wife may use their matrimonial right even during the days of natural sterility no objection can be made. In this case they do not hinder or jeopardize in any way the consummation of the natural act and its ulterior natural consequences. It is exactly in this that the application of the theory, of which We are speaking, differs essentially from the abuse already mentioned, which consists in the perversion of the act itself. If, instead, husband and wife go further, that is, limiting the conjugal act exclusively to those periods, then their conduct must be examined more closely.⁹²

Pius XII continues on to describe the necessity and quality of sufficient motives for recourse to periodic continence, which he takes quite seriously and which we will examine shortly. But here in this paragraph, he has clearly taught that NFP can be used without sin. The very next month, he gave a speech to a congress on the family, repeating his approval:

On the other hand, the Church knows how to consider with sympathy and understanding the real difficulties of married life in our day. Therefore in Our last discourse on conjugal morality We have affirmed the legitimacy and at the same time the limits – actually very large – of the regulation of births, which, contrary to so-called “birth control,” is compatible with God’s law. Indeed, one can hope (but in this matter the Church naturally leaves the judgment to medical science) that there might be able to be given that lawful

⁹⁰ There are some materials related to the drafting of *Casti Connubii* found in the Jesuit archives in Rome (ARSI), however, they appear to be minimally useful for understanding the history of the construction and translation of the document. In general, the translation of encyclicals at this time was not the healthiest operation. For example, see the reflections of Fr. Oswald Von Nell-Breuning, S.J., the ghostwriter of *Quadragesimo Anno*, which encyclical was published only a few months after *Casti Connubii*: <https://crisismagazine.com/vault/documentation-the-drafting-of-quadragesimo-anno>

⁹¹ My own taxonomy differs slightly from Pius XI’s in *Casti Connubii* in that I distinguish between the intrinsic nature of the act as regards due matter (man as man completing the act with woman as woman) and as regards positive intervention upon secondary causes of conception and their means (contraception), but this is a refinement of semantics rather than a substantive disagreement.

⁹² Pope Pius XII, “Address to Participants in the Conference of the Italian Catholic Union of Obstetricians” (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1951)

method a sufficient basis, and the most recent information seems to confirm such a hope.⁹³

Such was the doctrine of Pius XII on the issue.

Pope St. Paul VI brought the next major document to address the topic, in *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. While the encyclical is mainly concerned with explaining the illicit character of artificial contraception, the document also takes time to explain the difference between such methods and NFP, as well as to bring up, yet again, the need for sufficient motivation for using such a practice in the first place:

If therefore there are well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile, thus controlling birth in a way which does not in the least offend the moral principles which We have just explained. Neither the Church nor her doctrine is inconsistent when she considers it lawful for married people to take advantage of the infertile period but condemns as always unlawful the use of means which directly prevent conception, even when the reasons given for the latter practice may appear to be upright and serious. In reality, these two cases are completely different. In the former the married couple rightly use a faculty provided them by nature. In the latter they obstruct the natural development of the generative process. It cannot be denied that in each case the married couple, for acceptable reasons, are both perfectly clear in their intention to avoid children and wish to make sure that none will result. But it is equally true that it is exclusively in the former case that husband and wife are ready to abstain from intercourse during the fertile period as often as for reasonable motives the birth of another child is not desirable. And when the infertile period recurs, they use their married intimacy to express their mutual love and safeguard their fidelity toward one another. In doing this they certainly give proof of a true and authentic love.⁹⁴

The Pope clearly stresses the character of the natural defect of periodic infertility standing in opposition to the artificial defect introduced by contraception. One is taking advantage of a function of the well-functioning of the body itself, on the part of the woman, while the other is an intervention which destroys or inhibits the proper functioning of the faculty. He sees serious reasons (physical or psychological or external) as justification for avoiding conception by having recourse to periodic continence for conjugal acts, and relations during such infertile times as being useful for the expression of mutual love and, let it be noted, for the safeguarding of mutual fidelity.

⁹³ Pope Pius XII, "Speech to 'Fronte della Famiglia,'" *AAS*, vol. 43, 859 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1951) The translation is my own. See also Pius XII, "Allocution to the 7th International Congress of Hematology, *AAS* vol. 50, 732-740 (1958), where he explicitly discusses the Ogino-Knaus method of NFP and clarifies Pius XI's openness to NFP. Other material is present in the Apostolic Penitentiary archives which discusses Pius XII's interventions over the Ogino-Knaus method with Brazilian bishops and a priest from Spain, the texts of which I hope to publish in due time.

⁹⁴ Pope St. Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, §16 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1968); note that in this paragraph the Pope also gives a passing treatment of the marital debt, though in vague language. An attempt to ground the popular notion that the expression of affection suffices of itself to excuse the marriage act is tenuous; it expects too much from this passing mention of "how couples behave" – which mention is also paired with the "safeguarding of fidelity." Torquing these lines to try to make Paul VI a singular foundation at odds with the tradition is just to give this brief indicative allusion an unnatural amount of import.

A word of caution is warranted regarding the language of *Humanae Vitae* which has become so popular, namely, describing conjugal acts as needing to contain or respect the “unitive” and “procreative” aspects or dimensions. This way of speaking has proven itself over the decades to be rather unfortunate in that it has perhaps caused more confusion than clarity in the long run, not unlike the popular treatment of grave sin as requiring sufficient “knowledge” and “freedom.” While certainly a legitimate way to speak about the nature of properly ordered conjugal acts, the phraseology leaves much room for ambiguity about its precise meaning and thus its moral significance. It is certainly insufficient for the kind of exposition being undertaken in the present work, which is why it is not made use of.

The last major papal text on NFP comes from Pope St. John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*, notwithstanding any other references to periodic continence made by the Pontiff throughout his voluminous teachings on marriage and sexuality.

When, instead, by means of recourse to periods of infertility, the couple respect the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of human sexuality, they are acting as “ministers” of God’s plan and they “benefit from” their sexuality according to the original dynamism of “total” self-giving, without manipulation or alteration. In the light of the experience of many couples and of the data provided by the different human sciences, theological reflection is able to perceive and is called to study further the difference, both anthropological and moral, between contraception and recourse to the rhythm of the cycle: it is a difference which is much wider and deeper than is usually thought, one which involves in the final analysis two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality. The choice of the natural rhythms involves accepting the cycle of the person, that is the woman, and thereby accepting dialogue, reciprocal respect, shared responsibility and self-control. To accept the cycle and to enter into dialogue means to recognize both the spiritual and corporal character of conjugal communion and to live personal love with its requirement of fidelity. In this context the couple comes to experience how conjugal communion is enriched with those values of tenderness and affection which constitute the inner soul of human sexuality, in its physical dimension also. In this way sexuality is respected and promoted in its truly and fully human dimension, and is never “used” as an “object” that, by breaking the personal unity of soul and body, strikes at God’s creation itself at the level of the deepest interaction of nature and person.⁹⁵

Once again, we see NFP put in contradistinction with artificial birth control. St. John Paul II reflects further upon the subjective meaning of self-discipline and communication required to practice periodic continence.

Finally, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* comments on the use of NFP in the following way:

For just reasons, spouses may wish to space the births of their children. It is their duty to make certain that their desire is not motivated by selfishness but is in conformity with the generosity appropriate to responsible parenthood. Moreover, they should conform their behavior to the objective criteria of morality . . . Periodic continence, that is, the methods of birth regulation based on self-observation and the use of infertile periods, is in conformity with the objective criteria of morality. These methods respect the bodies of the spouses, encourage tenderness between them, and favor the education of an authentic freedom. In contrast, “every action which, whether in anticipation of the conjugal act, or

⁹⁵ Pope St. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, §32 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981).

in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible” is intrinsically evil.⁹⁶ This is a general summation of the tradition from the 1853 response from the Sacred Penitentiary to *Familiaris Consortio*. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II had spoken similarly:

Let [married couples] thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which the future may bring. For this accounting they need to reckon with both the material and the spiritual conditions of the times as well as of their state in life. Finally, they should consult the interests of the family group, of temporal society, and of the Church herself. The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God. But in their manner of acting, spouses should be aware that they cannot proceed arbitrarily, but must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive toward the Church’s teaching office, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel. That divine law reveals and protects the integral meaning of conjugal love, and impels it toward a truly human fulfillment. Thus, trusting in divine Providence and refining the spirit of sacrifice, married Christians glorify the Creator and strive toward fulfillment in Christ when with a generous human and Christian sense of responsibility they acquit themselves of the duty to procreate. Among the couples who fulfil their God-given task in this way, those merit special mention who with a gallant heart and with wise and common deliberation, undertake to bring up suitably even a relatively large family.⁹⁷

The Council here briefly indicates the basic structure of authority, duty, and merit in regards to the procreation of children.

Minimal reflection on NFP as such exists in the teachings of Pope Benedict XVI⁹⁸ and Pope Francis.⁹⁹ Pope Leo XIV has not spoken publicly on the topic as of the date of the publication of this text.

⁹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013) §2368, §2370 (Quotations therein come from *Humanae Vitae*, §14). Other significant texts include *Gaudium et Spes*, §51, and Pope St. John Paul II’s *Letter to Families* (1994).

⁹⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, §50 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965).

⁹⁸ One treatment by Benedict XVI is found in a letter to an international congress on *Humanae Vitae* dated October 2, 2008. “It is true, moreover, that serious circumstances may develop in the couple’s growth which make it prudent to space out births or even to suspend them. And it is here that knowledge of the natural rhythms of the woman’s fertility becomes important for the couple’s life. The methods of observation which enable the couple to determine the periods of fertility permit them to administer what the Creator has wisely inscribed in human nature without interfering with the integral significance of sexual giving. In this way spouses, respecting the full truth of their love, will be able to modulate its expression in conformity with these rhythms without taking anything from the totality of the gift of self that union in the flesh expresses. Obviously, this requires maturity in love which is not instantly acquired but involves dialogue and reciprocal listening, as well as a special mastery of the sexual impulse in a journey of growth in virtue.”

⁹⁹ The post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* in fact has surprisingly very little to say about NFP directly, limited only to a few passing comments in a single paragraph (222), quoting the *Relatio Finalis* and *Humanae Vitae*, 11. Pope Francis also offered his praise of the Billings Method in comments sent to a conference on NFP on April 28, 2023. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/04/28/230428b.html>

CHAPTER THREE

A SOLUTION

A Proposed Synthesis

In none of the magisterial literature is there any suggestion that NFP may be used without serious motives. However, there is also no exploration of the precise excuse for using the sexual act to achieve so-called secondary ends, such as psychological or social health or the expression of love, as opposed to other means which can also achieve these things; the literature is altogether silent on this, while, as we have seen, St. Thomas is not. Yet in the *Commentary on the Sentences* St. Thomas simply calls all requests for the marital debt venial sin if not requested for the sake of procreation, which sin varies in degrees depending on whether its motive is to avoid one's own worse sin (lesser guilt) or merely for pleasure (greater guilt).

The solution which ties all of this together, including the core of the doctrine of St. Thomas and his forebearers on the use of marriage, is the following thesis: the use of marriage can never be licit if it is not intended for procreation, as a payment of the debt, or the reasonably needful relaxation of one's concupiscence in view of removing distractions to work or prayer, and/or in view of avoiding unchastity. Recourse to infertile periods leaves the couple with only two other excusing motives, even if other motives may exist, however causally connected with the act they may be.

A repetition and rephrasing of the thesis may help to explain the point. Conjugal acts in NFP may be used in relation to the request for and payment of the marital debt for the sake of preserving fidelity (preventing unchastity) or for the general calming of concupiscence in favor of rational goods. It may not be used merely for the sake of venereal (sexual) pleasure or even merely for the sake of other benefits which are accidental to the sexual act but which flow from or are annexed to venereal pleasure, such as the psychological or social health of the spouses, without the true need for the relaxation of one's passions. Thus, St. Thomas' distinction between "preventing sin" and "mere pleasure" is preserved – to pursue "pleasure" is forbidden, while preventing sin is allowed.¹⁰⁰ There must be a *per se* order between the sexual act and what one seeks from it, and this means desiring either children, or desiring the calming of morally hazardous or at least distracting concupiscence, as desiring mere pleasure (also a *per se* effect) is clearly excluded by St. Thomas. The pleasure must be a means to the removal of the passions which urge one to pursue the sexual act in the first place; the pleasure must not be pursued simply for its own sake, or even merely as a means of increasing social ties between the spouses or other psychological or social goods (i.e. to pass the time). This relaxation of concupiscence, however, also has a *per se* order with the sexual act, as it is the natural completion of the trajectory of this particular desire. The satiation which is concomitant with the passion of delight simply is the same as the removal or relaxation of the desire by fulfilling that same desire.

Both the removal of distracting concupiscence in view of the normal pursuit of rational goods, and in view of avoiding sin, would be justified on this account.¹⁰¹ The act is certainly not

¹⁰⁰ See *ST* Supp. q. 64, a. 8, resp.

¹⁰¹ This is a very slight shift beyond the doctrine put forward by St. Alphonsus through Busembaum which we will see; they seem exclusively concerned with the danger of incontinence. However, given that concupiscence grows more dangerous over time, and the pursuit of normal rational goods is impeded by the fomentation of concupiscence

unnatural vice,¹⁰² nor does it seem right to call it natural vice as it does not directly threaten the welfare of a future child, but neither is it licit. It sits in a third category in between all three, which we might call “immoderateness.” It is simply immoderate natural sexual activity by a kind of excess, just like the *Commentary on the Sentences* implies of any requested sexual activity on holy days. Immoderateness, therefore, could be due to time or place or some other condition, but in this case it is immoderate with respect to the act itself and one’s intention in using it.

In the case of using NFP for recreation’s sake, the couple exceeds the moderate use of intercourse *even more* than a couple who simply seeks pleasure without virtually or actually intending procreation and without the need of the pacification of concupiscence. Desiring merely sexual pleasure from the marital act is a venial sin, much like merely desiring pleasure when eating (gluttony) or when speaking immoderately (idle words), and in this case it is aggravated by the positive insistence upon infertility, rather than a mere lack of intention to conceive. Taking the speech analogy, the use of NFP in view of sexual recreation while legitimately needing to avoid pregnancy is like the use of a justified broad mental reservation mixed with idle speech and insisting on the lack of the hearer’s understanding for the sake of obtaining the pleasure of speaking; that is to say, one has the right to deceive with speech in this case, but one does not actually need to speak at all and to do so is immoderate, and furthermore one is delighting in the inability of the hearer’s deception so that pleasure can be taken in one’s idle speech. Whether or not intending against and actively avoiding conception in the act (the “broad mental reservation”) is itself justified is a separate question, but if it is unjustified then the guilt of immoderate sexual activity clearly increases even more.

In the case of NFP as a framework for the moderate use of the marital debt in view of relieving dangerous concupiscence, the couple uses the marital debt in a way that also avoids an unnecessary and dangerous burden to themselves or some kind of peril to any potential children due to a severe lack of economic means or similarly grave circumstances which would occasion the legitimate avoidance of welcoming children. The man or woman delays its use until such a time as children are not likely to proceed, essentially suppressing his or her concupiscence until there is a suitable moment to relieve it. The use of the marital debt planned around natural infertility is an act of justice which is without sin itself and helps to avoid the grave sins of self-abuse or adultery and removes the distraction of habitual and acute pulls of concupiscence; simultaneously it ideally also builds discipline, communication, and trust, and it hopefully also builds anticipation for the time when children can in fact be welcomed indiscriminately.

Finally, it is easily argued that, while originating with concupiscence, the act itself proceeds from rightly ordered reason, a kind of act of temperance under the aspect of prudence exercised over oneself,¹⁰³ in view of both avoiding future sin by removing its occasion and also of removing barriers to purer friendship and contemplation. We have already looked at the analogy with communication, but this is also in some way analogous to St. Thomas’ treatment of sobriety, wherein he lauds the complete abstinence from alcohol as ideal but calls its moderate use “most profitable.”¹⁰⁴ While alcohol calms the mind and body without necessarily depriving one of the use of reason, such a possibility does not obtain with sexual intercourse, which by its very nature generally does not admit of the use of reason during its act or at a minimum greatly

into strong desire which is still not yet “proximate to sin,” I see this minimal and cautious extension as being justifiable or at least plausible.

¹⁰² See *SCG*, III, 122, 5.

¹⁰³ *ST I-II* q. 47, a. 12, ad. 3.

¹⁰⁴ *ST II-II* q. 149, a. 3, ad. 2, etc.

inhibits its act, especially on the part of the man; therefore, one must be more discerning in its use.¹⁰⁵ However, it seems the debt can and even ought to be requested when it is authentically needed, even if beholden to a predictable schedule by which one must hold him or herself, but not without careful interior moderation and self-honesty in regard to one's true needs, vis-à-vis truly just reasons for avoiding pregnancy in the first place.¹⁰⁶ This also solves the conundrum of perpetual infertility: the couple who can no longer conceive for whatever reason does not therefore have license to recreate sexually at will, presuming upon their infertility. Since such a couple is unable to form a true intention in favor of children, given they know conception to be impossible (or at least extremely improbable), they find themselves in the same position in relation to the conjugal act as a couple using periodic continence to avoid having children during the window of time when there is moral certitude that conception cannot occur.¹⁰⁷ Thus we have provided for one part of the phrase from the 1932 dubium submitted to the Sacred Penitentiary: "upright motives."

The question of whether the woman might try to extract a small amount of pleasure without inhibiting reason as a kind of recreation, let alone in paying the debt or attempting to procreate, was addressed indirectly in the past, such as by Kenrick in his famous manual,¹⁰⁸ but the opinions on this point were tainted by flawed biological assumptions about the role of pleasure with respect to conception. While claims that the woman sins mortally in the suppression of pleasure are overwrought, there is certainly reason to be skeptical of the proposal to moderate the pleasure of natural union in view of the extraction of that same pleasure without inhibiting reason. This is for at least two reasons. First, because the use of marriage still inhibits the reason of the man. Second, the desire for pleasure during the act would be frequently too difficult to control. A further consideration is the psychological (and social) frustration which could arise from such behavior practiced over a long time. Therefore, this kind of sexual activity seems to be venial sin on the part of the woman, albeit very slight. All this separates such a practice from the moderate use of intoxicants.

¹⁰⁵ In general, pleasures of food and drink are less relevant for the common good and thus are not as important to moderate (with the obvious exception of intoxicating drinks being very important not to use to excess). See *SCG* III ch. 123, 7: "It should be considered, further, that generation is the only natural act that is ordered to the common good, for eating and the emission of waste matters pertain to the individual good, but generation to the preservation of the species . . . [A] greater sin results from a disorder in this area [sexual impropriety] than in regard to the use of food or other things of that kind." It is to be observed, however, that the five classical species of gluttony (see *ST* I-II q. 148, a. 4) could be mapped onto excesses in the conjugal act between spouses, albeit somewhat imperfectly.

¹⁰⁶ The need for the relief of concupiscence should also, of course, be judged in light of the possibility of pregnancy which could result in the sort of struggles which would justify recourse to the use of the infertile periods in the first place, or else there could begin to be sin in the request on account of a lack of due self-restraint given the circumstances. However, taking the case of the leprous husband given by St. Thomas, it seems that the absolute or unconditional refusal of the debt would only be licit in the case only in grave circumstances as opposed to merely "serious" circumstances (i.e., leprosy), which the Angelic Doctor himself discusses and provides examples of, albeit not making the serious/grave distinction. St. Thomas does not consider the question of whether one spouse may lawfully refuse the debt if he or she foresees independently that another child would be impossible to care for, i.e., to feed.

¹⁰⁷ One must be honest about how plausible conception can be during a period where infertility is the norm. If one can actually form a reasonable intention to attempt conception, then so be it; this seems to be a binary evaluation, not admitting of a judgment of proportion (viz., strength of intention vis-à-vis possibility of conception). Rather, if one can actually form an honest intention to procreate and do have this intention in a conjugal act, then the act is formed by that intention. Ironically, having less knowledge about the fertility cycle of the woman allows for more freedom in this way, as one is unsure when the most infertile time would be.

¹⁰⁸ See Bishop Francis Kenrick, *Theologiae Moralis* (1843), vol. III, ch. 3, §2 (#70), p. 310, etc.

So there are these five cases: desiring the relief of concupiscence to free oneself from distraction in view of rational goods; desiring the relief of concupiscence to avoid sin; desiring pleasure alone without an intention for or against children; desiring pleasure alone with a justified intention of infertility (and use of infertility); desiring pleasure alone with an unjustified intention of infertility (and use of infertility). The latter three are immoderate, by degrees. They are made less sinful by the intention of other goods beyond pleasure, such as honor, to settle a dispute, affection, etc., but absent a virtual or actual intention in favor of children (or as a fulfillment of a request for the debt) they will remain venially sinful.

A doctrine quite similar to the proposed synthesis is given by St. Alphonsus Liguori himself, in quoting Busembaum (without subsequent comment or modification, thus implicitly endorsing the content or at least indicating it as a reasonable opinion):

From the foregoing cases, it follows that it is permissible to use marriage: 1) for the sake of children, even if this should not necessarily be intended while it is practiced, provided that it is not positively hindered; nay, even sometimes it is lawfully intended against, such as by the poor man, lest he be burdened too much with children; 2) to avoid the risk of incontinence in oneself or in one's partner; whoever requests the act commits venial sin, unless the impulses of the flesh cannot be restrained in another way [Alphonsus: as the same ends for which one may marry render honest the request for the debt]; 3) on account of health or on account of other extrinsic ends: because what is honorable by its nature and related to one end is lawfully referred to another not inconsistent with it. But to use it only for the sake of health is probably venial sin.¹⁰⁹

We see here the doctrine which has been laid out in the present text in these three points. This 17th century passage (1645), reiterated by St. Alphonsus in the 18th century, represents perhaps the most significant endorsement of NFP prior to the Sacred Penitentiary declarations of the mid and late 1800's, even though it is primitive in its articulation, lacking altogether the explicit mention of periodic continence to obtain what is desired.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ “Ex dictis casibus consequenter resolvitur, licitum esse uti matrimonio: 1) proli causa, etsi haec non necessario debeat intendi, dum exercetur, dummodo positive non impediatur; imo etiam aliquando simplici affectu licite excludatur, v. gr. a paupere, ne nimium proli bus gravetur; 2) ad vitandum periculum incontinentiae in se vel comparte; qui vult, esse veniale, nisi tamen stimuli carnis aliter sedari non possint [Alphonsus: iidem enim fines, quos habere licet ad matrimonium contrahendum, cohonestant etiam petitionem copulae]; 3) valetudinis causa vel propter alios fines extrinsecos: quia honestum ex natura sua et relatum ad unum finem licite refertur ad alium isti non repugnantem. Solius tamen sanitatis causa uti, probabile est, esse veniale.” [Edited to remove some references.] Quoted in St. Alphonsus Liguori, *Theologia Moralis: De Matrimonii*, (Book VI, Tract VI) §927; cf. Hermann Busembaum, *Medulla Theologiae Moralis* (1645), p. 566; see also the preceding “cases,” (p. 564-6) which regard illicit uses (i.e. in public, when one's life is threatened, etc.). See also p. 562. Note that “qui vult” seems to indicate the one requesting beyond the need to avoid incontinence in oneself or in one's spouse, not one perceiving signs for a request and taking initiative to make a reciprocal request (as one is sometimes bound – a topic which St. Thomas and St. Alphonsus also discuss in some detail). For an exposition of St. Alphonsus' treatment, and of its relation to Sánchez and other authors with a related (and somewhat problematic) discussion which exceeds the specific scope of the present book, see Fr. Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI, *Towards a Theology of Sexual Pleasure: Continuity and Development in the Theology of Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Tradition* (Lambert, 2011), and see also John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1986); in *Contraception* one finds helpful material, including material about some of the earliest authorities (i.e. St. Albert the Great, Denis the Carthusian, Le Maistre, etc.) who signaled a slow shift away from the Augustinian line on the use of marriage. A full treatment of St. Alphonsus's own doctrine on the use of marriage would require its own book-length work. Here I am only pointing to the most immediately relevant passage for our consideration.

¹¹⁰ It seems that Sánchez overall takes a somewhat relaxed view of the use of marriage compared to St. Alphonsus, but, as noted earlier, he explicitly rejects the thesis that the Sacrament of Matrimony as such itself provides an

The first two points are rather affirmative of what has already been said. The first point notes that the intention to have children is one justification for the use of marriage. This is modified by the statement, already anticipating the modern theory on NFP, that in some cases not only is a virtual intention of procreation not required, but an intention positively against having children is sometimes admissible, as in the case where more children would be too burdensome for a family. The second point is essentially making the same claim as the current synthesis. The request for the marital debt is licit to make when and only when it is the only sufficient means of relaxing the concupiscence. Finally, of course it is licit in itself to pay the debt to one's spouse when asked.

The third point requires some careful examination. When it is said that extrinsic ends are lawful to pursue by using the marital act, this does not necessarily mean such ends may be pursued independently of some other, "intrinsic" end. To take the given example, supposing one wishes to engage in the marital act for the sake of health, it is necessary also to have some other motivation, or else it is "probable" that it is venial sin, it is said. Likewise, I propose, if one engages in the marital act for the sake of honor, or to end a dispute, one indeed pursues an honest end; however, just as with health, to act for such honest ends alone is difficult to excuse without venial sin.¹¹¹ Clearly, if the good of one's own body is not sufficient motive of itself, these other goods would not be either (with the possible exception of consummation, as it corresponds quite directly with the good of the sacrament). This would also extend to social and psychological goods, viz., the increasing of marital intimacy; this seems all the more plausible given the fact that if Busembaum or St. Alphonsus had wanted to say a psychological or social good (the intensification of the "gentle association" which St. Thomas speaks of in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*) would be a sufficient motive by itself for using the marital act, we ought to presume that they would have simply said so.¹¹² Therefore, my extension of Busembaum's text, is that if

excuse for the use of marriage (*De Matrimonio* IX, 8, 13-14). However, on the other hand, earlier in the same Disputation we read him: "Hinc deducitur, conjugem utentem matrimonio, nec expresse intendentem, nec excludentem prolem, sed illius immemorem, intendentemque solum copulari conjugi tanquam conjugii, minime peccare. Quia licet non intendat prolem formaliter, at virtute intendit cum actus ille suapte natura ad proli generationem tendat, nec ex operantis intentione ad alium finem referatur." Here, we have to wonder whether Sánchez would think that periodic continence used specifically to avoid procreation would fit into this kind of use of marriage. It is also unclear how an exterior act can be its own motivation *per se*, without any pleasure or other purpose motivating the act.

¹¹¹ This way of addressing the problem differs slightly from St. Alphonsus. I also note the intriguing and somewhat unexplored possibility that a conjugal act used exclusively to render a marriage indissoluble ("consummation") could arguably justify the act's use. This is perhaps how one might argue for an excusing good corresponding to the good of "sacrament," thus completing the trio – with the payment of the debt corresponding to "fidelity" and procreation corresponding to "children." Once the marriage is consummated, however, the two are now one flesh, as Christ and the Church in habit if not in act, regardless of whether they are united in carnal union ever again. (I doubt that the request for the debt is lawful simply in order to re-establish the normal dynamics of rights and duties in marital life after the commission of adultery; one ought to take an oath reestablishing fidelity instead. However, the contrary opinion is also plausible as a good annexed to fidelity, or perhaps somehow annexed both to fidelity and sacrament.)

¹¹² I note further that the fact that the relief of concupiscence is not treated as an extrinsic end. Health is treated as an extrinsic end because, even though it stays within the same substance (and therefore does not depend on the disposition of some second substance outside itself), it does not necessarily follow, while the relaxation of concupiscence does necessarily follow, especially on the part of the man – on the part of the woman, it may follow in various degrees. Health – or even bonding, affection, honor, and other goods (except indissolubility arising from consummation) – could in fact be harmed, and in many cases is harmed. Never, however, is there an effect contrary to procreation (an "anti-child"), and the pleasure of sexual union is a universally sufficient cause of the relaxation of sexual concupiscence. We can see that other honest ends (i.e. health, fostering affection, etc.) have a different and

one is not intending children, or paying the debt, he or she must be intending the relief of desire which cannot otherwise reasonably be relieved. These are the only three motives which of themselves will excuse conjugal acts. This stays as close as is reasonably possible to the thought of St. Thomas.

The justification or *ratio* of the relief of concupiscence through the use of marriage apart from an intention of conception is the avoidance of sin and the pursuit of rational goods (i.e. contemplation, mental capacity for needful work, etc.). The former good is noted well in the older authors, such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas, but the latter is not as clearly enunciated but is nevertheless a true good which must be considered. By temporarily inhibiting one's powers of reason, one regains them rejuvenated, like taking a nap. There must be equivalence, however, between the good given up (temporary use of reason) and the good gained; just as one ought not to take a nap when there is work to do and a coffee would suffice, one ought not to ease concupiscence by inhibiting one's reason through pleasure when some simple prayers or focused attention on other things would suffice. Certainly, there will be times when it will not suffice within reason, and this might even be able to be known well enough across longer amounts of time, and even according to certain "seasons." In addition to perceiving clearly an immediate need, understanding the patterns or trends in one's needs in the long-term, the logic of planning times during a month when conjugal acts will be used while avoiding conception begins to make some minimal amount of sense. One delays the act in accordance with the expectation that in some days it will be possible, and this expectation is enough to keep one satisfied until then. However, should it then not actually be necessary at that time, one ought to make this judgment honestly and forego the act. (One might also delay the request for the debt out of some kind of consideration of one's spouse – whether the spouse's condition is from a physical, psychological, or moral defect, i.e., they would be very angry if the debt was requested during fertility).

Knowing the times of cyclical infertility helps each spouse attend to his or her own needs in this matter while avoiding conception, taking for granted that conception is licitly avoided. The knowledge provides the freedom to help oneself and one's spouse ease concupiscence *if it is really needed during that time*, which need might be part of an ebb and flow of temptations and desires which are treated in the aggregate rather than according to some particular feeling in the present moment. In any case, one must be honest about his or her needs.

We read Pius XII on this matter in the same speech to Italian midwives already referenced. He says,

The husband and wife do no wrong in seeking out and enjoying this pleasure [cooperating with God in propagating the human race]. They are accepting what the Creator intended for them. Still, here too, the husband and wife ought to know how to keep within the bounds of moderation. As in eating and drinking, they ought not to give themselves over completely to the promptings of their senses, so neither ought they to subject themselves unrestrainedly to their sensual appetite. This, therefore, is the rule to be followed: the use of the natural, generative instinct and function is lawful in the married state only, and in the service of the purposes for which marriage exists.¹¹³

weaker causal relationship with the marital act than pleasure and relief of concupiscence. Procreation has a formally stronger causative connection, insofar as it is the purpose for which the generative organs exist in the first place, despite the fact that conception does not always follow their natural use.

¹¹³ Pope Pius XII, "Address to Participants in the Conference of the Italian Catholic Union of Obstetricians," (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, October 29, 1951).

He continues,

The moral lawfulness of such conduct [limiting the use of the marital act to times of natural sterility] would be affirmed or denied according as to whether or not the intention to keep constantly to these periods is based on sufficient and reliable moral grounds. The sole fact that the couple do not offend against the nature of the act and that they are willing to accept and bring up the child that is born notwithstanding the precautions they have taken, would not of itself alone be sufficient guarantee of a right intention and of the unquestionable morality of the motives themselves. . . . The seriousness and holiness of the Christian moral law does not permit the unrestrained satisfying of the sexual instinct, nor such seeking merely for pleasure and enjoyment. It does not allow rational man to let himself be so dominated either by the substance or the circumstances of the act.¹¹⁴

Based on his tone, we can see that Pius XII is not of one mind with the popular authors of today. He does allow for recourse to infertile periods as long as it is for a purpose of marriage – and here we recall that the easing of concupiscence is a good of marriage, albeit a secondary good.¹¹⁵

We can also see that this hypothesis – that the naturally and intentionally infertile use of marriage is justified by the need for relief from harmful concupiscence – is the middle position between two extremes. On the one hand, there is the classical position of St. Augustine and St. Thomas, which sees this sort of act as venial sin; on the other hand, there is the position taken by the popular authors today, who think affective goods alone suffice for the licit use of marriage or even that pleasure alone suffices, basically because marriage and its act are good things in themselves. The hypothesis also essentially tracks and logically extends the teaching of St. Alphonsus on the point – it is essentially an application of his teaching in light of the clear and certain knowledge we now possess regarding cyclical fertility.¹¹⁶ Those wishing to argue for one of the extreme positions are invited to consider that they are in fact so doing.

Objections to this Theory

There are at least five significant objections to the foregoing hypothesis. We leave aside the appeal to the pure doctrine of St. Thomas as seen in the *Commentary on the Sentences* and his other writings which we have discussed as correct over and against the present interpretation of the papal literature and the pronouncements of the Sacred Penitentiary, as this has already been addressed in the discussion about commutative justice between the spouses, though more

¹¹⁴ Ibid. He goes on, “Make it clear that nature has undoubtedly given the instinctive desire for pleasure and sanctioned it in lawful wedlock, not as an end in itself, but in the service of life. Banish from your hearts this cult of pleasure, and do your best to stop the spreading of literature which considers it a duty to describe the intimacies of married life under the pretext of giving instruction, guidance and reassurance. In general, common sense, natural instinct, and a short instruction on the clear and simple maxims of the Christian moral law, will suffice to give peace to husband and wife of tender conscience.”

¹¹⁵ A note on virtual intentionality is warranted. While a true virtual intention in favor of the procreation of new life excuses every conjugal act (keeping in mind that conception must at least be seen as a reasonable possibility such that an actual intention could be formed were there advertence to the question of fertility), it is important to note that there can easily exist such a weak desire for children that it reduces to merely “notional” intention – one simply likes the idea of having children, or wants to have children someday, but this desire does not truly influence or motivate the act at all.

¹¹⁶ As a topic generally treated in the manuals in a section normally titled “On the Use of Marriage,” an enormous amount of writing exists in the classical authors on the motives for the conjugal acts. A large book could and should be written summarizing, comparing, and analyzing the various opinions. This is only a perfunctory treatment of the topic in view of addressing the central question, using St. Alphonsus as a primary authority (and cautiously extending beyond him in a minimal capacity, as noted in footnote 101).

could be said. We also leave aside practical objections about the difficulty of teaching this doctrine and living it out, which ultimately fail to address the intrinsic weight of the argument.

The first objection is that this position which is being submitted is not founded on the magisterial texts, namely, the responses of the Sacred Penitentiary and the papal literature. These documents do not put forward this precise position, it is admitted. However, they do not contradict it either; they are silent on the morality of requesting the marital debt altogether, therefore they could not take a position on reasons legitimizing such a request. Attempts to “read between the lines” might suggest that the true intention of the authors must be one which favors the use of the marital debt for any reason whatsoever, especially goods like “the expression of love,” “the increasing of bonding,” and so on, so long as one’s intentions remain within marriage itself; but these attempts would need to furnish positive evidence of this on the part of the authors and show why that argument is more persuasive in its intrinsic authority or show why and how the positions taken elsewhere by the extrinsic authorities themselves ought to influence how we read and are bound to assent to the doctrine contained in the relevant texts in such a way that the present argument is overturned. Put plainly, the burden of proof lies with those who wish to claim that the texts mean something more than what they actually say. Furthermore, we have already noted that St. Thomas is fully aware of the affective and social goods which sexual union procures, as he speaks of this in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.¹¹⁷ Despite having such an awareness he does not see this as sufficient in itself to justify conjugal activity. He explicitly denies that there is such a use of marriage related to the good of “sacrament,” which is what the motive of expressing affection would correspond to.¹¹⁸ We should also presume that recent popes were not ignorant of St. Thomas’s doctrine and could have addressed it directly had they so wished. Finally, Pius XII shows himself at least unenthusiastic about the mainstream attitudes of today, as we have already noted.

The second objection is more serious, namely, that regardless of the strength or distracting character of one’s concupiscence, one is still owed the marital debt anyway; this holds even without the strain of concupiscence. Therefore, along the line of reasoning used to defend the liceity of requesting the debt as proposed here, is one not simply asking for what one is owed, thereby removing the inordinate quality and excusing one of sin? The answer is that, surely, it is not sin to ask for what one is owed, but it is sin to ask for what one is owed for a bad reason. For example, one who lends a large sum of money to another may request his debt to be repaid and have a bad motive for doing so, i.e., to use that money for simony or to bribe a judge. In the case of an inordinate request for the marital debt, one is asking for what one is owed for an inordinate or sinful reason, which is the unnecessary pleasure of sexual recreation, which activity would be illicit for the reasons mentioned previously, viz., the unnecessary inhibition of one’s reason, coupled with the movement toward a habit which dulls the spiritual sensibilities over time. While it is true that St. Thomas sees room for withholding deposits, such as a man who is

¹¹⁷ *SCG* III, ch. 123, 6.

¹¹⁸ *ST Suppl.* q. 49 a. 5 resp.: “But the third good does not relate to the use of marriage, but to its excuse, as stated above (Article 3); therefore it makes marriage itself honest, but not its act, as though its act were wholly excused from sin, through being done on account of some signification.” Sánchez also takes this line. (*De Matrimonio*, Book IX disp. VIII) Those who want to argue that “expressing love” and other similar motives excuse the marriage act would do well to focus on connecting the good of the sacrament to the “signification” discussed by St. Thomas and Sánchez. (This does leave untouched, however, the question of non-sacramental marriages. Would it be the case that a sacramental marriage allows for the pursuit of social goods through pleasure but a non-sacramental marriage does not? Any explanation hinging on sacramental signification would need to grapple with this question.)

requesting his deposited weapon so that he might commit a murder,¹¹⁹ this seems to be quite different from the case of the marital debt, whereby one has rights over the other's body not by a deposit or even a loan but by the very nature of the relationship. When a superior of a religious community or a bishop of a diocese commands his subjects to do something which is within his authority to command, even when his reasons are secretly based on vanity or some other bad motive, his subjects are held to obey unless the command is completely ordered to his own personal good at the expense of the common good or has some other clear legal defect; this includes a case in which his bad motives are known. One may even draw an analogy between the marital debt and St. Thomas' teaching on the legitimacy of usury on the part of the borrower in some cases, insofar as one is making good use of a sinner, in that the spouse paying the debt is preventing infidelity.¹²⁰ In any case, this objection goes to the very logic of the marital debt in the first place; according to St. Thomas' teaching in the *Commentary on the Sentences* the request for the marital debt apart from an intention to procreate is always venial sin, so clearly on that account the justice of asking for the marital debt squares with its allegedly intrinsically illicit character. The difference which I am proposing is that sometimes this request is not illicit, on account of there being a sufficient excusing motive.¹²¹

The third objection is that pleasure is itself what eases the concupiscence. It then appears that to desire this pleasure is the very thing which St. Thomas and Innocent XI say is illegitimate, as it comes under the category of venial sin.¹²² The response first of all requires a distinction between pleasure sought as a remedy for sorrow and pleasure merely sought for its own sake.¹²³ All pleasures, as St. Thomas argues, afford a remedy against the passion of sorrow;¹²⁴ however, sometimes only fulfilling a desire will suffice for removing it in a reasonable way. Sexual desire is sometimes on able to be reasonably removed by achieving its final cause (delight in sexual pleasure), and the pain which arises especially from persistent desire is able to be removed by removing its efficient cause (desire). For Innocent XI, we note, there is no objection to pursuing pleasure, but only pursuing "pleasure alone." In seeking pleasures natural to the sexual act as a tool for removing distracting and potentially harmful concupiscence (and its accompanying pain) which is not otherwise reasonably removed, one does not seek pleasure alone but seeks to free one's mind and avoid sin. There is not merely a logical distinction but a real distinction between the pleasure which removes desire and sorrow and the due equilibrium which is actually reached by their removal. More will be said on "pleasure alone" momentarily.

The fourth objection is that arousal is the same as distracting or hazardous concupiscence; if such desire provokes a request for the marital debt, it seems that the request is therefore moderate. But this is not so, because momentary desires are not the same as gnawing and persistent desires which become distracting and morose. The latter kind of desire is liable to

¹¹⁹ *ST II-II* q. 62 a. 5 ad. 1.

¹²⁰ *ST II-II* q. 78, a. 4; One does not always sin in making us of a sinner's sin, except unless he occasions mortal sin where it would not otherwise have occurred. The request for the marital debt, under normal circumstances, is merely venial sin in the view of the *Commentary on the Sentences*. See also *ST I-II* q. 62, a. 5, ad. 2 on giving for a bad purpose wherein the giving itself is not sinful, i.e., payment for prostitution.

¹²¹ Yet another consideration is that a spouse might request the relations simply for the sake of procuring children when the other spouse does not want children. This, too, is a kind of use of the marital debt, albeit not in the most normal sense of the phrase. It seems that this situation is not precisely articulated by St. Thomas – nor by any of the magisterial literature.

¹²² See *The Catechetical Instructions of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 80.

¹²³ Cf. *ST I-II*, q. 34, a. 2, ad. 2.

¹²⁴ *ST I-II*, q. 38, a. 1. (Note that "passion," "desire," "sorrow," and "delight" have precise technical meanings for St. Thomas.)

produce various psychological strains, as well as emotional and even physical signs.¹²⁵ To be moderate, there has to be a real need based on the distracting and uncomfortable quality of concupiscence – a kind of pain which is concomitant with the desire, or a desire which will not go away easily and distracts one from work, study, prayer, and normal life.

If this is also a kind of habitual desire which anticipates and requires planned relief based around the infertile period, which is possible, then the integration of NFP into a standard ascetical paradigm becomes different from both the rigorous model of the marital debt in the *Commentary on the Sentences* and the lax mainstream model which foresees no restrictions other than the constraints of nature and the need for just causes for avoiding procreation. In the model of the *Commentary on the Sentences*, temperance is conforming one's acts to nature in the right circumstances, and using marriage for upright motives, which includes never requesting the marital debt for the relief of one's own concupiscence, while infused temperance¹²⁶ essentially is reducible to going without licit marriage acts for a time in order to discipline oneself in view of prayer or penance, especially if done under a (mutual) vow or at least resolution of continence, whether temporary or permanent.¹²⁷ In the lax model, temperance is only conforming one's acts to nature in the right circumstances, and having a sufficient reason to avoid having children if using marriage exclusively during infertile times, while infused temperance hardly even figures at all in the paradigm but is perhaps seen as the act of avoiding using marriage during fertile times for the sake of one's family.

In the model being presented here, the content of the rule of temperance is “floating,” dependent upon one's legitimate needs: it will either materially amount to the rigorous model because one has sufficiently mastered oneself or is of such a bodily condition that one does not really need to use marriage to relieve concupiscence, or it will be the self-discipline required to confine one's sexual activity to a precise period of time, namely, the infertile period of the month (a particularly noteworthy circumstance) due to the legitimate need to avoid pregnancy. Infused temperance would be the suppression of one's concupiscence in the exercise of extended continence when it would be easier and licit to make a request of the marital debt, the strength of the concupiscible urge being sufficient to excuse it, albeit not so strong that it would count as presumption upon strength one does not have to forego requesting the debt, risking various psychological and social and spiritual pressures which are better avoided by making use of the marriage act. The development of neurosis, or persistent melancholy, or discomfort around one's spouse would be signs that one is being too severe in restricting sexual desires.

The fifth and final objection is that the mere expression or cultivation of affection is a sufficient motive for the marital act. This requires a lengthier treatment.

Affection and *Solam Voluptatem*

Is the expression of affection, or the cultivation of affection, distinct from the “pleasure” condemned by Innocent XI? It is argued that there is a kind of expression of affection unique to the conjugal act, and that the social and psychological goods obtained by the couple for themselves through the act, such as the “gentle association” spoken of by St. Thomas, are

¹²⁵ In fact, St. Thomas speaks about precisely such signs as indicating implicitly that one would wish the debt to be paid but that one is ashamed to ask outright. See *ST* Suppl. q. 64, a. 2.

¹²⁶ See *ST* I-II q. 63, a. 4.

¹²⁷ This can only be lawful if mutual, and it would also be an act of religion.

sufficient for excusing the act.¹²⁸ Clearly, one's selfless desire for another's good, and the desire to strengthen such love as a couple, are not reducible to "pleasure," are they?

This question has become urgent only somewhat recently. As previously noted, Fr. Gury seems to be the first moralist to propose that the expression of affection suffices as a motive for the use of marriage, in the second edition (1852) of his once extremely popular manual. This proposal seems to coincide somewhat with the decline in marriage seen as a publicly oriented reality and more as a personal reality driven by the quest for self-fulfillment in romantic love, as briefly explored in the Introduction. However, this topic is for the study of historians.

While it is certainly possible to read Innocent XI's condemnation in such a way as to make room for the thesis that "affection" is distinct from pleasure, this does not seem to be a fair or realistic reading. Perhaps a satisfying solution to the *solam voluptatem* debate is still a long way off. It is difficult to hold the position I am proposing, as it very much sits in between simpler solutions, namely, the mainstream doctrine of today on the one hand which says at least implicitly that affective goods are not "pleasure" and therefore can excuse the marriage act, and the Augustinian-Thomistic line on the other which says that there is sin even in requesting the debt without the intention to procreate. However, it may in fact help the case: very frequently, Catholic truth is found in between the simple claims. The solutions which I can propose are the following.

First: Perhaps there is an analogy with the relief of concupiscence. The conjugal act is to be used to show or increase mutual affection only when there is no other way to show one's affection or increase mutual affection. This is arguably a circumstance which does not obtain in any real case. However, that is not so clear, and taking this approach is probably the best way to adopt something approximating the current mainstream doctrine as proposed by nearly all contemporary literature. Those who will write against this book's argument ought to begin with this line of attack, no doubt going on to say something like, "It is impossible to express marital love properly without the conjugal act, and the use of marriage gives the increase and of affection requisite for a healthy relationship, as laid down in the first section of *Gaudium et Spes* §51." My response to that argument is a question: Did Joseph and Mary love each other as spouses? Yes, they did, and their marriage is the exemplar of human marriage after the Fall.¹²⁹ The objection might be strengthened by considering the proportion between the loss of reason and the obtaining of the affective goods proper to a healthy marriage – could such a pursuit be proportionate, the way sleep-inducing anesthesia is proportionate to the good pursued in a necessary surgery which would be unbearably painful otherwise? The problem with this is threefold. First, such affective goods be effectively pursued in other ways in the majority of cases, provided one's spouse is cooperative; second, the frequency of this kind of use of marriage inclines one to abuse such a structure; third, there is no strict causal relationship (sometimes the act might even cause the opposite of what is intended). I conclude that the analogy with the relief of concupiscence fails.

Second: A further solution is proposed by Sasserath and was referenced already. It is that "pleasure alone" is immoral as an end because it inverts the order of the act's interior hierarchy of ends, while not perverting the act in its exterior structure as does unnatural vice. The physical

¹²⁸ Note that we are concerned here with a "final cause" – that which the act is done for the sake of, rather than an "efficient cause," that which impels one towards the act.

¹²⁹ Of course, their marriage was not sacramental properly speaking, and Christ and the Church are the true exemplar cause of Matrimony (by analogy) – the point is simply that there was never a greater human marriage after the Fall than between Mary and Joseph.

pleasures of the conjugal act exist to motivate procreation. Here, “pleasure alone” is understood as “physical pleasure being sought, absent the intention for reasonably needful relief of concupiscence, and absent the intention of procreation.” Other goods could be pursued in the act in this understanding of “pleasure alone.” It follows that any affective/social goods which are dependent upon the pleasures being pursued, which would certainly include the affective goods under consideration but could also include honor, reconciliation, etc., are dependent upon an inversion of the interior structure of the conjugal act in relation to the will – it is *to use the act to obtain pleasure which causes social goods*, rather than *to use pleasure to complete the act which will also cause social goods*. Social goods are totally exterior to the act and thus are in an accidental relationship to it, however causally strong that relationship might be.¹³⁰ It could be replied that the relief of concupiscence is just as much an inversion of the act as the pursuit of pleasure is, which means that either we must revert to the Augustinian-Thomistic position or else abandon Sasserath’s argument. However, we have already treated of pleasure sought as a means of relieving concupiscence above. While it is in fact the same pleasure in the man which leads to the completion of the act and which constitutes at least the physical dimension of “positive

¹³⁰ Today’s unwitting proponents of the idea that any “honest” extrinsic goods would suffice to excuse the marriage act of themselves will find support in the argument made about the same question by Anthony of the Holy Spirit (see *Directorii Confessariorum* [1680], Tract XI, Disp. IX, sec. 1). They will want to show that “affective goods” (i.e. bonding, expressing affection, etc.) are rightly considered “honest goods.” However, I believe this approach is mistaken, as such *affective* goods can be pursued in other ways and do not necessarily follow, and therefore they lack sufficient proportion with the act to justify of themselves the inhibition of reason. I note also that there is a somewhat undefended assertion in St. Alphonsus’s gloss on Busembaum, as quoted above, namely, that the motives which are lawful for one to contract marriage will also make the marriage act itself lawful; he does not prove this in the section he himself cites (§882), which concerns lawful motives for contracting marriage, and he seems not to address directly Busembaum’s clear contradiction of this very same principle with respect to health. (Busembaum is supported by Fr. Francis Silvius [d. 1649], who argues against the “proportionality” between the marriage act and health [see his commentary on *ST*, Suppl. q. 49, art. 6; Conclusion 6], as Fr. Leonard Gaudé quotes in a footnote on §881 in the 1953 edition of *De Matrimonio* [Tomus Quartus, p. 61]: “licet finis intentus sit bonus, et medium quod eligunt sit sibi licitum, non est tamen proportio medii ad finem.” I extend this to all honest extrinsic motives.) However, especially since Busembaum does not forbid the intention of extrinsic goods other than health “alone,” but he does not explain why. In any case, this is a significant opening for those who wish to argue that honest extrinsic goods are sufficient to excuse the marriage act (such as perhaps “affection,” “bonding,” etc. – which are not considered at all by St. Alphonsus, it must be noted, least of all as pursued during infertility chosen on account of avoiding conception.) Or else, perhaps I simply do not understand St. Alphonsus’s argument. The most relevant part of §882 reads: “Ad rationem autem contrariae sententiae, nempe quod sit deordinatio eligere finem secundarium prae primario: respondetur quod deordinatio quidem esset, si ordinaretur finis primarius ad secundarium; sed non, si ex duobus finibus licitis secundarius prae primario eligatur. Hujusmodi tamen fines intrinseci accidentales (vel procreandae prolis vel vitandae incontinentiae), ut honesti sint, oportet ut referantur ad Deum . . .” Other honest extrinsic ends also render the contraction of marriage lawful, and seemingly by extension its act, for St. Alphonsus, though he expressly excludes “pleasure,” which is a dishonest end (see §883) and thus casts doubt on the lawfulness of using “pleasure” for the sake of obtaining honest extrinsic ends, so the relationship between “pleasure” and affective goods must be considered. (There is also an appeal in §883 to extrinsic goods not merely as final causes but as *efficient causes in view of adopting the proper motives necessary for contracting marriage*, a point which must be considered as well.) A clear definition of honest goods is not given, nor is it evident St. Alphonsus would consider all “affective goods” as being honest insofar as they would be reducible even to *psychological pleasure* (though he would undoubtedly consider authentic love between spouses to be an honest good). All this is to say that there is a puzzle to explore. My own thesis stays as close to St. Thomas as I think reasonably possible – this is one of the principal goals of this work. It seems that a demonstration that any motive which makes contracting marriage morally upright will make the marriage act morally upright in use would suffice to show that affective goods excuse the marriage act, as affective goods would seem lawful to motivate the marriage contract, and this would be the best way to argue that they are honest goods.

pleasure,” the relation to the will is diverse, as in one case it is willed instrumentally for the sake of completion of an integral conjugal act (the physical ending of the act by delivering male gametes), and in the other it is willed for its own sake *apart from completion* except insofar as the “act” or process of completion itself constitutes the same pleasure. (Pleasure in the woman is physically irrelevant to the achievement of anything other than the relief of concupiscence in her, so pleasure sought by her is either for the relief of concupiscence or for some other good extrinsic to the act, as it is never for procreation *per se*.)

Here it is perhaps helpful to put forward some clarification of terminology. My proposal for a coherent and useful distinction between primary-secondary ends and intrinsic-extrinsic goods regards a spectrum and a binary way of viewing the relation of conjugal acts to what might be obtained by them. Health is not a primary good of any conjugal act because it has no essential relationship to the sexual faculty, but it is a secondary good because of the way the body is constituted – it is the sort of thing which follows from the act, on account of its design, but this will actually occur depending on various factors that are not directly related to the well-functioning of the sexual faculty. In fact, only procreation is a primary good of the marriage act. The more factors apart from the well-functioning of the sexual faculty are required, the more secondary an end is (i.e., the relief of concupiscence is less secondary than health which is less secondary than honor). When there is no meaningful relationship between the act and an end except due to the will of either the man or the woman subsequent to the act (i.e. to obtain information, to make money, etc.) or is otherwise totally alien to the nature of conjugal acts within a rightly ordered social context (which the act is designed to be annexed to in the broader scheme of things), the end is no longer secondary but is *per accidens*. Intrinsic goods, in my synthesis and proposal (and not necessarily tracking any one particular authority), are goods which are necessary for or are by nature concomitant with the act’s completion (pleasure in the man in view of completion, pleasure in the woman), which flow from the former necessarily (namely, the relief of concupiscence), and which constitute the fundamental purpose of the act (its primary end, procreation). Extrinsic goods are everything else which might be obtained from a sexual act, whether willed or unwilled.¹³¹

Third: Yet another part of the solution is to read Innocent XI’s condemnation in a fuller context; everything but delighting in one’s last end is done for more than its own sake. Therefore, we must look for a reasonable way to see sexual pleasure as a proximate end, as it is not fair to think that Innocent XI means pleasure “as a last end” – clearly, this would not only be venial sin but mortal sin. Therefore, what Innocent XI must have in mind is pleasure sought “now.” Therefore, the question to be asked is not, “Is this act being done for the sake of pleasure alone,” but rather, “Is this act being done on account of the pleasure contained in the act without

¹³¹ We also read in the authors of “honest” and “dishonest” goods – this language, in my opinion, perhaps ought to be abandoned; while it attempts to clarify the sort of goods which can lawfully be pursued, it tends to obfuscate the issue because “pleasure” is considered “dishonest” and yet is itself a good thing, unlike “vanity” (which would be a dishonest good, including in *contracting* marriage). One might even say the same of the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction. (St. Alphonsus speaks of honest and dishonest goods in marriage, as well as goods which are intrinsic-essential, intrinsic-accidental – which are, in fact, children and relief of concupiscence – and extrinsic-accidental. See *De Matrimonio*, §882-3 etc.) The intrinsic-extrinsic distinction might also be coherently described as being a spectrum of how the act relates to goods which flow from it as they actually ought to be pursued according to the design of the act and its proper role in married life vis-à-vis society. Then health is more intrinsic than honor, and honor is more intrinsic than money. In this case health would arguably be more intrinsic than bonding because it flows more necessarily from the act, but it would be more secondary than bonding because it is less of the sort of thing which ought to be pursued by means of the act.

the pursuit of any other intrinsic goods?” This is a much more reasonable reading of the Pontiff’s words than the “loophole hermeneutic” employed by any number of casuists (especially the Spanish, over and against the French who had pushed for the proposition’s condemnation).

Fourth: It can be replied that the affective goods are simply the same as the “pleasure” which Innocent XI is referring to. It is just the case that the couple wants to experience each other’s bodies and have erotic feelings and emotional catharsis. Even with the explicit intention to use such acts for the sake of cultivating a healthier domestic life in the long run, what the couple wants right now, as the object of their act, is this pleasant experience *as pleasant*, not only physically but also psychologically, emotionally, and socially. This argument, when coupled with the third argument, forms quite a plausible and clear picture of the basic moral structure of the marital act as pleasure-seeking in the teaching of Innocent XI.

One of these arguments alone may not suffice, but taken together I think they form a strong presumption in favor of the conclusion that affective or social goods do not of themselves suffice to excuse the conjugal act, should one wish to stay faithful to the teaching of Innocent XI on the matter – which one ought.

However, a final objection occurs. It could be argued that the principle of totality excuses the use of marriage for social goods. This is to say that the momentary inhibition of reason is worth what is gained for one’s overall good, like the use of anesthesia in view of a lifesaving surgery which would be excruciatingly painful and even impossible without being put under. This is a very powerful objection, but it faces several serious problems. First, it finds no support before modern authors (and the modern authors do not describe things in these terms anyway). Second, there is not a strict causal relationship between conjugal acts and the social goods which follow even when explicitly sought, such as there is between anesthesia and insensitivity to pain, so there seems to be a kind of “mismatch” or lack of proportion; such goods can be obtained in other ways and ought to be, and sometimes the intention “backfires.” Third, following upon the second point, we see many couples who are rather sexually active, even within the bounds of nature, and yet are quite miserable. Fourth, social and rational goods themselves are simply more delightful and yet are impossible to delight in properly when one’s reason is suspended, and yet one is purporting to pursue them in a better way while not actually needing the relief of concupiscence which is distracting the mind; other means ought to be used, such as conversation, prayer, service, and other mutual recreation. Finally, in connection with the fourth point, the proposal does not accord with the basic logic of the ascetical life, which is built upon human nature – to use pleasures to the point of losing one’s ability to rejoice in the love of God with one’s rational faculties is to do something which tends toward drawing one’s affect away from Him, even in conjugal acts which do not actually offend Him; this last point is why celibacy is recommended for those who are able to embrace it. The evangelical counsel of chastity is a weapon with which to fight against the flesh and its desires most perfectly, for those who are strong enough to lift the sword.¹³² Needlessly indulging in the most intense pleasures which the body can experience, to the point of incapacity for rational action whereby we can elicit acts of

¹³² The sources of sin are the world, the flesh, and the Devil; they tempt by the concupiscence of the eyes, concupiscence of the flesh, and the pride of life; the habits which dispose one for conquering them are the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience; the acts which fit the habits are the penances of almsgiving, fasting, and prayer. All are called to live this pattern of life according to one’s state, and gradually living this pattern more perfectly helps us to love God more perfectly over time.

faith, hope, and love for God, is harmful for one's pursuit of spiritual perfection, especially when done habitually over a long period of time.¹³³

It must be reiterated – as the point can be missed in the all distinctions, objections, and puzzles – that the main question here regards “sexual recreation,” that is, the use of conjugal acts not done for the three purposes listed above by St. Alphonsus: to pay the debt, to procreate (even with a virtual intention), and to relieve concupiscence not otherwise reasonably relieved. The word “recreation” should not be misconstrued as meaning “for pleasure alone” but also for the sake of any other good if the three excusing motives are all lacking. *We are only concerned with the couple who do not presently intend to have a child*, or with individual husbands and wives who do not intend to have a child.

In closing this chapter I note that while one will perhaps find many papal writings which indicate the value of conjugal acts in relation to affection, I do not believe one will find a magisterial text contradicting the position which I have herein proposed.

¹³³ See *ST Supp.*, q. 41, a. 3, ad. 2.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT IS A JUST CAUSE FOR SPACING BIRTHS?

Just Cause Defined

The last theoretical consideration to make is that of what constitutes a “just cause” for recourse to the use of periodic continence in the first place, thus completing the exegesis of the two parts of the 1932 *dubium* justifying the use of NFP – “just and grave causes” and “upright motives.” We have already established that, following as closely as possible to the reasoning of St. Thomas while not contradicting the papal literature, the request for the marital debt can be made within the context of intentional recourse to natural infertile periods for the sake of a legitimate easing of the movement of concupiscence. This leaves the question of what justifies the use of the habit of avoiding procreation in the first place. In other words, we have established what constitutes “idle speech,” but now we must ask what constitutes an “unjustified broad mental reservation.” There can indeed be such justification, because the sexual act, as St. Thomas so clearly teaches in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, requires rectitude both with regard to the nature of the act itself and with regard to the care of potential children.¹³⁴ Proper regard for the care for potential children could include avoiding their actualization as real children.

Pius XII in his “Speech to Italian Midwives,” and St. Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, both lay out several categories of “just causes” for using NFP. Pius XII lays out the following doctrine: Serious motives, such as those which not rarely arise from medical, eugenic, economic and social so-called “indications,” may exempt husband and wife from the obligatory, positive debt for a long period or even for the entire period of matrimonial life. From this it follows that the observance of the natural sterile periods may be lawful, from the moral viewpoint: and it is lawful in the conditions mentioned. If, however, according to a reasonable and equitable judgment, there are no such grave reasons either personal or deriving from exterior circumstances, the will to avoid the fecundity of their union, while continuing to satisfy to the full their sensuality, can only be the result of a false appreciation of life and of motives foreign to sound ethical principles.¹³⁵

St. Paul VI has an essentially identical take with very similar categories:

If therefore there are well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile, thus controlling birth in a way which does not in the least offend the moral principles which We have just explained.¹³⁶

Many interpretations could be made of these paragraphs.¹³⁷ However, we can see the connection between the “medical” motives of Pius XII with the “physical condition” of *Humanae Vitae*, and likewise the “social” with the “psychological,” and the “eugenic” and “economic” with the “external.” At least, this is one way to connect these unexplained categories. While surely there

¹³⁴ See *SCG* III, ch. 122, 4-6.

¹³⁵ Pope Pius XII, “Address to Participants in the Conference of the Italian Catholic Union of Obstetricians,” (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, October 29, 1951).

¹³⁶ Pope St. Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, §16 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, July 25, 1968).

¹³⁷ See Brugger, Christian, “Just Cause and Natural Family Planning,” June 16, 2010, Washington, D.C., Zenit

is no question that circumstances like living in an active warzone, having a wounded uterus, or being in a faltering marriage due to a schizophrenic spouse are grounds for the use of NFP to space births, the economic question is perhaps the thorniest. However, solving the economic question also could give some indication of how to interpret the less extreme instances of motives which would fall into the other categories.

I propose that there is a strong analogy between the duty to have children with the duty to give alms.

The teaching of St. Thomas on almsgiving is that it is an act of mercy, which is part of charity.¹³⁸ Justice demands the relinquishing of what belongs to some specific person or group, such as returning a deposit or loan, or such as paying wages which were fairly agreed upon – these acts are not acts of charity in themselves. Charity demands that one give *of one's own wealth* to others who are in need, motivated by friendship with God, Who cares for those who lack what they need to flourish in the natural order.

St. Thomas, like many commentators and manualists who followed him, including St. Alphonsus Liguori, see the obligation of almsgiving as standing in relation not only to the needs of those receiving alms but also in relation to the benefactor's socio-economic class.¹³⁹ It is in fact vicious on St. Thomas' account for a wealthy man to make himself significantly poorer by almsgiving, except in special cases. This provides us with a framework to understand the economic issue of having more children. If having another child is likely to move the couple downward a socio-economic class or even merely to force them to live altogether out of keeping with the class they belong to, they possess a serious enough reason to avoid pregnancy until that condition is removed.¹⁴⁰ The more serious the motive (or reservation) in this regard, the stronger the intention to avoid children can be with its accompanying restriction to the use of only the infertile time, ranging from merely “not intending to have children” to “strongly intending not to have children.”

It might be responded that the duty to have children is one of justice, not of charity. In fact, this is true, both in terms of the requirement to will that one's potential children offer due worship to God (as an act of religion which forms part of a rightly ordered conjugal act, as explained above), and also in terms of the common good of one's society which demands the production of virtuous children, especially on account of the social and economic privileges which a married couple is rightly afforded in virtue of their marriage (as an act especially proper to the general virtue of legal justice, which has the common good as its object).¹⁴¹ However, this second aspect of justice refers not to a “legal debt” but “moral debt,” that is, a debt of fittingness rather than one of strictly demarcated right. Having children *is the sort of thing which a couple ought to do* so that their community can flourish.¹⁴² The will to offer their children as virtuous

¹³⁸ *ST II-II* q. 32, a. 1.

¹³⁹ *ST II-II* q. 32, a. 6; cf. O'Neill, James David, “Alms and Almsgiving,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1907, New York: Robert Appleton Company.

¹⁴⁰ This is evaluated with due regard to the likelihood of twins, triplets, etc., the likelihood of a problematic gestation which will require expensive medical treatment, the likelihood of serious physical or mental deformities in the child requiring extraordinary assistance, and the likelihood of other special problems which could cause economic strain.

¹⁴¹ Legal justice is a “general virtue,” that is to say it is part of every virtue insofar as its object (the common good) is affected. (See *ST II-II*, q. 58, a. 6) However, a due act can be more directly in correspondence with what the common good demands, and therefore it follows that it can be more closely related to the general virtue of legal justice. NB: “legal justice” is not to be confused with the commutative justice arising from “legal debt.” (Much less is it to be confused with distributive justice issued in a courtroom – that is, “justice in a legal environment.”)

¹⁴² An extended study of the moral tradition on the duty to procreate would be a worthy project. I simply note that Pius XII and St. Paul VI explain the existence of such a duty in other places in the texts just quoted – the “Speech to

citizens to society is the natural counterpart to the supernatural offering of children to God as saints: benefitting the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant by raising up saints they have brought into the world through their marriage is also *the sort of thing a couple ought to do*. However, given that this offering is one of moral debt and not legal, and it is an offering not from one's possessions but of "creation" and of increasing the burden upon oneself in terms of duties toward dependents, the analogy with almsgiving seems especially appropriate. Likewise, all are bound to give alms – according to their state in life and their present disposition. Having renounced marriage altogether would excuse one from having children, and renouncing temporal possessions altogether would excuse one from giving alms as it is only possible to do metaphorically, since one would not really be giving of one's own possessions. Yet those who are married are bound to have children, not necessarily "here and now," but "here and there," just as one cannot be bound to give alms to a particular person (for then it would be justice), but rather one has discretion and must give "here and there" to those in need.

The conclusion is that the illicit avoidance of having children is at least a sin against legal justice and also a sin against religion. The motives which inform this decision (i.e. for wealth, for ease of life, etc.) will further specify the precise nature of the sin.

In his "Speech to Italian Midwives," Pius XII comments on the duty to have children in the following way:

The reason for this is that marriage obliges to a state of life which, while conferring certain rights also imposes the fulfillment of a positive work in regard to the married state itself. In such a case, one can apply the general principle that a positive fulfillment may be omitted when serious reasons, independent from the good will of those obliged by it, show that a similar demand cannot reasonably be made of human nature. The marriage contract which confers upon husband and wife the right to satisfy the inclinations of nature, sets them up in a certain state of life, the married state. But upon couples who perform the act peculiar to their state, nature and the Creator impose the function of helping the conservation of the human race. The characteristic activity which gives their state its value is the *bonum prolis*. The individual and society, the people and the state, the Church itself depend for the existence in the order established by God on fruitful marriage. Therefore, to embrace the married state, continuously to make use of the faculty proper to it and lawful in it alone, and on the other hand, to withdraw always and deliberately with no serious reason from its primary obligation, would be a sin against the very meaning of conjugal life.¹⁴³

Italian Midwives" and *Humanae Vitae*. The ancient and medieval authorities usually describe procreation as the primary end of marriage – the end thus defines "what one ought to do," without further need to explain a duty to pursue that end – that is to say, what else does one marry for? (St. Thomas, however, does allude to a duty to procreate in *ST II-II*, q. 142, a. 1, ad. 2.) In witness to this, I offer the words of St. Justin Martyr (died c. 165): "But whether we [Christians] marry, it is only that we may bring up children; or whether we decline marriage, we live continently." (*First Apology*, ch. 29; Translated by Marcus Dods and George Reith. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. [Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.] Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>.) See also Dr. N. Orville Griese, *The Rhythm in Marriage and Christian Morality*, The Newman Bookshop (Westminster, MD: 1944), p. 46-47. He compares the failure to have sufficient children to a priest with no assignment who refuses to give occasional sacramental assistance in a nearby parish church out of desire to stay in solitude with his own private mass.

¹⁴³ Pius XII, "Speech to Italian Midwives." He continues: "There are serious motives, such as those often mentioned in the so-called medical, eugenic, economic, and social "indications," that can exempt for a long time, perhaps even the whole duration of the marriage, from the positive and obligatory carrying out of the act. From this it follows that

We see that Pius XII sees the duty of the spouses to have children as being interwoven both with the logic of the use of marriage and with what is owed to the natural community (the State, the human race) and to the Church.

The summary of the principle is then the following: justice demands the payment of the marital debt, in proportion to the seriousness and reasonableness of the request, while charity demands due care for the needs of any potential children, in relation to one's status in the family or in society. It is possible for someone requesting the debt to be owed its payment while his or her charity towards potential children is lacking. As St. Thomas indicates, the debt is owed even in cases where the child is foreseen to be seriously ill (but not in cases where there is clearly serious danger to the spouse, evidently over and above that of possibly contracting leprosy).¹⁴⁴ In other words, the obligation of justice toward the spouse "outweighs" considerations of charity towards potential children. (The principal reason for this appears to be that the debt is owed to a real person, while charity is owed toward a potential person, viz., the child who may or may not be conceived.)

This model gives a way forward into thinking about other categories. For instance, a sufficient medical reason would probably not include the likelihood of gaining several pounds which one will be unable to lose easily (though this could be a legitimate *social* factor in an extremely unhealthy marriage where the wife is severely judged for her looks), but it could include worsening a preexisting heart condition that would render one unable to engage in the moderate recreations one is accustomed to. A sufficient social or psychological reason would likely not include standard postpartum depression or a slightly elevated level of stress, but it could include the foreseeable loss of mental energy to give the minimal amount of reasonably expected care to one's other children or even to oneself. But one must be really honest with oneself about such things.

The distinction between intending to avoid pregnancy and the absence of an intention to achieve pregnancy (whether virtually or in any particular sexual act) must be insisted upon. The mere *absence of an intention to achieve pregnancy* seems to require much less serious motives than the *positive intention to avoid pregnancy*, but it does appear that it requires at least some kind of justification. As Pius XII teaches so clearly, the vocation to matrimony is also a call to build up a family when possible. However, it may be the case that circumstances are not quite so difficult to justify positively intending to avoid having more children but are difficult enough that it would require virtue beyond what the couple possesses to intend positively in a psychologically healthy way to have another child, somewhat analogous to giving alms here and

observing the non-fertile periods alone can be lawful only under a moral aspect. Under the conditions mentioned it really is so. But if, according to a rational and just judgment, there are no similar grave reasons of a personal nature or deriving from external circumstances, then the determination to avoid habitually the fecundity of the union while at the same time to continue satisfying their sensuality, can be derived only from a false appreciation of life and from reasons having nothing to do with proper ethical laws." Note also that St. Paul VI opens *Humanae Vitae* by describing the transmission of human life as a duty: "The transmission of human life is a most serious role in which married people collaborate freely and responsibly with God the Creator. It has always been a source of great joy to them, even though it sometimes entails many difficulties and hardships. The fulfillment of this duty has always posed problems to the conscience of married people, but the recent course of human society and the concomitant changes have provoked new questions." (*Humanae Vitae*, §1.)

¹⁴⁴ *ST* Supp. q. 64, a. 1, ad. 4; a. 3; a. 4. The example discusses the contraction of serious illness on the child begotten, which is a matter for charity. Ultimately, however, the debt must be paid if there is sufficient insistence, which is explained in the Reply to the Fourth Objection in Article 1 as being because it is better for a child to be diseased than not to exist at all.

now begrudgingly, or doing non-obligatory ascetical practices out of a false sense of duty.¹⁴⁵ The couple would then be excused from actively trying to have more children, but they would not necessarily be justified in having intending not to conceive and subsequently having intentional recourse to infertile periods for relations. In practice, this means they are relieved from the duty of preoccupying themselves with achieving pregnancy – this latter state being the obligatory default habitual intention of the couple. If the virtual (but not actual) intention to have more children remains, that is, if they still really want more children but are not actively trying to maximize this possibility, then they are free in their use of conjugal activity, regardless of whether it is foreseen to be infertile or not.¹⁴⁶

Furthermore, it almost goes without saying, were they to decide to consecrate themselves to perpetual continence by mutual agreement for the sake of contemplative goods or the apostolate, this would also excuse them from having more children.

Dr. Griese's text (*The Rhythm in Marriage and Christian Morality*) provides a list of excusing motives for periodic continence which seem to match this analysis. He classifies them by their relation to the probability of licitly excusing the practice permanently and temporarily: sufficient for permanent use, certainly sufficient for temporary use, probably sufficient for temporary use, doubtfully sufficient for temporary use, and certainly not sufficient for temporary use. This list is quote in full in the Appendix.

I conclude this section with some pertinent lines from Pius XII's Address to Midwives, an allocution which has already been cited in this book several times:

It is not, moreover, necessary for Us to prove to you who have experienced it, how essential nowadays is that apostolate of appreciation and love for the new life.

Unfortunately, cases are not rare in which even a cautious reference to children as a "blessing" is enough to provoke a downright denial and perhaps even derision. Far more frequently, in thought and in words, the attitude of considering children a heavy "burden" predominates. How opposed is this frame of mind to the mind of God and to the words of Holy Scripture, and, for that matter, to sound reason and the sentiment of nature! Should there be conditions and circumstances in which parents, without violating the law of God, can avoid the "blessing" of children, such cases of *force majeure*, however, by no means authorise the perversion of ideas, the disparaging of values, the belittling of the mother who has had the courage and the honour to give life.¹⁴⁷

Final Synthesis

The fundamental questions to ask in the analysis of NFP are: what is the motivation for avoiding conceiving more children? – what is the motivation for this particular conjugal act? The preceptive data that has been presented thus far in searching out how to answer these questions correctly can be summarized by the following axiomatic principles.

First, the debt is to be paid according to the reasonability of the request according to circumstance in proportion to insistence upon it (in keeping with the normal human dynamic of communication about debts in general), regardless of any intention for procreation, lack of

¹⁴⁵ Cf. 2 Corinthians 9:7.

¹⁴⁶ We see that there is then a kind of gradation of justification required to avoid venial sin which maps onto the recourse to the use of marriage within the context of periodic continence which also tracks the kind of intentionality towards children which the couple has.

¹⁴⁷ Pius XII, "Address to Participants in the Conference of the Italian Catholic Union of Obstetricians," (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, October 29, 1951).

intention for procreation, or intention against procreation on the part of either spouse. No pre-arranged agreement of periodic continence short of mutually consensual vows of temporary or permanent continence would suffice to excuse one from this obligation, according to the general moral conditions regarding vows. In other words, if the spouse does not want to practice NFP, he or she does not have to and has a claim over his or her spouse according to the structure of the legal debt of conjugal goods.

Second, apart from the intention to conceive, the debt may only be requested for the sake of the easing of concupiscence not otherwise reasonably alleviated due to the risk of unchastity or gnawing distraction from rational goods, in proportion to the strength and urgency of that need vis-à-vis the strength of one's intention not to pursue procreation ("not intending" or "intending not to"), any danger or inconvenience which is intrinsic (i.e. health) or extrinsic (i.e. social or economic difficulties) to conception which may occur in proportion with conception's real likelihood (of an individual child, of twins, etc.), and the likelihood of such danger or inconvenience really obtaining. All this is to say that one may use marriage only to calm one's desires as long as it is sufficiently honest, generous, and prudent to do so.¹⁴⁸ Social or affective goods may be willed beyond the relief of concupiscence but do not suffice of themselves to excuse the act.

Third, intentionally delaying the relaxation of concupiscence to the infertile periods is acceptable in proportion to the need for such relief, whether that need and its delay until infertility is actual ("one-off") or habitual, and in proportion to the legitimacy of avoiding pregnancy. In other words, one may use NFP and anticipate sexual acts over some amount of time so long as it is really foreseen to be necessary for one's need to relieve concupiscence.

Fourth, the legitimacy of avoiding pregnancy is measurable in accord with the spiritual goods which replace children (i.e. continence used to free one for prayer or the apostolate), and to the extent that one's socioeconomic status or fundamental way of life is seriously threatened by conception strictly speaking. Just as one is bound to give alms in general, here and there (as opposed to being obliged to give in a specific case, which would then constitute an obligation of material assistance from justice rather than from charity), so too one is bound to have children generally within a marriage, "here and there."¹⁴⁹ Intentionally avoiding this in the long-term requires a proportionate justification, just as the long-term refusal to give alms requires a proportionate justification, and the longer the intention endures, and the stronger the intention is, the more serious the justification must be.¹⁵⁰

The simple summary of these four points could be expressed in the following way. "Give your spouse his or her due, be realistic about your own sexual needs independent of trying to conceive, only plan to use infertile periods for acts if really necessary, and try to have children unless it will clearly be harmful."

¹⁴⁸ This author rejects the hypothesis that health alone would excuse the use of marriage. While concupiscence might not be relieved in another reasonable way, it is not plausible that health could not be pursued in some other way. This seems to render it sufficiently secondary or extrinsic so as not to be an excusing good, unlike the relief of concupiscence, the justice of the payment of the debt, or the primary end of the act used, namely, procreation.

¹⁴⁹ McHugh and Callan recommend having at least four children as a general rule. See #2622 – in this section they share their summary of Pius XII's teaching on NFP and also discuss the debate on the positive duty to have children.

¹⁵⁰ To the untrained moralist, the continued use of the word "proportion" might give the impression that the position being presented is "proportionalist," that is, somehow connected to the moral philosophy which is called "proportionalism." This is not correct. For a brief explanation and condemnation of proportionalism, see Pope St. John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), §75, §79, etc.

It is not reasonable to say that a person would need to consider all of these things individually and deliberately in each decision to make use of marriage, nor is it to be expected that one considers all these things perfectly well when they are averted to. Rather, one must simply form his or her conscience well, developing a taste for the true good according to the dictates of practical wisdom. This takes maturity of mind and virtue. In other words, one must “grow up and sincerely try to figure it out.”

Something must be said about if and when an unjustified decision to refrain from having children and continuing to use marriage in the context of periodic continence becomes grave sin. It is not a question which admits of a clear answer, as the foregoing analysis would be enough to imply. However, it is clear that the couple who is capable of having children and who has not given up their conjugal rights or their use for the sake of spiritual goods has a duty to procreate, as offspring is the primary good of marriage. *Gaudium et Spes* summarizes this principle in the following way: “Parents should regard as their proper mission the task of transmitting human life and educating those to whom it has been transmitted. They should realize that they are thereby cooperators with the love of God the Creator, and are, so to speak, the interpreters of that love. Thus they will fulfil their task with human and Christian responsibility, and, with docile reverence toward God, will make decisions by common counsel and effort.”¹⁵¹ St. Thomas also speaks about the vice of “insensibility” (the immoderate aversion to pleasures of touch, including sexual pleasure,) as including a failure to fulfill one’s duty to procreate.¹⁵² In fact, given the inclination toward conjugal acts, we see that nature and the moral structure of the use of conjugal acts which has been explained in the preceding pages also generally inclines couples to intend to have children, or else be continually falling into venial sin. To be fully free to use conjugal acts indicates habitually having an intention towards procreation.

Given all this, it is difficult to see how an objectively and clearly unjustified avoidance of having children, whether due to a lack of constraining conditions or there being no proportionately taxing pursuit of higher spiritual goods, and then having frequent and intentionally infertile recreational sexual activity for the duration of several years, perhaps three or four, can be without grave guilt.¹⁵³ It is not that many venial sins accrue together to make one mortal sin, for this is impossible. Rather, it reveals and confirms that one is so without the kind of generosity proper to one’s state in life that one is spiteful of or at least ungrateful toward the

¹⁵¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, §50; later in the same paragraph, as quoted earlier, the text speaks of the “duty to procreate.”

¹⁵² *ST II-II*, q. 142, a. 1, resp.; ad. 2: “Whatever is contrary to the natural order is vicious. Now nature has introduced pleasure into the operations that are necessary for man’s life. Wherefore the natural order requires that man should make use of these pleasures, in so far as they are necessary for man’s well-being, as regards the preservation either of the individual or of the species. Accordingly, if anyone were to reject pleasure to the extent of omitting things that are necessary for nature’s preservation, he would sin, as acting counter to the order of nature. And this pertains to the vice of insensibility . . . Since man cannot use his reason without his sensitive powers, which need a bodily organ, as stated in I:84:7; I:84:8, man needs to sustain his body in order that he may use his reason. Now the body is sustained by means of operations that afford pleasure: wherefore the good of reason cannot be in a man if he abstain from all pleasures. Yet this need for using pleasures of the body will be greater or less, according as man needs more or less the powers of his body in accomplishing the act of reason. Wherefore it is commendable for those who undertake the duty of giving themselves to contemplation, and of imparting to others a spiritual good, by a kind of spiritual procreation, as it were, to abstain from many pleasures, but not for those who are in duty bound to bodily occupations and carnal procreation.”

¹⁵³ McHugh and Callan discuss several opinions on this topic in #2622. Of course, in line with the basic jurisprudence of the confessional, couples who have acted in such a way and are convicted in conscience that they have committed grave sin ought to manifest this in an appropriate way in their next confession, even if such sin has already been forgiven through sufficiently blameless ignorance in past sincere confessions.

One Who instituted that which is being abused – because by now, at this point, one could should know for sure that God wants one to set out to do this very important and serious thing which is being neglected, and instead one chooses to “fool around.” However, opinions on this may vary. Here we begin to see the blurrier lines of moral science. It becomes even less clear when we ask whether the same analysis holds true of prolonged ongoing continence in conditions which would not justify spacing births when continence is used not for spiritual goods but merely to avoid having children, or even because a couple is simply not interested in having children and also has little interest in conjugal acts. It seems that the less frequently conjugal acts are used in infertile times, especially illicitly (and most of all unnaturally), the more lenient the judgment on the amount of time until there is grave matter on account of a failure to attempt to produce children. Perhaps seven or eight years would suffice for grave matter for those practicing total continence for the sake of pursuing personal hobbies or to accrue wealth beyond what is necessary for their station in life.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Dr. Griese’s opinion is quite similar. See *Rhythm in Marriage and Christian Morality*, p. 54-56.

CHAPTER FIVE

SPIRITUAL AND PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS

By way of a sort of epilogue, it now remains to offer some thoughts on the spiritual and pastoral implications of the foregoing.

Spiritual Considerations

In general, all the benefits of chastity are contained also in the right use of marriage. Chastity as a virtue subjects the body to the order of reason in the use of venereal pleasure. As an infused virtue, that is, operating under the form of charity, it subjects the body to the order of spiritual thinking, especially freeing oneself for the pursuit of contemplation in the context of continence, especially under a vow, whether temporary or permanent (mutuality being taken for granted on the part of one's spouse). Infused temperance is founded upon the natural "acquired" virtue of temperance, itself correlated to Matrimony as a sacramental base.¹⁵⁵

Chastity as a Fruit of the Holy Spirit is a delight in the act of the virtue of chastity on account of supernatural friendship with God; it is spiritual delight in the act of controlling the most violent rebelliousness of our flesh in its fallen state in order to know, love, and serve God. This Fruit rests upon the Gift of Fear of the Lord, which is a reverence for God as Father and a desire to cling to Him as a Friend. This Gift is founded upon the theological virtue of hope, the supernatural desire to reach God with His help. When absolutely perfected in act, the Fruit of Chastity manifests in poverty of spirit, the first Beatitude, which humbles one before God. For St. Thomas, this order has the Sacrament of Extreme Unction as its associated base. (Thus the order is: Extreme Unction, hope, Fear of the Lord, Chastity, poverty of spirit.) In light of this whole progression we see our bodies for what they are – corrupted and corruptible, but also able to be healed and conquered, and able to be saved and restored in the Resurrection by the Lord; but saved not with anything of ourselves we possess except grace and virtue which have been given by God in our lifetime, and which we could not earn on our own without His help. The more one pursues the right mode of the use of marriage, let alone overcomes its lawful use in favor of spiritual goods, the more one will receive such blessings in the interior life, and the lights to find them more and more.

Of course, the first difficulty to tackle in marital chastity is the temptation towards unnatural vice. Before worrying about self-control in the use of periodic continence, let alone the higher gifts of the spiritual life, a couple who has not moved beyond the struggle against unnatural vice (private self-abuse and pornography, consensual contraception of various kinds, "completed" unnatural acts, and extremely immoderate foreplay or other acts annexed to true conjugal union which amount to self-abuse) must do this first.¹⁵⁶ This being achieved, I propose

¹⁵⁵ The ordering of the sacraments, virtues, Gifts, Fruits, and Beatitudes in this section is taken from St. Thomas's treatment of the topic throughout the *ST I-II*. In general, an extended study of such things with regard to marriage, and to NFP specifically, would be a worthwhile endeavor.

¹⁵⁶ I am well aware that this sentence opens its own whole discussion of casuistry, some of it rather complex, especially about acts which are remotely connected to conjugal union but do not characterize it. As for questions admitting of a more direct answer, I refer the reader especially to the opinions laid down by St. Alphonsus for consideration. Most pointedly, St. Alphonsus observes that the use of the generative organs of a woman other than the man's wife in preparation for completed natural union with his wife is real adultery, and therefore the use of non-generative organs of the wife (as a kind of prolonged simulation of natural union) in preparation for completed

that it is not possible, or is at least very difficult, to advance in chastity when taking for granted that the recreational use of sex within marriage in the context of actively trying to avoid procreation.

It could be the case that a new couple is terribly struggling with out of control desires, a state which normally accompanies youth and is in fact often made stronger by the thrill of being newly married. This could possibly mean that legitimate recourse could be had to NFP “in act” quite frequently, even many times a month. However, speaking frankly, a couple that is sincerely trying to improve their self-control with the help of the normal means afforded them by nature and grace, especially the sacraments and frequent prayer, ought to reach the point where they use NFP “in act” only a few times a year, if at all. This is to say, both husband and wife ought to master their concupiscence sufficiently to need very little help through conjugal union by recourse to infertile periods, should they have a sufficient reason to avoid children in the first place. Not progressing in this way is a sign of a lack of basic generosity with the Lord and unseriousness about their state in life.¹⁵⁷

In truth, many couples who live the “NFP lifestyle” think themselves to be very ascetical and self-disciplined. They are not, and in fact many times they are ordering their very small deprivations towards delayed carnal pleasure which they are actually obliged to forego. This is not asceticism; it is something more like a woman who is dieting with the goal of being ogled with mild desire by passersby on the beach during next month’s vacation and calling it “fasting.”

One dreadful and thankfully incorrect conclusion which could be reached from the doctrine set forth herein is that marriage is or ought to be a rather boring, stale, and legalistic relationship. Cartoonish ideas of Victorian-era mores may abound in one’s imagination after being told that self-restraint is necessary even within marriage. I wish to clear the air: marriage ought to be a lively (and, ideally, romantic) pursuit of mutual goods, even affective goods within the use of marriage. There is, however, a catch – the more sexual activity one desires, the more “open to life” one must be. Marriage as an institution exists for the betterment of the couple, but it also exists for the building up of earthly society and the Kingdom of God, by raising good and virtuous citizens and by making saints who will worship God in this life and the next, respectively. Spouses who simply want to “have a nice time” in a “boutique-marriage” may feel quite satisfied with themselves and with their lives, but they are actually socially stagnant with each other, spiritually weak, and generally unfulfilled, and all this can be true even without falling into grave sin. They are socially stagnant with each other because there is no need to search out the limits of the other’s capacity for self-giving and the creativity and communication which its effective application demands. They are spiritually weak because they are not

natural union with her is real sodomy, even though incomplete. (See *Theologia Moralis*, Book VI, Q. 916, etc.) The key seems to be about the proportionality between the stage that the body has reached in preparation for completed union and the exterior act which is being done in view of completed union. At a certain point, one is not “preparing for union” except by an artifice of the will, anymore than throwing dough in the sink or the trash can while the oven is heating is “preparing to bake bread” simply because one intends to put the dough in the oven after one has been sufficiently amused by disproportionate superfluities – or even to keep the oven running after the bread has been baked (“completion of pleasure for the woman after the man”). A full discussion of these topics goes well beyond the scope of the present text but should be noted nonetheless as characteristic of the laxity found in the doctrine popular authors on marital chastity, who never seem to grapple with the classical authors or even seem aware that these issues have been litigated at some length.

¹⁵⁷ It is also generally true that men and women progress somewhat differently in their habitual intensity of desire. This natural dynamic has implications for a higher-level discussion of the ascetical progression of men and women in the pursuit of chastity, including under the head of infused temperance. This is a topic for investigation in a separate text.

practicing properly the basic demands of infused temperance, nor are they forced to grow in virtue by the increasing demands of managing a growing family in humility, patience, and charity. They are generally unfulfilled because they are not maximizing their capacity as a couple, and given that their relationship with each other is the backbone for understanding their own place in the world, this is a highly significant factor. The question which ought to occur to a couple – even haunt them – is, “Are we trying to be all that we can be for God and the world as husband and wife?”

Couples ought to feel freed by their chastity. Freedom opens one up towards God. The too-frequent use of marriage unnecessarily conforms the heart and mind more and more to the pleasures of the flesh. In fact, even the licit use of marriage tends overall toward a strengthening concupiscible desires and making them more frequent, despite healing concupiscence according to its momentary effects and its relation to reason (by constraining its satisfaction to being within the marriage bond). This whittles away at the life of prayer and ultimately at the relationship of the couple themselves insofar as it is rooted in Christ. Even the slightest movement away from the recreational use of marriage, whether towards the positive intention of having children, or towards more prolonged continence, will tend to open the minds and hearts of the couple towards greater horizons in the spiritual life and within their own marriage which they are likely not even able to imagine. Eventually they may even be prepared to resolve to be perpetually continent for the sake of the Kingdom, which will tend towards freeing them from worldly desires more and more.

The witness offered by a couple who not only are “open to life” perpetually but who are also disciplining themselves over and above this give a very strong witness to the reality of the spiritual life and the next world, as well as showing the right order between a couple and this world. They demonstrate that self-control over the body for the sake of opening oneself up more and more to God is worth it; they manifest by their joy that they are happier than those who lack such discipline; they promote the idea that procreation is done not only as an act which is psychologically and existentially fulfilling for the couple, but is also done as a help to the community and the human race in general, and is done chiefly as an act of religion such that the discussion of whether to have more children revolves chiefly around *what can reasonably be offered to God in worship of Him*. This discourse tracks the growth of the individual soul in the life of asceticism and prayer in general – “What should I give to God right now?” Penances and pious disciplines ought not crush one, lest despair, bitterness, neurosis, or pride overwhelm the soul, but growth will often involve some discomfort. This is also true of the natural progress of the couple who is honestly seeking to be generous with their conjugal life for the worship of God by raising up saints who will praise Him forever in Heaven.

A rigorous discipline of voluntary prolonged continence will also prepare a couple for if and when the moral necessity of such a practice is imposed by the realities of bodily health which either render the slightest chance of conception a deadly gamble or make the use of marriage itself seriously dangerous. Voluntary prolonged continence will also prepare a couple to embrace permanent continence if and when it seems spiritually opportune. This must be mutually agreed upon, even for spiritual reasons – in the Catechism of Trent, for example, we read the implicit warning about the woman needing permission to go abroad,¹⁵⁸ which seemingly concerns not just vanity excursions but also pilgrimages, but seemingly not extended to penances

¹⁵⁸ “Domi vero libenter se contineant, nisi necessitas exire cogat; idque sine viri permissu facere nunquam audeant.” (*Catechismus ex decreto Concilii Tridentini*, Part III, ch. VIII, q. XXVII; Ratisbon edition, 1905, p. 248.)

involving travel, as was once common.¹⁵⁹ Certainly, work necessary for the proper sustenance of the family which involves extended travel admits of its own justification, for which reason it seems the permission for men to go abroad is not mentioned by the text.¹⁶⁰

It ought to be noted that the advice to withdraw more and more from even the licit use of marriage is for the *better*, not for the *good*. This is to say, one should not feel pressured to do so. So too should couples not scruple about whether they are “justified enough” in using their rights in this or that instance. Rather, one ought to develop the aspiration to be honest about one’s limits and needs in a spirit of realistic generosity. Certainly, there will be mistakes in judgment. Putting up with one’s own small (or large) faults is part of the normal path of discipleship, and so too is dealing with moral ambiguities. The key is to trust in Christ’s mercy, without presuming upon it, as if it were owed by natural right.

Couples who do not take up NFP as a “lifestyle” also avoid various snares and obstacles to their marital and spiritual health – they allow themselves to be sexually fulfilled when nature most inclines to the act (*viz.*, during the woman’s fertile time) and thus avoid psychological tensions which would accompany specifically foregoing acts during that time; they do not contribute to any sort of scandal related to population control or give the impression that they are “cheating the system”; they do not give the impression that they do not wish to offer children as saints to God; they are better disposed to welcoming an unintended pregnancy.¹⁶¹

All this is reason for clergy, moralists, doctors, other relevant authorities, and even couples themselves from recommending NFP wholesale without at least a good deal of caution. Rather, it ought to be emphasized that the same sort of technical methods could and should be used primarily to determine when a woman is most fertile that conception might be easier.

Pastoral Considerations

Current teaching documents, such as those distributed by any number of episcopal conferences, would need some substantial revisions were they to incorporate the present position. The lack of any discussion at all about the marital debt is also a serious problem which cuts across many or even most national, diocesan, and parochial programs on marriage preparation, catechesis, and pastoral counseling; it is as if the moral obligation to give one’s body to one’s spouse upon reasonable request has been forgotten altogether.¹⁶² Finally, more directly

¹⁵⁹ See Lateran II’s (1139) prescribed penances for arsonists, indicating a year of service of God (presumably in a hospital or pilgrim hostel) in Spain or the Holy Land (Canon 18); see also *ST Supp.*, q. 28, a. 3 (on a public penance involving travel). St. Thomas tells us, however, that the man may go abroad on his own without the permission of the wife to engage in a crusade. (*ST Supp.*, q. 64, a. 6, resp. 1) The discussion of the casuistry related to the “bottom line” regarding the payment of the marriage debt is a worthy endeavor requiring its own dedicated text after deep and careful study of the literature and legal precedents.

¹⁶⁰ Nowhere in the moral tradition will one find an exception for the husband to take extended leave of his wife, depriving her of her conjugal rights and other assistance, for frivolous reasons. As St. Thomas teaches, man and woman are equal with respect to the marriage debt, even if they are not equal with respect to the governance of the household or their relation to public life. (See *ST Supp.*, q. 64, a. 5.)

¹⁶¹ Cf. Dr. N. Orville Griese, *The Rhythm in Marriage and Catholic Morality*, p. 62-74.

¹⁶² Of course, neglecting the dynamic of the marital debt leads to many problems within marriages, in which the debt is not always paid when it is due. However, presenting the concept of the marital debt to couples, including or even especially those couples who are relatively devout and have some interest in contemporary papal literature on marriage, poses the challenge of explaining how this is not “objectification.” Such people need to be helped to see that this is not only a right which is acquired through the marriage contract, but it is also a great help to one’s spouse, and the refusal of a serious and reasonable request can do immense damage to their relationship and to the soul of one’s spouse – for which reason to avoid paying the debt without a proportionately serious reason is sinful,

addressing the issue of just motives for avoiding having children would also be helpful in these documents.

Teaching couples about NFP on the parochial or diocesan level presents many challenges, and certainly it is difficult enough for many pastors and collaborators merely to make the case against contraception, let alone to make the case for the more rigorous doctrine espoused in the current text. However, there are many couples who, far from needing to be convinced about the evils of contraception, have the sense that something is not quite right with the principle of “free reign” to recreate sexually during infertile periods, just causes for avoiding pregnancy being taken for granted. These couples could easily see the need for self-restraint even within infertile periods to which recourse can legitimately be had for the sake of avoiding pregnancy. They would accept the suggestion that abstinence from relations for about a week each month does not suffice for a completely chaste relationship.¹⁶³ Many couples, it is true, struggle mightily to practice the popular doctrine on NFP and would be led to despair should it be suggested that self-control is necessary over and above what they are already practicing; other couples even less trained in virtue could be led to presume upon God’s mercy callously and deliberately commit many venial sins, creating a terrible spiritual disposition in them. Perhaps it is normally better to leave such couples undisturbed, given the greater harm which could come to them should they be led to fear the burden of virtue to such an extent that they give up on chastity, be led into presumption, or even give up on holiness altogether.¹⁶⁴ Confessors especially ought to avoid prying into this delicate topic in the hopes of correcting venial sin in this regard, not the least of all because the doctrine presented here is, while safe, not common opinion. Marriage preparation courses or retreats could be better forums to explore this topic with general and indirect language, i.e., “Sex is not something to do just for fun,” etc.

Rhetorical strategies which use the language employed by St. John Paul II could be used to suggest that merely recreational sex, even if done for the sake of social or psychological goods, is actually detrimental to the relationship of the couple on account of a degradation of the meaning of human sexuality. It is to tell one’s spouse that in order to express one’s love for him or her, there has to be carnal union. While certainly this is one fitting and even important expression which can be virtuous, gratifying, and healthy for the relationship, rational expressions of love, whether by language or by willful perseverance and sacrifice in difficulty for the sake of one’s spouse, are objectively superior, insofar as these behaviors are specifically human activities, while sexual reproduction is something which animals and even mere plants can do.

And perhaps it is better in many cases, even in marriage preparation courses, hardly to touch the issue at all. Rather, it might be better to help engaged couples to see that children are a

even gravely, as all the classical authorities agree. On the other hand, the spouse should be free to point out that the debt is being abused, and that, while it is owed, it is in such-and-such a case sinful to ask for. Unfortunately, few contemporary voices which do address this topic do so with the subtlety required; a common mistake is the conflation of the use of the imperative mood (“do this”) with a strict appeal to one’s rights (“I command you to do this”).

¹⁶³ Past disciplines popular in the Church prohibited the use of marriage on many days of the year – Sundays, certain feast days, Lent, Advent, Ember Days, and, of course, three days before receiving Holy Communion. This was formerly considered an appropriate set of boundaries in favor of prayer.

¹⁶⁴ This is in accord with the so-called “law of gradualism.” Scrupulous persons, on the other hand, should most certainly be advised in accord with prevailing doctrines on the perplexed conscience; no mention should be made that perhaps their motives for the habitual state of avoiding pregnancy or their actual requests for the marital debt are sinful unless it is extremely clear to the confessor or director.

good thing – not mere burdens, not environmental or population threats, but also not a supped-up form of a household pet which one might have as part of a lifestyle. Putting the focus on the primary good of the sexual act is something which might effect more healing than is commonly suspected. We are designed to pursue the good before we avoid the bad.

Should a husband or wife find this rigorous doctrine on NFP convincing, that leaves us with the question of the other spouse: what if he or she is seeking to use periodic continence in a way one finds unchaste? It is not an easy conversation to have, and because of the uncertainty of the argument laid down here, one might lawfully decide not to have such a conversation at all and simply change one's own behavior in this regard. This course of action – self-amendment without giving one's spouse an explanation for a sudden behavioral change involving conjugal life – could be a wise decision, or a terrible mistake. I cannot possibly offer concrete advice about how to navigate the unique situations of all couples. What I can say is that adopting the change here proposed could be a good opportunity for a conversation among spouses about the meaning of their conjugal life, including especially the goodness of the children which they have perhaps had the grace to bear – or have the hope of bearing.

The question of “how much easing of concupiscence is reasonable in the context of NFP” has not been explored here at great length, as this is an individual matter and moves into psychological and biological science as much as (or more than) moral science – I will only suggest a review of the Church's traditional exhortations and laws on the use of marriage on certain days to give an oblique indication of what might be a reasonable point of beginning to orient oneself around in this regard – that is, as a point of departure for self-examination.¹⁶⁵

Those inclined to scrupulosity ought to follow the normal guidance for people in such a condition (such as strict adherence to the guidance of one's confessor, presuming they are not sinning unless absolutely sure, etc.) and resign themselves to the fact that they are not perfect and may not be so for quite some time, though they can be with God's help.

St. Thomas, if he were to be persuaded by the recent magisterial literature and/or the manuals which incline away from his position, whether by their intrinsic or extrinsic authority, would at a minimum certainly caution against the indiscriminate use of and counseling towards frequent recourse to infertile periods, especially as an anchor for a healthy sexual dynamic within marriage. He would instead insist on the virtues of religion, legal justice, and charity as normative poles by which to orient married couples' understanding of their sexuality. Religion, as part of justice, is the normal way St. Thomas talks about the marital act being virtuous: it is an act of procreation for the sake of raising children in the Faith to worship God; the meaning of Holy Matrimony, as distinct from mere natural marriage, is to create saints who will love and worship God forever in Heaven. Legal justice has the common good as its object.¹⁶⁶ The desire to produce virtuous citizens is an especially important intention for the benefit the common good. Finally, charity inclines the couple toward loving in a special way the souls which God deigns to entrust to them as parents, in view of both the natural ends of society and the supernatural end of Heaven. Couples ought to wish to be benefacted by God in this way, thus being able to return a special kind of thanks to Him, although they are bound to exercise due care

¹⁶⁵ See the Roman Catechism's treatment: “But as every blessing is to be obtained from God by holy prayer, the faithful are also to be taught sometimes to abstain from the marriage debt, in order to devote themselves to prayer. Let the faithful understand that (this religious continence), according to the proper and holy injunction of our predecessors, is particularly to be observed for at least three days before Communion, and oftener during the solemn fast of Lent.” *The Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests*, trans. McHugh and Callan (1923), p. 355.

¹⁶⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 58, a. 6.

not to overburden themselves by having too many children and thus be unable to provide for them well as to natural or supernatural ends. Both the desire for and welcoming of children can thus be acts of charity, and so too is the stewardship over one's family which takes into consideration the welfare of each actual and potential child. All of these considerations ought to form a substantial part of marriage preparation courses. Above all, couples preparing for marriage (or even those who have been married for some time) must be shaken out of the illusion that their marriage is about their own existential fulfillment apart from the plan of God; it is principally about fulfilling God's designs, both for the human race in general, and for the eternal community in the next world. Conjugal activity and children are not to be treated as simply "part of a lifestyle," as they are gifts from God which are supposed to be spiritually creative in their returns. Shirking the gift being offered through fertility in marriage is, we may say, a burying of one's talents. (Mathew 25:24-30)

Married couples are meant to give their lives to each other, to their children (including in having them to begin with), to the Church, and to their community. For those who seek their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives will gain them. (Matthew 10:39) Such a context paves the way for the presentation of NFP in general, and it even makes the rigorous model laid down in this text more palatable for those who are only beginning to become aware that the world, and perhaps even some clergy and moral theologians, have misled them about the meaning of chastity and its relationship to Holy Matrimony.

APPENDIX

GRIESE'S LIST OF MOTIVES FOR USING PERIODIC CONTINENCE

This list is published as found in Dr. N. Orville Griese's book, *The Rhythm in Marriage and Christian Morals* (1944), p. 76-79.

[Note: Dr. Griese frames these causes as potentially excusing motives to abstain from relations, not as motives to have relations during infertile times. His book lacks a robust discussion of the latter piece of the puzzle.]

Ordinarily Sufficient for the Permanent Practice of Periodic Continence

1. Because conception will very probably result in death or a permanent state of bad health for the mother.
2. Because it is almost certain that the mother cannot bring forth living children.
3. Because the mother can bring forth only abortive children (i.e. miscarriages).
4. Because it is practically certain that the children will be born with serious and incurable hereditary defects, especially insanity.
5. Because it is morally impossible for the husband to support another child.
6. Because the mother has proven to be utterly incapable of fulfilling the usual maternal duties relative to the care and training of children either physically or morally.
7. Because one of the spouses is absolutely opposed to having children or another child. If there is no just cause for such an attitude, the other party (not the opposing one) would be justified in using the "rhythm" method. If the opposing party cannot be persuaded to change that attitude, the practice may be permitted to that party as the lesser of two evils.
8. Because it is the only way of stopping or preventing the use of onanistic methods in marital relations. The remarks made in reference to the above motive (no. 7) are applicable in this case as well.
9. Because it is morally certain that one of the parties will otherwise fall into sins of incontinence (cf. remarks concerning motive no. 7).

Ordinarily Sufficient only for the Temporary Practice of Periodic Continence

1. Because of a temporary physical weakness or period of convalescence on the part of the mother, e.g. gaining strength after childbirth or after an illness.
2. Because of the extraordinary inconveniences and expenses associated with childbirth in an individual case, e.g. Caesarean deliveries.
3. Because of the exceptional fecundity of the mother, it is necessary to "space" births. (Footnote: This would be true especially of a woman who is not strong physically, so that a large family would be a serious strain on her health. Ordinarily, however, many births rather fortify than weaken the health of both mother and children. C f. Leclercq, op. cit., 220, 299)

4. Because of difficult financial conditions at the present time, unemployment, misfortunes, etc.
5. Because the young wife is not yet physically fit to assume the cares of motherhood.
6. Because of a temporary nervous strain on the part of the wife; simply cannot bear the thought of another child.
7. Because the birth of another child will actually render the mother incapable of properly rearing the children already born, at least for the time being.
8. Because the wife has to work and help support the family – husband’s salary is insufficient, or employment irregular, etc.

Doubtfully Sufficient Motives

1. Because the man and wife wish to train just one or two children for special careers or social standings in life.
2. Because the wife wishes to work for a while after marriage in order to help pay for the furniture, help the husband pay his debts, etc.
3. Because the wife wishes to have only one or two children and keep her career; nurse, teacher, beauty specialist, singer, etc.

Insufficient Motives

1. Because the wife has an unfounded fear of the ordinary pains and inconveniences of pregnancy and childbirth – “too delicate.”
2. Because the man and wife wish to “enjoy life while they are young – they will settle down later on; or any other motive which indicates an excessive love of ease and comfort, or which indicates a spirit of avarice, vanity, etc.; e. g. they shrink from the sacrifices normally associated with the rearing and education of children, or they simply have no desire for children, or they desire only one or two children so that their wealth will stay in the family, or because it is the “style” to have a child or two.
3. Because of any malicious motive such as hatred of children, contempt for the divine plan or for the authority of the Church, etc.

About the Author

Eamonn Clark is a licensed moral theologian (STL) of the Catholic Church, filmmaker, endurance athlete, and entrepreneur. After graduating from Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, MD, with a B.A. in philosophy, he studied at the seminary on the same campus. He subsequently obtained his STB and STL (Moral Theology) from the P.U.S.T. (Angelicum) in Rome, where he is currently a lay doctoral student researching the social teaching of Pius XI.

Email: profidellc@gmail.com

X: [@eamonnclark](https://twitter.com/eamonnclark)

Personal YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/@eamonnclark

Personal Blog: www.christianrenaissancemovement.com

Company YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/@profidemedia

Company Mailing List: www.provide.io/subscribe



P.S. – I very much appreciate words of thanks and encouragement, and I also welcome constructive criticism. Please understand that I cannot respond to every request for explanation on moral theology topics due to the many demands on my time, especially questions related to more fundamental principles. Please consult the standard authors, especially McHugh and Callan's manual, which is excellent overall and available online for free; if you are having "problems" in your own life then speak to your parish priest or another cleric or close friend whose judgment you trust. In some months from the publication of this book, I hope to launch a larger public project related to marriage ethics, part of which will in time explore the sorts of questions that this text is bound to prompt in many minds. Thank you!

-Eamonn

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