

JOHN PAUL II'S 'THEOLOGY OF THE BODY' AND THE BEAUTY OF GOD'S PLAN OF LOVE IN NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING AND NAPROTECHNOLOGY

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The question placed before us is this: how do NaProTechnology and Natural Family Planning correspond to God's plan for human beings? Another way to put the same question might be: what is it about NaProTechnology and Natural Family Planning that makes them fitting forms of behaviour for human beings while other methods of achieving pregnancy and spacing child birth are not?

This immediately raises another question and a very profound one at that. This is the question of the purpose of human life. It might surprise some that we are so immediately plunged into such deep water, but the truth is that we simply cannot avoid such profound questions when we are dealing with matters that touch upon the very origin of human life.

The answer that John Paul II gives to this latter question about the meaning of life is remarkably simple: simple in its profundity. He says that the goal of human life is to make a gift of oneself for the sake of communion. Gift and communion: these are the hermeneutical keys through which the previous pontiff viewed the world. In effect, he says that at the end of your life, you will judge it to have been a success or a failure not on the basis of fame, wealth, or pleasure; but on the basis of whether you took the opportunity to make a gift of yourself to others and whether or not you achieved profound communion with others and with God.

If you are not acquainted with the thought of John Paul II, the phrase 'gift of self' might strike you as unusual; and even if you

are, it can remain a bit nebulous. So let us spend just a moment to deal with this.

In many ways, 'gift of self' is synonymous with 'love'. However, this does not really solve the problem because the word 'love' is used analogously for a whole range of realities that come under the umbrella of 'desiring the good for someone'. Here is not the place to draw all the distinctions, but in *Love and Responsibility*, Karol Wojtyla does just that and concludes that 'a total gift of self' or 'betrothed love' is the highest possible form of love. It is that type of love in which one person submits their whole self to another person (human or divine) forgoing, by that very act, the right to decide his future for himself. In a word, a 'total gift of self' make one the property of another.¹

Now, it seems to me that John Paul II comes to this notion of the goal of human life as gift and communion from both revelation and a reflection of human experience. It would be worth our while considering all this in more detail.

THE REVELATION OF MANKIND'S VOCATION

In his *Theology of the Body* (TOB), John Paul II spends a considerable amount or much time of time interpreting the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis, that part of the Bible that describes both the creation and the fall.

In addressing the former, John Paul II notes that the only motivation for God to create the world is to make a gift of existence to what He creates; after all, an all perfect God (which is the very definition of God) can gain nothing for Himself in creation that He does not already enjoy, since in the act of creation everything flows from Him.²

¹ Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 96-97

² John Paul II points out that, while the first chapters of Genesis do not make this point explicitly, they do note that God calls His own creation 'good': "God saw all that he had made and indeed it was very good" (Gen 1:31). Now since goodness is what the will loves, John Paul II concludes that the motivation behind creation must be love, TOB, 13.3, see Michael Waldstein, *Male and Female He Created Them* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 179-180.

Now, clearly, over and above all other creatures, mankind is the beneficiary of this gift of creation, and this is on two accounts: first, creation is for his benefit – it is very clear in Genesis that mankind is given dominion over creation (Gen 1:26, 29-30; 2:15); second, mankind receives a higher share in God’s existence in the sense that he receives not just being, not just life, not just the ability to sense, but he receives the ability to know and love. One might say that while the existence of all creatures is a gift of God, mankind’s existence is more marked by the notion of gift than any other creature in the visible world. The notion of gift runs like a water-mark through his very existence.

Having established this, we must now apply to it a self-evident but extremely important axiom. It is that ‘to act follows to be,’ or in Latin, *agere sequitur esse*. This axiom points to the fundamental truth that in all things, the action that is proper to it follows on from the type of thing it is. So, apple trees (being) produce apples (action) and humans think (action) because they have rational natures (being). When we apply this axiom to mankind, its import should be clear: since at the very root of the existence of man is a divine gift, in a special way humans are called to make a gift of themselves to others. This vocation is written into their very fiber.

John Paul II comes to the same conclusion in a second and related way. This time, he focuses on the revelation (also contained in the creation narratives of Genesis) that mankind is created in the image and likeness of God. To get a handle on this, let us consider a seminal text from his Letter on the Dignity of Women (*Mulieris Dignitatem*). There we read:

[T]he New Testament . . . reveal[s] the inscrutable mystery of God’s inner life. God, who allows himself to be known by human beings through Christ, is the unity of the Trinity: unity in communion. In this way new light is also thrown on man’s image and likeness to God, spoken of in the Book of Genesis. The fact that man “created as man and woman” is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a

“unity of the two” in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life.³

Here we touch on the central nerve of the TOB. The point is this: God is Himself a Communion of Divine Persons; and it is revealed to us that mankind – both male and female – are created in His likeness: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26).

What is particularly striking about this text is that the Lord God speaks of Himself in the plural of Himself: “let us.” In more recent times, John Paul II and others have focused their attention on this interesting expression.⁴ From this has sprung an authentic development in the doctrine of man’s creation in the image of God. This development is at least obliquely referred to in what John Paul II says above. The long established tradition of the doctrine focused on a likeness of the *individual* man or woman to God based on each person’s power to know and love. The development in this doctrine considers the likeness more at the level of *communion* between persons: a communion founded on truth and love (cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* 24). In the quote above, and focusing in this case on the community of marriage, John Paul II says that spouses “are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God.” The point is that God Himself is a communion of Persons and we who are made in His likeness can have no other ultimate purpose in life than to seek communion, both human and divine.

MAN’S VOCATION IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE

This much, then, John Paul II garners from a detailed examination of scripture: we are called to gift and communion. But, John Paul II

³ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 7. Cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

⁴ For other places in the Old Testament where God refers to Himself in the plural, see Gen. 2:18, 3:22, 11:5-7.

claims that even without revelation we might make a good guess that this is the goal of human life.

In his earlier work, *Love and Responsibility* (which complements TOB in the sense that it approaches human sexuality more from the perspective of reason than from revelation) we find the following startling statement:

The sexual urge . . . is a natural drive born in all human beings, a vector of aspiration along which their whole existence develops and perfects itself from within.⁵

Here, Wojtyla points out that sexual desire is something built into what it means to be a human being and that this very desire indicates that by our nature we are orientated out of ourselves and towards others. This natural desire is, one might say, the spring board from which emerges the total gift of self that, for John Paul II, is the purpose of human life. In this sense, then, sexual desire is “a vector of aspiration along which their whole existence develops and perfects itself from within.” Of course, there is a lot more to be said here since the sexual urge needs to be channeled or harnessed by the virtue of chastity, but the point is clear enough: our experience of this natural inclination is enough to surmise that the goal of human life is self-donation.

For John Paul II, this time in TOB, there is another observation about our experience of human nature that leads in the same direction. This is the rather unspectacular observation that the male body is made for the female body and vice versa. From this observation, John Paul II develops what must be accounted as the central idea of TOB: the notion of the spousal meaning of the body. This concept asserts that a reflection on the character of the human body leads precisely to an understanding of the innate human vocation to gift and communion. He calls this the *spousal* meaning of the body because the distinctive mark of marriage is the exclusive gift of self, husband to wife and wife to husband. In this way, marriage is the paradigm of self-giving, even if other forms of community can surpass marriage in terms of profundity:

⁵ Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 46.

such as the communion between a father and a son, or between religious (e.g. St Ignatius and St Francis Xavier or St Francis and St Clare).⁶

It is worth noting, at least momentarily, that an idea like the spousal meaning of the body rests upon the premise that God has written into creation some clues as to his intention for it. Another way to put all this is that creation is not, as some suggest, meaningless but has been inscribed with God given significance. Literally, God has written (inscribed) into creation clues as to His purpose for mankind. Our task is to read out of creation what has been written into it and then, by conforming our actions to this.

Of course, this is nothing other than the idea of natural law. It is by a reflection on the way that God has created human nature that we know how God wants us to act. For example, by reflecting on the fact that the power of speech is for communication of truth, we know that lying is wrong. There is nothing new here. However, John Paul II does add a new expression to this long standing understanding of natural law when he points out that even the configuration of the male and female body support this idea. This, to my mind, is typical of the TOB. It is not really novel in what it says, but in how it says it and, in this, it conforms perfectly to the demands of the New Evangelization, since this is an evangelization not new in content but “new in its ardor, methods and expression.”⁷

NAPROTECHNOLOGY AND SPACING THE BIRTH OF CHILDREN

Here, then, is the evidence offered by John Paul II as to the universal vocation of human life. There is evidence from Scripture and evidence from a careful reflection on human experience: and both point in the same direction, that every human being is called to make a sincere gift of himself for the sake of communion.

⁶ Marital communion is the paradigm of self-gift and communion because what is closest to our senses is most *evident* to us. This does not mean it is more profound than other forms. However, because marriage has a bodily dimension and bears tangible fruit (children), the communion of marriage is often held up by John Paul II as the archetype of the human vocation to gift and communion.

⁷ John Paul II, *Address to CELAM's 19th ordinary assembly*, 9 March 1983.

Having, hopefully, laid the foundations of an adequate anthropology, my task is now to show that both in seeking to space birth and seeking to achieve a conception, NaProTechnology conforms to this innate and universal vocation of human life.

Let us take first the way that NaProTechnology (and indeed some other forms of natural family planning) can be used to try and space births. The question before us then becomes: how is it that NaProTechnology conforms to the truth about the human person while other methods of spacing conception – such as condoms, hormonal contraception, and inter-uterine devices – do not?

Without giving an exhaustive answer to this question, there seems to be at least three ways in which contraception fails to live up to this vocation, whereas NaProTechnology fully respects it and, moreover, promotes it.

First, NaProTechnology fully respects what John Paul II calls the *Language of the Body* (LOB). This is yet another idea from the TOB and is closely connected to the notion of the *spousal meaning of the body*, which we have already met. The LOB is the idea that when a husband and a wife engage in sexual intercourse their bodies speak an innate language which is nothing less than the language of gift: it is, in this sense, the expression of the spousal meaning of the body in marital intercourse. In the intimacy of the marital act, the body necessarily says I give myself to you: I am all yours (*totus tuus*). Seen in this light, contraception is wrong because, in John Paul II's own words, "the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other."⁸ In contrast, of course, NaProTechnology preserves the full integrity of each marital act because when the husband and wife come together, since neither spouse denies to the other their fertility as they have it, each spouse says what he or she ought to say: "I give all I am to you".

⁸ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 32

Note that the premise here is that fertility is an essential aspect of the gift that spouses give to each other. This can hardly be denied given that fertility is the *unique* gift that one spouse gives to another. As a teacher by profession, I give my time and talents (as I have them) to my students, including my female students: in this sense, I give myself to these women. But as a married man, I give my fertility only to my wife. This shows that gift of fertility is at the very heart of the *marital* exchange of gifts.

A second way to see how NaProTechnology conforms to what it means to be human (and that contraception does not) is to notice how natural family planning (when it is used to space conceptions) promotes the virtue of chastity. Here we shall see that NaProTechnology not only does not contradict the human vocation as contraception does, but rather it promotes it.

Chastity is nothing other than self control in matters of sexual desire: the ability to harness the energy in ones sexual urge so that it would become the raw material for love. As I have already pointed out, only on account of this virtue can the sexual urge become, in the words of John Paul II, “vector of aspiration” that leads of perfection in charity. Note that this is a wholly positive description of chastity in the sense that it empowers us to do something useful with sexual desire: it is not simply a matter of neutering the desire.

But how exactly does NaProTechnology build chastity? The answer is that self-control is at the foundation of chastity and this self-control is born out of periodic abstinence. This means that each of us, according to time and place, must abstain from taking possession of those good things that our corporeal desire would incline us to. However good those things are in themselves our fallen nature wants too much of them. This is true of food and drink, as well as of sex.

But, such tutelage in self control is built into the practice of NaProTechnology. In contrast, contraception removes the need for any self-control within the context of prudently seeking to avoid a new conception. Accordingly, it does nothing to build virtue and quite a lot to build vice.

We can transpose this second point into the language of gift by pointing out that one cannot give what one does not have. Therefore, one cannot make a gift of self unless one has oneself; and a person has himself in matters of sexuality through the virtue of chastity.

A colleague of mine told me a story of a conversation he once had with a newly married man whom he was informally counseling. This colleague was careful to impress upon this young man the effectiveness of NFP as a means to regulate conception. After a long and careful explanation of this point to show how NFP surpassed various forms of contraception on this score, the young man responded: "it is not that I do not trust NFP, it is that I do not trust myself." What a poignant moment of self knowledge! The contraceptive way of dealing with child spacing appealed to this man not because it would be a better way to stop his wife from becoming pregnant, but because it demanded of him no self-control and no effort to grow in virtue.

This is a pessimistic view of human life. It is built on the assumption that in the area of sexuality it is impossible to change. In TOB, John Paul II contrasts the attitude of what he calls 'the masters of suspicion' with those who believe in the redemption of the body. The latter - Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche - preach a kind of pessimistic determinism in which all human actions are explainable in terms of an alterable desire for wealth, sexual gratification, or power. In contrast, the New Testament talks about 'the redemption of the body' (Rom 8:23). As John Paul II explains this in TOB, this is the effect of grace on the body and particularly on human sexuality. On account of the gift of grace in the soul, certain supernatural virtues flower in the bodily appetites and bring greater freedom in matters of sexuality. John Paul II speaks in particular of infused temperance and the gift of piety (cf. TOB 57.3). This is more than a power to control a wayward sexual urge: it is, as we have said, the power to harness sexual desire for the demands of authentic love. So, in summarizing this point we might say that NaProTechnology implies an optimistic view of the human person in the light of the fact that Christ has redeemed

both the body and the soul. In this sense, to doubt the possibility of living chastely – as contraception does – is to reject the Gospel.

The third way to see the irreconcilable difference in mentality between NaProTechnology and a contraceptive mentality relates to the way each implicitly views and values the human body. The former accords full personal dignity to the body, while the latter (unwittingly perhaps) treats the body as sub-personal. He goes as far as to suggest that in the contraceptive world view we are witnessing a reemergence of the old heresy of the Manicheans who proposed an exaggerated dichotomy between the world of the spirit and the world of matter, and who despised the latter.⁹

The point here is that contraception treats the body – and specifically the generative power of the body – as something that can be suppressed in sexual intercourse without thereby damaging personal communion. This is based on the premise (conscious or not) that the body and the person are not, after all, intimately related to each other. Of course, this is false. The body is a constituent part of the human person and what we do with the body we do with the person. For example, if I hit your face with my fist, it would be unreasonable to say that *I* did not hit *you*, but only that my body hit your body.

Here, of course, there is no suggestion that we cannot, in fact, distinguish between the soul and the body. They are clearly distinct entities. The point is that they come together in the most profoundly intimate union in the constitution of a human being (even if the soul is forever the senior partner). The tradition expresses this truth by calling the soul the form of the body.¹⁰

The bottom line is that it is not only through the body that we come *to know* the fundamental vocation of human life as gift and communion: we also *achieve* this vocation in and through the human body.

⁹ John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 19.

¹⁰ Cf. Council of Vienne (1311-1312), Denzinger, 481.

NAPROTECHNOLOGY AND ACHIEVING CONCEPTION

Moving now to the other facet of NaProTechnology, which I take to be the more central concern of that technology, namely achieving conception, we shall see that exactly the same reality transpires: again, NaProTechnology wonderfully conforms to the truth about the human person, whereas alternatives such as IVF and sperm donation do not.

It ought to be made clear straight away that it is not wrong in itself to use technology to help to achieve conception and pregnancy, just as it is not wrong in itself to use technology to try to avoid conception. What matters is that the use of technology might be in accord with the dignity of both the spouses and the child to be conceived. That said, it is hard to deny an alarming trend towards equating what is technologically possible with what is morally good. Benedict XVI speaks of the ideology of technology in which “the conscience is simply invited to take note of technological possibilities.”¹¹

Donum Vitae, the declaration from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that deals with matters of artificial conception, gives us the principle on the basis of which we can discern which technologies are licit and which are not. We read:

The human person must be accepted in his parents’ act of union and love; the generation of a child must therefore be the fruit of that mutual giving which is realized in the conjugal act wherein the spouses cooperate as servants and not as masters in the work of the Creator who is Love.¹²

Here we have both a norm for action and a reason for that norm. The key norm is that “the generation of a child must therefore be the fruit of that mutual giving which is realized in the conjugal act.” The reason given for this norm is that “the human person must be accepted in his parents’ act of union and love.”

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 75.

¹² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae*, 4c.

Let me try to unwrap what is going on here. The silent premise is that a child is a gift. Every couple who has longed for a child knows this well, because conceiving and carrying a child to term is not something that we are so in control of that whoever wants it can do it. But even those couples fortunate enough to have children should remember that since human beings have spiritual souls, every conception relies upon a gratuitous action of God who alone can create and infuse a soul into the human body.

Now, it is precisely because the human child is a gift, that the only fitting context for his conception is an act of self-giving on the part of the parents. This is why *Donum Vitae* says that conception must be “the fruit of that mutual giving which is realized in the conjugal act.” Other contexts for conception of a human being, however well meaning, are not appropriate. For example, the creation of children in laboratories through the agency of a technician is not commensurate with the truth of what a human being is, in this case, since the context is clearly not that of an act of profound human self-giving.¹³

So, again, having laid the foundations it is not difficult to see how NaProTechnology conforms to the truth about the human person because the application of technology to the goal of achieving conception is aimed at making the marital intercourse of the spouses fruitful: it in no sense seeks to replace this act as the proximate cause of conception. So, the context of conception remains that of the profound self-donation of the spouses one to another.

This is radically different from the way that IVF brings about conception. In this latter technology, the spouses only provide the matter for conception, the sperm and eggs (and this outside of the conjugal act), while the true agent of conception is the laboratory technician.

By way of contract, NaProTechnology seeks various ways to maximize the chances of conception when the spouses engage in

¹³ Cf. Donald Asci, *The Conjugal Act as a Personal Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 160-161.

conjugal relations, for example by a more accurate determination of the best day for intercourse or by enhancing the chances of implantation after conception through the regulation of the woman's hormones. Even surgical operations that might be part of the wider application of NaProTechnology are aimed at removing impediments to conception by the normal means: they are never attempts - as is the case with IVF - to replace the "parents' act of union and love" as the cause of the coming to be of the child.¹⁴

There are various other aspects of IVF, as it is normally practiced, that indicate that it is decisively outside of the context of gift. These are things like pre-implantation genetic screening and so called selective reduction, which is the abortion of implanted embryos if more than a desired number are present. This is decisively the realm of manufacturing since it is nothing less than quality and quantity control applied to human life. Now, while neither of these techniques is essential to IVF, they are manifestations that the whole atmosphere of this technology is not one of gift but of production and control. There is wisdom in the old saying that 'one should never look a gift horse in the mouth.' When we know that something is a gift, we do not reject it because it does not meet some arbitrary standard of perfection.

Finally, with regard to helping couples to conceive, NaProTechnology also conforms to the truth about marriage. In marriage a man and a woman promise only to become pregnant through the agency of each other. This is a fundamental aspect of the promise of fidelity that is so central of the marriage. Many forms of artificial conception, such as artificial insemination by donor (as well as IVF) do not respect this commitment because in these cases the wife becomes pregnant by the agency of another man either because he provides the gametes or he is responsible for transferring an embryo to her uterus.

¹⁴ Another technique called lower tubal ovum transfer (LTOT) would also be permissible, since it merely seeks to move, by surgical means, a egg to the lower part of the fallopian tube thereby removing obstacles to the sperm reaching the egg, when the sperm is released in the conjugal act (see William May, *Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of Human Life* [Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2000], 89).

CONCLUSION

In his Apostolic Letter on The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II asserts that:

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.¹⁵

His point is clear: the difference between natural family planning and NaProTechnology on the one hand, and contraception on the other, comes down to a disagreement about what it means to be a man. The disagreement is not at the level of technology but anthropology. As we have seen the same also applies to different ways of bringing about conception. It is not a matter simply of technology but of whether the technology respects the status of the human child as a gift.

Ultimately, then, each side of the argument enshrines a different view of what it means to be a human being. These are conflicting views and utterly incompatible with each other. It is in this sense that matters of human sexuality and artificial conception have become the modern battle ground for two world views that cannot peacefully coexist.

Under-girding NaProTechnology is a view that human life is a gift and that we are called (each and everyone) to love, understood as making a gift of oneself for the sake of communion. The world view behind contraception and artificial conception is the antithesis of this: and, despite what Hegel might say, there can be no synthesis here. The world view of contraception and artificial conception is one of appropriation and production: it is essentially

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 32.

consumerist, and a consumer culture is one that puts a premium not on giving but on taking.

Finally, there is one aspect of the title of this talk that I have, until now, neglected. The title speaks of “the *beauty* of God’s plan for love” that is embedded in NaProTechnology.

Beauty is that which gives joy to the beholder from the experience of proportion and harmony. Whenever the parts of a thing are in the right place and each given its proper importance in the whole, then we have beauty: this is true of a human face, a building, or of a work of art; and it is above all true of a human life. A beautiful life is one in which a person gives the proper importance to each thing in his life, and highest place to love. In this sense, NaProTechnology is part of living a beautiful life because it brings a right ordering of priorities into a couple’s life: it brings proportion and harmony. After all, spouses do not just fall into the practice of NaProTechnology and NFP, like many fall unthinkingly into the use of contraception – the only choice usually being the exact method. No, NaProTechnology demands and manifests a careful reflection on the part of the spouses as to the meaning of life and the goal of marriage. And it demands considerable and deliberate effort to construct a way of life.

Of course, in this life, love is never separated from the cross for very long. Things do not always work out as we initially hoped: we become pregnant when we hoped not to, or we did not conceive when we hoped we would. Nonetheless, it is my perception that the pedagogy of NaProTechnology allows those couples who use it to better embrace this aspect of God’s loving plan for them because they have already been trained in the school of love.