

Contenance Deepens Personal Communion

Pope John Paul II

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF 7 NOVEMBER [1984]

At the general audience in the Paul VI Hall on Wednesday, 7 November, Pope John Paul II continued his analysis of the virtue of continence and its role in the spirituality of marriage and the family. Following is our translation the Holy Father's address.

1. We are continuing the analysis of the virtue of continence in the light of the doctrine contained in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. It is well to recall that the great classics of ethical (and anthropological) thought, both the pre-Christian ones and the Christian ones (St. Thomas Aquinas), see in the virtue of continence not only the capacity to contain bodily and sensual reactions, but even more the capacity to control and guide man's whole sensual and emotive sphere. In the case under discussion, it is a question of the capacity to direct the line of excitement toward its correct development and also the line of emotion itself, orienting it toward the deepening and interior intensification of its pure and, in a certain sense, disinterested character.

Not an opposition

2. This differentiation between the line of excitement and the line of emotion is not an opposition. It does not mean that the conjugal act, as a result of excitement, does not at the same time involve the deep emotion of the other person. Certainly it does, or at any rate, it should not be otherwise.

In the conjugal act, the intimate union should involve a particular intensification of emotion, or rather the deep emotion, of the other person. This is also contained in Ephesians in the form of an exhortation directed to married couples: "Defer to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21).

The distinction between excitement and emotion, noted in this analysis, proves only the subjective reactive-emotive richness of the human "I." This richness excludes any unilateral reduction and enables the virtue of continence to be practiced as a capacity to direct the manifesting of both the excitement and the emotion, aroused by the reciprocal reacting of masculinity and femininity.

Natural method

3. The virtue of continence, so understood, has an essential role in maintaining the interior balance between the two meanings of the conjugal act, the unitive and the procreative (cf. HV 12) in view of a truly responsible fatherhood and motherhood.

The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* devotes due attention to the biological aspect of the question, that is to say, to the rhythmic character of human fertility. In the light of the encyclical, this "periodicalness" can be called a providential index for a responsible fatherhood and motherhood. Nevertheless a question such as this one, which has such a profoundly personalistic and sacramental (theological) meaning, is not resolved only on this level.

The encyclical teaches responsible fatherhood and motherhood "as a proof of a mature conjugal love." Therefore it contains not only the answer to the concrete question that is asked in the sphere of the ethics of married life but, as already has been stated—it also indicates a plan of conjugal spirituality, which we wish at least to outline.

Maintains balance

4. The correct way of intending and practicing periodic continence as a virtue (that is, according to *Humanae Vitae* 21, the "mastery of self") also essentially determines the "naturalness" of the method, called also the "natural method." This is "naturalness" at the level of the person. Therefore there can be no thought of a mechanical application of biological laws. The knowledge itself of the rhythms of fertility—even though indispensable—still does not create that interior freedom of the gift, which is by its nature explicitly spiritual and depends on man's interior maturity. This freedom presupposes such a capacity to direct the sensual and emotive reactions as to make possible the giving of self to the other "I" on the grounds of the mature self-possession of one's own "I" in its corporeal and emotive subjectivity.

Communion of persons

5. As we know from the biblical and theological analyses we have previously done, the human body in its masculinity and femininity is interiorly ordered to the communion of the persons (*communio personarum*). Its spousal meaning consists in this. The spousal meaning of the body has been distorted, almost at its roots, by concupiscence

(especially by the concupiscence of the flesh in the sphere of the threefold concupiscence). The virtue of continence in its mature form gradually reveals the pure aspect of the spousal meaning of the body. In this way, continence develops the personal communion of the man and the woman, a communion that cannot be formed and developed in the full truth of its possibilities only on the level of concupiscence. This is precisely what the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* affirms. This truth has two aspects: the personalistic and the theological.