

## **Continence Frees One from Inner Tension**

Pope John Paul II

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GENERAL AUDIENCE OF WEDNESDAY, 31 OCTOBER [1984]

At the general audience on Wednesday morning, 31 October, Pope John Paul II continued his treatment of the virtue of continence in the light of the teaching of "Humanae Vitae". Following is our translation of the Holy Father's address.

1. We are continuing the analysis of continence in the light of the teaching contained in *Humanae Vitae*.

It is often thought that continence causes inner tensions which man must free himself from. In the light of the analyses we have done, continence, understood integrally, is rather the only way to free man from such tensions. It means nothing other than the spiritual effort aimed at expressing the "language of the body," not only in truth but also in the authentic richness of the manifestations of affection.

### **Essential reasons**

2. Is this effort possible? In other words (and under another aspect) the question returns here about the feasibility of the moral law, recalled and confirmed by *Humanae Vitae*. It constitutes one of the most essential questions (and currently also one of the most urgent ones) in the sphere of the spirituality of marriage.

The Church is totally convinced of the correctness of the principle that affirms responsible fatherhood and motherhood, in the sense explained in previous catecheses. This is not only for demographic reasons but for more essential reasons. We call that fatherhood and that motherhood responsible which correspond to the personal dignity of the couple as parents, to the truth of their person and of the conjugal act. Hence arises the close and direct relationship that links this dimension with the whole spirituality of marriage.

Pope Paul VI, in *Humanae Vitae*, expressed what had been affirmed elsewhere by many authoritative moralists and scientists, even non-Catholics(1), namely, that precisely in this field, so profoundly and essentially human and personal, it is necessary above all to refer to man as a person, the subject who decides by himself, and not to means which make him the object (of manipulations) and depersonalize him. It

is therefore a question here of an authentically humanistic meaning of the development and progress of human civilization.

3. Is this effort possible? The whole question of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is not reduced simply to the biological dimension of human fertility (the question of the "natural cycles of fertility"), but goes back to the very subjectivity of man, to that personal "I" through which the person is man or woman.

Already during the discussion in the Second Vatican Council, in relation to the chapter of *Gaudium et Spes* on the "Dignity of Marriage and the Family and its Promotion," the necessity was discussed for a deepened analysis of the reactions (and also of the emotions) connected with the mutual influence of masculinity and femininity on the human subject.(2) This question belongs not so much to biology as to psychology. From biology and psychology it then passes into the sphere of the spirituality of marriage and the family. Here this question is in close relationship with the way of understanding the virtue of continence, that is, self-mastery and especially of periodic continence.

### **Understanding continence**

4. A careful analysis of human psychology allows us to arrive at some other essential affirmations. (Psychology is at the same time a subjective self-analysis and then becomes an analysis of an "object" accessible to human knowledge.) In interpersonal relationships in which the mutual influence of masculinity and femininity is expressed, there is freed in the psycho-emotive subject in the human "I," alongside a reaction distinguishable as excitement, another reaction that can and must be called emotion. Although these two kinds of reaction appear joined, it is possible to distinguish them experimentally and to differentiate them with regard to their content or their object.(3)

The objective difference between the one and the other kind of reaction consists in the fact that the excitement is above all corporeal and in this sense sensual. On the other hand, even though aroused by the mutual reaction of masculinity and femininity, emotion refers above all to the other person understood in the person's integrality. We can say that this is an emotion caused by the person, in relation to the person's masculinity or femininity.

5. What we are stating here with regard to the psychology of the mutual reactions of masculinity and femininity helps in understanding the role of the virtue of continence, which we spoke about previously.

Continence is not only—and not even principally—the ability to abstain, that is, mastery over the multiple reactions that are interwoven in the mutual influence of masculinity and femininity. Such a role would be defined as negative. But there is also another role (which we can call positive) of self-mastery. It is the ability to direct the respective reactions, both as to their content and their character.

It has already been said that in the field of the mutual reactions of masculinity and femininity, excitement and emotion appear not only as two distinct and different experiences of the human "I." But very often they appear joined in the sphere of the same experience as two different elements of that experience. The reciprocal degree to which these two elements appear in a given experience depends on various circumstances of an interior and an exterior nature. At times one of the elements is clearly prevalent; at other times there is rather a balance between them.

### **Maintaining the balance**

6. As the ability to direct excitement and emotion in the sphere of the mutual influence of masculinity and femininity, continence has the essential task to maintain the balance between the communion in which the couple wish to mutually express only their intimate union and that in which (at least implicitly) they accept responsible parenthood. In fact, on the part of the subject, excitement and emotion can jeopardize the orientation and the character of the mutual language of the body.

Excitement seeks above all to be expressed in the form of sensual and corporeal pleasure. That is, it tends toward the conjugal act which (depending on the natural cycles of fertility) includes the possibility of procreation. Emotion, on the other hand, caused by another human being as a person, even if in its emotive content it is conditioned by the femininity or masculinity of the "other," does not per se tend toward the conjugal act. But it limits itself to other manifestations of affection, which express the spousal meaning of the body, and which nevertheless do not include its (potentially) procreative meaning.

It is easy to understand what conclusions arise from this with respect to the question of responsible fatherhood and motherhood. These conclusions are of a moral nature.

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1) Cf., for example, the statements of the "Bund für evangelisch-katholische Wiedervereinigung" (L'O.R., 19-9-1968, p. 3); Dr. F. King, Anglican (L'O.R., October 5-10-1968, p. 3); and also the Muslim, Mr. Mohammed Cherif Zeghoudu (in the same issue). Especially significant is the letter written on November 28, 1968, to Cardinal Cicognani by Karl Barth, in which he praised the great courage of Paul VI.

2) Cf. the interventions by Card. Leo Suenens at the 13th General Congregation on September 29, 1968: *Acta Synodalia S. Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol. 4, part 3, p. 30.

3) In this regard we should recall what St. Thomas says in a final analysis of human love in relation to the "concupiscible" and to the will (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 26, art. 2).