

Continence Protects the Dignity of the Conjugal Act

Pope John Paul II

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF WEDNESDAY, 24 OCTOBER [1984]

At the general audience of Wednesday, 24 October, Pope John Paul II resumed his series of reflections based on "Humanae Vitae", taking up the subject of the virtue of continence. Following is our translation of the Holy Father's address.

1. In keeping with what has already been said, today we will take up the analysis of the virtue of continence.

Continence, which is part of the more general virtue of temperance. Continence consists in the capacity to dominate, control and direct drives of a sexual character (concupiscence of the flesh) and their consequences, in the psychosomatic subjectivity of man. Insofar as it is a constant disposition of the will, this capacity, merits being called a virtue.

We know from the previous analyses that concupiscence of the flesh, and the corresponding desire of a sexual character aroused by it, is expressed with a specific impulse in the sphere of somatic reaction and also with a psycho-emotive excitement of the sensual impulse.

The personal subject, in order to succeed in mastering this impulse and excitement, must be committed to a progressive education in self-control of the will, feelings and emotions. This education must develop beginning with the most simple acts in which it is relatively easy to put the interior decision into practice. As is obvious, this presupposes the clear perception of the values expressed in the law and the consequent formation of firm convictions. If accompanied by the respective disposition of the will, these convictions give rise to the corresponding virtue. This is precisely the virtue of continence (self-mastery). This virtue is seen to be the fundamental condition for the reciprocal language of the body to remain in the truth and for the couple to "defer to one another out of reverence for Christ," according to the words of Scripture (Eph 5:21). This "deferring to one another" means the common concern for the truth of the language of the body; rather, deferring "out of reverence for Christ" indicates the gift of the fear of God (a gift of the Holy Spirit) which accompanies the virtue of continence.

2. This is very important for an adequate understanding of the virtue of continence and especially of the so-called "periodic continence" dealt with in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. The conviction that the virtue of continence is set against the concupiscence of the flesh is correct, but it is not altogether complete. It is not complete especially when we take into account the fact that this virtue does not appear and does not act abstractly and therefore in isolation. But it always appears and acts in connection with the other virtues (*nexus virtutum*), and therefore in connection with prudence, justice, fortitude and above all with charity.

In the light of these considerations it is easy to understand that continence is not limited to offering resistance to the concupiscence of the flesh. But through this resistance it is open likewise to those values, more profound and more mature, inherent in the spousal significance of the body in its femininity and masculinity, as well as in the authentic freedom of the gift in the reciprocal relations of the persons. Concupiscence of the flesh itself, insofar as it seeks above all carnal and sensual satisfaction, makes man in a certain sense blind and insensitive to the most profound values that spring from love and which at the same time constitute love in the interior truth that is proper to it.

Linked to power of love

3. In this way also the essential character of conjugal chastity is manifested in its organic link with the power of love, which is poured out into the hearts of the married couple along with the consecration of the sacrament of marriage. In addition, it becomes evident that the call directed to the couple that they "defer to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21) seems to open that interior space in which both become ever more sensitive to the most profound and most mature values that are connected with the spousal significance of the body and with the true freedom of the gift.

Conjugal chastity (and chastity in general) is manifested at first as the capacity to resist the concupiscence of the flesh. It later gradually reveals itself as a singular capacity to perceive, love and practice those meanings of the language of the body which remain altogether unknown to concupiscence itself. Those meanings progressively enrich the marital dialogue of the couple, purifying it, deepening it, and at the same time simplifying it.

Therefore, that asceticism of continence, which the encyclical speaks of (cf. HV 21), does not impoverish affective manifestations. But rather it makes them spiritually more intense and therefore enriches them.

No contradiction

4. Analyzing continence in this way, in the dynamics proper to this virtue (anthropological, ethical and theological), we see that that apparent contradiction disappears, which is often an objection to the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and to the doctrine of the Church on conjugal morality. That is, there would be a contradiction (according to those who offer this objection) between the two meanings of the conjugal act, the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning (cf. HV 12), so that if it were not licit to separate them, the couple would be deprived of the right to conjugal union when they could not responsibly be permitted to procreate.

The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* gives an answer to this apparent contradiction, if one studies it in depth. Pope Paul VI confirms that there is no contradiction but only a difficulty connected with the whole interior situation of the "man of concupiscence." Rather, precisely by reason of this difficulty, there is assigned to the interior and ascetical commitment of the couple the true order of conjugal life. In view of this order, they become "strengthened and, one might say, consecrated" (HV 25) by the Sacrament of Marriage.

Adequate meaning

5. That order of conjugal life means in addition the subjective harmony between responsible parenthood and personal communion, a harmony created by conjugal chastity. The interior fruits of continence mature in it. Through this interior maturing, the conjugal act itself acquires the importance and dignity proper to it in its potentially procreative meaning. At the same time, all the affective manifestations acquire an adequate meaning (cf. HV 21). They serve to express the personal communion of the couple in proportion to the subjective richness of femininity and masculinity.

Particular affection

6. In keeping with experience and tradition, the encyclical reveals that the conjugal act is also a "manifestation of affection" (HV 16). But it is a "manifestation of particular affection" because at the same time it has a potentially procreative meaning. As a result, it is oriented to express personal union, but not only that. At the same time the encyclical indicates, although indirectly, many manifestations of affection, effective exclusively to express the personal union of the couple.

The role of conjugal chastity, and still more precisely that of continence, lies not only in protecting the importance and dignity of the conjugal act in relation to its procreative meaning, but also in safeguarding the importance and the dignity proper to the conjugal act as expressive of interpersonal union, revealing to the awareness and the experience of the couple all the other possible manifestations of affection that can express this profound communion of theirs.

It is indeed a matter of not doing harm to the communion of the couple in the case where for just reasons they should abstain from the conjugal act. Still more, this communion, continually being built up, day by day, through suitable affective manifestations, may constitute a vast terrain on which, under suitable conditions, the decision for a morally right conjugal act matures.