Fertility: an Interpersonal Gift

If one follows the semantics of the contraceptive industry, it is clear that fertility and conception are viewed largely as a woman's responsibility. Women's fertility continues to be the subject of research and experimentation. Men continue to be a third party to the birth process. Quite often the relationship which determines the ongoing management of fertility in marriage most is the one between the woman and a health care professional. Such a separation of spousal responsibility regarding reproduction undermines the intersubjectivity of the reciprocal personal commitment required for marriage. The Church, in defending the intimate covenant of matrimony, teaches that it should be otherwise. The following are four foundational ideas regarding marital sexuality and fertility from the perspective of a Catholic theology.

Original Wholeness

After stating that "... The two of them become one body," the second story of Creation in Genesis concludes with the phrase "the man and woman were naked, yet they felt no shame" (Gen. 24b, 25). Pope John Paul II has taught, in his personalist reflections on the Genesis myth, that this is a description of the original unity of man and woman and of their original innocence. This original unity is experienced in the reciprocal self-donation of love, expressed in and through corporeal masculinity and femininity. The absence of shame indicates a purity of heart, a joyful wholeness in the embodied gift of self-surrender. This means that, in our original innocence, all our functions - emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical - are integrated in a capacity to give and receive one another.

The combined fertility of husband and wife has the capacity to generate new human persons. It is not simply a physical process like breathing, circulation, or digestion. It involves a series of interpersonal values beginning in spousal love (mutual self-donation) and becoming incarnated in parenthood. Because of these values, fertility should be integrated into the ongoing self-gift of a husband and wife rather than be subjected to contraception.

Old and New Covenant Bases of Marriage

One way to theologize about this conviction is to root it in two fundamental perspectives of covenant. In the Old Testament the Lord God forms a covenant with his beloved, though idolatrous, Israel. This covenant is a bond, a solemn promise, freely and publicly given for an open-ended future. It requires risk and vulnerability. Above all, it is characterized by unending fidelity and unconditional love on behalf of the Lord God.

This covenant finds its fulfillment in the New Testament. In order to teach us how to live, in Jesus, God became embodied as a human being. The Redemption and the creedal promise of the resurrection of the body implies that all that is human, including our corporeality, is good and holy. To show us this, the sacrificial nature of covenant love was manifested on the Cross. The God-man Jesus totally surrendered, emptied himself of breath, blood, and water. It was a worthy sacrifice reconciling all humanity, the crown of Creation, with God the Creator. The Church was born to carry out this New Covenant.

If a covenantal relationship is a constituent of

(continued on page 2)
Christian marriage, then, among other things, it means husbands and wives are called to love each other unconditionally (the Old Covenant) and in a self-emptying manner of self-surrender (the New Covenant). This means accepting all that is human about oneself and one’s spouse, including fertility. The Church teaches that, through self-mastery, fertility is not only accepted but integrated into a coventional relationship in a way which honors the procreative and unitive meanings of marriage, coitus, fertility, and parenthood.

In Intimate Partnership

A third foundational element of marital sexuality and fertility integration is a psychological dimension of covenant commitment. Returning to the Genesis story, we find the man in need of “a suitable helpmate.” Theologian David Thomas, in his book Christian Marriage: A Journey Together (1986), says that the original Hebrew is more aptly translated “someone alongside him,” which the phrase “a suitable partner” best describes. Gaudium et Spes builds on this understanding when it describes marriage as “the intimate partnership of life and love” (48). This, too, is foundational to John Paul’s definition of the Christian family: “an intimate communion of persons” (Familiaris Consortio #15).

Simply stated, intimacy is “the mutual sharing of vulnerabilities” (How’s Your Family?, Lewis, 1979). Like the covenant of marriage, marital intimacy requires freedom and risk. Partnership implies the action of equals; in marriage, the two spouses are equal in dignity and worth as children of God. Intimate partnership, therefore, means spousal intersubjectivity accepted through mutual self-giving.

Contraceptive intercourse detracts from marital intimacy. It compromises the total self-gift through an attempt to eliminate both the procreative meaning and effect of the conjugal act. In its implicit chauvinism, it compromises partnership by making one spouse “responsible” for conception control. Many feminists seem to miss this subtle point. In the name of “liberation,” feminists endorsing contraception and abortion reinforce one of the roots of the inequality they wish to eradicate.

Integration and Self-Gift

This leads to a fourth aspect of responsible parenthood through integration of fertility in the gift of self. It is the masculine quality of domination which characterizes contraception. An antidote to the contraceptive mentality is natural family planning which requires exercising responsible stewardship over marital love. It means recognizing that the gift of fertility is part of the self and is a constituent part of self-donation in marriage. As Mary Joyce points out (Women and Choice, 1986), the responsible part of the self integrates fertility awareness into sexual awareness by learning its cycles and regulating sexual expression. This integration means that true sexual potency and responsiveness is holistically sexual not just genitally competent.

Thus responsible parenthood is not simply the controlling of possible effects of coitus, as the contraceptive industry might define it. Contraception alters human sexuality at the personal, not the biological level. Sexuality pertains to what a person is, not to what a person has. To encapsulate Humanae Vitae #10, responsible parenthood requires the patient and loving integration of the joint fertility of husband and wife into their marriage covenant by the learning of and living with their fertility as they find it. It is part and parcel of their intersubjectivity. Contraception deprives the couple of their reciprocal gift of self which tempers them to become objects of manipulation.

Pope John Paul II calls the capacity of the body to express the total self-surrender of one person to another as the nuptial meaning of the body. The bodily differences between a man and a woman are the physical and personal means through which the unselfish donation in love is made. The sexual act should be the total self-surrender of each spouse to the other in all of his and her potentialities. Self-mastery is thus proper to human persons and makes possible both the gift of self and the interpersonal acceptance of fertility.

Conclusion

No one can live the call to fertility acceptance in marriage without prayerful commitment to God. A man and a woman can give themselves unconditionally and irrevocably to one another because their commitment rests not just on their own strength but on the strength and fidelity of Jesus, the source of their love. Those who endeavor to practice the self-mastery of fertility acceptance count on a love which is the enduring love of God himself.

Charles Balsam, M.A., M.R.E.
Office of Family Life Ministry
Diocese of Beaumont