

Life-Giving Love

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2 May 1993

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Pentecost 1993

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A Pastoral Letter to:

- **Pastors**
- **Religious Educators**
- **Graduates, Undergraduates & Teachers of the Christian Family**
- **Those who help young couples prepare for marriage**
- **And others who want a better understanding of the Church's teaching on sexual morality**

Foreword

It is surely ironic that at a time when public concern over child abuse and domestic violence is high; when perpetrators of violent crimes and criminal lawyers are acknowledging the adverse influence of pornography; and when "sex" is marketed by a multi-million dollar porn industry, some would say the Church should have less to say about sexual morality.

Yet, strangely, they have a point. There is a way of moralising that consciously or unconsciously seeks to dominate other people, and loads on to people an unhealthy sense of guilt.

However, the fact that some say it badly is not a reason why we should say nothing. If we really believe that sexuality is a wonderful gift, that surely deserves to be proclaimed. When such a gift is turned against people, manipulating them and leading them to where they will be less free, isn't that a reason for us to object? And if chastity is about growing in personal freedom and wholesome relationships, why should we keep quiet about that?

In one way or another many of you are teachers of the Catholic faith. In this letter, I am inviting you to reflect on where lies the ultimate difference between the use and misuse of one of God's greatest gifts.

It is really an old story. Creation was not completed until God made us male and female. What God saw then was very good. All sexual morality derives from this original Fact.

Special Foreword to those of you who are married

Your vocation stands at the very heart of all creation. What can the world be without love or without respect for life? Those two gifts – love and life – come together most intimately in marriage. From there they reach out into all human relationships and the human environment. The harmony of the world is linked to the harmony of marriage.

You have glimpsed in a special way the wonder and beauty of love. If you are parents, you have also seen the miracle of new life. You already know that somehow life and love belong together. The Church's teaching on human sexuality only puts words to what deep down you already know.

When in privileged moments you see how wonderful love is, and how life-giving, and when life itself is revealed to you as the hint of something even more wonderful to come, pause to remember that both life and love are gifts. We experience them as freely given. We cannot demand them, or totally possess them; we can only receive them, carry them to each other, and be caught up in something greater than ourselves.

Your special vocation is to hold these two gifts together. Allow yourselves to give love and life. And, if you haven't already done so, allow your love for each other to gently explode in the miracle of new life.

Your children embody something of the wonder of each of you; their uniqueness derives from what you have given to each other. Treasure that new life in your children, consecrate it, rejoice in it, and make sure it is united to the One who overcame death for us.

Introduction

The relationship between love and life is the key to understanding all that the Church teaches concerning sexual morality. Its teaching on sexuality and married love is a prophetic voice on the side of human dignity, love, growth and freedom. But when that teaching is not properly understood, or is poorly presented, it can lead to unnecessary suffering and alienation.

Catholics are entitled to a presentation of the Church's teaching that generates understanding and appreciation and a desire to form their consciences in the light of that teaching. There is much to lose when, through poor teaching or poor understanding, people get the impression that the Church's moral teachings are only "rules", supposedly invented and imposed by the Church,

A faithful presentation of Catholic teaching neither "waters down" the moral law nor overlooks the fact that to live it fully can take time and effort.

The Catholic Tradition does not make a simple equation between wrong actions and bad conscience. It recognises that sometimes people dissent from the Church's teaching, or feel unable to comply with it, in good faith. Those with teaching responsibility in the Church must do better than talk past these people. To speak only of repentance is to miss out on those people who sincerely believe they are not sinning. To speak only of their duty to accept the Church's teaching is to beg the question when they sincerely feel unable to do so.

However, nor can it be supposed that all dissent is so innocent. Not all our wrong choices are made in good faith, and we all find it easy to justify the conclusions we want to reach anyway. In our hearts we know this, and this may be why people don't really want the Church to soft-pedal the reality of sin or the need for conversion.

Even so, sin is in the choice and decision to misuse God's creation. Sin never changes the fact that everything God made is "good" – except human nature, which is "very good" (cf Genesis, Ch.1).

In God's Image

The essential connection between life and love results from our being made in the image of God. In God life and love are the same. That is the image in which we are made. To be true to ourselves, therefore, true to the image in which we are made, we cannot simply put aside the relationship between life and love which God has built into human nature.

It is little wonder, then, that love, both in its “ordinary” moments and in its ecstatic moments, is life-giving. As you know, even being in love is like coming alive. To be intimately known by someone and still “believed in” and loved no matter how well you are known, is to experience the unexpected; it contains surprise; it shows that love is a gift. This experience enables us to accept ourselves in spite of things we don’t like in ourselves. In fact, we are better able to face these when we find ourselves loved in spite of them. Being loved frees us to see ourselves more honestly, and still accept ourselves.

The kind of love that affirms, heals and makes us free like this is love that is not put off even by the worst things others might come to know about us. It isn’t conditional upon how well we live up to anyone’s expectations. It is there regardless – faithful, forgiving, reliable and lasting.

These were the qualities of Christ’s love for us and they reveal what God’s love for us is really like. Christ’s love *continues to be reflected* in many ways, e.g. in the sacrifices parents make for their children, in celibate love and serving others, in the love of husbands and wives for each other, and in the unwavering, continuing commitment of one who has been abandoned by an unfaithful partner. Love can reach great heights.

What makes it possible to love in these ways is the realisation that we are loved by God unconditionally. When we are secure in the knowledge that God’s love for us is unconditional, we ourselves are more able to love unconditionally; we are less dependent on whether others are grateful, or whether they love us in return; we are more free, and free to love.

The connection between life and love is also a characteristic of celibate love. Jesus himself was the most loving and life-giving person who ever lived, and he was celibate.

In another way, couples who cannot have children also experience the life-giving power of life, and are able to share it with others, including children.

Marriage and Family Life

The commitment of husband and wife freely made to each other is what creates the intimate sharing of lives called marriage. On the basis of a relationship that is exclusive to them and permanent, their love for each other is able to deepen and grow for as long as they live.

One of the greatest fruits of such love is new human lives – new persons made in the image of those who gave them life, and raised within the security of their parents’ love for each other. God entrusts to “ordinary” people the profound experience of sharing life and love.

A relationship that is not intended to be permanent, exclusive and at least open to new life is not a marriage relationship.

Christian Marriage

To be a sign of what Christ's own love is like is the special vocation of Christian husbands and wives. According to St Paul, marriage points beyond itself to the relationship between Christ and his Church (Eph. 5:28-33).

In other words, the love of husband and wife for each other is intended to reflect the very characteristics of Christ's love. He loved us unselfishly, even to the point of dying for us. His was a love that set no limits, and once given it was never taken back. It was unconditional and remained faithful even though we were unfaithful.

For husband and wife to love like this is not easy. It is tempting, even for Christians, to aim lower; to settle for something less permanent, less faithful, less forgiving, less committed. But the marriage ceremony highlights total commitment. In Christian antiquity, the altar had the same symbolic value as the crucifix does for us today. It was the symbol of Christ's total, forgiving and unconditional love for us. When Christians marry "before the altar" they remember Christ saying: "this is my body... my blood (=my whole self and my life) given over for you". It is not merely a matter of marrying "in the presence of God"; after all, God is present everywhere.

Our ability to reflect the characteristics of Christ's love is not prevented by our experience of human weakness. Just the opposite: because we are weak, our efforts to love each other as Christ loved us are a sign of *his* power at work in human weakness.

We are only the earthenware jars that hold this treasure, to make it clear that such an overwhelming power comes from God and not from us (2 Cor. 4:7).

A Radical Position

The Catholic perception of sexual morality hinges on the *relationship between* giving life and giving love within marriage. [1] This is not to say that sexual morality depends on whether particular married couples can actually have children. Some cannot. Rather, it is to say that the *natural orientation* of sexual expression is towards the twin purposes of expressing love and procreating new life. This underlying "natural orientation" does not depend on the circumstances of fertility.

This perception of sexual morality stands in contrast to ideologies which allow a total severance between the sexual expression of love and the giving of life. For example, sexual activities which have no reference to the giving of new human life; or, conversely, procedures of human reproduction which have no reference to sexual intercourse.

In the Catholic Tradition, sexual morality is determined by the *meaning* of our actions. Life and love both belong to the meaning of sexual expression and so may not be severed. The contrary view, which allows this severance, measures sexual morality only by reference to the *consequences* of particular actions.

In the final analysis, we are here dealing with what Pope John Paul II has called "two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality" (FC32).

A Prophetic Voice

Pope John Paul II has acknowledged that the Church's teaching on contraception is not easy to understand (FC 33). This is not surprising when we look at history. It seems that the

Church's teaching on marriage, and therefore on sexuality has never been the popular view. But it has been prophetic in ways we can be proud of. [2]

There is also a darker side to the Church's history. What matters most, however, is not that the Church shows signs of human weakness, but that in spite of these weaknesses, gospel values come through against the immense weight of error and confusion in the world.

In the context of today's secular society which makes contraception more easily available, the Church once again finds itself on the outer, and again because of its defence of important values. Pope Paul VI has predicated that

... a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraception methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection (*Humanae Vitae*, 17).

Some would like the Church to say less about human sexuality. Perhaps they should look again at the values which the Church's teaching enshrines. The Church's teaching on human sexuality has turned out to be a prophetic voice on the side of human dignity and freedom.

The Church and Conscience

The difference between right and wrong is ultimately the difference between what is truly human and what is not. Not all people perceive this difference the same way. But the Catholic Tradition has always held that there is a difference, based on objective criteria, and that these criteria can be known. This basic position is in contrast to the popular, rather shallow view that what is right or wrong is only a matter of opinion and depends on how the individual feels about it.

How can we know whether particular activities are right or wrong? With some activities it is reasonably clear. But sometimes the issues are more subtle. What we regard as true to human nature depends on how we understand human nature. It would help, wouldn't it, if we knew how God sees us! Well, the meaning of human life is what Christ came to reveal. And we "put on the mind of Christ" (Phil. 2:5) within the "body of Christ" – the community of ordinary people who draw life from the Risen Christ. This makes a difference of how we see our world and our lives in it. And it makes a difference to how we know what is authentic human behaviour and what is not.

That is why Catholics form their consciences from the perspectives of the Church. its perceptions become theirs. These perceptions are carried within the life of the Church (cf F.C. 5) and are sometimes lived and "known" even before they are properly understood and explained.

Bringing the Church's convictions and perceptions into sharper focus is a process that can take time and is sometimes difficult, because the Church is a human community. it is for this reason that the charism to teach authoritatively is given to the Church. It is vested in the bishops.

People who form their consciences from the perspectives of God's people can expect that how they interpret God's plan will sometimes be different from how it looks to people outside that perspective. We should expect to be different.

Gradual clarification of the Church's teaching

The Church's own understanding of what is authentically human and what is not has itself become further clarified and more refined in the course of history.

For some centuries, Christianity was dominated by the view that sexual intercourse in marriage was morally good only if it was accompanied by a positive intention to procreate. This view was later modified, and intercourse was considered right even when the couple did not want to conceive a child, provided they intended that other purpose of marriage which was to love and comfort each other. Later still, it came to be accepted that intercourse within marriage could be morally right even if the partners positively intended to avoid procreation, by choosing the infertile periods.

These are significant changes and they show that even within the Church we are capable of incomplete and inadequate interpretations of the moral law. But we cannot stop there. We need to look deeper to see what were the values which lay beneath these different interpretations. What we find is a profound and consistent conviction, namely, that giving love and giving life *both belong to the meaning of intercourse*. This is the underlying value and conviction that gives cohesion and consistency to the Church's teaching, even throughout a history of gradual clarification and significant changes.

The Second Vatican Council's contribution to this process of development and clarification was its emphasis on the dignity of the human person as the basis for the Church's teaching on marriage and sexuality. [3] This focus on the person includes respect for our biological nature, but is not limited to that. It extends to other dimensions of human personhood, including the love by which husbands and wives comfort and strengthen each other – whether or not their love-making coincides with the times of biological fertility.

The central aspect of human dignity is freedom. Pope Paul VI took the refinement of Catholic teaching a further step forward: he made it clear that to be true to its meaning sexual intercourse needs not only to be within marriage, but also truly personal and free (*Humanae Vitae* 9, 13).

Consequently, when the Church teaches that contraception is always wrong, it is referring to the *truly personal and free sexual intercourse of husbands and wives*. When it is not truly personal and free, it is already wrong, and is not made wrong by contraception.

Further refinement and clarification of the Church's teaching has been occasioned by more recent new reproduction technology. Indeed, this process of clarification and refinement is not yet complete.

Chastity

The very meaning of sexual expression is found in the love of a husband and wife for each other. This means that married love is the objective measure over against which other forms of sexual activity are found wanting. They fall short of, or contradict, the meaning of sexual expression, by radically separating its life-giving and love-giving purposes. So, for example:

- enforced intercourse, even inside marriage, is false because the absence of freedom means the absence of love;
- rape is false because it has nothing to do with love;
- homosexuality is false because it excludes the natural orientation towards creating new life;
- masturbation lacks the natural orientation towards new life, and usually the natural orientation towards love for another;
- adultery is false to the vows made by married persons;
- fornication (sexual relations between unmarrieds) is false because the total commitment which intercourse is meant to embody has not yet been made.

Of course, when marriage itself is devalued, it is harder to see what is wrong with these ways of contradicting marriage. Sexual morality all hinges on the meaning and dignity of marriage.

Ultimately, the trivialisation, commercialisation and exploitation of sex, whatever the motives, are really just sex removed from its meaning.

Contraception, too, radically separates the two characteristics which together give sexual expression its meaning. The Church teaches that ‘each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life’ (H.V. 11).

Note that the Church’s teaching about contraception concerns the ‘marriage act’. In other words, it concerns contraception inside marriage, not outside marriage.

Note also that the Church’s teaching is not based on the supposition that every act of intercourse must or can be fertile. Being “open” to new life concerns the underlying *natural orientation* of intercourse towards new life.

The wrongness of contraception within marriage is easier to understand when intercourse between husband and wife is seen as an act of *communication*. It is their way of telling each other – in the language of total self-giving – that their commitment to each other is the commitment of marriage, not nay lesser kind of commitment. And because procreation belongs to the meaning of married love, their intercourse is *truthful communication* only if it is fundamentally open to new life (cf FC n.11).

Intercourse which is imposed, or is directed in imagination to some other person, or doesn’t have a natural orientation towards new life, makes a lie of an action that is intended to be the language of *married love* (cf FC n.32).

Natural Family Planning

Where there are good reasons for limiting or spacing the births of children, the teaching of the Church is that a husband and wife are acting rightly and in a responsible way if they decide to “plan” their family. The couple themselves reach this decision after a conscientious consideration of “their own duties towards God, towards themselves, towards the family and towards society in a correct order of values.” [4]

While the Church commends the valour of those who raise large families (G.S. 50), it does not teach that couples should have as many children as is physically possible; rather, it encourages them to be both *unselfish* and *responsible* in sharing the gift of life. These two qualities together make responsible parenthood.

The METHOD they use for spacing or limiting their children must be in accordance with the *meaning* of sexual intercourse, namely, expressing a love that is open to new life. To change intercourse into an action which is not open to new life is to act against its meaning. That is what is wrong with contraceptive intercourse.

On the other hand, natural methods of avoiding pregnancy are consistent with the meaning of sexual intercourse even though the couple, for appropriate reasons, choose to avoid procreation. The meaning of their actions is not falsified by what they do in harmony with the cycle of fertility and infertility which nature provides.

The the really radical difference between NFP and mere contraceptive practices shows up even more clearly at the level of attitudes and relationships. Those who choose to regulate their family by abstaining during fertile periods need to understand each other intimately, respect each other sensitively, and co-operate with each other generously. Their decision puts them in the position of having to find new ways of expressing their love for each other – including ways that might not be found or even looked for if they could have intercourse every time. Perhaps this is what accounts for that deepening o their relationship and that refinement of their personalities that can be so striking. The most convincing arguments in support of the Church’s teaching are the couples who are living by it.

In contract to the vulnerable position of women whose sterility is artificially ensured, the use of natural rhythms requires and sets up a more truly equal situation between husband and wife and a more personal way of relating to each other.

The choice of the natural rhythms involves accepting the cycle of the person, i.e. the woman, and thereby accepting dialogue, reciprocal respect, share responsibility and self-control (John Paul II, F.C. 32).

Likewise, it has to do with being more free and becoming more free. Those husbands and wives are more fully in control of their own lives who can recognise the signs of fertility and then choose to have or avoid intercourse at the fertile time. Those are less fully in control of their lives who have to take some kind of blocking action to counteract the natural consequences of their own actions.

A Moral Demand of an Ideal

From what has been said already, it is clear that the ideals which the Church proclaims are in fact *the norms of a true personalism and true humanism*. It is wrong to suppose, therefore, that an ideal is a standard that is out of most people’s reach; that they are not really expected to live up to it, or capable of doing so. The Church’s teaching on chastity within marriage is an ideal that people can live up to, given goodwill, time and the necessary help.

It is also clear that we are not dealing with laws that the Church makes, but with the Church’s role in interpreting God’s law, i.e. discerning what is truly human.

And so, with a sense of true humanism the Church:

- teaches that couples who conscientiously decide to limit or space their children should do so by choosing natural methods. For this purpose the Church also encourages education in the methods of natural family planning. [5]

- encourages the men and women of science to explore ways of helping couples to identify more accurately the times of their fertility and infertility, so that natural methods of family planning can be made easier for them (H.V. 24; F.C. 35).
- teaches that within the context of true acts of love between husband and wife it is always wrong to use artificial methods of contraception. True acts of love are those between a husband wife that are truly human and personal (H.V. 9) and freely entered into by both partners (H.V. 13). (The Church has not said contraception is wrong when intercourse is not truly human, personal and free.)

Falling Short of the Ideal

Sometimes people can feel that the natural methods of family planning are outside their reach. There are situations in which intercourse cannot be avoided even when pregnancy should be. A husband and wife can sometimes feel caught in a conflict between two sets of responsibilities. For a very good reason, they might feel obliged to avoid a pregnancy, and at the same time, they might consider that expressing their love sexually is necessary for the good of the marriage. It can seem to them that they have “no real choice”.

If in these circumstances they use wrongful methods, they don't necessarily incur the guilt of serious sin, because of their perceived moral dilemma. This does not mean there is “nothing wrong” with artificial contraception in these circumstances; it is always an evil for the reasons already explained. If in such cases it is not sinful, this is because, as they perceive it, they have no other choice.

It is not being said that abstinence is always too difficult. Indeed a married couple's growth as persons, the good of their relationship, and particular circumstances can require that they do exercise self-control and occasional abstinence. Nor should they underestimate the assistance that comes to them through openness to God in prayer. Nevertheless, divine grace does not work as magic, and the pressures that can reduce people's options must be acknowledged. The social and economic environment can provide pressures in the forms of unemployment, poverty, financial difficulty, stress, in some places hunger and political oppression, and sometimes prolonged separation between husband and wife.

These outward pressures must be seen in conjunction with that mutual support which husband and wife are meant to give to each other, and which is one of the essential purposes of their marriage. They can experience a real necessity to love and to be loved, from which they receive assurance, affirmation, solace and healing. The sexual expression of their love is not the only way they can meet these needs, but it is normally a most significant expression of this deep support of each other. Abstinence over a long time, even when it is motivated by fear of a difficult or dangerous pregnancy, can be extraordinarily difficult.

That difficulty can lead some couples to believe they have no real alternative but to resort to an artificial method of voiding pregnancy. They might decide that the Church's teaching is wrong, or at least that it doesn't apply in their circumstances. The point being made here is NOT that artificial contraception for people in these circumstances is right – not even “right for them”; rather it is being said that if such couples really think they have little or no choice, they may be without moral blame.

It was in that context of contraception that the Congregation for Clergy reminded us that

Particular circumstances surrounding an objectively evil human act, while they cannot make it objectively virtuous, can make it inculpable, diminished in guilt or subjectively defensible. [6]

Clearly, the Church's teaching is concerned with people's actions, which may be right or wrong. But it is also concerned with their consciences, which are not always bad even when their actions are wrong.

This is not a new way of doing theology. The Church has always taught that even when a particular wrong action is serious (a "serious matter") there is still no question of serious moral guilt ("serious sin") unless it is also perceived to be seriously wrong, and then deliberately chosen.

Therefore it is important that people who feel they have "no real choice" in the sense described above not be made to feel they are outside the life of the Church. The Church acknowledges the position of those who are not succeeding in avoiding what is wrong, but who nevertheless may be without guilt or without serious guilt. Such people may not be excluded from Holy Communion.

Unnecessary harm is done when people are made to feel guilty when they are not, or more guilty than they really are, or that they don't quite belong.

Taking account of the factors which reduce guilt should not be interpreted as "making exceptions" or as eroding the Church's teaching. Pastors are faithful to the mind of the Church when they take these subjective factors into consideration (cf Congregation for Clergy, quoted above). They cannot be regarded as "lax" for doing so. They would be failing if they did not do so. At the same time, they may not give the impression that the moral law doesn't really matter; people have a right to receive clear teaching on this matter (cf F.C. 33).

The factors which make a wrong action inculpable should not be too easily presumed. But certainly in some marriages, due to lack of support, or lack of education, or lack of motivation, one or both partners can feel that natural family planning is outside the range of what they can manage. Changing this situation can take time.

...in dealing with the concrete application of certain directives of the moral order, it can happen that because of particular circumstances which appear to them as conflicts of duties some of the faithful sincerely believe that it is impossible for them to conform to these directives. In this case, the Church asks them to seek loyally the mode of acting which will permit them to adapt their conduct to given norms. If they do not succeed at first, they should not consider that because of this they are separated from God's love. (Statement of Belgium Bishops, 1968)

It is not that the law applies to some people and not to others; it is rather that people go through different "stages of growth" in their ability to fulfil the law (cf F.C. 34).

Sin

There are other situations in which couples are really able to abstain from intercourse in order to avoid pregnancy, but through frailty or lack of serious effort they choose instead to avoid pregnancy by artificially blocking the effects of their freely chosen actions. This is moral failure, and like all sin it puts us in need of forgiveness. Of course, even in these cases, there

are greater and lesser degrees of responsibility, depending on levels of awareness and freedom.

It is because we can easily fall short that we are encouraged to look for the strengthening and the mercy that are available especially in the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. It is important for our moral growth that we actually acknowledge our sinfulness and our need of mercy and divine assistance. The Church, for its part, must embody in its attitudes and actions God's attitude towards human frailty – God's unconditional love and longing to forgive.

Keeping in touch with the sacraments helps us to keep the ideal of married love in sight, even if there are occasional lapses. But when we lose sight of the ideal, the shortfall tends to become the "norm". This involves a greater loss of authenticity.

It was noted earlier that there is not a simple equation between wrong actions and a bad conscience. It can happen, especially in matters of sexual morality, that wrong actions are done without incurring serious guilt. This can be due either to lack of proper understanding or lack of sufficient freedom/maturity. Adolescent masturbation is an obvious case in point. Unchastity within marriage can also sometimes lack the full freedom that is necessary for serious sin.

Good counselling takes these subjective factors into account and tries to help people develop a healthy sense of self-esteem. It also helps people to develop the self-control which is chastity. Without that self-control, it becomes more difficult to maintain respect both for oneself and for others – including one's married partner.

Good counselling accepts that growth in self-control is a journey that can take time, patience and perseverance, as well as openness to God's help.

Artificial Insemination and In Vitro Fertilisation

Because the Church has always emphasised the dignity of parenthood, it naturally sympathises with infertile couples who wish to become parents. Indeed, they are to be admired in an age which tends to be unsupportive and even negative about family life. Why, then, does the Church have grave reservations about the use of technology in human reproduction?

First of all, it is *not* an objection to the use of technology or to "artificial methods" as such. The given physical and biological order is not the natural law and does not provide moral norms. The natural law is our vocation to become more authentically human. This requires that our technological interventions be in accordance with values that make life more human, not less so.

The Church welcomes the use of technology not only in surgery but also to assist natural functioning. Ethical considerations arising from IVF and AI fall into three main areas:

One area of moral objection concerns the involvement of third parties. "Donors" – whether in artificial insemination or in IIVF – are third parties by the fact of providing semen or ova or even the temporary use of a womb, which are not those of the husband and wife themselves. To adopt children into a marriage is a most commendable act of love and compassion. But

procreation belongs so closely to intercourse, which in turn takes its meaning from the exclusive relationship of husband and wife, that the involvement of third parties offends the marriage relationship even if done with consent. One turns aside from the other in order to become a natural parent which the other is not.