

The Scandal and the Lampstand

By John F. Kippley

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The priestly sex-abuse scandal has had so much publicity that it's hard to imagine what more can be said. But what's amazing to me is that almost nothing has been said about the relationship of the Scandal and the dissent from *Humanae Vitae*. Rarely mentioned, if ever, is the Totality Thesis of the dissenters. So I propose this imaginary dialogue.

Mr. X: "This whole thing about the sexual abuse of minors and seminarians is completely off base. It's no different from parents exercising their authority to persuade their kids to eat their veggies."

JFK. Such a statement is based on a hugely false assumption—namely, that there is no intrinsic meaning to the human sexual act.

Mr. X: "Even if there is such a meaning, it doesn't apply all the time. When bishops muddied the waters post-*Humanae Vitae* by writing about licit dissent, the whole issue of marital sexuality became a matter of personal decision-making not bound by the teaching authority of the Church."

JFK: "The bishops made a horrible mistake. There is no such thing as licit dissent from *Humanae Vitae*. Such dissent will legitimate any imaginable sexual behavior between consenting persons of legal age. In fact, an enthusiastic dissenter wrote approvingly after *Humanae Vitae* that the organized dissent entailed the acceptance even of bestiality (Michael Valente, *Sex: The Radical View of a Catholic Theologian* (Bruce, 1970). Also, I wrote in 1971 that the decision-making principles of archdissenter Fr. Charles Curran could not say "no" to spouse-swapping, and no one responded in disagreement. ("Continued Dissent: Is It Responsible Loyalty?" *Theological Studies*, March 1971).

When the principles of dissent allow bestiality and spouse swapping, it's time to get back to basics. The reality is not complicated.

Who put together in one act what we call "making love" and "making babies?" A theist has to reply, "God Himself."

What is contraception except the effort to take apart what God has put together in this one human act? That's it precisely.

What did Jesus teach about the *indissolubility* of marriage? That's very straightforward: "What God has put together, let no one take apart" (Mt 19:6).

Can also we say that about the marriage act itself? Yes. St. Pope Paul VI specifically taught indissolubility in *Humanae Vitae*. First, he reminded us that "the Church... teaches that *each and every* marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life" (n. 11). Then he affirmed the basis for that teaching in section 12: "That teaching, often set forth by the magisterium, is founded upon the *inseparable* connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive and the procreative meaning."

Indissoluble and inseparable are Latin-derived synonyms; both mean unbreakable.

Does this have any particular importance at this time in 2019? Pope Francis and the heads of episcopal conferences around the world are meeting in Rome on February 21-24 to address the sexual abuse scandal. If they confine themselves to the horrible reality of the sexual abuse of children, the meeting will be a tremendous waste of time because that problem has already been well addressed.

Bishops need to ask themselves, “Why did some priests *think* that they could do this?” I submit that at least some of them were following the logic of the dissent from *Humanae Vitae*. Dissent from the received teaching was in the theological winds during the late 1950s, and it became rampant in the 1960s after the FDA accepted hormonal birth control. Articles and pamphlets by Catholics argued that the Church could change its teaching on birth control and still claim that it never changed a serious moral teaching of the Church.

Rarely mentioned in discourse about *Humanae Vitae* is the precise theological error to which it was addressed—the Totality Thesis. This was the idea that acts of contraception in an overall fruitful marriage would take their morality from that fruitfulness. That’s why the Pope had to state that “*each and every* act” must remain open to the transmission of life (n 11). He reaffirmed this in the closing sentence of section 14: “Consequently, it is an error to think that a conjugal act which is deliberately made infecund and so is intrinsically dishonest could be made honest and right by the ensemble of a fecund conjugal life.”

That is certainly clear enough, but it was seriously undermined by the lack of support from episcopal conferences. The US Bishops responded on November 15, 1968 with *Human Life in Our Day* which generally upheld the encyclical. However, it undermined itself by including a section titled “Norms of Licit Theological Dissent.” That was a disaster. Certainly, the prime subject of public dissent from *Humanae Vitae* was marital sexuality, but people of same-sex orientation were reading the papers too.

Bishops need to put themselves into the shoes of priests and others with same-sex attractions. Given the apparent acceptance of the idea that married couples could licitly contradict the explicit teaching of the Church, is it not understandable that people with same-sex attractions might think that the sexuality teachings of the Church were no longer binding? Is it any wonder that some of them may have rationalized that with the Totality Thesis the morality of acts of sodomy would take their morality from most-of-the-time chastity? Or even that such acts were good? And if they could be “good”, is it so strange that some would persuade themselves that it would be “good” to share their behaviors with minors, even children? As one organization blatantly proclaimed, “Sex before eight or it’s too late.”

I submit that *Humanae Vitae* and dissent need to be on the table at the February meeting. There is no such thing as *licit* dissent from *Humanae Vitae*. De facto acceptance of marital contraception is truly a Pandora’s Box and has led to the de facto acceptance of sodomy.

When the leaders of the Catholic Church from the Pope to local pastors return to teaching the biblically based song of love, marriage, generosity, and sexuality taught by the Tradition, the Church will once again be seen as truly a light to the nations. This Tradition is not an esoteric teaching. It has been reaffirmed in the last 88 years by *Casti Connubii*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio*, the *Catechism*

of the Catholic Church, the Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II, and numerous talks and writings by St. John Paul II.

Properly implemented, a consistent effort to teach the Tradition and to provide the right kind of practical help will bring about a remarkable turnaround in the Church within 20 years. Such teaching is a lamp on the lampstand.

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Editor: Feel completely free to delete the references I made to the book by Valente and my 1971 article in TS.

If you want bio info:

John F. Kippley has been active in the effort to uphold *Humanae Vitae* and provide practical help since it was published. In 1968 he wrote *Covenant, Christ and Contraception* published by Alba House in 1970. This has been revised and is now available from Ignatius as *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality* (2005).

In 1969 his wife, Sheila, published her ground breaking book, *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing* subsequently published by Harper and Row in 1974. In 1971 the Kippleys founded an organization to provide the practical help of systematic natural family planning and Ecological Breastfeeding plus doctrinal support with the covenant theology of the marriage act. They continue that work in Natural Family Planning International (www.nfpandmore.org).