Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne
Śląska Opolskiego 46 (2026), no 1
DOI: 10.25167/sth.6274

Martin Perčič
Faculty of Theology of the University of Ljubljana
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8435-3934
martin.percic@teof.uni-lj.si

Theology of the *Kraków Memorandum* on the Transmission of Life

Abstract

This article examines responsible parenthood in the Kraków Document, prepared by theologians gathered around Karol Wojtyła in response to drafts of the encyclical on birth regulation. It presents the document's philosophical and theological argument concerning human dignity, natural law, conjugal love, the transmission of life, and the moral distinction between contraception and the natural regulation of conception. The Kraków Document is interpreted as an important stage in the personalist defense of Catholic teaching on marriage and fertility. Read in relation to Wojtyła's *Love and Responsibility* and John Paul II's theology of the body, the memorandum emerges as a transitional text in which the personalist norm, responsible parenthood, and conjugal self-gift take on an explicitly theological form.

Keywords: Karol Wojtyła, Kraków Document, transmission of life, responsible parenthood, contraception, theology of the body.

Teologia *Memoriału krakowskiego* w sprawie przekazywania życia

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje zagadnienie odpowiedzialnego rodzicielstwa w świetle tzw. dokumentu krakowskiego, opracowanego przez teologów skupionych wokół Karola Wojtyły w odpowiedzi na projekty encykliki dotyczącej regulacji urodzeń. Tekst przedstawia argumentację filozoficzną i teologiczną tego dokumentu, odnoszącą się do godności osoby ludzkiej, prawa naturalnego, miłości małżeńskiej, przekazywania życia oraz moralnego rozróżnienia między antykoncepcją a naturalną regulacją poczęć. Dokument krakowski ukazano tu jako istotny etap personalistycznej obrony katolickiego nauczania o małżeństwie i płodności. Analizowany w kontekście dzieła Wojtyły *Miłość i odpowiedzialność* oraz teologii ciała Jana Pawła II, memoriał jawi się jako tekst przejściowy, w którym norma personalistyczna, odpowiedzialne rodzicielstwo i małżeński dar z siebie zyskują wymiar wyraźnie teologiczny.

Słowa kluczowe: Karol Wojtyła, dokument krakowski, przekazywanie życia, odpowiedzialne rodzicielstwo, antykoncepcja, teologia ciała.

The report of the Kraków theologians, published as Foundations of Church Teaching Concerning the Principles of Married Life: *A Memorandum Prepared by a Group of Moral Theologians from Kraków* and commonly known as the *Kraków Document*[1], responded to two drafts of an encyclical on birth regulation received by Paul VI. These drafts proposed different positions on contraception

[1] 2012. "Foundations of Church Teaching Concerning the Principles of Married Life: A Memorandum Prepared by a Group of Moral Theologians from Kraków". Nova et Vetera 10 (2), 321–359.

and responsible parenthood[2]. The majority draft argued that the morality of married life should be assessed within the totality of marriage and that chemical or mechanical means of preventing pregnancy could be acceptable within the broader moral context of family planning. The minority defended the Catholic position that contraception violates the natural moral law because it separates the procreative and unitive meanings of sexuality. In this light, and in the view later upheld by Paul VI, the morally permissible means of regulating births is the cyclical method, that is, respect for the woman's natural cycle[3]. The Kraków theologians judged both drafts critically: the conservative curial draft lacked a sufficient personalist and theological argument, while the draft favourable to contraception, prepared under Cardinal Julius Döpfner, in their view overlooked the purpose and nature of conjugal intercourse and thereby undermined the structure of moral theology[4].

The memorandum is therefore best read not only as an intervention in the immediate controversy preceding *Humanae vitae*, but also as a transitional text in the development of Wojtyła's anthropology of marriage. Its central categories – the person as a conscious and free subject, the personalist norm, the integration of sexuality, responsible parenthood, and the truth of conjugal self-gift – extend the argument of *Love and Responsibility* and anticipate John Paul II's later catecheses on human love, especially their account of the spousal and parental meanings of the body and the "language of the body". Barberi and Selling likewise identify a line of continuity from Wojtyła's early writings through the Kraków memorandum and *Humanae vitae* to *Familiaris consortio* and the *Theology of the Body*, although they interpret this genealogy critically and argue that it contributed to an impasse in postconciliar fundamental moral theology[5]. Their thesis makes it necessary to distinguish two questions that guide the present analysis: the historical influence of Wojtyła's thought and the independent theological adequacy of the personalist argument.

---

[2] Robert Blair Kaiser. 1987. *The Encyclical That Never Was: The Story of the Commission on Population, Family and Birth, 1964–1966*. London: Sheed & Ward, 297; Janet E. Smith. 2018. The Kraków Document. In *Self-Gift: Essays on Humanae Vitae and the Thought of John Paul II*, 257, Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic; George Weigel. 2000. *Apostol upanja: Življenje in delo Janeza Pavla II*. Bled: Vernar, 201ff.

[3] Weigel. 2000. *Apostol upanja*, 201.

[4] Weigel. 2000. *Apostol upanja*, 202–203.

[5] Michael J. Barberi, Joseph A. Selling. 2013. "The Origin of '*Humanae Vitae*' and the Impasse in Fundamental Theological Ethics". Louvain Studies 37 (4) : 364–381.

1. The Nature of Church Teaching on the Regulation of Births

At the beginning, the *Kraków Document* formulates several questions concerning the nature of the Church's teaching on the transmission of life, questions that mark the entire document:

I. Does the Church have the right to make authoritative statements on questions of morality and natural law?
II. Is its teaching on the regulation of births infallible or not?
III. Can the teaching on the regulation of births change?

According to the Kraków theologians, it is necessary to formulate a more comprehensive philosophical and theological argument for Church teaching, arranged as a logical and clearly presented whole, so that the Church can respond to the tendencies within the Church that seek to permit contraception. The answers to these questions provide the document with a doctrinal context that makes it possible to define precisely and locate natural law within the Church's teaching[6].

With respect to the first question, "Does the Church have the right to make authoritative statements on questions of morality and natural law?", the *Kraków Document* states that defenders of contraception have no clear answer. On the one hand, they "contest the Church's right to define norms of natural law" and restrict the authority of the Church to "the relation of human beings to God and to one another", understood in the broadest possible sense; by doing so, they "deny the Church the right to propose detailed norms in the domain of natural law". To the question "Is its teaching on this subject infallible or not?", defenders of contraception give a negative answer. In defence of their position, they maintain that "the Church and theologians today distance themselves from these positions", thereby answering positively the third question, "Can this teaching change?", since, in their view, the concepts of nature and natural law have changed in meaning in modern times[7].

Regarding the development of Church teaching in the field of morality, the *Kraków Document* states that development consists in a deepening of the understanding of moral norms and in connecting the teaching with analogous moral questions. At the same time, it clearly emphasizes that teaching can change only in matters that are "changeable, and not in relation to things that are by their nature constant, conditioned by the fundamental relations of human nature"[8]. Oppo-

[6] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 321–322.

[7] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 322–323.

[8] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 326.

sition to contraception is, in this light, an application of more general moral-theological principles that the Church's magisterium grounds in the natural moral law. For this reason, the Church's teaching on the transmission of life is, in a certain sense, already "a doctrinal norm that binds moral theologians in their research" and is, theologically speaking, objectively valid "despite the opposition of some moral theologians and regardless of certain practices in various Catholic and especially non-Catholic milieus"[9]. Consequently, from the standpoint of Christian philosophy and theology,

> all theories that conceal within themselves the seeds of relativism and situation ethics must be rejected, since they undermine the objective and immutable foundations of morality and ultimately lead to subjectivism and anarchy in the understanding of principles and in conduct. Thus, instead of authentic morality, there would come about the destruction of the moral sense in human action and of the moral dignity of the human person[10].

Situation ethics and moral relativism are problematic because they deny the existence of acts that are immoral regardless of the agent's intention[11]. In this respect the *Kraków Document* also responds to moral proportionalism, which maintains that the right action can be determined by weighing the good and the necessary evil involved in action, with the aim of choosing the lesser evil[12]. The opposite of proportionalism is the deontological ethics of which John Paul II speaks in the encyclicals *Veritatis splendor* and *Evangelium vitae*, according to which acts are right or wrong by their nature. Moral action is therefore grounded in the object of the act (*finis operis*), the intention of the acting person (*finis operantis*), and the circumstances that accompany the act[13].

Opponents of contraception do acknowledge that the Church's teaching in the field of marital ethics is supplemented and developed. Yet they stress that this does not apply to contraception, where the "teaching is remarkably unchanging and continuous, despite different vocabulary and different explanations of the doc-

---

[9] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 327.

[10] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 328.

[11] Dietrich von Hildebrand. 2019. *Morality and Situation Ethics*. Steubenville, OH: Hildebrand Project, 57–58.

[12] Richard T. Garner, Bernard Rosen. 1967. *Moral Philosophy: A Systematic Introduction to Normative Ethics and Metaethics*. New York: Macmillan, 70.

[13] John Paul II. 1993. *Encyclical Veritatis Splendor*. Vatican: LEV, 75; John Paul II. 1995. *Encyclical Evangelium Vitae*. Vatcian: LEV, 68.

trine", because "a change in the future teaching of the magisterium would amount to self-rejection, which would have disastrous consequences for the Church". In this way they respond to naturalistic or evolutionary ways of understanding natural law and human nature among defenders of contraception, while emphasizing that the immutability of human nature provides the objective basis of natural law. "The immutability of human nature is the objective foundation of natural law", which is not only a philosophical but also a theological category, since it includes formal theological elements, namely the authority of the Church's magisterium[14]. The *Kraków Document* therefore does not introduce the concept of natural law as a new argument against contraception, but it does propose additional emphases that could give the arguments greater weight. Reference to natural law

> clarifies the precise understanding of natural law and of the human nature on which that law is based. Defenders of contraception understand these concepts in a way that differs essentially from their authentic and traditional meaning in philosophy and theology[15].

2. The Meaning of the Dignity of the Human Person

At the beginning of the tractate on the dignity of the person, the *Kraków Document* poses the question "Who is the person?", answering it in vocabulary characteristic of Wojtyła.

> One must therefore begin with the ontological concept of the person, understood as the subject of conscious and free action. In order to answer the question 'What is man?', the constitution *Gaudium et spes* refers to Genesis 1:26, where it is said that man is created in the image of God. Therefore, the ontological definition of the person must take into account his relation to God and to the world. Man is neither an absolute nor the highest value, but a creature of God. Thus his relation to God includes not only creaturely dependence on God, but also the human capacity consciously to recognize this dependence and responsibly to cooperate with God. This structure of the person also includes his relation to the world. Man belongs to the world, yet he differs from other beings by his capacity to follow, with full consciousness, the truth and goodness he knows – by his capacity for moral life. In the world man can read the order of nature and its finality in relation to himself and his good. In the midst of this order of things, man can recognize a normative force based on that order. Moreover, the

[14] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 323.

[15] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 324–325.

> world is ordered for man, since, according to *Gaudium et spes*, God 'set him over all earthly things so that he might rule over them and use them, glorifying God'[16].

This tractate from *Gaudium et spes* contains the most characteristic themes of Wojtyła's philosophical anthropology: the human being as the subject of experience and the human being as the subject of conscious and free action, which Wojtyła discusses in *The Acting Person*[17].

The human being, created in the image of God, is called to rational and responsible cooperation in God's creative and redemptive plan. This means, among other things, that he must recognize and protect the limits of his dominion over the world. "Therefore his relation to God includes not only creaturely dependence on God, but also the human capacity consciously to recognize this dependence and responsibly to cooperate with God". An important part of cooperation with God is the transmission of life, which is "God's gift and part of the integrity of the human person". Taking into account this integrity of his own nature,

> man must respect this power and its specific structure. In it his reason discovers a biological law which, although biological, is connected with the human person as a unity of body and soul. This law cannot be understood as deriving merely from nature understood in the broadest sense. It follows that it is one thing to act upon the environment and transform it, and another thing to intervene in the biological laws of the human person.

Man is part of the world, but he differs from other beings by his capacity to follow, with full consciousness, the truth and goodness he knows, which is the expression of moral life[18]. With full responsibility, man is called to cooperate in God's creative and redemptive plan. This includes recognizing and protecting the limits of his rule over the world, limits determined by the very nature of the capacities he has received from the hands of his Creator[19].

According to the *Kraków Document*, four truths about the human person must be considered. First, the human being, created in the image of God, possesses personal dignity in a conscious and free life lived in accordance with

---

[16] Second Vatican Council. 1965. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes*. Vatican: LEV, 12.

[17] Karol Wojtyła. 1979. *The Acting Person*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

[18] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 328.

[19] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 328–329.

truth. Thus the human being is capable of recognizing the limits placed on his power over all things and of being aware that the power to transmit life is God's gift. This position was essential in opposing the draft favourable to contraception, which claimed that the human being has been given dominion over nature and may shape it according to his will[20]. Second, the capacity to transmit life is God's gift; for that reason "man must come to terms with this power and its specific structure" and must not oppose this gift[21]. Third, contraception causes the human being to treat the other person as a possible object of use, since it

> constitutes an active intervention in the structure of the sexual act and therefore in the action of the person; in this way it violates the person as a being to whom sexuality has been given, and violates that person's biological laws. It is therefore not the use of a means that is in itself indifferent and that can be used well or badly depending on the intention of the acting subject.

Other persons "must never be treated as things used for our own purposes; rather, we are obliged to show them benevolent love that protects the true good of the human being, including moral good, and the fulfilment of his vocation"[22]. Fourth, in order to develop fully, the human being must master instinctive and impulsive activity. Human development

> consists, among other things, in the perfection of acts that must become ever more in accord with reason and freedom. All human inclinations must be gradually and wisely integrated into the responsible fulfilment of one's vocation. Therefore human flourishing and perfection do not consist in the complete satisfaction of one's impulses, but in mastering them with full consciousness and integrating them into the whole of one's moral life. In this way the Christian, with the help of grace, renews and strengthens the harmony of his inner being disturbed by sin[23]. The gradual restoration of this equilibrium makes it possible effectively to overcome selfish inclinations and to grow in true love[24].

---

[20] Robert G. Hoyt. 1968. *The Birth Control Debate*. Kansas City, MO: National Catholic Reporter, 68–70, 87.

[21] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 329.

[22] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 330.

[23] *Gaudium et Spes*, 13.

[24] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 330–331.

The question of the dignity of man and woman is placed in the context of marriage, where the document emphasizes equality on three levels: equality in metaphysical nature, equality in personal dignity, and equality in final vocation. Here the influence of Wojtyła's *Love and Responsibility* is evident[25].

> Man and woman have an equal right to the full flourishing of their vocation, while taking into account their sexual difference. The fact that a person is of one or the other sex does not in itself determine the person's vocation, since this vocation essentially transcends sex as such; it determines only the manner in which this vocation is realized. The person is sexual, but sexuality as such does not determine the person. The vocation of the person is not realized through sexuality, but through the encounter between persons of different sex (here we mean the vocation to marriage). Therefore relations between persons are never realized merely on the sexual level; in beings endowed with reason, the sexual relation can be formed only on the level of the person[26].

Seen from the perspective of the theology of the body, this anthropology is already more than a prohibition grounded in biological regularity. The body belongs to the person and participates in the person's capacity to signify truth in action. Sexual differentiation is therefore neither an accidental attribute nor the exhaustive definition of the person: it is an embodied mode of relation through which man and woman can become a communion of persons. What the memorandum formulates through the unity of body and soul, the personalist norm, and responsible mastery of the drive is later placed by John Paul II within an "adequate anthropology", developed through the biblical experiences of original solitude, original unity, and original nakedness. The continuity lies in the claim that freedom becomes genuinely personal not by treating the body as neutral material, but by receiving and integrating its meaning within a truthful gift of self[27].

3. The Influence of Contraception on Conjugal Love

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, defines conjugal love as an expression of the mutual gift of self and the mutual

---

[25] Karol Wojtyła. 2013. *Love and Responsibility*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 28–29, 224.

[26] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 332–333.

[27] John Paul II. 2006. *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. Trans. by Michael Waldstein. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 5–23.

sanctification of the spouses[28]. If contraception is considered in light of this definition of marriage, it becomes clear that contraception is a conflict between conjugal love and the transmission of life, a point also noted by the draft favourable to contraception[29]. The *Kraków Document* places the nature of conjugal love and responsible parenthood within the domain of natural law, drawing on numerous concepts from Wojtyła's *Love and Responsibility*. Contraception is not only opposition to the transmission of life; to an even greater degree, it is a devaluation of conjugal love and of the conjugal self-gift in sexual intercourse.

> Conjugal love cannot be manifested by an act voluntarily deprived of fertility, because active intervention in the sexual act or in the organic functions of the human person contrary to their purpose, solely for the sake of pleasure or sensual love, is equivalent to using the partner for one's own ends. Such use is contrary to the dignity of the person and to conjugal chastity, because the human being seeks sexual satisfaction in a manner contrary to reason; in any case, it does not conform to the image of fruitfulness, neither in the image of the fruitful union of Christ and the Church nor in the image of the completely selfless divine persons at the heart of the Trinity. Rather, it is egoism and self-seeking on the part of one of the spouses – or sometimes both, which is nonetheless always egoistic[30].

Gaudium et spes speaks similarly:

> When there is a question of harmonizing conjugal love with the responsible transmission of life, the morality of conduct does not depend solely on sincere intention and the evaluation of motives. It must be determined by objective criteria drawn from the very nature of the human person and of his acts, criteria that respect the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love; this is possible only if the spouses sincerely cultivate the virtue of conjugal chastity[31].

The spouses are called to mutual self-giving that transcends the egoistic satisfaction of needs, as *Gaudium et spes* also emphasizes: "Such love, uniting the human and the divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual giving of themselves,

---

[28] *Gaudium et Spes*, 48, 49, 51, 52.

[29] Hoyt. 1968. *The Birth Control Debate*, 74, 86.

[30] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 331.

[31] *Gaudium et Spes*, 51.

manifested in tender affection and action, and permeates their whole life; indeed, by its generous activity this love is perfected and grows"[32].

The *Kraków Document* places conjugal love in the context of the mutual self-gift of the spouses, already discussed in *Gaudium et spes*. By intertwining the spouses' mutual self-gift with a parental attitude, it goes beyond *Gaudium et spes*.

> An analysis of the role of sexual life in the structure of the person and of his acts makes it possible to formulate the following moral postulates governing the responsible regulation of fertility: sexual life must always mean and express, in full truth, mutual self-giving and love attentive to the good of the person; every sexual act must express the parental character of conjugal love and conjugal life; the sexual integrity of marital relations must be preserved. Conjugal love can manifest itself not only in a fertile act, but also in an act normally completed though naturally infertile. It can also manifest itself in abstention from the conjugal act when prudence advises abstaining from procreation. On the other hand, conjugal love cannot manifest itself in an act voluntarily deprived of fertility[33].

Contraceptive sexuality likewise cannot be an image of Christ's love for his Church or the mutual love of the persons of the Holy Trinity[34], since it does not express unconditional self-giving and complete communion with the other person, even if this is concealed by various illusions. Behind contraception there is selfishness, which

> opposes the dignity of the person and conjugal chastity, because the human being seeks sexual satisfaction in a way contrary to reason; in any case it does not conform to the image of the fruitful union of Christ and the Church nor to the image of the completely selfless union of the divine persons at the heart of the Trinity, but involves egoism and self-seeking on the part of one of the spouses, or sometimes both, which is nonetheless always egoistic. The elements essential to all virtues – self-mastery, self-giving, and selflessness – are removed because of pleasant experiences and the satisfaction of the senses or emotions. Such acts not only do not signify true love; if repeated, they necessarily lead to the destruction of love, since they are contrary to it[35].

---

[32] *Gaudium et Spes*, 49.

[33] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 331.

[34] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 331–332.

[35] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 331–332.

Contraception also does not contribute to the protection of the dignity of the woman, since it is a means that above all allows the man to satisfy the needs of his sexual drive without having to assume responsibility. When the man no longer assumes responsibility, "the equality of the woman in human dignity is no longer respected"[36]. Because the sexual act takes place in the body of the woman, women bear a greater burden in sexual relations.

> The sexual act takes place in the woman's body; unlike the man, she can be raped. Moreover, pregnancy and childbirth are a burden unique to the woman. The upbringing of the child, especially in the first years of life, is also primarily her task. Furthermore, the man under normal conditions is always fertile, whereas the woman is fertile only periodically, for a very short though relatively frequent interval. Moreover, the man is usually the one who takes the initiative in seeking sexual relations.

For this reason, all the inequalities between man and woman, from the sexual act to parenthood, impose on men a proportionally greater responsibility[37]. The *Kraków Document* consequently concludes that contraception is in a certain sense an approval of the man's erotic-hedonistic behaviour.

> In this situation the man inevitably gains at the expense of the woman, since he no longer sees the woman in the context of the transmission of life, and she becomes for him merely an opportunity for the satisfaction of pleasure. If we add to this the fact that initiative in the sexual sphere is inscribed in the very structure of the man, and that the threat of being abused is above all a threat to the woman, then we must acknowledge that the moral situation of the woman appears truly disastrous. Therefore, in the use of contraception the woman faces not only inequality, but also sexual slavery[38].

For the protection of the dignity of wives, a greater measure of responsibility in mastering their desire is consequently placed upon their husbands.

> In the sphere of sexual life there is no biological equality between man and woman. A just proportion in their common contribution to the regulation of births can therefore be found only if the man is able to integrate the dynamism of his drive into the whole of his life, in which reason prevails, and to express his love

[36] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 334.

[37] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 334.

[38] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 334–335.

> thoughtfully through the sexual act. Otherwise the woman would be excessively burdened by sexual life and its consequences, or she would simply become an object used by her husband to satisfy his desire. Moreover, the difficulties that the man has in the sphere of the sexual drive most often arise from a lack of effort to master himself[39].

4. Responsible Parenthood

The *Kraków Document* gives an extensive description of the factors that spouses should consider when deciding on the size of their family. The transmission of life is "the vocation to which God calls them in his creative and redemptive plan", which the spouses realize within the concrete conditions of their state.

> In desiring to fulfil this duty effectively and in accordance with God's plan, the spouses must prudently and with awareness of their responsibility weigh all circumstances and take into account all the demands that these circumstances place upon them. Therefore the number of children called into life cannot be left to chance. On the contrary, because of all the human values involved, the spouses must decide on the number of children with full consciousness. They therefore undertake this task as persons, and the decision itself must be an act of human responsibility[40].

The *Kraków Document* broadens the criteria of responsible parenthood proposed by Pius XII, which spouses should consider. These criteria are: (1) the good of the spouses and responsibility toward themselves, to which care for health must be added, what Pius XII called the medical indication for the regulation of births; (2) the good of children already born or yet to be born, and responsibility toward them, including Pius XII's eugenic indications; (3) the good of the community to which the spouses belong: the family, society, and the Church; (4) temporal circumstances; (5) material and spiritual conditions, including the economic and social indications already mentioned by Pius XII. The criteria of responsible parenthood that spouses should consider may not only encourage spouses to abstain from transmitting life, but may even encourage them consciously to transmit life[41].

---

[39] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 355.

[40] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 336.

[41] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 339–340.

In using the concept of responsible parenthood as an argument against contraception, the *Kraków Document* follows the meaning of responsible parenthood that Karol Wojtyła developed in *Love and Responsibility*. There Wojtyła says that sexuality includes awareness of the meaning and purpose of sexuality, which links the procreative and unitive meanings of sexuality. A person aware of the meaning and purpose of sexuality knows that sexual intercourse by its nature leads to new life: a life of infinite value; a life God has willed to create; a life that deserves parents committed to one another. A responsible person is likewise aware that, with the person with whom he or she has sexual relations, he or she can become a mother or a father, and that this is an immeasurable responsibility requiring a virtuous personal attitude[42]. In his interpretation of responsible parenthood, Wojtyła goes beyond the classical arguments against contraception. He does not understand responsible parenthood as the limitation of the number of children, but as an understanding of the internal processes connected with sexuality and of the importance of mastering them. This includes respect for the objective natural order established by God and for the social and personal circumstances in which the human being finds himself. Respect for the procreative nature of the sexual act therefore means not only respect for natural laws, but also service to God, the creator of human nature[43].

Parenthood, as a lifelong task, is at the same time an expression of readiness to be the lifelong companion of another person. It is an act of deep affirmation of the dignity of the other person and an expression of the complete gift of oneself to that person[44]. This means that contraception, which limits the gift, is incompatible with complete self-giving to the other person and with a parental attitude. Consequently, all contraceptive procedures that manifest an anti-parental attitude must be excluded from sexual activity. Contracepted relations cannot be an expression of a parental attitude, because they do not express the unlimited and unconditional gift of oneself to another person, even if this fact is concealed by various illusions. Unlimited and unconditional self-giving requires "great ascetic effort, self-mastery, and complete awareness of one's acts", which is impeded by the tendency toward disorder resulting from original sin[45]. Although the human being is marked by disorder, as a consequence of original sin, in all areas of existence, this disorder

---

[42] Karol Wojtyła. 1969. "The Truth of the Encyclical Humanae Vitae". L'Osservatore Romano (Weekly Edition in English) (January 16) : 6; Wojtyła. 2013. *Love and Responsibility*.

[43] Smith. 2018. The Kraków Document, 273.

[44] *Veritatis Splendor*, 24.

[45] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 342–346.

is "most evident in the sphere of the sexual drive, which is undoubtedly one of the strongest human drives"[46].

In the theology of the body, responsible parenthood is consequently not reduced either to fertility management or to the maximization of births. It is a form of conjugal discernment in which self-mastery serves the reciprocal gift and enables the spouses to act as subjects rather than as passive objects of biological processes or desire. The "parental meaning" of the body names the orientation of conjugal communion toward fruitfulness, while the "spousal meaning" names the person's capacity for self-gift. Their relation clarifies why openness to life and prudent responsibility are not rival principles in Wojtyła's thought, but dimensions of the same personal vocation[47].

5. Periodic Abstinence

The *Kraków Document* places responsible parenthood in the context of natural family planning, the essence of which is respect for the natural cycle of the woman. Alongside the woman's cycle, it discusses the importance of periodic abstinence, which is necessary for fully respecting that cycle. This is expressed as the overcoming of impulses in the human being, who interiorly faces various sensory and emotional movements. In confronting internal processes and the drive, a need for defence arises in the human being, a need that stems from the rational essence of the person. The person defends himself or herself against the assault of sensuality and the concupiscence of the flesh; the person defends himself or herself because these processes threaten the natural power of self-determination. The reason for this natural defensive system lies in the order of values, from which self-mastery also derives; this is closely connected with the natural need for self-control[48].

Periodic abstinence therefore means "abstaining from sexual relations during the fertile period and engaging in them in other periods in accordance with the norms of married life". By contrast with respect for the natural cycle, the use of contraception is an active intervention in sexual intercourse and opposition to the dignity of the person. This is the key difference between natural regulation of births and contraception.

---

[46] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 335.

[47] John Paul II. 2006. *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 118–123.

[48] Wojtyła. 2013. *Love and Responsibility*, 180–181.

> Since sexual relations on infertile days are normal and willed as such, they preserve respect for the hierarchy of values and the full meaning of sexual life. They can therefore appropriately express the parental character of married life and of the love that unites the spouses. This is the complete opposite of the conscious sterilization of the relation, which, actively deprived of its proper role, cannot be the sexual expression of the love that unites two persons.

Periodic abstinence is ultimately an expression of respect for the dignity of the woman, which contraception opposes; the document therefore concludes that, despite possible dangers of abuse, the method is morally permissible.

> Abstinence from sexual relations during the fertile period, together with the preservation of the sexual character of relations outside that period, can be an expression of respect for the hierarchy of values. Although it can express such respect, however, it does not necessarily do so, since the practice of periodic abstinence for the purpose of not transmitting life without sufficiently reasonable motives (for example, aversion to children) bears witness to a disorder in the human person's psychosexual behaviour. Yet this possibility in no way changes the fact that periodic abstinence, practised for reasonable motives, is the only morally good way of regulating births.

Periodic abstinence is in this case a sign of conjugal love and of striving for perfection[49].

Abstinence is and should be an act of love that affirms the value of the person and the ultimate primacy of the person among all other values.

> The condemnation of contraception as a method of regulating births by no means leaves contemporary couples without means for solving this problem effectively and morally. Apart from complete abstinence, which many deeply loving couples have already undertaken because of circumstances, and of which every human being must be capable, since it is indispensable for celibacy and ensures marital fidelity when one of the spouses is absent, there is also another path opened by modern science. Births can in fact be regulated by abstaining from sexual relations during the fertile period[50].

---

[49] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 353–356.

[50] John Paul II. 2006. *Man and Woman He Created Them*; "Foundations of Church Teaching", 349.

The document then explains the difference between natural methods of regulating births and contraception. To clarify the distinction, it first differentiates rational from irrational behaviour.

> Rational sexual behaviour therefore by the very nature of things requires abstaining from the sexual act when love demands it. This voluntary abstention from the sexual act can even express greater love than the act itself. The pursuit of perfection in married life therefore requires, on the one hand, knowing how to express love through abstinence from the conjugal act, and, on the other, subordinating one's own pleasure in the sexual act to the interpersonal and social values of that act[51].

The drive is in itself good, since it opens the person to the other; at the same time, the person must not allow the drive to dominate life and action.

> Since man can and must direct procreation, and since this act has other functions besides the purely biological, it follows that man can engage in acts that do not lead to fertilization if the purpose and meaning of their biological structure remain intact. This requirement follows from the fact that the sexual act of the person is one act, although polyvalent and structured. It is the biological act of the person: all personal values are signified in it precisely through its biological orientation. Active interventions in the structure of the act cause its mutilation, which means violence against its value as a sign of communication[52].

The human being must therefore strive to preserve equilibrium and personal integrity. The virtue of abstinence can be described as a habitus that, by reason, masters concupiscence; this is particularly important in mastering sensuality in the sphere of sexuality.

6. Sexuality as Sign: From the *Kraków Document* to the theology of the body

The *Kraków Document* places sexuality within the order of signs that cannot be grasped directly and through which the spouses reveal themselves to one another.

---

[51] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 348.

[52] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 344–345.

> It is therefore not only a need proper to man as a social being, but also a *sine qua non* condition for the existence of society. Human sexual life belongs to the order of signs by which one subject expresses something to another and by which the sphere of spirit, which cannot be directly grasped, is manifested. Sexuality attracts individuals to one another. Its manifestations are therefore a very suitable means of expressing what unites people, namely the recognition that the other has a value by which the individual is drawn toward common union for ends proper to human persons. This is precisely what love is. Therefore sexual life in its expressions is a very suitable way of manifesting love. And since this union of body and soul in this life constitutes the indivisible unity of the person, the love expressed through sexuality, that is, through the sexual organs, is in its own kind clearly defined by the sexuality of the body. Because of the unity of the person, who is both body and spirit, the sexuality of the body and thus the sexuality of the person creates special demands for personal love marked by sexuality. Every sexual act between spouses should therefore be a mutual gift of self[53].

The understanding of sexuality as a sign through which spouses reciprocally reveal themselves to one another was later developed more fully by John Paul II in the theology of the body, where the sign is described as the unique capacity of the body to express to another its inner meaning, that is, the expression of the personal values of the human being.

> The theology of the body considers the body in the context of the person as a whole and within interpersonal relations. Understanding the body does not include only the somatic structure of the human organism, but primarily describes "the human being who expresses himself through this body, and in a certain sense I would say that he is this body. In this way, since it is a question of man as person, this thread of evaluation is indispensable for describing the human body"[54].

The description of the human body is important for John Paul II for two reasons. First, a large part of the reflections of the theology of the body concerns love between man and woman, as well as sexual and marital ethics, where a correct understanding of the body plays an important role. Second, in his polemic with the idealism characteristic of phenomenology, in which he himself was to some extent

[53] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 342–343.

[54] John Paul II. 2006. *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 55:2.

rooted, the pope emphasizes the epistemological value of the body and of human sensory perception[55]. The theology of the body understands the body as the way in which the person experiences himself or herself. It speaks of the meaning of the body in two ways: as the spousal meaning and as the parental meaning of the body (TOB 16,5; 40,3–4). In both meanings the body is not merely a biological reality, but above all a theological reality[56].

This relationship is one of development rather than simple repetition. The *Kraków Document* already contains the semantic core of what John Paul II later calls the "language of the body": the conjugal act is not mute biological material, but a personal sign capable of expressing truth or falsehood. The theology of the body places this insight within a broader biblical and sacramental horizon. Its movement from creation, through the historical condition of concupiscence and redemption, to resurrection and the sacramentality of marriage shows why the body can disclose both the vocation of the person and the divine gift. In this framework, the inseparability of the unitive and procreative meanings is not presented merely as compliance with a biological process. It is interpreted as a requirement of the truth of the conjugal sign: a bodily act should correspond to the totality of the gift it claims to express. Thus the later catecheses deepen the memorandum's natural-law and personalist argument by giving it a more explicitly biblical, Christological, and sacramental foundation[57].

John Paul II in the theology of the body unequivocally emphasizes that contraception is opposed to the fullness of the conjugal relationship. The conjugal communion that arises from the loving gift of self and from the marital language of the body is the expression of a reciprocal and complete gift of self, which proceeds from dedication to the other person and from the affirmation of that person's dignity. Contraception, by contrast, limits this dedication and affirmation, when both the man and the woman say to one another: I accept you, but without your fertility[58]. In the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, John Paul II discusses the falsity of contraception in the context of opposition to God's plan for marriage.

> When couples, by means of recourse to contraception, separate these two meanings that God the Creator has inscribed in the being of man and woman and in the dyna-

[55] Jarosław Kupczak. 2014. *Gift and Communion: John Paul II's Theology of the Body*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 178.

[56] Christopher West. 2007. *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's Man and Woman He Created Them*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 13.

[57] John Paul II. 2006. *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 103–117, 118–133.

[58] Kupczak. 2014. *Gift and Communion*; Smith. 2018. The Kraków Document.

> mism of their sexual communion, they act as arbiters of the divine plan and 'manipulate' and degrade human sexuality – and with it themselves and their married partner – by altering its value of total self-giving. Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality[59].

If contraception is characteristic of an arbitrary attitude toward God's plan for the human being, then the use of natural methods of regulating fertility causes the spouses to become servants within God's salvific history. In the pope's words:

> When, instead, by means of recourse to periods of infertility, the couple respect the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of human sexuality, they are acting as ministers of God's plan and they 'benefit from' their sexuality according to the original dynamism of total self-giving, without manipulation or alteration[60].

7. Education for Mature Sexuality

Because of the various cultural, religious, and social convictions that mark humanity, the question of regulating the transmission of life and contraception remains a complex challenge. Taking into account the real condition of humanity, the *Kraków Document* is directed toward the search for a more honest and deeper theological approach to the debate on contraception within Catholic teaching. In its final part, it emphasizes the importance of education in confronting changes in society and in preparing adequately for married and family life.

> The new obligations facing contemporary families require that the faithful be properly prepared for married life. Education must therefore be grounded in respect for the other, respect for the body, and respect for the reality of sexuality. Young people must be spoken to directly about family life, its bonds and laws; about married life, its values and qualities, its joys, duties, and difficulties. They must be told that men and women have equal rights, but also psychological and biological differ-

[59] John Paul II. 1981. *Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio*. Vatican : LEV 33.4.

[60] *Familiaris Consortio*, 33.5.

> ences that impose great demands of mutual responsibility. The special value of life must be emphasized, life which originates from the bodies of the parents but whose human personality is called into existence by the creative act of God himself. Formation suitable for family life is at the same time formation for the choice of celibacy for those called to that state. The choice of one or the other vocation requires the same maturity of men and women. Education must not neglect this aspect of the Christian vocation to perfection.

The *Kraków Document* concludes that, in seeking solutions to the difficulties encountered by young people, one must discuss them in an understanding dialogue[61]. For education and preparation for married life, an adequate explanation of the moral principles taught by the Church is of exceptional importance.

> Ministers of the Church must not only inform the faithful about the principles of morality, but must also place at their disposal all the means that facilitate moral conduct in life. Neglect in this area is unfortunately considerable. Our contemporaries are very confused about the moral principles governing the regulation of births; among the sources of this confusion is a lack of energy and determination in efforts to help people make use of scientific discoveries that make it possible to regulate births in accordance with divine law. Therefore pastors, wherever the need appears, should provide in parishes services by which lay experts from various fields can advise couples and families, not only on all difficulties connected with responsible parenthood, but also in other areas connected with family life. The faithful must be provided with free, professional, and responsible counselling faithful to Christian teaching. Without this effort, it is meaningless to speak about the formation of conscience. A pastor who does not organize this assistance for the good of his flock will be gravely guilty and co-responsible for the moral disorder that destroys the domestic and religious life of contemporary families[62].

An important and irreplaceable role in forming preparation for marriage and in encouraging the transmission of life in a manner worthy of the human person is held by spouses who are "faithful to the Church's guidelines"[63].

---

[61] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 357–358.

[62] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 358.

[63] "Foundations of Church Teaching", 358.

*

This article shows that the *Kraków Document*, on the basis of natural law, theological anthropology, the nature of sexuality, and the sacramental understanding of marriage, confirms the doctrinal character of the Catholic view of contraception. It is therefore an important theological source for the Catholic understanding of marriage and sexuality. In a cultural environment in which the view of marriage is changing and becoming differentiated, it offers a coherent Catholic position that, on the one hand, expresses awareness of the importance of confronting changing contemporary challenges and, on the other, remains faithful to ecclesial tradition and the magisterium. Because of its coherence and fidelity to Catholic tradition, the *Kraków Document* can be interpreted as a response to tendencies seeking recognition of the moral legitimacy and permissibility of contraception, and at the same time as a call to a comprehensive view of marital ethics[64]. Because it is permeated by Wojtyła's philosophy and by numerous concepts that he had previously developed in his works, especially in *Love and Responsibility*, it can also be treated as one of the stages of Karol Wojtyła's defence of Church teaching concerning the transmission of life and the evaluation of contraception[65].

This genealogy also exposes a question of method. Barberi and Selling accept the historical continuity between *Love and Responsibility*, the Kraków memorandum, *Humanae vitae*, and John Paul II's later teaching, but treat it as evidence that the inseparability principle originated in a specific Wojtyłian framework rather than simply restating an uncontested constant tradition. They therefore regard the same continuity as a source of an impasse in fundamental theological ethics[66]. Even if one does not accept their normative conclusion, their critique prevents genealogy from functioning as proof: the fact that the memorandum anticipates *Humanae vitae* and the theology of the body explains the development of the teaching, but does not by itself establish its validity. The personalist argument must be assessed on its own terms – its account of the acting person, the unity of body and spirit, the truth of the bodily sign, self-mastery, and reciprocal gift. Read in this way, the theology of the body is not merely a later repetition of the memorandum, but an attempt to supply the broader biblical and sacramental anthropology by which its moral claims can be understood and evaluated.

---

[64] Smith. 2018. The Kraków Document, 268; Hoyt. 1968. *The Birth Control Debate*, 85–87.

[65] Angela Mary Woelkers. 2016. "Freedom for Responsibility: Responsibility and Human Nature in the Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła". Studia Gilsoniana 5 (4) : 634; Smith. 2018. The Kraków Document, 258.

[66] Barberi, Selling. 2013. "The Origin of '*Humanae Vitae*'", 379–89.

Finally, the *Kraków Document* is also important because of its influence on Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae vitae*. Weigel holds that *Humanae vitae* "did not fully adopt the rich personalist context proposed by the Kraków commission", and therefore that the *Kraków Document* was better than *Humanae vitae*. He concludes: "If the memorandum of the Kraków commission had more decisively shaped the argumentation of *Humanae vitae*, a more intelligent and insightful debate might have taken place"[67]. We agree that the argument of *Humanae vitae* could have been stronger had it included more elements from the *Kraków Document*. The differences between the two documents can, however, be partly explained by the fact that the *Kraków Document*, because it was not originally intended for a popular audience, is somewhat more philosophical in its argumentation of Catholic teaching than *Humanae vitae*, which is primarily a pastoral document.

*

Bibliography

2012. "Foundations of Church Teaching Concerning the Principles of Married Life: A Memorandum Prepared by a Group of Moral Theologians from Kraków". Nova et Vetera 10 (2), 321–359.

Barberi Michael J., Selling Joseph A. 2013. "The Origin of '*Humanae Vitae*' and the Impasse in Fundamental Theological Ethics". Louvain Studies 37 (4) : 364–381.

Blair Kaiser Robert. 1987. *The Encyclical That Never Was: The Story of the Commission on Population, Family and Birth, 1964–1966*. London: Sheed & Ward.

Garner Richard T., Rosen Bernard. 1967. *Moral Philosophy: A Systematic Introduction to Normative Ethics and Metaethics*. New York: Macmillan.

Hildebrand Dietrich von. 2019. *Morality and Situation Ethics*. Steubenville, OH: Hildebrand Project.

Hoyt Robert G. 1968. *The Birth Control Debate*. Kansas City, MO: National Catholic Reporter.

John Paul II. 1981. *Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio*. Vatican : LEV.

John Paul II. 1993. *Encyclical Veritatis Splendor*. Vatican: LEV.

John Paul II. 1995. *Encyclical Evangelium Vitae*. Vatican: LEV.

John Paul II. 2006. *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. Trans. by Michael Waldstein. Boston: Pauline Books & Media.

Kupczak Jarosław. 2014. *Gift and Communion: John Paul II's Theology of the Body*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.

Second Vatican Council. 1965. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes*. Vatican: LEV.

[67] Weigel. 2000. *Apostol upanja*, 210.

Smith Janet E. 2018. The Kraków Document. In *Self-Gift: Essays on Humanae Vitae and the Thought of John Paul II*, 257–276, Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic.

Weigel George. 2000. *Apostol upanja: Življenje in delo Janeza Pavla II*. Bled: Vernar.

West Christopher. 2007. *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's Man and Woman He Created Them*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media.

Woelkers Angela Mary. 2016. "Freedom for Responsibility: Responsibility and Human Nature in the Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła". Studia Gilsoniana 5 (4) : 633–647.

Wojtyła Karol. 1969. "The Truth of the Encyclical Humanae Vitae". L'Osservatore Romano (Weekly Edition in English) (January 16) : 6.

Wojtyła Karol. 1979. *The Acting Person*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

Wojtyła Karol. 2013. *Love and Responsibility*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media.