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Natural and Artificial Family  
Planning: Some minor  
additions to Dietrich von  
Hildebrand's defense of  
*Humanae Vitae*\*

A Dialogue

Fritz Wenisch\*\*

2018

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\*The dialogue is a continuation of conversations that can be found in Fritz Wenisch, *Is Faith in the Gospels Irrational?* (see footnote 1). The Text is available under the Creative Commons License Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) Publication date: 23.08.2018.

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About two months after their wedding, Deb and Tom visited me in my office – a little over two years after I had had extensive discussions with them.<sup>1</sup> I told them that I had found their wedding ceremony at Grace Church moving and beautiful, and that the reception at the Hope Estates had been delightful. They smiled. It was obvious that they were very happy. Tom said, “Maybe as a Catholic, you think that we are not really married, but only living together.” He grinned wryly. I replied, “To me, it sounded as if you really meant what you said when you promised that you would be together ‘till death do us part.’” “Yes, we meant it,” said Tom, smiled at Deb, took her hand, and she said, “We belong together forever.” Tom added, “Forever and ever and ever and ever and then some.” Deb poked him, laughing. I asked, “And did you intend to have children?” “Yes,” they exclaimed simultaneously without hesitation. “Well,” I replied, “then, the

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<sup>1</sup>Knowing the content of these conversations (Fritz Wenisch, *Is Faith in the Gospels Irrational? A Dialogue with an Agnostic*, Irving – Gafei – Granada: International Academy of Philosophy Press, 2016.) is not presupposed at all for understanding any of the considerations presented in this dialogue; but it will probably not surprise you that I, as the author, recommend that you acquire the book anyway. It is available through Amazon.com and Amazon.de.

Catholic Church considers you as validly married.” They smiled again. After they had told me a bit about their honeymoon and after some small-talk, Tom said. . . (From now on, “T” stands for “Tom,” “D” for “Deb,” and “F” for “Fritz”):

T: During my years as a student, if I’d have had a chance to talk people out of Catholicism, I would have intended to talk them out of Christianity altogether. Now, however, I am tempted to try talking you out of Catholicism and into the small Evangelical denomination to which Deb and I belong. There are, of course, many other Evangelical denominations just as valid as ours; but according to what our minister pointed out when he prepared me for my baptism and when he gave us marriage instructions, Catholicism is caught up in a number of quite fundamental errors. Don’t you remember that absolutely obvious example he mentioned during our marriage preparation, Deb?

D: You mean what he told us about birth control?

T: Precisely.

F: Well, what did he say?

D: He spoke, of course, forcefully out against abortion and warned us that some so-called birth control methods are abortifacients, preventing the implantation of a fertilized ovum, which he designated as the moral equivalent of abortion during early stages of

pregnancy. He explained, however, that there is absolutely nothing wrong with birth control methods that simply prevent fertilization. Naturally, he also emphasized that married couples have the responsibility to raise children, in accordance with Gn 1.29, where God commands the first human couple to “be fertile and multiply”; but he said that this does not mean that a couple must have more children than they can reasonably take care of. And then... then...

- T: Well, let me “jump in” here; Deb seems to be hesitant to tell you that he pointed out an obvious mistake in Roman Catholic teaching. This was, by the way, not the only time he came across as highly critical of Catholicism; I think he was concerned that our conversations with you had attracted us too much to your form of Christianity. Your church allows what is called “natural family planning,” does it not?
- F: Yes; it consists in determining the relatively few days during a woman's cycle during which she can conceive and abstaining from the conjugal act during these days.
- T: And what is the goal of natural family planning?
- F: To make sure that the woman does not conceive a child – at least not at the time during which that family planning method is practiced.
- T: Isn't this exactly the same goal one pursues through

so-called artificial birth control?

F: Yes.

T: So there are two procedures which have exactly the same goal and which, if carried out successfully, also will lead to exactly the same result. As our minister pointed out, it is more than strange for a Christian denomination to approve of one of these procedures, while forbidding the other. It strikes me similar to you telling me, “You are not allowed to enter my room if you come from the direction of the department secretary’s office, but you are allowed to enter if you come from the opposite direction of the hallway.” Unless you can point at something negative – such as dirt on the hallway floor in the direction of the secretary’s office, dirt which might stick to my shoes and which I might carry into your office if I come from that side, this directive would be completely arbitrary. I must agree with my pastor that the Catholic directives about birth control make just as little sense. What can you say except for admitting that the command not to use artificial birth control is just as arbitrary as you telling me, “Never enter my room when you come from the direction of the secretary’s office”?

F: First, I would recommend that you read Dietrich von Hildebrand’s relatively short work, *Love, Marriage, and the Catholic Conscience – Understanding the*

*Church's Teaching on Birth Control.*<sup>2</sup> Here is a copy of it – you are welcome to borrow it.

T: And second?

F: You seem to imply that there is no moral difference between two modes of procedure if their outcome is the same.

T: I am not only implying this, but I am explicitly saying that it is so.

F: Then think of the following example: A man – the father of five children – is in the hospital with a serious heart disease. He will die unless he receives a heart transplant. His death would be an unspeakable tragedy for his family. A single man is brought to the hospital after a serious car accident. An agreement to be an organ donor signed by him is on file. He dies as a consequence of the accident, and his heart saves the life of the father of five.<sup>3</sup> What do

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<sup>2</sup>Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1998. Originally published in German, entitled *Die Enzyklika "Humane Vitae" – ein Zeichen des Widerspruchs* (Regensburg: Habbel, 1968). Subsequently, the work was published in English, translated by John Crosby and Damian Fedoryka, entitled, *The Encyclical "Humanae Vitae" – A Sign of Contradiction* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1969). The Sophia Institute Press edition also contains a reprint of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

<sup>3</sup>This example presumes, of course, that the organ spender really has died. Whether so-called 'brain death' is sufficient in that context is, of course, more than questionable.

you think of this? Was what the physicians did appropriate?

T: I would feel sorry for the man who died; but obviously, what was done was appropriate.

F: Allow me now to change the example a little. It is very likely that the single man who is brought to the hospital seriously injured will die, but there is no absolute certainty – maybe he will survive. The heart for the transplant is, however, needed immediately, or else, the father of five will die. The single man is, as an organ donor, eminently compatible with the father. The physician goes ahead with the transplant operation, thereby saving the life of the father of five, but causing the death of the other, justifying his action by saying, “The other man would likely have died anyway in day or two.” What do you think of his conduct?

T: It would be terrible.

F: But does it, in the end, not have exactly the same outcome as the physician’s action in the first example? The single man is dead, and the life of the father of five children has been saved.

T: Yes, but...

F: Does a comparison of these examples not show that looking at the final outcome of instances of conduct is not sufficient to determine whether or not the con-

duct is morally acceptable? Do they not show that other factors also must be taken into consideration? Is there anything that comes to mind in the heart transplant examples?

D: I would say that every human being, including someone who likely will die in a short while, has a right to life, that this right is violated in the second case, but not in the first; that this makes the physician's conduct acceptable in the first case, but unacceptable in the second.

F: A good answer, Deb. Do you agree, Tom?

T: I agree; but I do not see how on earth this can be applied to the difference between natural and artificial birth control, unless you assume a right to life prior to a person's conception; that is, prior to his or her existence. Are you now going to say that such a right exists? And even if it did – which I don't agree with – I still would not see how natural birth regulation would be less of a violation of this right than artificial birth control.

F: Don't worry; I am not going to argue that someone who does not even exist has any rights. All the example is meant to make clear is that looking at the final outcome of human actions is not sufficient for determining the moral property of what has been done – whether it is right or wrong. This is, of course, not to deny that the outcome of human con-



duct is one of the factors – actually, a very important factor – which must be taken into consideration; but other factors also must be looked at. Might it not now be the case that there are factors besides the identical final outcome that make natural family planning morally acceptable, while contributing to the moral unacceptability of artificial birth control?

T: Good luck with convincing us that there are such factors. I cannot see any, and I think Deb is on my side. Deb?

D: I cannot see any either.

T: Well, during our conversations several years ago, you and Deb occasionally “ganged up” on me; now, it’s the two of us against you.

F: So let’s see what I can do against a two-thirds majority. Both of you can probably list many things for which you ought to be grateful – let’s call them “goods.” Can you list some?

T: That I graduated with a high grade point average, that I am healthy, that I have a well-paying job, that my boss is friendly with me, that we have enough food, that we are able to visit you – and one of the greatest goods: That I met Deb, that we love each other, and that we are now married. My dear, dear Deb! (He briefly placed his arm around her shoulders.)

D: My dearest Tom!

F: Saying that I am very, very happy for you is the under-

statement of the century. – Many other items could probably be added to your list. The group of goods can now be divided into two subgroups which overlap. First, there are things which are in a person's true interest.<sup>4</sup> Health, enough food, or a place to live are examples. Second, there are things which are intrinsically precious, the existence of which is better than their non-existence, which enrich the world.<sup>5</sup> I am sure, Tom, you would agree that Deb is an example belonging in this second group.

T: Would I ever!

F: From this example, you can see that the two groups of goods overlap: Was it not in your best interest that she came into your life?

T: What an understatement!

F: Here is another overlap example: I guess that in the not-too-distant future, you will have your first child – an intrinsically precious object (remember that philosophers do not intend to “objectify” things in a negative way when they call them “objects,” but

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<sup>4</sup>This is what Dietrich von Hildebrand calls “objective goods for the person.”

<sup>5</sup>This is what von Hildebrand calls objects endowed with “values.” In this context, it is important to note that Von Hildebrand considers the fact that a person enjoys an objective good as a value; thus, every action providing an objective good to someone else is an action through which a value is realized. See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Ethics* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1992), p. 91.

that they apply that term to everything that is or can be thought of). But having that child will also be in your best interest – it will give you much joy and happiness.

Do you think that it is reasonably clear to you what is meant by “good”?

T: I think so. How about you, Deb?

D: I think so too, Tom, my most precious good.

F: Allow me now to call attention to another important distinction between two types of goods. Consider goods like health, enough food, and a place to live. Imagine a person from whose life one of these goods is missing. Would that not be negative?

T: Yes, it would – lack of health (i.e. sickness), food (i.e. starvation) and homelessness are negative.

F: Thus, there are goods the absence of which is an evil.

D: Isn't it like this with all goods?

F: Do you have siblings?

D: Yes, there are five of us – I have four older brothers.

F: So you are the youngest in the family.

D: Yes.

F: This means, of course, that you do not have a younger sister.

D: No, I don't.

F: But if you had one, would she not be precious as a human being, an enrichment to the universe, a great good?

D: Yes.

F: But she does not exist – she is absent.

D: True.

F: Is her absence an evil?

D: No.

F: Thus, there are goods the absence of which is not an evil. Before making an important qualification to what I just said, let me use another example: Would it not be great if next week, you could go on a two-week vacation to Salzburg? Just look at the picture up there on the wall.

D: What a beautiful town!

F: Well, how about visiting it for two weeks? Would it not be wonderful if next week, you could start your trip?

T: It would be wonderful.

F: But it will not work out, will it?

T: No, we do not have time off from our work – plus we could not afford it; we need to save for the down payment of the house we intend to buy.

F: I take it, though, that during the next two weeks, you

will be happy anyway – happy with each other, with the things you will do together, maybe even with your work – hopefully at least.

T: You are right.

F: Thus, this trip to Salzburg is another example of a good the absence of which is not an evil. We must, therefore, distinguish goods the absence of which is an evil from goods the absence of which is not an evil. Health, a place to live, eyesight, or being able to hear belong into the first group; Deb's younger sister and your trip to Austria belong to the second group.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, let me return to the qualification I postponed before: I take it, Tom, that you were reasonably happy at URI prior to meeting Deb?

T: Now, I cannot even imagine life without her; but true, I had a wonderful time at URI, being away from home, being on my own, hanging out with my friends (except for the first four or five weeks – they were kind of hard on me).

F: That's the usual freshmen experience. That Deb entered your life was a great good for you; but as you just implied, her absence was not an evil.

T: You are right.

F: But now, losing her would be a great evil.

T: That would be terrible! Don't even talk about it!

F: Thus, when we speak of goods the absence of which is not an evil, we have in mind situations in which the good was never present; the loss of a good is always an evil, even if prior to the good's presence, no evil was experienced.

That can also be illustrated with Deb's younger sister whom she never had. Suppose your parents would have had a sixth child. That would surely have been possible, would it not?

D: Yes.

F: What if the child had died when she was two years old? How would you have responded?

D: With great sadness.

F: But suppose someone would have stated, "What are you sad about? You did not miss your little sister three years ago, and the situation only has reverted to how it was then."

D: That would have not been helpful, and a very silly thing to say.

F: Thus, it is hopefully clear by now that the absence of a good's not being an evil cannot be transferred to the loss of that good; it applies only to the situation prior to the good's existence. On the other hand, there are goods the absence of which is an evil even if they never were present – such as eyesight, being

free of brain damage, or a human's having two legs. Is it now not possible to carry out actions through which we provide goods to others?

T: Yes. Whenever we help someone else who experiences difficulties, we perform such an action.

F: Let's consider briefly actions through which we provide to others a good the absence of which is an evil (as you will see, our main topic will be actions contributing to the coming about of a good the absence of which is not an evil).

Suppose you see an injured person by the side of the road; it is clear that he needs immediate medical attention, you are the only one around and could easily bring him to the hospital, but you ignore him.

D: Tom would never do that.

F: I know – but suppose someone would.

D: That would be terrible.

F: So you are saying that Tom would be obligated, duty bound, to bring the injured man to the hospital.

D: Yes, that's what I am saying.

F: Bringing him to the hospital is providing him with a good the absence of which is an evil, is it not?

D: Yes.

F: Thus, the example shows that in many cases, there is a duty to perform actions bringing about goods the

absence of which is an evil. True?

D: I agree; and I am sure Tom does, too.

T: Yes, I do.

F: Moreover, the duty constitutes itself simply from the encounter with the evil; no promise to help another or a command by a legitimate authority or an obligation stemming from having signed a contract need to enter the picture.

T: Agreed – when we encounter evils, we have a duty to provide the good the absence of which results in the evil we encounter.

F: Be careful; don't generalize hastily. Suppose, Deb, one of Tom's coworkers is in danger of going totally blind, his eyesight could be preserved only by a cornea transplant, and Tom would be the perfect cornea donor. Would he be duty bound to give up one of his eyes so that the coworker's sight can be preserved in at least one eye?

D: If Tom would do so, this would be a very noble act – but no, he would not be obligated.

F: It would go beyond the call of duty. Thus, we can see that not all actions providing goods the absence of which is an evil are obligatory. Determining the conditions under which such a duty exists is an intricate task; let's not go into it, though, because for our topic – birth control – actions bringing about goods



the absence of which is not an evil are important.<sup>6</sup> Imagine the following scenario: I know you had a beautiful honeymoon, although you had to make sure that it was not too expensive. Suppose the thought had occurred to me to finance for you a two-week trip to Austria, beginning, of course, in Salzburg, but also including Vienna and several other beautiful Austrian towns. Would not financing this trip for you have been an action bringing about a good the absence of which is not an evil?

D: It would have been wonderful – but no, its absence was not an evil; although we did not spend our honeymoon in Austria, it was truly beautiful.

T: You can say that again!

F: Would I have been obligated to finance that trip for you?

D: Of course not.

F: Does that not show that, if all that I observe is that I can bring about a good the absence of which is not an evil, I have no duty to do so?

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<sup>6</sup>A detailed discussion of this “intricate task” can be found in Fritz Wenisch, “To Do or not To do. . . Basic Elements of an Ethics of Actions,” in *Aletheia – An International Yearbook of Philosophy*, Vol. VII (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 31-220. The conditions under which there is a duty to perform an action contributing to the coming about of goods the absence of which is not an evil – designated there as “action taking care of an evil” – are explained in “4. The extent of one’s duty to take care of evils,” pp. 181-199.

T: No, there is no duty. But why do you say, "if all that I observe"?

F: I do not have a duty to give you the money for a trip to Austria when the next vacation comes up for both of you, do I?

T: No, of course not!

F: But suppose I were to promise to finance that trip, and you accept the promise? Would that not make me duty bound to give you the money?

T: Yes, then, you would be duty bound.

F: That's the reason for me having said, "if all that I observe." There may be external factors making it obligatory to bring about a good the absence of which is not an evil, such as a promise; but – to repeat what I said before – if all that I observe is that I can bring about a good the absence of which is not an evil, acting may be morally commendable, is, however, not obligatory.

To make sure that we do not generalize hastily, let's look at an example of a good even much higher than a trip to Austria: After your birth, Deb, could your mother still have had additional children?

D: She was not too old for it yet.

F: Then, for all you know, your parents may even have considered to have another child, but decided against it. Had they had another child, they would have

brought about a great good the absence of which is not an evil, as we saw before. Did they, however, violate a duty by not having a sixth child?

D: Raising five children was enough work for them – no, they did not violate an obligation. They had no duty to have a sixth child.

T: Do you agree, Fritz?

F: Yes, of course. Remember: Unless there are external factors – such as a promise – there is no duty to contribute to the coming about of a good the absence of which is not an evil; there is only what I call an “invitation” to do so.

T: Interesting. It seems that all we have discussed so far supports our view on birth control.

F: Just wait. Here is another example: Suppose a wealthy man visits a family – the father works as an auto mechanic – and is deeply impressed with their daughter’s intelligence. During the conversation, he finds out that she will graduate from high school at the end of the current schoolyear. “What college will she attend?” he asks. They respond that the family cannot afford sending her to college, that they need a secretary for their shop, and that she will work there after school is over. She indicates that she is looking forward to assisting her dad. Later that day, in his hotel room, the wealthy man asks himself whether he should offer to finance the young

woman's college education, and to suggest that she apply to first-rate colleges as soon as possible. Is he under an obligation to do so?

- T: No, of course not; this is another case of providing a good the absence of which is not an evil. As we have seen before, there is no duty to perform such actions.
- F: Suppose just before going to bed, he decides that he will make this offer and to call the auto mechanic's family in the morning. After getting up, he is about to pick up the phone – but then, he has second thoughts about the matter. Would it be allowed for him to change his mind?
- T: Of course; he has not made a commitment yet, and no one except for him even knows that he has considered making this offer.
- F: Now allow *me* to come into the picture. Assume that the wealthy man has not changed his mind, and that I meet him for breakfast in the hotel prior to him having made the telephone call to the family. He tells me that every year, he sets a big amount of money aside for a good work, and that this year, it is financing a gifted young lady's higher education. He also tells me that he will call the family after breakfast. Let me add that he feels deeply in my debt because I have saved his life at an earlier occasion (before you express your admiration for me, remember that that whole story is made up on the

spot). So I have good reasons to assume that he will go along with my wishes, and I suggest that he use the money for a different purpose. Is this morally acceptable? Would you say “yes,” “no,” or “it depends”?

T: I think I’d say, “It depends.”

F: And what does it depend on?

T: What you suggest he do with the money instead of financing the young lady’s college education.

F: Suppose I call his attention to another young very gifted high school graduate whose parents cannot afford sending her to college and suggest that he spend the money for her instead of for the auto mechanic’s daughter. Would this be OK?

T: In view of the fact that he has made no commitment and that the auto mechanic’s family does not even know that he is considering donating the money, your attempt to persuade him to use the funds for someone else’s higher education seems fine.

F: Suppose I call attention to the fact that one of my acquaintances needs a very expensive medical treatment which his family cannot afford, that the funds he would have to set aside for the college education would cover it, and try to persuade him to use the money for that purpose?

T: That also seems OK.

F: But suppose I try my best to persuade him to give the money to me so that I can go to Las Vegas to gamble.

T: You want him to do that instead of financing the woman's higher education?

F: Precisely.

T: That strikes me as wrong. What do you think, Deb?

D: I agree.

T: I did not know that you are a gambler, Fritz.

F: Whatever gambling I do does not take place in Las Vegas, and it is not literal gambling. But let's see what the results of my last dice throw are.

Persuading the wealthy man to use the money set aside for the young woman's college education for a different purpose is an action interfering with the coming about of a good the absence of which is not an evil, is it not?

T: Yes, that sounds right.

F: And as the examples we went over show, such an action is not always morally acceptable. There are two things one must compare to determine the acceptability of such an action. What are they?

T: We must compare the good the coming about of which is prevented with the purpose of the interfering action.

F: And if that purpose is of equal or greater importance compared to the good interfered with – as is the case when one person’s higher education is compared with the higher education of an equally gifted person or with the medical treatment of someone who is desperately ill – carrying the interfering action out seems appropriate.

T: Agreed.

F: If, however, the purpose of the interfering action is of lesser significance than the good interfered with – as is the case when the young woman’s higher education is compared with my enjoying myself gambling in Las Vegas – the interfering action is wrong. Yes or no?

T: Yes.

F: Now tell me: Does not artificial birth control involve an action interfering with the coming about of a good the absence of which is not an evil? – Tom? – It seems as if he does not want to answer the question; so what do you think, Deb?

D: Yes, it seems to be that kind of an action.

F: What is the good the coming about is interfered with?

D: A human person.

F: That is, a very precious, very valuable, very high good. And aren’t actions interfering with the coming about of a good the absence of which is not an evil justified

only if they are carried out for a purpose at least as significant as the good interfered with?

D: That's what we seem to have seen before.

F: How easy is it to think of a purpose of the interfering action as significant as a human life?

D: It does not seem easy.

F: Is not the good for the sake of which the coming about a human life is interfered with the immediate enjoyment and happiness which the conjugal act brings about (I say "immediate," for if one were to practice natural birth regulation, that enjoyment would only be postponed by several days at the most rather than eliminated)?

D. It seems so.

F: Thus, the good the coming about is interfered with is a human person; the good intended by the interfering action is worry-free sex, if you allow me to formulate it that blandly. What ranks higher, the good intended, or the good interfered with?

D: Obviously the good interfered with.

F: Given what we have seen before, does this not show the interfering action to be morally wrong? – Both of you seem to be reluctant to respond; so allow me to summarize: We have seen that there are actions *contributing* to the coming about of goods the absence of which is not an evil; we have also seen that



there are actions *interfering* with the coming about of a good the absence is not an evil. With regard to the first type of action, we saw that, unless there is an “outside” source of an obligation (such as a promise), there is never a duty, but only an invitation to carry the action out. With regard to actions interfering with the coming about of goods the absence of which is not an evil we have, however, seen that there is a duty to omit these action if the purpose for which the action is performed does not measure up in significance to that of the good interfered with. This shows that artificial birth control morally questionable, to say the least.

How about natural family planning, though? Is in that case, the decisive step doing something or not doing something? Tom?

T: It’s not doing something – abstaining from intercourse.

F: Is this performing an action interfering with the coming about of a good the absence of which is not an evil, or omitting an action which might bring about a good the absence of which is not an evil?

T: Obviously the second.

F: And have we not determined that, barring the presence of outside sources of duties, there is never an obligation, but always only an invitation to perform such actions? Does it not seem now that the difference between artificial birth control and natural family

planning is not just like the difference between you walking into my room from the direction of the secretary's office as opposed to from the other direction? Tom?

T: At this point, I cannot think of a reply but... but...

F: I suppose you want to add, "But something might come to my mind." There is nothing wrong with carefully considering the arguments we went over. Actually, maybe at this point, I can help you out with a counterargument one of my students used in the past when I got to this point of the conversation: The purpose of an action interfering with the coming about of a good the absence of which is not an evil can either be bringing about another good the absence of which is not an evil, or preventing, alleviating, or removing an evil. The first applies to persuading the wealthy man to finance the college education of another deserving high school graduate rather than that of the auto mechanic's daughter; the second applies to the case of persuading the wealthy man to finance the medical treatment of the seriously ill person rather than sending someone to college.

My conversation partner said that, if two goods are at stake the absence of which is not an evil, the interfering action would be allowed only if the good for the sake of which the interfering action is performed is of equal or higher value compared to that of the

good interfered with. He said that for this reason, trying to persuade the wealthy man to give me the money set aside for the young lady's college education so that I can buy a Van Gogh original to hang in my living room would be morally questionable. He continued, however, by pointing out that from the point of view of significance, it is difficult to compare goods the absence of which is not an evil with evils, and took the position that, if the goal of the interfering action is the prevention of an evil, the action is allowed, at least if the evil to be prevented can be designated as significant. Thus, he took the position that artificial birth control is acceptable whenever its purpose is to prevent a serious difficulty that would be connected with childbirth – and he said that this applies to almost all cases. How does that strike you?

T: I am not sold on the statement that there are any cases in which artificial birth control is unacceptable while natural family planning is acceptable, and I hope that I will come up with arguments showing that both always are equivalent; but it seems that, given what your conversation partner has said, even you must agree that artificial birth control is acceptable if the birth of a child would be connected with difficulties, such as if a poverty stricken family must care for three children already, if both husband and wife must work to earn a living for their family, and if the

wife's workplace does not allow maternity leave, or if an additional pregnancy would mean health risks for the woman.

F: Would not in all these cases natural family planning also reach the desired goal?

T: True, but remember how your conversation partner straightened you out – if I am permitted to use this language: At least in cases in which the birth of a child involves serious difficulties, artificial birth control is allowed. Does that not clearly follow from what he said? I doubt that you were able to respond to his argument.

F: Suppose after my retirement, I live in a little town in Maine, about five miles distant from the Appalachian Trail. Early Friday morning, a friend comes by my house, tells me that over the weekend, he will walk on the trail together with some other friends and asks me to come along. "We would pick you up in about an hour and drive to a parking lot from which we have access to the trail." I agree, and he states. "Be sure to pack warm clothes. You know that the weather can change very quickly up there. You probably have read in the paper about the six people who froze to death there during the past three weeks." As soon as he leaves, I remember that all my warm clothes are at the cleaner. So I go to my next-door neighbor's house to borrow clothes – he is pretty

exactly my size. He is not home, and I remember that he is out of town over the weekend. I break into his house; in one of his closets, I find what I need, and I take it. The weather turns out such that without the warm clothes, I truly would be in very bad shape (and my friends would not have taken me along anyway). After the hike, my friends drop me off at my house. A little later, I walk over to my neighbor's house and ring the bell. He comes out, very agitated, and says, "While I was gone, someone broke into my house and stole some of my clothes. Did you see anything?" I reply, "Yes. I needed your clothes. Here they are." I hand him a bag. He looks into it and sees his clothes; then he looks at me. "What? You broke into my house?" I reply, "I needed the clothes because otherwise, I would have probably frozen to death during the weekend hike I took with my friends up on the Appalachian Trail." Very much to my surprise, he keeps on being upset and says that he would report me to the police right away.

T: What do you mean, "very much to my surprise"? Nothing forced you to go on the hike; you could easily have stayed home.

F: So you would not buy the justification I gave for having broken into his house?

T: Of course not! It might have been different if you

had needed the clothes to participate in a rescue operation – and then, your next-door neighbor might have forgiven you; it might even have been different, had your friends forced you to go along; but neither of that was the case.

F: Let's examine the example. It involves two different actions. One is going on the hike. To make sure that this first action does not have any negative consequences, a second action is necessary. What is it?

T: Breaking into your next-door neighbor's house and taking the clothes without his permission.

F: What is the purpose of this second action?

T: To make sure that you don't freeze to death on your hike.

F: And what is the purpose of the first action?

T: To enjoy a weekend on the Appalachian Trail.

F: This first action – freely carried out by me without any need or compulsion – makes the second action necessary to make sure that the first does not have negative – in that case even disastrous – consequences. What strikes you as more correct with regard to the second action: “I took the clothes to enjoy a weekend on the Appalachian Trail,” or “I took the clothes in order not to freeze to death”?

T: There is a sense in which both apply – but the first seems to be more relevant; otherwise, your next-door

neighbor's continuing to be upset would not be justified.

F: This teaches us the following: Suppose there are two actions. The first one could be easily omitted without serious negative consequences; but to perform it without negative consequences, a second action is required. In those cases, a moral justification of the second action is not to be given in terms of the goal of the second action, but in terms of the goal of the first. Agreed?

T: It sounds a bit complicated; but I think I got it. How about you, Deb?

D: I think I got it, too; and it seems to be supported by the example.

F: So tell me, what are the two actions involved in artificial birth control? What is the first action which makes performing of the second necessary?

T: Sexual intercourse.

F: The conjugal act. And what is the second action?

T: Whatever is done to prevent conception – such as using a diaphragm, a condom, or both, preferably together with spermicides.

F: What is the objective of the second action?

T: To prevent pregnancy.

F: In other words, to prevent the coming about of a highly

precious good the absence of which is not an evil. And what is the immediate goal of the first action which, as you say, makes the second necessary?

T: The enjoyment and happiness brought about by the conjugal act.

F: Let me add – to account for what natural family planning would involve – that enjoyment and happiness right now rather than a few days later. Remember: A moral evaluation of the second action must be given in terms of the immediate goal of the first action which makes the second action necessary, as you say. The first brings about a good the absence of which is not an evil – the immediate enjoyment and happiness engendered by the conjugal act. The second interferes with the coming about of a great, a precious good. If you compare the significance of the good the coming about of which the second action prevents with the significance of the good the first action brings about, which one ranks higher? Tom?

T: I am thinking about this whole argument – there must be some flaw in it.

F: Deb, are you willing to answer my question?

T: As stated before, a human person ranks higher than the enjoyment and happiness brought about by the conjugal act.

F: Given that, if two actions are connected in the way



described earlier, the second must be evaluated in light of the immediate goal of the first, don't we have to say that artificial birth control interferes with the coming about of a high good for the sake of a lesser good even if it takes place in a situation in which a pregnancy would be difficult? And did we not see earlier that this is morally not acceptable?

D: Honestly, I do not know what to say.

T: Maybe we can come up with something if we think about it some more. A first item to mention is that refraining from intercourse has exactly the same outcome.

F: Remember that considering the outcome of human conduct is not sufficient for its proper moral evaluation. And besides, abstaining from the conjugal act is omitting an action which could bring about a good the absence of which is not an evil; recall that, unless there are external factors making such actions obligatory, there is, in an individual case, never a duty, but only an invitation, to perform them.

I know that both of you are still more than hesitant to go along with my arguments. The moral considerations we went over are, of course, much more important than all other arguments – if they are sound, they are the chief reason why artificial birth control is to be avoided. There are, however, still additional considerations in support of natural family planning.

T: Such as?

F: Besides the conjugal act, there are many other ways in which husband and wife can and should express their love for each other, including physically. Something important is missing from a marriage if these other ways are absent. Even the conjugal act is such that one ought not just to “jump” into it; but it should be preceded and followed by other ways of expressing one's tenderness and love to each other physically. Is it now not much more likely that these alternative expressions of physical tenderness are present among marriage partners who must regularly go through relatively short periods during which they must abstain from the conjugal act rather than among marriage partners to whom the conjugal act is available “on command,” whenever they want to? The first applies to couples who practice natural birth regulation; the second applies to those who practice artificial birth control. How do these thoughts strike you? Deb? Didn't you major in psychology?

D: It seems to make sense.

F: Here is another comparison: Think of a person who is served his favorite meal – fried duck – for two months every evening as opposed to someone who has a chance to eat it once approximately every ten days. What do you think the first one's reaction will be?

T: I like fried duck; but after a couple of weeks, I'd be sick of it.

F: So as the second person, you would enjoy it much more. Even though the conjugal act is something significantly different from enjoying food, the example still can teach us an important lesson: First, we are not speaking about the conjugal act "approximately once every ten days." We are speaking about abstaining from it for a couple of days in regular intervals. Might this not, in addition to teaching you to use alternative ways of expressing your love through alternative ways of physical tenderness, give you a greater appreciation of the conjugal act when you can resume it, similarly as you, Tom, will enjoy fried duck more after not having had it for some time? You are married for only about two month; so what I am going to say next does not yet apply to you. It might, however, start applying in five, ten, fifteen years. Listen to what Dietrich von Hildebrand writes in the book I offered to lend you: "Temporary abstinence is a psychological aid against the spiritually dulling power of habit."<sup>7</sup> There are couples for whom the conjugal act takes only a couple of minutes and is neither preceded nor followed by other expressions of physical tenderness. Compare mentally what they experience in contrast to what you experience now when you give yourselves to each other in

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<sup>7</sup>Hildebrand, *Love, Marriage, and the Catholic Conscience*, p. 66

the conjugal act. You probably do not wish to wind up in the situation of the couple I just referred to. As you will see in the not-to-distant future, avoiding this situation requires conscious and continuous effort; and for the psychological reasons given before, natural family planning might be a great help in these efforts. Finally, let me mention that, while, of course, abstaining from the conjugal act is a sacrifice, Dietrich von Hildebrand states, "We are. . . speaking. . . of married couples who are called to make this sacrifice for a few days. . . The difficulty of periodic abstinence is often greatly exaggerated: how many people, for example, are ready to undertake temporary abstinence for professional reasons such as prolonged journeys?"<sup>8</sup> Does he not have a point?

T: Well, all of this would be much less unsettling if the assumption on which you seem to have based all you said in this discussion would be true: That there are reliable methods of natural birth regulation. I have heard, however, that natural birth regulation is quite ineffective, and that unplanned pregnancies result from it quite frequently. Besides, Deb and I would not even know how to go about natural birth regulation.

F: What you said about the effective of natural methods

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

is often repeated, but I can assure you that it is not correct. Putting abortifacients to the side – remember that even the so-called “pill” occasionally works by preventing the implantation of a fertilized ovum, falls, therefore, under your minister’s condemnation – putting them to the side, natural birth regulation compares very favorably to methods of artificial birth control. With regard to how it works, much information is available on the Internet. Here, on that piece of paper, you see the URL of an Internet site. It leads you to a webpage explaining natural family planning in great detail.<sup>9</sup>

There are still two additional points I would like to bring up. First, I claim that I have presented sound arguments demonstrating that natural family planning is morally acceptable, while artificial birth control is not. I know that you are hesitant to go along with my claim. . .

T: You can say that again!

F: . . . However, did you hear me use any religious arguments, such as an appeal to a teaching of the Bible or to an authoritative teaching of the Catholic Church, or did I not limit myself to considerations of which I think that human reason can understand them apart from revelation?

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<sup>9</sup>[http://nfp.marquette.edu/pdf/nfp\\_user\\_manual.pdf](http://nfp.marquette.edu/pdf/nfp_user_manual.pdf)  
(<http://www.webcitation.org/71Xyv5lq>).

- T: You appealed only to our reason, and I can assure you that my reason will try to do its best to come up with counterarguments.
- F: Suppose, however, that there are no sound counterarguments, and that my arguments stand. Would that not mean that the Evangelical denomination you belong to would officially permit conduct that is morally wrong, while the Church of which I am a member would correctly designate that conduct as morally unacceptable?
- T: Correct, if there are no sound counterarguments, which I consider more than a big "if."
- F: And would this not be a strong argument in favor of the denomination your pastor argued against when preparing you, Tom, for baptism, and the both of you for marriage?
- T: *If* there are no sound counterarguments. But remember...
- F: ... I know, the big "if." Allow me to turn to the second of the two points. While there would, of course, be many points of disagreements between your pastor and me if we ever were to meet for a discussion, there would, also be many points we would agree on – such as there were many points Deb and I agreed on when we "ganged up" on you, Tom, during our conversations more than two years ago. One thing I particularly appreciate is his objection to aborti-

facients – unfortunately, there are Christian denominations which would not go along with him in this respect. The second point is the way he applies the words of Gn 1.29 “be fruitful and multiply” – to marriage: Remember what I said with regard to actions bringing about a good the absence of which is not an evil: *If all I observe* is that I can bring such a good into existence, there is no duty, but only an invitation for me to act. There may, however, be external factors (I used a promise as example) which might make performing such actions obligatory. With your minister, I am now saying that people who place themselves into a Christian marriage fall under the “be fruitful and multiply” command of God, and are obligated to bring children into the world; not more, of course, than they can be reasonably expected to take care of. Thus, although natural family planning is morally acceptable, it would not be morally acceptable for a married couple to practice it during the entire duration of their marriage. It is, of course, up to them when to have children. And as you said before, you intend to have children.

D: Yes, we do.

F: To make sure that there is no misunderstanding: Unlike any of the arguments I presented earlier, the second of the two final points I made included a religious argument.

But now, that it has come to be evening, I am think-

ing about an action bringing about a good the absence of which is not an evil: How about me inviting both of you for dinner at the new restaurant across the street? I have heard excellent things about it; the food is supposed to be really outstanding.

T: I have heard that it is on the expensive side.

F: You would not have to worry about this – me inviting you means that I would pay. Do you want to come?

D: It is very, very kind of you to invite us.

F: So you want to come?

D + T: Yes, we do! Thank you very, very much.

With that, we got up and left my office; I locked it, and we went across the street...