

Book Review: Reimers, Adrian J., *The Good Is Love: The Body and Human Acts in Humanae Vitae* and John Paul II¹

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Adrian Reimers' book *The Good is Love: The Body and Human Acts in Humanae Vitae and John Paul II* discusses the truth behind contemporary practices as regards to the conjugal act such as contraception that are branded as immoral by the 1968 encyclical of St. Pope Paul VI *Humanae Vitae* and the Personalist Philosophy of St. Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II), specifically his *Theology of the Body*. It is comprised of eight chapters outlined in a scholastic fashion. Chapter 1: The Heart of the Issue: Love, as the title indicates, introduced the reader to the heart of the issue, which is love. Here, Reimers elucidates the Christian notion of love as presented in its moral philosophy. It aims to present the notion of love in the Christian understanding so as to be able to understand why the Church forbids the use of contraception— because it is contrary to love. The key argument here is that love comes from God as the Creator of man, therefore, man was made to love the way God loves His creation. From here, one can solidly establish the true notion of conjugal love in relation to the love the Creator has for His creation. Having established this, the true essence of the body as a spiritual composite is discussed in Chapter 2. It is from this nature as a spiritual composite with a rational nature where it gets its dignity, and hence must not be subservient to subjective emotions or pleasures, and actions must be directed to respect its dignity.

Having proven that the philosophically founded morality accentuates is always in accord with the law of God as its end, Reimers presents in the third chapter the character of the present era as regards to the practice of contraception. He showcases the dark reality behind this prevalent belief by exposing the historical and conceptual aspects: the good as presented by Max Scheler, and the effects utilitarianism had on the mindset of the world today (affecting even those in the Church particularly in the “Majority Report” of the papal commission on birth control commissioned by the Vatican to discuss the issue). Having exposed the truth behind the contemporary mindset, Reimers discussed briefly but concisely John Paul II's theology of the body in Chapter 4, and subsequently the pope's understanding of the notion of concupiscence vis-à-vis the notions of virtue and covenant. He paid particular attention to the tendency of contemporary society to reduce concupiscence from the evil that it is to a natural part of man's fallen nature. Then, in Chapter 6: Acts and Morality, he discoursed on Wojtyla's account of proper human actions that lead to self-fulfillment (i.e., moral actions) as he outlined in his opus *Person and Act* as well as in his other writings prior to and after his election to the papacy. Of particular note here is the comprehensive discussion on the idea of mortal sin against the objections to it by contemporary ethicists.

After the philosophical discourses in the previous chapters, Reimers discussed the importance of faith and obedience and intellectual submission for human beings to recognize their vocation. He explained here that it has been far too common for the authority of the Magisterium to be criticized

¹ South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2020.

for being legalistic. In reality though, distancing one from faith actually harms the well-being of the human person as a spiritual composite. As humans are called to love as God loves, similarly man is called to faith because it is the way to love the Creator whom he finds fulfilment as shown by St. John of the Cross. From here, Reimers concludes with the discussion of the spirituality of marriage in the eighth chapter, a topic that often goes unnoticed in the pope's theology of the body. He presented there that marriage is a gift that intends to bring the utmost fulfilment to the conjugal life and hence must always be found in relation to spiritual goodness, particularly by piety, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In terms of its content, the book discusses an ongoing, controversial debated issue worldwide. The practice of sex outside of marriage (e.g., cohabitation and infidelity), that was once abhorred, is now normalized so long as there is mutual consent between both parties. Many people, especially the young, are being educated or experience the values of the conjugal act in this manner and so are losing their notion of what is truly right and wrong. Even those from a deeply religious background are vulnerable to these New Age trends. By knowing and upholding the objective truth by living it out, one will be able to find true fulfilment as satisfaction for all their longings for love.

The author is very scholastic in his presentation and discussion of the content of his work. It is outlined well, and his arguments are consistent with what he emphasized throughout the work. The choice of words he used are easily understandable, making Wojtyla's dense philosophy, the Magisterial teaching, and Thomistic metaphysical concepts easily graspable. The greatest strength this book has is Reimers' constant use of vivid and concrete examples to illustrate abstract and general concepts being discussed. For example, in Chapter Two in the discussion on the aspect of the Conjugal Act where the two are "Becoming One Flesh," Reimers divides the discussion into *Physical Structure of the Act*, *Organic meaning*, *Interactional meaning*, *Sensual and emotional factors*, and *The Subjective: Emotions and Pleasure*. In the *Interactional meaning*, he illustrates the complementarity of the actions of both parties by saying the man's behavior is more aggressive which is why he enters the woman's body while the woman's behavior is passive and receptive. The act has both anthropological and symbolic significance where the action of the man is a sign of conquest and at the same time, a commitment given the fact the possibility of conception. On the other hand, the woman, while surrendering to the man, subdues his masculinity.² This explains why many feminists would revolt at the image of surrender and conquest without considering that there is axiological implication in this regard.

In terms of objectivity, while the author is clearly Catholic, he shows depth and mastery of the topic, the issues surrounding it and the arguments he utilized and refuted. As an example, in Chapter 2, Reimers discusses the apparent good pro-contraception proponents promise to the people. He acknowledges the apparent good they show as valid but expounds that the good cannot remain in *utilitas* but on *honestum*. Such is the case of John Stuart Mill, who attempted to refine Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian principle of morality based on "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" from quantitative pleasures of sex and food to qualitative pleasures such as education. Still, as Wojtyla shows, this simply cannot work because ultimately, pleasures are sensual and fleeting and subjective, therefore, cannot be the ground from objective morality. Reimers then goes on to reflect on the impact and implications utilitarianism had in shaping the world as we know it today in a manner that exposes the bleak secret hidden amongst the normal reality of the day to day lives of the people as presented in the mainstream media. This influence of utilitarianism has extended even to the Church as seen in *The Majority Report*. Having discoursed that, Adrian then proceeds to expound the foundation of the

² Reimers, "Becoming One Flesh," in *The Good is Love*, 33.

Church's arguments against contraception as outlined in her moral theology and John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. Through this method of presentation, Reimers was able to show that the Church's arguments against these practices are coherent and have a solid foundation and are not solely reliant on divine revelation. Moreover, Adrian's respect to the reader is clearly seen from the introduction. The writings of Wojtyla were regarded just as one would regard any respectable writer. Hence, he writes, "if the reader disagrees on John Paul II's assessment of Freud as a "master of suspicion", he is not obliged to change his mind."³

As a devout Catholic, the proponent agrees wholeheartedly with Adrian Reimers' work because it is in line with the Culture of Life movement that opposes the Culture of Death that is widespread in today's postmodern world.⁴ The best term which captures the postmodern mentality is what the late Pope Benedict XVI calls 'The Dictatorship of Relativism' "that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate standard consists solely of one's own ego and desires."⁵ Relativism, caused by many factors such as the excess of modernism exacerbated by postmodernism's outright denial of the transcendental value of truth, has poisoned the minds of people in the society. Coupled with the hedonist, consumerist, secularist and materialist mentality brought on with widespread unbridled capitalism spread around the world by globalization, then one need not think twice why people think that it is alright to commit abortion and use contraception. The Catholic Church is fundamentally the only large institution that opposes issues such as abortion, homosexual activity, contraception, etc. Its oppositions to these practices, which are being normalized as a part of global culture, has led the Church to be criticized and at worst ostracized in the minds of many liberals especially since they had lost their credibility as a source of teaching authority with people questioning: "Who is the Church to say what I want to do that makes me happy?" With the notion of who man is becoming vaguer than it has ever been, there has to be a clearer view of who man really is so as to clear up the confusion that stems from the issue of sexuality. In reality, they have made death normal and downplayed morality to the point that it becomes subjective.

The Good is Love: The Body and Human Acts in Humanae Vitae and John Paul II turns a nightmare into a wonderful dream come true. The primary topic discussed is about a contemporary real-life issue that is put forward in the mainstream culture as progress in human development. But this work manages to expose the truth behind this so-called progress. Instead of the progress as it is often portrayed, contraception is actually a recess in human moral development. Through the analysis of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and the philosophical and theological writings of John Paul II, Reimers was able to showcase the metaphysical reality behind the issue that the proponents of the practice reject. It does this in a profound yet down to earth manner that readers will be able to relate to. Reading this book will open one's eyes to the bigger picture: that is portrayed as true, good, and love in contemporary culture is an evil practice legitimized as a result of decades of philosophical and cultural movements that shaped the world we know today. Moreover, he will be able to understand the Catholic Church's teachings against contraception and abortion for example, thereby enabling

³ Reimers, preface to in *The Good is Love*, xx.

⁴ The Culture of Death refers to the New Age movement as an attempt by contemporary thinkers to reinstate the practices that Christianity rejected such as homosexuality, contraception, euthanasia, suicide, etc. as practices against life, giving rise to a new image of humanity as a result of blind and random forces rather than that of a loving Creator. The proponents of these are known as the Architects of the Culture of Death. Cf. Donald De Marco and Benjamin Wicker, *Architects of the Culture of Death* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 15.

⁵ Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Peter Seewald, *Light of the World: The Pope, The Church and The Signs Of The Times* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 27.

them to find true happiness. Ergo, the reader will be made aware about the truth about the good, which is love, and vice-versa.

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