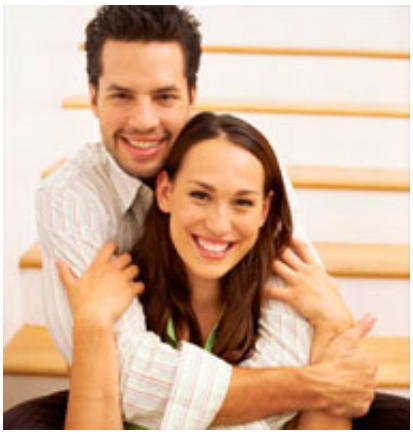

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Presentation

Through his Church, Christ continues the mission he received from the Father. He sent the Twelve to proclaim the Kingdom and to call people to repentance and conversion, to metanoia (cf. Mk 6:12). The Risen Christ transmitted his own power of reconciliation to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive, are forgiven them" (Jn 20:22-23). Through the outpouring of the Spirit effected by Christ, the Church continues the preaching of the Gospel, inviting people to conversion, and administering the sacrament of the remission of sins, by means of which repentant sinners obtain reconciliation with God and with the Church and see the way of salvation opening up before them.

This Vademecum traces its origin to the particular pastoral sensitivity of the Holy Father, who has entrusted the task of preparing this aid for confessors to the Pontifical Council for the Family. With the experience he acquired both as a priest and a Bishop, the Pope ascertained the importance of clear and certain guidelines to which the ministers of the Sacrament of Reconciliation can refer in their dialogue with souls. The richness of the doctrine of the Magisterium of the Church on themes of marriage and the family, especially since the Second Vatican Council, has raised the need for a good synthesis regarding some questions of morality pertaining to conjugal life.

If, on a doctrinal level, the Church has a solid awareness of the requirements of the Sacrament of Penance, it cannot be denied that a certain void has been forming with regard to implementing these teachings in pastoral practice. The doctrinal data, therefore, is the foundation supporting this "Vademecum," and it is not our task to repeat it here, although it is called to mind in various passages. We know well all the richness that has been offered to the Christian community by the Encyclical Humanae vitae illuminated then by the Encyclical Veritatis splendor and by the Apostolic Exhortations, Familiaris consortio and Reconciliatio et Paenitentia. We also know how the Catechism of the Catholic Church has provided an effective and synthetic summary of the Church's doctrine on these subjects.

"To evoke conversion and penance in man's heart and to offer him the gift of reconciliation is the specific mission of the Church (...). It is not a mission which consists merely of a few theoretical statements and the presentation of an ethical ideal unaccompanied by the energy with which to carry it out. Rather it seeks to express itself in precise ministerial functions directed toward a concrete practice of penance and reconciliation" (Apostolic Exhortation Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, n. 23).

We are happy to put this document in the hands of priests, a document that has been prepared at the request of the Holy Father with the aid of the competent collaboration of professors of theology as well as some pastors.

We thank all those who have offered their contribution to making this document possible. We are especially grateful to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Apostolic Penitentiary.

INTRODUCTION

1. Aim of the Document

The family, which the Second Vatican Council has defined as the domestic sanctuary of the Church, and as "the primary vital cell of society",[1] constitutes a privileged object of the Church's pastoral attention. "At a moment of history in which the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it, and aware that the well-being of society and her own good are intimately tied to the good of the family, the Church perceives in a more urgent and compelling way her mission of proclaiming to all people the plan of God for marriage and the family".[2]

Over recent years, the Church, through the words of the Holy Father and a vast spiritual mobilization of pastors and lay people, has greatly increased her concern to help the entire community of the faithful to consider with gratitude and fulness of faith, the gifts given by God to men and women united in the sacrament of Marriage, so that they may be able to realize an authentic path of holiness and offer a truly evangelical witness in the concrete situations of life in which they find themselves.

The sacrament of the Eucharist and the sacrament of Penance play a fundamental role in this path toward marital and domestic holiness. The former reinforces union with Christ, the source of grace and life, and the latter rebuilds it, whenever it has been destroyed, or increases and perfects conjugal and family unity,[3] menaced and wounded by sin.

To help married couples be aware of the path of their holiness and to carry out their mission, it is fundamental that their conscience be formed, and that God's will be fulfilled in the specific area of married life, that is, in their conjugal communion

and service for life. The light of the Gospel and the grace of the sacrament represent the indispensable elements for the elevation and the fulness of conjugal love that has its source in God the Creator. In fact, "the Lord, wishing to bestow special gifts of grace and divine love on it, has restored, perfected and elevated it".[4]

The moment in which the spouses ask for, and receive the sacrament of Reconciliation represents a salvific event of the greatest importance for accepting the demands of authentic love and of God's plan in their daily life. It provides an illuminating occasion for deepening their faith and a concrete aid in carrying out God's plan in their lives.

"It is the sacrament of penance or reconciliation that prepares the way for each individual, even those weighed down with great faults. In this sacrament each person can experience mercy in a unique way, that is, the love which is more powerful than sin".[5]

Since the administration of the sacrament of Reconciliation is entrusted to the ministry of priests, this document is addressed specifically to confessors and seeks to offer some practical guidelines for the confession and absolution of the faithful in matters of conjugal chastity. More specifically, this vademecum ad praxim confessariorum intends also to offer a reference point for married penitents so that they can draw ever greater advantage from the practice of the sacrament of Reconciliation, and live their vocation to responsible parenthood in keeping with divine law, authoritatively taught by the Church. It will also serve as an aid for those who are preparing for marriage.

The problem of responsible procreation represents a particularly delicate point in Catholic moral teaching relating to conjugal life. This is especially the case with regard to the administration of the sacrament of Reconciliation, in which doctrinal affirmations confront concrete human situations and the spiritual paths of the individual faithful. It has become necessary, in fact, to recall firm points of reference which make it possible to deal pastorally both with new methods of contraception and the aggravation of the entire phenomenon.[6] This document does not intend to repeat the entire teaching of the Encyclical Humanae vitae, the Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris consortio, and other documents of the ordinary Magisterium of the Supreme Pontiff, but only to offer suggestions and guidelines for the spiritual good of the faithful who have recourse to the sacrament of Reconciliation, and to overcome possible discrepancies and uncertainties in the practice of confessors.

2. Conjugal Chastity in the Doctrine of the Church

Christian tradition has always upheld the goodness and honesty of the marital union and of the family against numerous heresies which arose from the very beginnings of the Church. Willed by God with creation itself, brought back to its

primal origin and elevated to the dignity of a sacrament by Christ marriage consists of an intimate communion of the spouses of love and life, intrinsically ordered to the good of the children that God wishes to entrust to them. Both for the good of the spouses and of the children, as weft as for the good of society itself, the natural bond no longer depends on human decision.[7]

The virtue of conjugal chastity "involves the integrity of the person and the integrality of the gift",[8] and through it sexuality "becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman".[9] This virtue, in so far as it refers to the intimate relations of the spouses, requires that "the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love"[10] be maintained. Therefore, among the fundamental moral principles of conjugal life, it is necessary to keep in mind "the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning".[11]

Throughout this century the Supreme Pontiffs have issued various documents expounding the principal moral truths on conjugal chastity. Among these, special mention is due to the Encyclical Casti connubii (1930) of Pius XI,[12] numerous discourses of Pius XII,[13] the Encyclical Humanae vitae (1968) of Paul VI,[14] the Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris consortio[15] (1981), the Letter to Families Gratissimam sane[16] and the Encyclical Evangelium vitae (1995) of John Paul II. Together with these, the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et apes[17] (1965) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church[18] (1992) deserve special mention. Important also, in keeping with these teachings, are some documents of the Episcopal Conferences, as well as those of pastors and theologians who have developed the subject and given it a deeper understanding. The example should also be mentioned of many married persons, whose commitment to live human love in a Christian way constitutes a most effective contribution for the new evangelization of the family.

3. The 'Goods' of Marriage and the Gift of Self

By means of the sacrament of Marriage, married couples receive from Christ the Redeemer the gift of grace that confirms and elevates the communion of faithful and fruitful love. The holiness to which they are called is above all a grace given.

The persons called to live in the married state realize their vocation to love[19] in the full gift of self which adequately expresses the language of the body.[20] From the mutual gift of the spouses comes, as its fruit, the gift of life to the children, who are a sign and crowning of their spousal love.[21]

Contraception, directly opposed to the transmission of life, betrays and falsifies the self-sacrificing love proper to marriage, "altering its value of total self-giving"[22]

and contradicting God's design of love in which it has been granted to married couples to participate.

VADEMECUM FOR THE USE OF CONFESSORS

This vademecum consists of a set of propositions which confessors are to keep in mind while administering the sacrament of Reconciliation, in order to better help married couples to live their vocation to fatherhood or motherhood in a Christian way, within their own personal and social circumstances.

1. Holiness in Marriage

1. All Christians must be fittingly made aware of their call to holiness. The invitation to follow Christ addressed, in fact, to each and every member of the faithful, must tend towards the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity in each one's own state.[23]

2. Charity is the soul of holiness. By its very nature, charity—a gift that the Spirit infuses in the heart — assumes and elevates human love and makes it capable of the perfect gift of self. Charity makes renunciation more acceptable, lightens the spiritual struggle and renders more joyous the gift of self.[24]

3. Human beings cannot achieve perfect self-giving with their own forces alone. They become capable of this by the grace of the Holy Spirit. In effect it is Christ who reveals the original truth of marriage, and, freeing man from all hardness of heart renders him capable of fully realizing it.[25]

4. On the path to holiness, a Christian experiences both human weakness and the benevolence and mercy of the Lord. Therefore, the keystone of the exercise of Christian virtues—and thus also of conjugal chastity — rests on faith which makes us aware of God's mercy, and on repentance which humbly receives divine forgiveness.[26]

5. The spouses carry out the full gift of self in married life and in conjugal union which, for Christians, is vivified by the grace of the sacrament. Their specific union and the transmission of life are tasks proper to their conjugal holiness.[27]

2. The Teaching of the Church on Responsible Procreation

1. The spouses are to be strengthened in their view of the inestimable value and preciousness of human life, and aided so that they may commit themselves to making their own family a sanctuary of life:[28] "God himself is present in human fatherhood and motherhood quite differently than he is present in all other instances of begetting 'on earth'".[29]

2. Parents are to consider their mission as an honor and a responsibility, since they

become co-operators with the Lord in calling into existence a new human person, made in the image and likeness of God, redeemed and destined, in Christ, to a Life of eternal happiness.[30] "It is precisely in their role as coworkers with God who transmits his image to the new creature that we see the greatness of couples who are ready 'to co-operate with the love of the Creator and the Savior, who through them will enlarge and enrich his own family day by day"'.[31]

3. From this the Christian's joy and esteem for paternity and maternity are derived. This parenthood is called "responsible" in recent documents of the Church, to emphasize the awareness and generosity of the spouses with regard to their mission of transmitting life, which has in itself a value of eternity, and to call attention to their role as educators. Certainly it is a duty of married couples—who, for that matter, should seek appropriate counsel—to deliberate deeply and in a spirit of faith about the size of their family, and to decide the concrete mode of realizing it, with respect for the moral criteria of conjugal life.[32]

4. The Church has always taught the intrinsic evil of contraception, that is, of every marital act intentionally rendered unfruitful. This teaching is to be held as definitive and irreformable. Contraception is gravely opposed to marital chastity, it is contrary to the good of the transmission of life (the procreative aspect of matrimony), and to the reciprocal self-giving of the spouses (the unitive aspect of matrimony); it harms true love and denies the sovereign role of God in the transmission of human life.[33]

5. A specific and more serious moral evil is present in the use of means which have an abortive effect, impeding the implantation of the embryo which has just been fertilized or even causing its expulsion in an early stage of pregnancy.[34]

6. However, profoundly different from any contraceptive practice is the behavior of married couples, who, always remaining fundamentally open to the gift of life, live their intimacy only in the unfruitful periods, when they are led to this course by serious motives of responsible parenthood. This is true both from the anthropological and moral points of view, because it is rooted in a different conception of the person and of sexuality.[35]

The witness of couples who for years have lived in harmony with the plan of the Creator, and who, for proportionately serious reasons, licitly use the methods rightly called "natural," confirms that it is possible for spouses to live the demands of chastity and of married life with common accord and full self-giving.

3. Pastoral Guidelines for Confessors

1. In dealing with penitents on the matter of responsible procreation, the confessor should keep four aspects in mind a) the example of the Lord who "is capable of reaching down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, to sin";[36] b) a prudent reserve in inquiring into these

sins; c) help and encouragement to the penitents so that they may be able to reach sufficient repentance and accuse themselves fully of grave sins, d) advice which inspires all, in a gradual way to embrace the path of holiness.

2. The minister of Reconciliation should always keep in mind that the sacrament has been instituted for men and women who are sinners. Therefore barring manifest proof to the contrary, he will receive the penitents who approach the confessional taking for granted their good will to be reconciled with the merciful God, a good will that is born, although in different degrees, of a contrite and humbled heart (Ps 50:19).[37]

3. When occasional penitents approach the sacrament, those who have not confessed for a long time and manifest a grave general situation, it is necessary, before asking direct and concrete questions with regard to responsible procreation and chastity in general, to enlighten them so that they can understand these duties in a vision of faith. Thus it will be necessary, if the accusation of sins has been too succinct or mechanical, to help the penitents to place their life before God, and, with general questions on various virtues and/or obligations in accordance with their personal conditions,[38] remind them in a positive way of the invitation to the sanctity of love and of the importance of their duties in the area of procreation and the education of children.

4. When it is the penitent who asks questions or seeks clarification on specific points, even if only implicitly, the confessor will have to respond adequately, but always with prudence and discretion,[39] without approving erroneous opinions.

5. The confessor is bound to admonish penitents regarding objectively grave transgressions of God's law and to ensure that they truly desire absolution and God's pardon with the resolution to re-examine and correct their behavior. Frequent relapse into sins of contraception does not in itself constitute a motive for denying absolution, absolution cannot be imparted, however, in the absence of sufficient repentance or of the resolution not to fall again into sin.[40]

6. The penitent who regularly confesses with the same priest frequently seeks something besides absolution alone. The confessor needs to know how to provide guidance to help him or her to improve in all Christian virtues, and, in consequence, in the sanctification of marital life.[41] This certainly will be easier where a relationship of actual spiritual direction exists, even if this name is not used.

7. On the part of the penitent, the sacrament of Reconciliation requires sincere sorrow, a formally complete accusation of mortal sins, and the resolution, with the help of God, not to fall into sin again. In general, it is not necessary for the confessor to investigate concerning sins committed in invincible ignorance of their evil, or due to an inculpable error of judgment. Although these sins are not imputable, they do not cease, however, to be an evil and a disorder. This also

holds for the objective evil of contraception, which introduces a pernicious habit into the conjugal life of the couple. It is therefore necessary to strive in the most suitable way to free the moral conscience from those errors[42] which contradict the nature of conjugal life as a total gift.

Though one must keep in mind that the formation of consciences is to be accomplished above all in catechesis for married couples, both general or specific it is always necessary to assist the spouses, also in the moment of the sacrament of Reconciliation, to examine themselves on the specific duties of conjugal life. Whenever the confessor considers it necessary to question the penitent, he should do so with discretion and respect.

8. The principle according to which it is preferable to let penitents remain in good faith in cases of error due to subjectively invincible ignorance, is certainly to be considered always valid, even in matters of conjugal chastity. And this applies whenever it is foreseen that the penitent, although oriented towards living within the bounds of a life of faith, would not be prepared to change his own conduct but rather would begin formally to sin. Nonetheless in these cases, the confessor must try to bring such penitents ever closer to accepting God's plan in their own lives, even in these demands, by means of prayer, admonition and exhorting them to form their consciences, and by the teaching of the Church.

9. The pastoral "law of gradualness., not to be confused with the "gradualness of the law" which would tend to diminish the demands it places on us, consists of requiring a decisive break with sin together with a progressive path towards total union with the will of God and with his loving demands.[43]

10. On the other hand, to presume to make one's own weakness the criterion of moral truth is unacceptable. From the very first proclamation of the word of Jesus, Christians realize that there is a "disproportion" between the moral law, natural and evangelical, and the human capacity. They equally understand that the recognition of their own weakness is the necessary and secure road by which the doors to God's mercy will be opened.[44]

11. Sacramental absolution is not to be denied to those who, repentant after having gravely sinned against conjugal chastity, demonstrate the desire to strive to abstain from sinning again, notwithstanding relapses. In accordance with the approved doctrine and practice followed by the holy Doctors and confessors with regard to habitual penitents, the confessor is to avoid demonstrating lack of trust either in the grace of God or in the dispositions of the penitent, by exacting humanly impossible absolute guarantees of an irreproachable future conduct.[45]

12. When the penitent shows a willingness to accept the moral teaching, especially in the case of one who habitually frequents the sacrament and demonstrates trust with regard to the spiritual help it offers, it is good to instil confidence in divine Providence and be supportive, in order to help the penitent to examine himself

honestly before God. For this purpose it will be necessary to verify the solidity of the motives inducing a limitation of fatherhood or motherhood, and the liceity of the methods chosen to distance or avoid a new birth.

13. Special difficulties are presented by cases of co-operation in the sin of a spouse who voluntarily renders the unitive act infecund. In the first place, it is necessary to distinguish co-operation in the proper sense, from violence or unjust imposition on the part of one of the spouses, which the other spouse in fact cannot resist.[46] This co-operation can be licit when the three following conditions are jointly met:

1) when the action of the co-operating spouse is not already illicit in itself;[47]

2) when proportionally grave reasons exist for cooperating in the sin of the other spouse;

3) when one is seeking to help the other spouse to desist from such conduct (patiently, with prayer, charity and dialogue; although not necessarily in that moment, nor on every single occasion).

14. Furthermore, it is necessary to carefully evaluate the question of co-operation in evil when recourse is made to means which can have an abortifacient effect.[48]

15. Christian couples are witnesses of God's love in the world. They must therefore be convinced, with the assistance of faith and even in spite of their experience of human weakness, that it is possible to observe the will of the Lord in conjugal life with divine grace. Frequent and persevering recourse to prayer, to the Eucharist and to the sacrament of Reconciliation, are indispensable for gaining mastery of self.[49]

16. Priests, in their catechesis and in their preparation of couples for marriage, are asked to maintain uniform criteria with regard to the evil of the contraceptive act, both in their teaching and in the area of the sacrament of Reconciliation, in complete fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church.

Bishops are to take particular care to be vigilant in this regard, for not infrequently the faithful are scandalized by this lack of unity, both in the area of catechesis as well as in the sacrament of Reconciliation.[50]

17. The pastoral practice of confession will be more effective if it is united to an on-going and thorough catechesis on the Christian vocation to marital love and on its joyful and demanding dimensions, its grace and personal commitment,[51] and if consultors and centres are made available to which confessors could easily refer penitents in order to acquire adequate knowledge about the natural methods.

18. In order to render the moral directives concerning responsible procreation concretely applicable, it is necessary that the precious work of confessors be

completed by catechesis.[52] Accurate illumination of consciences with regard to the sin of abortion certainly forms an integral part of this task.

19. Regarding absolution for the sin of abortion, the obligation always exists to have regard for the canonical norms. If repentance is sincere and it is difficult to send the penitent to the competent authority to whom the absolution of the censure is reserved every confessor can absolve according to can. 1357; suggesting an adequate penitential act, and indicating the necessity to have recourse, possibly offering to draft and forward it himself.[53]

Especially in these times, the Church considers it to be one of her principal duties to proclaim the mystery of mercy, revealed in a supreme degree in the Person of Jesus Christ, and to bring mercy into life.[54]

The pre-eminent setting for proclaiming and realizing mercy is the celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Precisely this first year of the triennium of preparation for the Third Millennium, dedicated to Christ Jesus, the only Savior of the world, yesterday, today and for ever (cf. Heb 13:8), can offer a great opportunity for the work of pastoral renewal and catechetical deepening in the Dioceses, and specifically in shrines visited by many pilgrims where the sacrament of forgiveness is administered with an abundant availability of confessors.

May priests always be fully available for this ministry on which the eternal beatitude of married couples depends, and also upon which, in good part, their serenity and happiness in this present life rests. May priests truly be for them living witnesses of the Father's mercy!

Vatican City, 12 February 1997.
Alfonso Cardinal Lopez Trujillo
President of the Pontifical Council for the Family

Francisco Gil Hellin
Secretary

NOTES
1 Vatican Council II, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People Apostolicam actuositatem, 18 November 1965, n. 11.
2 John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981, n. 3.
3 Cf. John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981 n. 58.
4 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. Const. on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes, 7 December 1965, n. 49.
5 John Paul II, Enc. Dives in misericordia, 30 November 1980, n. 13.
6 The abortifacient effect of new pharmaceutical products must be borne in mind. Cf. John Paul II, Enc. Evangelium vitae, 25 March 1995, n. 13.

7 Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. Const. on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et , 7 December 1965, n. 48.
8 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 11 October 1992, n. 2337.
9 Ibid.
10 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. Const. on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes, 7 December 1965, n. 51.
11 Paul VI, Enc. Humanae vitae, 25 July 1968, n. 12.
12 Pius XI, Enc. Casti connubii, 31 December 1930.
13 Pius XII, Allocution to the Congress of the Catholic Union of Italian Midwives, 2 October 1951, Discourse to the Union of the Family (Fronte della famiglia) and to the Associations of Numerous Families, 27 November 1951.
14 Paul VI, Enc. Humanae vitae, 25 July 1968.
15 John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981.
16 John Paul II, Letter to Families Gratissimam sane, 2 February 1994.
17 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. Const. on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes, 7 December 1965.
18 Catechism of the Catholic Church 11 October 1992.
19 Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. Const. on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes, 7 December 1965, n. 24.
20 John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981, n. 32.
21 Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2378, cf. John Paul II, Letter to Families Gratissimam sane, 2 February 1994, n. 11.
22 John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981 n. 32.
23 "The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one—that sanctity which is cultivated by all who act under God's Spirit and, obeying the Father's voice and adoring God the Father in spirit and in truth, follow Christ poor, humble and cross-bearing, that they may deserve to be partakers of his glory. Each one, however, according to his own gifts and duties must steadfastly advance along the way of a living faith, which arouses hope and works through love" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Const. on the Church Lumen gentium, 21 November 1964, n. 41).
24 "Charity is the soul of the holiness to which all are called" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 826). "Love causes man to find fulfilment through the sincere gift of self. To love means to give and to receive something which can be neither bought nor sold, but only given freely and mutually" (John Paul II, Letter to Families Gratissimam sane, 2 February 1994, n. 11).
25 Cf. John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981, n. 13. Keeping God's law in particular situations can be difficult, extremely difficult, but it is never impossible. This is the constant teaching of the Church's tradition" (John Paul II, Enc. Veritatis splendor, 6 August 1993, n. 102).
"It would be a very grave error to conclude that the norm taught by the Church is in itself only an 'ideal' which must then be adapted, put in proportion, aligned, they say, with the concrete possibilities of man, according to a 'weighing of the various goods in question'. But what are the 'concrete possibilities of man'? And of what man are we speaking? Of man dominated by concupiscence or of man redeemed by Christ? For this is the matter under consideration: the reality of the redemption

of Christ. Christ has redeemed us! This means: He has given us the possibility of realizing the entire truth of our being. He has liberated our liberty from the domination of concupiscence. And if redeemed man sins again, that is not due to the imperfection of the redeeming act of Christ, but to the will of man who subtracts himself from the grace gushing out from that act. The commandment of God is certainly proportioned to the capacities of man: but to the capacities of man to whom the Holy Spirit has been given, the man who, if he has fallen into sin, can always obtain pardon and enjoy the presence of the Spirit" (John Paul II, Discourse to Participants in a Course on Responsible Procreation, 1 March 1984).

26 "To acknowledge one's sin, indeed —penetrating still more deeply into the consideration of one's own personhood —to recognize oneself as being a sinner, capable of sin and inclined to commit sin, is the essential first step in returning to God. (...) In effect, to become reconciled with God presupposes and includes detaching oneself consciously and with determination from the sin into which one has fallen. It presupposes and includes, therefore, doing penance in the fullest sense of the term: repenting, showing this repentance, adopting a real attitude of repentance —which is the attitude of the person who starts out on the road of return to the Father. (...) In the concrete circumstances of sinful humanity, in which there can be no conversion without the acknowledgment of one's own sin, the Church's ministry intervenes in each individual case with a precise penitential purpose. That is, the Church's ministry intervenes in order to bring the person to the 'knowledge of self'" (John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apost. Exhort. Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, 2 December 1984, n. 13).

"When we realize that God's love for us does not cease in the face of our sin or recoil before our offenses, but becomes even more attentive and generous; when we realize that this love went so far as to cause the passion and death of the Word mad flesh who consented to redeem us at the price of his own blood, then we exclaim in gratitude: 'Yes, the Lord is rich in mercy', and even: 'The Lord is mercy'" (ibid., n. 22).

27 "Christian spouses and parents are included in the universal call to sanctity. For them this call is specified by the sacrament they have celebrated and is carried out concretely in the realities proper to their conjugal and family life. This gives rise to the grace and requirement of an authentic and profound conjugal and family spirituality that draws its inspiration from the themes of creation, covenant, cross, resurrection and sign" (John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981, n. 56).

"Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is directed and enriched by the redemptive power of Christ and the salvific action of the Church, with the result that the spouses are effectively led to God and are helped and strengthened in their lofty role as fathers and mothers. Spouses, therefore, are fortified and, as it were, consecrated for the duties and dignity of their state by a special sacrament; fulfilling their conjugal and family role by virtue of this sacrament, spouses are penetrated with the spirit of Christ and their whole life is suffused by faith, hope, and charity; thus they increasingly further their own perfection and their mutual sanctification, and together they render glory to God" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. Const. on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes, 7

December 1965, n. 48).
28 "But the Church firmly believes that human life, even if weak and suffering, is always a splendid gift of God's goodness. Against the pessimism and selfishness which cast a shadow over the world, the Church stands for life: In each human life she sees the splendor of that 'Yes', that 'Amen', who is Christ himself. To the 'no' which assails and afflicts the world, she replies with this living 'Yes', thus defending the human person and the world from all who plot against and harm life" (John Paul II Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981, n. 30).
"It is necessary to go back to seeing the family as the sanctuary of life. The family is indeed sacred: it is the place in which life—the gift of God—can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth. In the face of the so-called culture of death, the family is the heart of the culture of life" (John Paul II, Enc. Centesimus annus, 1 May 1991, n. 39).
29 John Paul II, Letter to Families Gratissimam sane, 2 February 1994, n. 9.
30 "God himself said: 'It is not good that man should be alone' (Gn 2:18) and 'from the beginning (he) made them male and female' (Mt 19:4), wishing to associate them in a special way with his own creative work, God blessed man and woman with the words: 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Gn 1:28). Without intending to underestimate the other ends of marriage, it must be said that true married love and the whole structure of family life which results from it is directed to disposing the spouses to co-operate valiantly with the love of the Creator and Savior who through them will increase and enrich his family from day to day" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. Const. on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes, 7 December 1965, n. 50).
"The Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the procreation and education of children it reflects the Father's work of creation" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2205).
"Co-operating with God to call new human beings into existence means contributing to the transmission of that divine image and likeness of which everyone 'born of a woman' is a bearer" (John Paul II, Letter to Families Gratissimam sane, 2 February 1994, n. 8).
31 John Paul II, Enc. Evangelium Vitae, 25 March 1995, n. 43; cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. Const. on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes, 7 December 1965, n. 50.
32 "Married couples should regard it as their proper mission to transmit human life and to educate their children; they should realize that they are thereby cooperating with the love of God the Creator and are, in a certain sense, its interpreters. This involves the fulfilment of their role with a sense of human and Christian responsibility and the formation of correct judgements through docile respect for God and common reflection and effort; it also involves a consideration of their own good and the good of their children already born or yet to come, an ability to read the signs of the times and of their own situation on the material and spiritual level, and, finally, an estimation of the good of the family, of society, and of the Church. It is the married couple themselves who must in the last analysis

arrive at these judgements before God. Married people should realize that in their behaviour they may not simply follow their own fancy but must be ruled by conscience — and conscience ought to be conformed to the law of God in the light of the teaching authority of the Church, which is the authentic interpreter of divine law. For the divine law throws light on the meaning of married love, protects it and leads it to truly human fulfilment" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. Const. on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes, 7 December 1965, n. 50).

"When it is a question of harmonizing married love with the responsible transmission of life, it is not enough to take only the good intention and the evaluation of motives into account; the objective criteria must be used, criteria drawn from the nature of the human person and the human action, criteria which respect the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love, all this is possible only if the virtue of married chastity is seriously practiced. In questions of birth regulation the sons of the Church, faithful to these principles, are forbidden to use methods disapproved of by the teaching authority of the Church" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. Const. on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes, 7 December 1965, n. 51).

"In relation to physical, economic, psychological and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised, either by the deliberate and generous decision to raise a numerous family, or by the decision, made for grave motives and with due respect for the moral law, to avoid for the time being, or even for an indeterminate period, a new birth.

"Responsible parenthood also and above all implies a more profound relationship to the objective moral order established by God, of which a right conscience is the faithful interpreter. The responsible exercise of parenthood implies, therefore, that husband and wife recognize fully their own duties towards God, towards themselves, towards the family and towards society, in a correct hierarchy of values.

"In the task of transmitting life, therefore, they are not free to proceed completely at will, as if they could determine in a wholly autonomous way the honest path to follow, but they must conform their activity to the creative intention of God, expressed in the very nature of marriage and of its acts, and manifested by the constant teaching of the Church" (Paul VI, Enc. Humanae vitae, 25 July 1968, n. 10).

33 The Encyclical Humanae vitae declares as illicit "every action which, either in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible." And it adds: "To justify conjugal acts made intentionally infecund, one cannot invoke as valid reasons the lesser evil, or the fact that such acts would constitute a whole together with the fecund acts already performed or to follow later, and hence would share in one and the same moral goodness. In truth if it is sometimes licit to tolerate a lesser evil in order to avoid a greater evil or to promote a greater good, it is not licit, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil so that good may follow therefrom, that is, to make into the object of a positive act of the will something which is intrinsically disorder, and hence unworthy of the

human person, even when the intention is to safeguard or promote individual, family or social well-being. Consequently it is an error to think that a conjugal act which is deliberately made infecund and so is intrinsically dishonest could be made honest and right by the ensemble of a fecund conjugal life" (Paul VI, Enc. Humanae vitae, 25 July 1968, n. 14).
"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 dynamism of their sexual communion, they act as 'arbiters' of the divine plan and they '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" (John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981, n. 32).
34 The human being must be respected and treated as a person from his conception. Therefore, from that very moment the rights of a person must be accorded to him, foremost among which is the inviolable right to life of every innocent human being" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation Donum vitae, 22 February 1987, n. 1).
"Ever more clearly there emerges the strict connection which, at the level of mentality, exists between the practice of contraception and that of abortion. This is demonstrated in an alarming way also by the development of chemical preparations, intrauterine devices and injections which, distributed with the same ease as contraceptives, in reality act as abortifacients in the initial stages of development of the new human being" (John Paul II, Enc. Evangelium vitae 25 March 1995, n. 13).
35 "If, then, there are serious motives to space out births, which derive from the physical or psychological conditions of husband and wife or from external conditions, the Church teaches that it is then licit to take into account the natural rhythms immanent in the generative functions, for the use of marriage in the infecund periods only, and in this way to regulate birth without offending the moral principles which have been recalled earlier.
"The Church is coherent with herself when she considers recourse to the infecund periods to be licit, while at the same time condemning, as being always illicit, the use of means directly contrary to fecundation, even if such use is inspired by reasons which may appear honest and serious. In reality, there are essential differences between the two cases; in the former, the married couple make legitimate use of a natural disposition; in the latter, they impede the development of natural processes. It is true that, in the one and the other case the married couple are concordant in the positive will of avoiding children for plausible reasons, seeking the certainty that offspring will not arrive, but it is also true that only in the former case are they able to renounce the use of marriage in the fecund periods when, for just motives, procreation is not desirable, while making use of it during

infecund periods to manifest their affection and to safeguard their mutual fidelity. By so doing, they give proof of a truly and integrally honest love" (Paul VI, Enc. Humanae vitae, 25 July 1968, n. 16).
"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" (John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981, n. 32).
"The work of educating in the service of life involves the training of married couples in responsible procreation. In its true meaning, responsible procreation requires couples to be obedient to the Lord's call and to act as faithful interpreters of his plan. This happens when the family is generously open to new lives, and when couples maintain an attitude of openness and service to life, even if, for serious reasons and in respect for the moral law, they choose to avoid a new birth for the time being or indefinitely. The moral law obliges them in every case to control the impulse of instinct and passion, and to respect the biological laws inscribed in their person. It is precisely this respect which makes legitimate, at the service of responsible procreation, the use of natural methods of regulating fertility" (John Paul II, Enc. Evangelium vitae, 25 March 1995, n. 97).
36 John Paul II, Enc. Dives in misericordia, 30 November 1980, n. 6.
37 Just as at the altar where he celebrates the Eucharist and just as in each one of the sacraments, so the priest, as the minister of Penance, acts 'in persona Christi'. The Christ whom he makes present and who accomplishes the mystery of the forgiveness of sins is the Christ who appears as the brother of man, the merciful high priest, faithful and compassionate, the shepherd intent on finding the lost sheep, the physician who heals and comforts, the one master who teaches the truth and reveals the ways of God, the judge of the living and the dead, who judges according to the truth and not according to appearances" (John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apost. Exhort. Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, 2 December 1984, n. 29).
"When he celebrates the sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return, and of the just and impartial judge whose judgement is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1465).
38 Cf. Congregation of the Holy Office Normae quaedam de agendi ratione confessariorum circa sextum Decalogi praeceptum, 16 May 1943.
39 "The priest in posing questions is to proceed with prudence and discretion with attention to the condition and age of the penitent, and he is to refrain from asking the name of an accomplice" (Code of Canon Law, can. 979).
"Accordingly, the concrete pedagogy of the Church must always remain linked with her doctrine and never be separated from it. With the same conviction as my predecessor, I therefore repeat: 'To diminish in no way the saving teaching of Christ constitutes an eminent form of charity for souls'" (John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981, n. 33).

40 Cf. Denzinger-Schonmetzer, Enchiridion Symbolorum, 3187.
41 "Confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance: 'All mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession, even if they are most secret and have been committed against the last two precepts of the Decalogue; for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly"' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1456).
42 "If—on the contrary—the ignorance is invincible, or the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgement, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1793).
"It is possible that the evil done as a result of invincible ignorance or a nonculpable error of judgement may not be imputable to the agent; but even in this case it does not cease to be an evil, a disorder in relation to the truth about the good" (John Paul II, Enc. Veritatis splendor, 6 August 1993, n. 63).
43 "Married people too are called upon to progress unceasingly in their moral life with the support of a sincere and active desire to gain ever better knowledge of the values enshrined in and fostered by the law of God. They must also be supported by an upright and generous willingness to embody these values in their concrete decisions. They cannot, however, look on the law as merely an ideal to be achieved in the future: they must consider it as a command of Christ the Lord to overcome difficulties with constancy. 'And so what is known as the law of gradualness" or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with "gradualness of the law., as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situations. In God's plan, all husbands and wives are called in marriage to holiness, and this lofty vocation is fulfilled to the extent that the human person is able to respond to God's command with serene confidence in God's grace and in his or her own will'. On the same lines, it is part of the Church's pedagogy that husbands and wives would first recognize clearly the teaching of Humanae vitae as indicating the norm for the exercise of their sexuality, and that they should endeavor to establish the conditions necessary for observing that norm" (John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981, n. 34).
44 "In this context, appropriate allowance is made both for God's mercy towards the sin of the man who experiences conversion and for the understanding of human weakness. Such understanding never means compromising and falsifying the standard of good and evil in order to adapt it to particular circumstances. It is quite human for the sinner to acknowledge his weakness and to ask mercy for his failings; what is unacceptable is the attitude of one who makes his own weakness the criterion of truth about the good, so that he can feel self-justified, without even the need to have recourse to God and his mercy. An attitude of this sort corrupts the morality of society as a whole, since it encourages doubt about the objectivity of the moral law in general and a rejection of the absoluteness of moral prohibitions regarding specific human acts, and it ends up by confusing all judgments about values" (John Paul II, Enc. Veritatis splendor, 6 August 1993, n. 104).

45 "If the confessor has no doubt about the disposition of a penitent who asks for absolution, absolution is not to be refused or delayed" (Code of Canon Law, can. 980).
46 "Holy Church knows full well that not infrequently, one of the parties is sinned against rather than sinning, when for a grave cause he or she reluctantly allows the perversion of the right order. In such a case, there is no sin, provided that, mindful of the law of charity, he or she does not neglect to seek to dissuade and to deter the partner from sin" (Pius XI, Enc. Casti connubii, MS 22 [1930], 561.
47 Cf. Denzinger-Schonmetzer, Enchiridion Symbolorum, 2795, 3634.
48 "From the moral standpoint, it is never licit to co-operate formally in evil. Such co-operation occurs when an action, either by its very nature or by the form it takes in a concrete situation, can be defined as a direct participation in an act against innocent human life or a sharing in the immoral intention of the person committing it. (John Paul II Enc. Evangelium vitae, 25 March 1995 n. 74).
49 "Yet this discipline which is proper to the purity of married couples, far from harming conjugal love, rather confers on it a higher human value. It demands continual effort yet, thanks to its beneficent influence, husband and wife fully develop their personalities, being enriched with spiritual values. Such discipline bestows upon family life fruits of serenity and peace, and facilitates the solution of other problems, it fosters attention for one's partner, helps both parties to drive out selfishness, the enemy of true love; and deepens their sense of responsibility. By its means, parents acquire the capacity of having a deeper and more efficacious influence in the education of their offspring: little children and youths grow up with a just appraisal of human values, and in the serene and harmonious development of their spiritual and sensitive faculties" (Paul VI, Enc. Humanae vitae, 25 July 1968, n. 21).
50 For priests, the first task—especially in the case of those who teach moral theology — is to expound the Church's teaching on marriage without ambiguity. Be the first to give, in the exercise of your ministry, the example of loyal internal and external obedience to the teaching authority of the Church. That obedience, as you know well, obliges not only because of the reasons adduced, but rather because of the light of the Holy Spirit, which is given in a particular way to the pastors of the Church in order that they may illustrate the truth. You know, too, that it is of the utmost importance, for peace of consciences and for the unity of the Christian people, that in the field of morals as well as in that of dogma, all should attend to the Magisterium of the Church, and all should speak the same language. Hence, with all our heart we renew to you the heartfelt plea of the great Apostle Paul: 'I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement'.
"To diminish in no way the saving teaching of Christ constitutes an eminent form of charity for souls. But this must ever be accompanied by patience and goodness, such as the Lord himself gave example of in dealing with men. Having come not to condemn but to save, he was indeed intransigent with evil but merciful towards individuals" (Paul VI, Enc. Humanae vitae, 25 July 1968, nn. 28-29).
51 "With regard to the question of lawful birth regulation, the ecclesial community

at the present time must take on the task of instilling conviction and offering practical help to those who wish to live out their parenthood in a truly responsible way.
"In this matter, while the Church notes with satisfaction the results achieved by scientific research aimed at more precise knowledge of the rhythms of women's fertility, and while it encourages a more decisive and wide-ranging extension of that research, it cannot fail to call with renewed vigor on the responsibility of all--doctors, experts, marriage counselors, teachers and married couples--who can actually help married people to live their love with respect for the structure and finalities of the conjugal act which expresses that love. This implies a broader, more decisive and more systematic effort to make the natural methods of regulating fertility known, respected and applied.
"A very valuable witness can and should be given by those husbands and wives who, through their joint exercise of periodic continence, have reached a more mature personal responsibility with regard to love and life. As Paul VI wrote: 'To them the Lord entrusts the task of making visible to people the holiness and sweetness of the law which unites the mutual love of husband and wife with their co-operation with the love of God the author of human life'" (John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. Familiaris consortio, 22 November, 1981, n. 35).
52 "Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2271; see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on Procured Abortion, 18 November 1974).
"The moral gravity of procured abortion is apparent in all its truth if we recognize that we are dealing with murder and, in particular when we consider the specific elements involved. The one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life. No one more absolutely innocent could be imagined" (John Paul II, Enc. Evangelium vitae, 25 March 1995, n. 58).
53 It is to be kept in mind that the faculty to absolve in the internal forum in this matter belongs "ipso iure", as for all censures not reserved to the Holy See and not declared, to any Bishop, even if only titular, and to the diocesan or collegiate Penitentiary (can. 508), as well as to chaplains of hospitals, of prisons and of voyagers (can. 566, §2). Confessors belonging to a mendicant Order or to certain modern religious Congregations enjoy, by privilege, the faculty to absolve only for the censure regarding abortion.
54 Cf. John Paul II, Enc. Dives in misericordia, 30 November 1980, n. 14.