

Women's Health Care and the New Humanism

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It's a combination of mystery and serendipity when what you read, sometimes a single statement, changes your life or — more modestly — changes the way you think about something. It's as if that simple sentence manages to stop you from fixating on the individual tree so that you can, finally, survey the whole forest.

The latter precisely describes a recent experience of mine. A statement issued by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (PAS) in June of 2003¹ revolutionized the way I had formerly been thinking about a system of women's health care called NaProTECHNOLOGY (NPT). The Academy (comprised of distinguished scientists from around the world and appointed by the Pope) echoed a plea and a challenge that John Paul II has repeatedly extended to scientists and people of faith. "What is required more now than ever before," the PAS urged, is "a new humanism," a new system of thinking, believing and acting that evolves from and is nurtured by a conversation with, rather than opposition among, science, ethics and faith.

What I want to explore here is how NPT, this new science of women's health care, is a prolepsis of the positive societal impact of a humanistic science. In other words, it is an already-existing model of reproductive health care that *anticipates* bio-medicine's role in the new humanism envisioned by the Pope and PAS membership. NPT was and is and will be a part of a much larger movement, of a more formidable objective than that of merely being an example of how faith and reproductive medicine can be in harmony. With its neo-humanist culture, NPT is, in my opinion, the flagship of natural procreative initiatives that are, even as you read, producing the "good fruit" of a truly human culture where knowledge, belief and behavior will be ordered to the good of present and future generations of the family of mankind.

To prove my thesis, I want to explore with you the culture of NPT from two perspectives: the vision of its science and the vision of its faith. Both perspectives share one feature in common: They attest, from different points of view, how the culture of NPT is a robust re-

sponse to the call for science, ethics, and faith to build a new humanism.

Background

A preliminary definition of this new science of women's health care is the first order of business. NaProTECHNOLOGY (Natural Procreative TECHNOLOGY) is an emerging science of women's health care developed by Dr. Thomas W. Hilgers and his colleagues at the Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction. This science of reproductive health care is a complex of medical and surgical interventions promoting gynecological health that obviates the need for either reproductive techniques that exclude marital intercourse or the prescription of oral contraceptives for therapeutic or contraceptive purposes. First, it is reproductive health care that assists and optimizes, rather than obviates and/or suppresses, the natural procreative system. It allows a woman to maintain her obstetric and gynecological health and helps couples to understand and respect the full psychosomatic truth of their fertility. Second, it is obstetric and gynecological medicine that accurately evaluates and effectively treats a host of abnormalities (whether on an endocrine or anatomic level) which could be the causes of infertility or, in the case of a

pregnant woman, the cause of miscarriage. Third, it promotes fertility awareness that enables couples to avoid and achieve a pregnancy in a way consonant with the comprehensive meaning of their marital union.

I. NPT: The Vision of Its Science

Undergirding and permeating mainstream reproductive technology is a scientific theory about the human person and human procreation. It is a view freighted with materialism, pragmatism, progressivism and individualism. The science of NPT, in contradistinction, avoids all of these reductionistic errors. As a result, it distinguishes itself as a technology that is in dialogue with, not divorced from, ethics and faith.

The resultant contrasts between mainstream reproductive science and NPT are, theoretically and practically speaking, stark. The science behind contraception and Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) constitutes scientism; the body of knowledge that grounds NPT is genuine science. Logically, then, the culture of ARTs and contraception promotes the "isms" that collectively constitute the old reductionist humanism. The culture of NPT, in contrast, advances the new integrated humanism envisioned by the PAS. Let me unpack these rather sweeping

conclusions.

The principal assumption grounding ARTs is that of a value-free or morally neutral science. Moral norms and ethical values arise not from an objective source — the nature of the human person and human dignity — but from societal consensus: the culturally acceptable, ever-shifting individualistic preferences that surface at any given point in time. Value-free science views human beings as “the by-products of an evolutionary process” that has no intrinsic finality.² People are, by nature, nothing but material beings, material entities which lack not only a moral or spiritual dimension but that also lack a nature that desires to know the truth and to choose the good.

The main premise behind the reproductive science of NPT, on the other hand, is rooted in the *imago Dei* doctrine of Scripture and Tradition (human beings are created in the image of God) and the comprehensive psychosomatic vision of the human person to which it gives shape. Accordingly, God’s purposes for male and female sexuality are connatural. Human sexuality is meant to foster a covenantal life-giving love between a married man and woman, who “by a mutual personal gift, proper and exclusive to themselves,”³ mirror God’s own inner, tri-personal, love-giving life.

Moreover, the anthropological vision of NPT — the divine plan for our sexually bifurcated human race — is not only discernible by human reason and our human experience of natural (moral) law but is also supported by the best available scientific data. The law of human nature teaches (and psychological and sociological studies attest) that, first, children find a much-needed security in the knowledge that they were conceived within acts of their parents’ committed sexual love. Second, for children to be conceived, gestated and brought into and within marriage is important not just for the well-being of those children but also for a healthily functioning familial and social order. Third, it is critical to a sound society that parents who conceive their children within a permanent monogamous marriage are also supported by public laws that outline parental responsibilities for those children.

Many infertile couples resort to ART because they see it as a quick-fix science. It provides what looks like the most pragmatically effective way for them to have their own biological child. Moral considerations within this schematic are predictable. The choice of *in vitro* fertilization, or one of its variations, is presented as the “right” choice for two reasons: It works (it’s pragmatic), and

it's ostensibly the most expeditious way of conceiving (it's useful or utilitarian). And, since a "good" choice is one that produces "good" consequences and maximizes "human happiness," the pragmatic choice is thought to be necessarily "ethical."

What's behind a couple's choice of NPT, in contrast, is the conviction that there are such things as objective truth and objectively good and bad choices. To choose well in the arena of reproductive medicine is, first, to choose a treatment or method that fully respects what is objectively true about personhood and human fertility and, second, to choose what fully respects the couple's dignity and their procreative capacities.

I suppose, by way of summary, you could say that the science of NPT is a both/and science. The science of ARTs, on the other hand, is a reductionistic, either/or science. Proponents of ART argue that, for ART to be a reason-based science,⁴ it must necessarily exclude an appeal to faith. ART's designers insist that the empirical observations of reason and experience are the *sole* criteria for finding solutions to the problem of infertility.

But NPT tries to get at the objective reality of what is being studied — female fertility, the complexities of the menstrual cycle and conception —

through "a subtle combination of faith and experience, intuition and reason, imagination and deduction, personal insight and communal wisdom."⁵ Stated differently, while the radical empiricist science behind ARTs refuses to admit facts other than those observationally verifiable, the science of NPT admits metaphysical truths. The latter truths, what John Paul calls the "realities of the spirit," though not able to be viewed under a microscope, are real nonetheless and form "part of the whole truth" about human fertility and fertility treatments. In short, the science of NPT necessitates the march of human reason as it ought to be: "with [its] eyes fixed on Divine Revelation."⁶

II. NPT: The Vision of Its Faith

Out of the gate, the single-most important thing I could say about the faith vision behind NPT is what it is not. It is *not* fideism. That is, the faith which grounds NPT does not pit "faith against reason, belief against knowledge, or religious experience against critical intelligence."⁷ The science of NPT recognizes that faith is the "great friend of intelligence."⁸ The Catholic faith that inspires NaPro guarantees that the knowledge base of this reproductive technology maintains the right relation-

ship between faith and human reason as it honors their “autonomy and mutuality.”⁹ The faith vision of NPT admits that, although “science and faith represent two different orders of knowledge, autonomous in their processes,” they converge, in the end, upon “the discovery of reality in all its aspects, which has its origins in God.”¹⁰ The vision of the faith behind NPT links “scientific thought with man’s power in faith to seek truth” and “to bring the whole fullness of human capabilities to realization.”¹¹

As a result, the Catholicism behind NPT has confidence in reason, and its human intellectual component is open to Catholic theology. The vision of its faith puts reason and faith at the service of the human family. Hence, it is a faith that will not deteriorate into the truncated rationalism typical of scientism. What’s more, NPT is not at risk for the temptation that plagues a functional science like ART: to serve ideology (rather than humanity).¹²

In short, the faith behind NPT stands in the right relationship with reason envisioned by the Second Vatican Council: “If methodological investigation within every branch of learning [substitute “reproductive medicine”] is carried out in a genuinely scientific manner and in accord with moral norms, it never truly

conflicts with faith. For earthly matters [substitute “family planning and infertility”] and the concerns of faith [substitute “the deeper meaning of procreation”] derive from the same God.”¹³

In sum, the faith vision of NPT, fully admitting that science must work in harmony with faith, makes an invaluable contribution to human culture and participates fully in the new humanism.

Codicil

As an old maxim points out, “The whisper of truth can have an amazing resonance.” Proof positive is that, within the neo-humanist spheres of NaProTechnology, our national and international communities have access to a procreative culture that celebrates the priority of ethics over medical technology, the primacy of the person over things, and the superiority of the spirit over matter. In short, the hallmark of the new humanism — seizing the hidden dynamic behind reality — is interchangeable with the scientific and cultural charisms of NaProTechnology. What an achievement for our generation and those to come! What a bold, versatile, and kinetic model of procreative medicine! What woman-friendly medicine! What a blessing for society and the family of humankind!

¹ “Statement of the Pontifical

- Academy of Sciences on the Cultural Values of the Natural Sciences,” *Zenit*, June 17, 2003 (available at zenitenglish@zenit.org).
- ² Luke Gormally, “Luke Gormally on Human Dignity and Bioethics—Part I,” *Zenit*, July 11, 2003 (available at zenitenglish@zenit.org).
- ³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons,” # 2 (available at www.vatican.va).
- ⁴ C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) understood that, although scientific reason is valid, it is not the only kind of reasoning. He pointed out that, although “[N]oncontradiction, validity, truth, value, meaning, purpose, and obligation” are “necessary presuppositions of the scientific method” they are “not themselves scientific phenomena.” (M. D. Aeschliman, “C. S. Lewis on Mere Science,” *First Things* 86 [October, 1998]: 17.)
- ⁵ Avery Cardinal Dulles, S. J., “Science and Theology,” 13.
- ⁶ Stanley L. Jaki, O.S.B., *Scientist and Catholic: An Essay on Pierre Duhem* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 1991), 278.
- ⁷ Richard John Neuhaus, “The Naked Public Square: The Passion for Truth: The Way of Faith and Reason,” *First Things* 88 [December, 1998]: 73.
- ⁸ Pope John Paul II, “Address to Pontifical Academy of Sciences,” *Origins* 13 (November 12, 1984): 542.
- ⁹ Neuhaus, “Passion for Truth,” 70.
- ¹⁰ John Paul II, “A Papal Address on the Church and Science,” *Origins* 13 (June 2, 1983): 51.
- ¹¹ John Paul II, “Science and the Church: A Dialogue,” *Origins* 10 (December 4, 1980): 397.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 396.
- ¹³ *Gaudium et Spes*, # 36 (cited in “The Collaboration of Science and Religion,” *Origins* 21 [October 10, 1991]: 283).

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