

Lost Horizons

by ROBERT L. PHILLIPS

In 2004 my book, *Last Things First* (Roman Catholic Books), provided a detailed critique of the wreckage caused by the Second Vatican Council. A prominent example is a quote by Cardinal Walter Kaspar early in the book which illustrates the theme of the work. The gist of his remarks is that the Catholic Church has finally taken its place in pluralist society.

In 2004 it was possible to regard this as an heretical opinion, being, as we were, in the midst of the reign of St. John Paul II. In my wildest ravings, it never occurred to me that Kaspar would assume the stature and influence that he currently holds. At the time I thought that although things were bad, they were unlikely to get much worse. Cardinal Ratzinger's election to the papacy seemed to confirm that prognosis.

And yet, I was very much mistaken.

When a pilot loses his sense of the horizon, he loses his bearings and does not know where he is, or even if he is flying right side up. Under the present

pontificate Catholic horizons are obscured. Matters are much too grave to fall back upon reassurances that, after all, no doctrines have been changed, that we are merely dealing with pastoral matters. The enormity of what happened in the pre-synodal meetings in Rome in October of 2014 must be recognized for what they are--the injection of concepts into the Catholic bloodstream which are deadly poisonous. It is no good saying that proposals concerning homosexuals, cohabitation, and communion for the divorced and civilly re-married did not receive a two-thirds majority approval. The fact that they received any votes at all is devastating. What we saw in Rome is a church falling apart. Pope Francis has staked his papacy on novelty, so there is for him no turning back. But how many bishops and cardinals will follow him? October can only be approached with dread by faithful Catholics.

Let us in this first article in a series attempt to regain lost horizons.

WHAT IS THE CATHOLIC FAMILY?

The answer to this question is profoundly simple and beautiful: Bodily

sexual desire and feelings of love and comradeship between man and woman have one and only one final cause, purpose, vector--the population of Heaven for the glory of God. Spouses in conjugal union provide the bodily nature of the child whose animating principle, the anima, is provided by God which act of cooperation with the Creator lends profound dignity and endows awesome responsibility upon the parents. For the animating principle of the new human being is immortal. The child will live forever. Among the species, man alone understands the final cause of his amour and the almost frightening obligation to the little one he has helped into being. The child will live forever. His eternal destiny will depend upon God and his parents just as his nativity so depended. Is there any other task in human life--career, fame, wealth, service--which approaches the seriousness of this vocation, the responsibility for the eternal destiny of the child? Will this definition of the Catholic family guide the Synod on the Family in October? Will Pope Francis make this the guiding horizon?

The meaning of the Catholic family is constantly and systematically obscured in our times. When asked about our children even traditionalist Catholics will often focus on secular matters--what schools they attend,

what jobs they have, where they vacation--worldly success, in short. Are we typically ashamed to speak of our children's spiritual progress or lack of it?

In the same way, discussions of marriage are obsessed with the happiness of the married couple, their sexual satisfaction (which has spawned a major industry), their material well being as an end in itself.

A famous thought experiment. Suppose you knew that your demise was soon to come and you had the choice of leaving your children with a family who would provide them with enormous wealth and privilege--everything the world could provide as well as a genuinely friendly environment but would take no thought whatever for the place of God and eternity in their lives, or you could place them with a poor family where life would be a struggle but where their lives would be lived with a deep and lively Catholic faith. Is there any question here? Or if there is hesitation does not that tell us a lot about the inversion of our values?

Failure to keep clearly and daily in mind the overarching purpose of the family necessarily leads to profound disfunction--a sad task to which we now turn. Eros is the bodily spur, the efficient cause, to child bearing. So

powerful is eros that it can overthrow reason which is why Dante places sexual sins on the upper levels of Hell. There are in sexual sins some echo of their proper destination in love--the "warm sins," Dante calls them.

Nonetheless, contemporary focus on sexual ends exclusively is obviously to confuse efficient with final causality. It demeans one of the key ways in which God has chosen to reveal himself to his creatures as cooperators. As St. Thomas puts it, God acts through secondary causes in order to permit creatures the dignity of causation. To make orgasm an end in itself is to blunt this gift of special relationship with God. Traditionally, this matter has been tackled through exhortations to modesty, censorship of pornographic materials, and exhortations to chastity. All right in their place, but inadequate in the current situation of laxity. Indeed, such approaches were always dealing with symptoms. Unless we have a *very* strong grasp of the supernatural origin of eros and its place in the Divine economy, cheerleading for modesty will not take us very far in laying the groundwork for saving the family. *A fortiori*, contemporary society is the most eroticized in human history. Never in the experience of the race have we been confronted in every waking moment with sexual stimuli. I refer not merely to pornography but to the association of sexual satisfaction with worldly

success. Thus the bedrock problem cannot be solved by programs of abstinence only, as eros is too powerful and omnipresent. We can see in the current confusion and hesitation in the Church over contraception an unwillingness at all levels, but especially in the parish pulpit, to unequivocally link conjugal union with the creation of a new human being destined for eternal glory. And that really is how we must talk about children---not as cute little creatures who will make the parents and grandparents happy and their lives fulfilled---but as immortal souls challenging us to extreme spiritual exertion on their behalf.

Contraception remains the key to understanding the demise of the family. Much talk about it in church circles is irrelevant, beside the point and thus not convincing. Most commonly natural law arguments are advanced intent on showing that contraceptive acts are in violation of the natural order and so exhibit "incompleteness". Sometimes they are said to destroy an openness to life--every conjugal act must be "open" to life. This is too abstract and passive. There must be an intent to populate Heaven for the glory of God, not merely a generalized "openness". Alternatively, Catholic writers sometimes focus on negative consequences. Contraception tends to treat sexual partners as mere "objects" as if the purpose of conjugal

union is the mutual fulfillment of the spouses. This has proven an unconvincing argument to generations of contraceptors. These arguments are well and good but they are not distinctively CATHOLIC as they neglect the cooperative will of God to bring more souls to the Divine life. This positive imperative is why marriage is sacramental. The evil of contraception is not its secondary effects but its direct rejection of the imperative end of marriage. We are living in an era where love is seen as the goal of marriage where the love normally described is based upon affection and mutual interests, each keyed into the enrichment of the spouse's lives. Such mutual love is desirable but, in traditional Catholic teaching, has always been understood as a secondary good. In any event, what common goal is more likely to generate affection and loyalty in a marriage: fostering mutual love through shared interests and physical attraction or the common and transcendent goal of helping a child with an immortal soul in his difficult and perilous journey to Heaven? Is there anything short of this awesome duty that would truly bond spouses forever? So contraception understood here as any act between spouses that frustrates the cooperative work of God and man toward the population of Heaven for the glory of God is a terrible and almost infinitely sad outcome. When this true Catholic meaning of the family is clearly set forth, we may

understand all the many social pathologies which flow from its violation. Perhaps most dramatic is the acceptance of homosexuality and of same sex marriage. It is frequently noted with some surprise that the homosexual marriage movement has made such rapid strides in Western countries. This should come as no surprise at all, as nearly a century of contraception has prepared the way. Both are sterile attempts at conjugality that fatally undermine the very meaning of Catholic family. A homosexual marriage is a parody, a caricature, of Catholic marriage, but then so are the great majority of opposite sex marriages in today's world. And that is why homosexual marriage finds increasing favor with modernity--children, the center of the Catholic family, are reduced to an "option". Hence, the homosexual slogan "Love makes a family" often resonates (or simply throws off balance) with the populace. Contraception and homosexuality are thus intimately linked morally, so that there can be no positive aspects of either as the pre-synodal document of October 2014 intimated.

It is worth noting two further effects of sexual sterility. If childbearing is to be considered optional then there arises the problem of "unintended" conceptions--this shows how far we have wandered from reality when a child with an immortal soul destined for a life of glory is described as

"optional "and therefore dispensable. And so, abortion on demand is the logical outcome of the contraceptive mentality. Second, if "Love makes a family" then when affection fades the family is ended as there is no larger meaning available and so no-fault divorce becomes a necessity. And so we complete the outlines of the modern family.

As already mentioned, Dante places sexual sins in the upper reaches of Hell as the "warm sins" because they have about them some simulacrum to genuine acts of love, defective though they are. But most significantly, Dante does not place sodomy there, but rather, in the Seventh Circle. The Sodomites dwell in a desert of blowing stinging sand and hot ashes--the sand and fire standing for sterility. Their terrible sin is against nature and nature's God and their acts do not remotely resemble conjugality. There is nothing sexual about them. Had Dante, beyond his wildest imaginings, had to face our modern contraceptors, he would assuredly know where to place them.

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