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2011 Theology of the Body conference:

Why the Fig Leaf?
God, Sex and Sensibility

A Theology of the Body for our times.

The Round-up:

Below is a summary from Dr. Janet Smith's talk at this year's conference.

Dr. Janet Smith, *'Healthy Passion: Understanding the Owner's Manual'* Talk Highlights:

John Paul II seemed to understand that if what the church taught was indeed true then it should be supported by science as well as the human heart.

Christopher West quoted the late pope in his book "Introduction to Theology of the Body":

"…John Paul II's philosophical approach begins with human experience. He believes that if what the Church teaches is objectively true, then human experience-subjective as it is - should offer confirmation of that truth. Knowing that the Church's message "is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart" (CCC, n. 2126), the Pope doesn't need to nor does he attempt to force assent to his proposals. Rather, he invites men and women to reflect honestly on their own experience of life to see if it confirms his proposals."

Indeed, if what the church teaches is objectively true then *both* the secret desires of the human heart *and* science would be expected to fall in line with the church's teachings wherever applicable. Dr. Janet Smith took this line of thinking for part of her talk at the Theology of the Body conference at Madonna University this past summer. The title of her talk was "Healthy Passion-Understanding the Owner's Manual". In case you're wondering, the owner's manual is Church's teaching of natural moral law.

Dr. Smith addressed the Church's teachings on birth control, providing the audience with some compelling evidence that the experience- specifically the biological - lends support to the Church's firm opposition to birth control in all forms.

Dr. Smith presented the findings from a study demonstrating how hormonal contraception may mask the signals that draw the sexes together. Specifically, the chemical signals. Dr. Smith shared results from several studies. One article she discussed was titled, "The Tricky Chemistry of Attraction: the pill interferes with a woman's choice of a mate." This article was an amalgam of studies demonstrating how hormonal contraception masks the chemical signals that normally draw the sexes together.

One study in the article, called the T-shirt study, was performed in the early 1990's and had female participants smell the T-shirts of various men and rate the pleasantness of each shirt's smell. The study concluded that the women on the pill were more attracted to the T-shirts of the men who had different sets of immune system genes (called MHC genes) from them. However, they also found that the pill interfered with a woman's ability to detect these differences in immune system genes.

Being able to find a mate with different immune system genes is beneficial to the children of the parents. Scientists believe that the more divergent the parents' immune system genes are from one another, the healthier will be the child's immune system.

Other studies support this finding. One study published in the journal of Psychological Science in 2006 analyzed the MHC genes of 48 couples. Researchers found that women partnered with men who shared the least genetic diversity reported less sexual responsiveness to their mate. Ramifications of interfering with our natural mate selection process are certainly obvious as we potentially affect the health and viability of future generations.

It's not only women who respond differently when they are using the pill. Men also seem to react differently to women who use hormonal contraceptives.

A 2004 study in the journal in Behavioral Ecology reported on a T-shirt study that had a panel of 31 *men* smell the T-shirts of 81 women. The men experienced the greatest attraction for women who were ovulating and not using hormonal contraception.

It seems obvious enough that ingesting artificial hormones alters a woman's body chemistry, but what about condoms? Are there biological pitfalls when it comes to using barrier methods of contraception?

The answer seems to be "yes". Scientists have found that human semen contains many mood elevating hormones such as

- testosterone (which has a positive effect on mood)
- estrogen (which also elevates mood)
- prolactin (which, in addition to its lactation stimulating effects is responsible for sexual satisfaction and relaxation after sex)
- prostaglandins (which are also thought to be involved in elevating mood).

As the vagina is known to be very vascular and able to absorb many artificial hormones (i.e. ones used to induce labor) it is possible that semen has mood elevating effects on a woman. The authors of an article published in the Archives of Sexual Behavior in 2002 sought to test this hypothesis by having women fill out an anonymous written questionnaire about their recent sexual behavior and history. The participants were also asked to complete the Beck Depression Inventory, a common tool in psychology for assessing depressive symptoms.

The study authors found that women who had unprotected sex were happier and less depressed than women who used condoms.

It seems that study after study supports what the church understood from the beginning: that interfering with God's plan for human sexuality, specifically by using birth control (in all its forms) not only emotionally harms our relationships but may also be affecting our physical well being.

Dr. Janet Smith holds the Father Michael J. McGivney Chair of Life Ethics at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit and is the author of many books including *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*

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