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chapter

The Morality of Rhythm

Continence, either periodic or continuous, is the only form of birth control not in itself morally objectionable. Directive 30. (Cf. U.S. Code, "Reproductive Organs and Functions," n. 5; and the Canadian Code, article 33.)

A DISCUSSION of the morality of birth control must necessarily include a consideration of what is sinful and what is not; hence, it seems well to preface the discussion of this directive with a reference to a few familiar ideas about sin. Sin, as we know, can be committed in two ways: by doing something evil, or by not doing something good. But, as we also know, the mere omitting of something good is not sinful unless the good is something one is obliged to do. Thus, the Catholic who omits Mass on an ordinary weekday does not sin because there is no obligation to go to Mass on those days. Were he to attend Mass on weekdays, he would be doing something good for his own soul and something very pleasing to God and edifying to his neighbor—but it is a good which, as the military saying goes, is "beyond the call of duty." On the other hand, attendance at Mass on Sundays, unless one has a good excuse, is a matter of obligation; hence, the deliberate missing of the Sunday Mass without such an excuse is sinful.

Each of the foregoing very simple and very familiar ideas has its application in a discussion of the morality of birth control. But, before applying them, it will be well to indicate briefly what is meant by birth control. By birth control we mean

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here some method of avoiding conception. In general, there are two methods: one called "artificial," which consists in the practice of some form of contraception; the other called "natural," which consists in abstaining from marital intercourse. This abstinence might be continuous or it might be restricted to the periods in which the marital act is apt to be fertile. Periodic abstinence is often referred to as "the rhythm"; and we shall keep that term here.

Chapter 19 explained the Catholic teaching on the morality of artificial birth prevention. The present chapter will be limited to a discussion of the moral aspects of natural birth control, especially by periodic continence. In chapter 21, I shall outline some points that seem to be of special pertinence for doctors in dealing with their patients.

THE RHYTHM: PRINCIPAL MORAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Church teaches that contraception is a sin because it means doing what is evil. It is not the same with rhythm. Those who practice the rhythm do nothing evil. They simply omit doing something good—that is, they abstain from intercourse at the time when it might be fertile. Therefore, the morality of using rhythm must be judged in the same way as other omissions: if the abstinence from intercourse is a neglect of duty, it is sinful; if it does not imply a neglect of duty, it is not sinful. A simple means of determining whether any duty is neglected is had by asking these three questions: (a) Are both parties *willing* to practice the rhythm? (b) Are both *able* to practice it? (c) Do they have a *sufficient reason* for avoiding or postponing childbirth? If all these questions can be answered with a "yes," then no duty is neglected and the use of rhythm is not sinful. If any one of these questions must be answered "no," then some duty would be neglected; and, according to the importance of that duty, the use of rhythm would be sinful. A brief explanation of the questions will show the duties that must be considered.

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a) *Are both parties willing?* By reason of the marriage contract, each party assumes a serious obligation of granting the other's reasonable requests for sexual intercourse. That is why St. Paul refers to conjugal intercourse as the marriage "debt." For one party to insist on the practice of rhythm against the reasonable objection of the other would be a violation, and a very serious one, of this fundamental marital duty. Hence, the first requirement for the licit use of rhythm—that both be *willing* to practice it.

b) *Are both able to practice it?* This question refers to the "secondary" purposes of marriage: the fostering of mutual love and harmony between husband and wife and the safeguarding of their chastity. These purposes are very important. Moreover, in the ordinary providence of God, the conjugal act is certainly one of the principal means of achieving these ends; and married people are obliged to use this means insofar as it is necessary. There is no doubt that for many couples the attempt to use rhythm might seriously jeopardize these purposes. The methodical restriction of intercourse to certain periods can create tensions in married life; and it can be the occasion of vehement temptations against chastity.

Among the dangers associated with the practice of the rhythm, the main one is very likely concerned with chastity. The restriction of intercourse to the sterile periods calls for no little self-control. The attempt to make this restriction is apt to lead to sins of self-abuse, to mutual fondling to the point of culpable orgasm outside of intercourse, and even to sins of adultery. These dangers are greater for men than for women; but it would be unwise to think that women are exempt from them. A not insignificant number of women are strongly passionate; and, even among those who are not usually passionate, many experience strong sexual desire during the fertile period.

As for the other dangers, though they may be less important and especially less tangible, than that of incontinence, they are

just as real. For example, when children are avoided entirely, the harmony which ought to exist between man and wife is imperiled, and the maternal instinct is likely to be thwarted. This instinct is strong in most women, even though they do not recognize it. When they have no children, they are likely to begin mothering their husbands (or cats and dogs), and they are exposed to a great loneliness about the time of the menopause—just the time when they may be most in need of comfort. When the family is unduly limited to one or two children, the children may suffer; ordinarily speaking, their characters develop better in the large family. Lastly, in all practices of birth limitation, there is the resultant social evil: namely, alarming reduction of the birth rate and the breaking down of esteem for large families.

No doubt, a mature couple with a good reason for using rhythm and a willingness to cooperate with the grace of God can make the adjustment necessary for removing the personal dangers—i.e., the dangers to their chastity, mutual harmony, and so forth. But the adjustment calls for self-control and an understanding spirit of charity. That is what I mean when I say that both parties must be *able*.

c) *Do they have a sufficient reason* for avoiding or postponing childbirth? This question refers to the "primary" ends of marriage: the procreation and education of children. Parenthood is the chief glory of marriage; and children are its chief blessing. They are a blessing to the parents, to the state, to the Church. Thus, in his address on the moral problems of married life, Oct. 29, 1951, Pope Pius XII said: "The individual and society, the people and the nation, the Church herself, all depend for their existence, in the order God has established, upon fertile marriage." It is little wonder then that the same Pope declared officially that on married people "who make use of this right by the specific act of their state [i.e., by marital intercourse], nature and the Creator impose the function of providing for the conservation of the human race."

In a word, Pope Pius XII has made it clear that married people who choose to have intercourse are obliged to have children if they can. He did not attempt to define this obligation in terms of the number of children; but he declared that it is possible to be excused from the duty "for a long time and even for the whole duration of married life, if there are serious reasons, such as those often provided in the so-called 'indications' of the medical, eugenical, economic, and social order." When reasons such as these exist, the duty of childbearing is suspended and the use of rhythm is permitted.

The Pope gave only general headings, not specific examples, of the reasons that would excuse from the duty of childbearing. Some specific examples that would fit under one or more of these headings might be the following: danger to the mother in childbirth; illness of husband, wife, or of a child already born, that would make it exceptionally difficult to care for another child; the fact that conception usually results in miscarriage or stillbirth; the real probability that future children would be mentally defective or have some other serious hereditary defect; the fact that parents are financially unable to provide for more children according to the standards of decent living frequently outlined by the Church—standards which include frugal comfort in living conditions, the possibility of properly educating the children, and the ability to save reasonably for the future; the lack of proper housing facilities; employment that is not conducive to childbearing, e.g., military service.

The careful reader will note that these reasons vary considerably in seriousness. Some (e.g., those concerning illness) might be of such a nature as to exempt permanently from the duty of childbearing; others (e.g., inadequate housing facilities) might be merely temporary, so that they would justify the postponement of the next pregnancy or a spacing of births but would not constitute a permanent excuse from childbearing.

I trust that the preceding paragraphs sufficiently explain the three questions that must be answered in deciding whether the

use of rhythm is permitted. There are cases, no doubt, in which a sincere and mature couple can readily answer the questions and judge for themselves whether they may practice rhythm. But in most cases they need the help of a prudent counselor. It is often said that Catholics should consult their confessor. This should not be taken too literally, because the confessional has its limitations. In the confessional a priest talks to only one party and frequently does not know the person. For advice about using the rhythm, it would be much better for husband and wife to go together to a priest whom they know and who understands them and the conditions under which they live. In this way they can obtain help not only in judging what they are permitted to do but also in making the proper adjustment to the difficulties they might face in carrying out their decision.

SOME SPECIAL OBSERVATIONS

As regards the reasons for practicing rhythm, I should like to make a few further observations. First, I wish to re-emphasize the point that, in considering the economic reason, we must think not merely in terms of frugal support but also of the possibility of moderate saving for the future. As the Administrative Board of the NCWC declared on Feb. 7, 1940, "a saving wage constitutes an essential part of the definition of a living wage." Those who so readily accuse our Catholic people of seeking specious excuses for practicing the rhythm might well ponder how many of them actually get a family living wage according to Catholic standards.

Secondly, the social and economic reasons are, for the most part, defects in society itself. Resort to the rhythm may be the only possible solution for an individual couple; but a social order which imposes such a solution should be changed. If the papal teaching on the reconstruction of the social order were put into practice, these reasons would seldom exist.

Thirdly, when we speak of excusing causes we are speaking

in terms of obligation. Generous Catholic couples will often neglect these reasons and, trusting in divine providence, will continue to build a family.

Fourthly, there is the question: are the excusing causes suggested by the Pope the only limitations on the duty to procreate, or is this duty, like many other obligations to the neighbor and to society, itself limited?

The answer to this is not perfectly clear. However, in a discussion of this topic in June, 1952, the majority of a large group of theologians favored the opinion that, generally speaking, married people who have more than four or five children are not only doing their duty but are acting "beyond the call of duty." According to this opinion—to put it concretely—the use of rhythm to restrict the size of the family to four or five children would not be sinful for those who are *willing* and *able* to use it. One advantage of this opinion is that it gives to parents of large families a tribute that they seem richly to deserve: namely, that their appreciation of the chief blessing of marriage is such that they willingly act beyond the call of duty. Another advantage is that it gives to people who wish to do their duty but who lack the spiritual idealism to want to do more, a sort of practical working-norm for the number of children they should have if they are able. These advantages square with the traditional policy of the Church of (a) teaching Catholics what they are obliged to do, and (b) urging them to do even more than this for the glory of God and their own sanctification.¹

CONTINUOUS ABSTINENCE

The Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph, though truly married, lived lives of perfect virginity. And some married saints have followed their example. But, in the ordinary providence of

¹ This question is more completely discussed in my article, "Rhythm in Marriage: Duty and Idealism," *America*, May 3, 1952, pp. 128-130.

God, marriage and virginity are distinct vocations; and married people usually do the will of God, and thus sanctify themselves, by moderately using their marriage rights, not by foregoing them. Nevertheless, there are some situations in which, though perfect virginity may not be called for, continuous abstinence from the complete sexual act (i.e., intercourse) may be indicated. I refer to the case in which childbirth would be dangerous and the use of rhythm would not be effective. In this case the only permissible means of avoiding the risk would be continuous abstinence from intercourse. The Church admits that such abstinence is heroic; but she solemnly affirms that the heroism is possible with the grace of God. We are sometimes inclined to assume a defeatist attitude regarding this matter; and it would be well for all of us to recall frequently these forceful words of Pope Pius XII when he spoke on the moral problems of married life:

It is an injustice to the men and women of our time to regard them as incapable of prolonged heroism. Nowadays for many reasons—perhaps under the yoke of hard necessity, sometimes even in the service of an unjust cause—heroism is exercised to a degree and an extent that in times past would have been deemed impossible. Why, then, must this heroism, if the circumstances really call for it, halt at the frontiers of passion and natural inclination? Obviously, anyone who does not want to control himself will not be able to do so; and anyone who thinks he can control himself relying only on his own strength, and without sincerely and perseveringly asking God's help is doomed to disillusionment.

It should be noted that the Pope did not say that married people are always obliged to abstain from intercourse in order to avoid a serious risk in childbirth. Certainly there are some cases in which they might lead a normal married life and trust in divine providence. But a decision of this kind is very difficult; and it should not be made without prayer and sound spiritual guidance.