

# NFP: an unhappy compromise

Written in June 1948 for *Integrity* magazine, Fr. Hugh Calkins, O.S.M., discusses the problems of Natural Family Planning (NFP), then known as the "Rhythm Method". Angelus Press reprinted the article in *Raising Your Children; The Integrity Magazine Series*.

## Rhythm: the unhappy compromise

What about Rhythm? That simple question is rapidly becoming a stormcenter of controversy. It comes up during parish missions, Cana Conferences, bull sessions on careers, even high school retreats. All too often, wrong answers are given, bum theology is handed out. Even more often, right answers are given but very imprudently. These cause confusion among the laity and lead to cynical questioning. Why don't priests get together on this thing voices that cynicism.

This article will discuss Rhythm thoroughly. First, the latest and best theological thought concerning the morality involved shall be presented. This will remove the guesswork of beauty shop theologians and gabfest experts who too easily settle everything with: "*Oh, Rhythm's okay. It's Catholic birth control.*" Secondly, we shall present the true picture of how Rhythm is currently being used around America. It is not a pretty picture, but it's based upon wide missionary experience and thorough research. It may surprise a few too glib advocates of Rhythm — lay, cleric, religious — to see how widely astray Catholic couples have gone on this moral question. Thirdly, we shall discuss how all this fits into a full Christian life, into the synthesis of religion and life any earnest Christian must promote, if we are "*to restore all things in Christ.*"

### **Moral considerations**

Let's understand what we mean by Rhythm. Incidentally, we are permitted to discuss the method. The only official prohibition issued by the Church deals with the teaching and recommending of the method. Too long have we kept silent, while imprudently zealous advocates spread the method nationwide. The term Rhythm is a convenient name for a systematic method of performing marital relations on certain days of the month. The method is built around the Rhythm of fertility and sterility which occurs in the monthly cycle of a woman's menstrual periods. Briefly, it now seems medically certain that on certain days of the month a woman is quite likely to conceive new life and on other days she is quite unlikely to conceive. The days on which conception are quite likely are called "fertile": those on which conception is quite unlikely are called "sterile".

The Rhythm Method consists in following a systematic method of performing marital relations only on "sterile" days and abstaining on "fertile" days. This method is followed in order to space children or to avoid having children. Whether the method is used for a few months, a few years, or all during childbearing years, the motive remains the same. The motive in using this method is to avoid conception and pregnancy. Let's have no talk about "virtuous continence." That's the red herring often dragged in to confuse the issue. The people who use Rhythm are not primarily concerned about continence. They seek to avoid conception. Hence, they restrict sexual intercourse strictly to sterile days, safe periods.

Contrary to widespread misunderstanding, Rhythm is not the same as contraception. It's true that often the aim of the married couple is the same — they use Rhythm to avoid conception — but their method is not the same as the birth-controller. The practice of Rhythm is natural so far as the biological aspect is concerned. The practice of contraception is unnatural, against nature, a perversion just as truly as homosexuality. But just because Rhythm is "natural" doesn't mean it is always morally good and permissible. The practice of Rhythm proceeds from a free and deliberate will — the will not to have children — that is directly opposed to the primary purpose of marital relations as ordained by God. Is such a free will choice contrary to the will of God and sinful?

Without getting too technical, there are two schools of thought on the essential morality of Rhythm as a system. The more common opinion, the majority opinion, holds that this method is not of itself illicit, and becomes lawful only when there is sufficient cause present for sidestepping the primary purpose of marriage. Both opinions are approved by expert theologians: you may follow either one until the Church makes an official pronouncement on the subject. But keep in mind that all theologians hold certain basic facts to be true. There is perfect agreement among theologians that Rhythm can become sinful because of circumstances and dangers involved.

### **Important conditions**

So we can summarize the latest and best theological thought on the subject. The Church neither approves nor disapproves of the Rhythm Method as a system to be followed. The Church merely tolerates the use of this method. Tolerates indicates reluctant permission. And the Church only tolerates this method, when three definite factors are present. These three are:

- First, there is sufficiently serious reason for a given couple to use this method, sufficiently serious enough to justify side-stepping the first purpose of marriage;
- Second, both husband and wife are truly willing to follow the method — neither one can force the other to adopt this system;
- Third, the use of this method must not cause mortal sins against chastity nor become a proximate occasion of such sins.

The breakdown of any one of those three factors makes the use of Rhythm sinful. So the correct attitude is this: The use of Rhythm is sometimes no sin, sometimes venial sin, sometimes mortal sin. Please stop saying, "*Oh, it's okay, the Church approves it.*"

Now study carefully those three factors. First, a sufficient reason; theologians admit there are at times solid reasons to justify the use of the Rhythm system. These reasons may be permanent or only temporary — poverty, poor health of the mother (real, not pretended), frequent still-births or Caesarean births, medical necessity of spacing births because of the unusual fecundity of the wife, in other words, solid and honest reasons for avoiding births for a time, or maybe for all time. But even when such honest reasons are present (and so often today they are not) it still remains true that husband and wife must both be truly willing.

But all too often in actual daily life, one spouse is unwilling and is being high-pressured by the other. All moral theologians would condemn as a grave sin the exclusive use of the sterile period when it is not a truly free agreement on both sides. If not free, a grave injustice is done the other spouse. Such dangers and such mortal sins are frequent in our materialistic age. Confessors would do well to investigate the close relationship between "cheating" by married people and their use of Rhythm. So a good reason by

itself is not enough. Circumstances change cases. A confessor's help is advised. More about those three factors later.

Assuming there is free consent and no special dangers of mortal sin, would a couple be justified in using Rhythm for only selfish reasons? Theological opinion is divided: some say such a course would be mortally sinful, others say venially sinful. But all eminent theologians say such a course would be sinful and fraught with grave danger. The more you study the theologians on this question, the more you see how cautious priests and laity should be in advocating Rhythm. You see why the Holy See, only with reluctance, tolerates this method. It certainly has never been declared officially that the Holy See approves of the "safe period" method. Not even the much-quoted paragraph from the "Chaste Wedlock" encyclical of Pius XI [*Casti Connubii*] can be accurately used as giving such approval. It is far more likely that Pius XI was referring to physically sterile people ("*certain defects*") or those who have passed the menopause ("*reasons of time*") and not the use of Rhythm. Yet the new supercolossal campaign for selling Rhythm devices by mail dares to quote the Holy Father in approval of such crassly commercial restriction of birth.

### **Face the cold realities**

Now that we've laid the theological groundwork, let's be terribly practical. Catholic couples have gone hog-wild in the abusive employment of Rhythm. Theological distinctions have been pitched completely in the utterly selfish desire to avoid conception at any cost. Too many priests are acting imprudently in the public recommendation (in classrooms and sermons) of the method which the Holy See has cautioned "*the confessor may cautiously suggest.*" There is abundant evidence increasing daily that only spiritually strong couples can be trusted really to observe Rhythm prudently, even when a sufficient reason is present. All too many other couples say they're using Rhythm and they really are following a system of "Don't become pregnant at any cost." So they use Rhythm, when it "works," varied methods of contraception when it doesn't work, and even abortion when they get "caught" (what an expression to describe the start of an immortal existence). Yet all the time such people try kidding confessors with "*Oh, no, no birth control, we just use Rhythm.*"

It's becoming a scandal to their sincere neighbors. John Doe is no theologian. He doesn't make fancy distinctions between unnatural and natural birth control. All he sees is these selfish couples are married and don't have kids — even brag about how they're through having any more. He begins to wonder how they can so easily go to Confession and Communion. I'm beginning to wonder too. Even our adversaries throw a body blow at us by saying: "*What's the difference? You forbid contraception so firmly, but your couples slip through by using Rhythm.*"

### **Promoting sterility**

The thing is out of hand. A method meant to be a temporary solution of a critical problem has become a way of life, a very selfish, luxury-loving, materialistic way of life. What theologian would ever justify practices like these actual cases I now cite: parish priests giving a copy of a book on Rhythm to each engaged couple with a word of approval; preachers explaining in weekend retreats the advantages of this method for having children as you planned them; teachers in some of our best colleges teaching the method, often to girls who are well set financially; gynecologists lecturing in leading Catholic medical schools and telling classes of young doctors how to teach this method to patients, so that the doctors assume Church approval to recommend the method has now been given them; engaged couples planning their wedding day with rhythm cycle all plotted so no pregnancy results until a year or two passes, so that they can enjoy all the privileges and none of the obligations of marriage.

It is one thing to permit Rhythm reluctantly, as the Church officially does. It's quite another to become promoters of sterility, as too many of our people have. Naturally, the commercializing of Rhythm has hit a new high. Expensive gadgets are now available — "*every medical and theological student, nurse and social worker should have one,*" reads the blurb. So now our people have fool-proof methods of "making love by a calendar," effectively blocking God's creative designs. It's enough to make God vomit out of His mouth the creatures who ignore so completely the divine purposes of marriage. How will we ever convert godless America, how produce modern saints, if we won't give God citizens for His Heavenly Kingdom? And most ironic of all, Catholics so anxious to be in on Catholic Action (which to them means anything from bingo to flag-waving) are often the most determined advocates of Rhythm. They labor so hard to get others to attend lectures, Cana Conferences, book reviews; but to have babies as God wants them to — don't be silly. Have you noticed the heavy emphasis on Rhythm among our wealthy parishes, among our college graduate couples, our social and cultural leaders?

### **Rhythm mentality**

So there has sprung full-grown from pagan propaganda this vicious Rhythm mentality — a state of mind that won't trust God. Our moderns concede God knows how to balance the universe in the palm of His hand, knows how to harness atomic energy, can dangle stars and planets at His fingertips, but children? Oh, no, God just doesn't know how to arrange things there. We'll take care of that through family planning. But the planning centers about how not to have a family. So our do-gooders extol either the practice of total sexual abstinence (oh, so piously), even when the other partner is unwilling and is being unjustly defrauded, or the practice of methodical Rhythm. They don't admit or don't care about the mortal sins such systems produce. They are determined: No Pregnancy Now! There is the state of mind that despairs of God's help.

These bleeding hearts, especially busybodies-in-law, and nosey neighbors, scream protestingly: "*Who'll take care of the next baby?*" The simple answer is: The same God that takes care of you even when you resist His Will. "*But we must give our children security and education.*" Just because God doesn't give parents and children all today's phony materialistic standards require, doesn't mean He fails them. He didn't give His own mother much in material security. But heaven, not security, is the goal set for the babies God sends. God established marriage primarily to give children life in this world that would bring eternal life.

Too many people are trying to play God. God alone is still the Author of new life. And God doesn't need alarmist doctors, despairing parents, nor even thoughtless priests trying to run His affairs and deciding when new life shall be born. What God wants from us is free will cooperation with His Will. That's the one contribution we alone can make. What God demands from married partners is willingness to have the children He shall decide to send. People go to heaven only by doing God's Will, not by planning things for Him.

Well, then, should every couple have a flock of children? That's up to God. Every couple should have the children God wants them to have. But they are not having them. Forty-four percent of American families have no children. Twenty-two per cent have only one child. And Catholics living in cities now have far fewer children than the families in rural areas (which are about eighty per cent Protestant). Obviously, family planners are planning families out of existence. That certainly is not God's Will. The use of Rhythm by so-called "devout" Catholics is a major factor in that falling birth rate. You say the birth rate is up higher now? Yes, on the first and second babies. But it continues to fall steadily in the number of third, fourth and later babies.

## Too much prudence

The Rhythm mentality has a tear-jerker argument. It's turned on, full stops, something like this:

But God wants people to use prudence in bringing children into the world. Neither God nor His Church demands people have as many kids as possible. People should use discretion, be decent enough to plan their family. Isn't it far better that a few kids be well fed, clothed, educated than a large family endure poverty.

It sounds good, doesn't it? People advancing this line are often quite righteous about it. With pharisaical smugness, they feel sorry for "imprudent pregnancy" of poor parents. But I'm sick of them. They're the kind who probably pitied Mary of Nazareth, carrying a Baby God has sent, but for whom Joseph and Mary couldn't find a home (talk about a housing shortage and tough landlords). They're the kind who pitied my own mother, when she carried me, her twelfth child. Sweet chance I, and many another poor kids like me, would have to be priests, if Rhythm mentality prevailed. And what would the bleeding heart of another day have done about Nancy Hands carrying the Baby who became Abe Lincoln? There would have been no Bernadette of Lourdes, coming from a jail flat, nor Teresa of Lisieux from sickly parents and a mother who lost three babies in a row, and most certainly not a Catherine of Siena, a twenty-third child, if the "prudent planners" had their way.

What all these extollers of prudence forget is: God's Will is the end of man. The essence of the world: ours to do His Will. Prudence is a cardinal virtue, highly praiseworthy indeed. But faith, hope, and charity are supernatural virtues far more praiseworthy. And the greatest of these is charity. What nobler way to practice charity than to co-operate with God in passing on new life, when God wants it to be born, not when humans think it should? Let only God play God.

## Hidden costs

Such a manner of using the marriage right, followed without a very serious reason during all, or almost all of the married life, is opposed to the plan of Providence for the propagation of the human race, represents a serious attack on the honor of marriage and particularly on the dignity of the wife, and creates grave dangers for the married people.

So spoke the bishops of Belgium in their Fifth Provincial Council back in 1937. Their words point up the hidden costs of using Rhythm. Take that point on debasing the honor of marriage and lowering the dignity of the wife. Fifty per cent of today's mothers are neurotic, say several leading non-Catholic psychologists. In many cases, Rhythm produces the neurosis. It made the "rejecting mother" type. She "got caught" with a pregnancy she had sedulously fled. The unwanted pregnancy results in the lonely, neurotic, unwanted child. Neurosis like this can increase sterility, so often when the "Rhythmeer" finally wants a baby, she can't have one. It's odd that women can't see the debasing results of a system that uses them systematically to satisfy sexual desires but seldom to produce children.

Advocates of Rhythm are fond of stressing how "natural" the method is. But as Fr. Lavaud, O.P., has said: *"We cannot see an adaptation to nature in something which is, in effect a trick to frustrate nature."* Rhythm is quite unnatural as currently employed. It requires the couple to "make love by a calendar," so charts, gadgets, graphs rule romance, not the loving desire of devoted partners. Some medical men assure us a wife's desire for marital union is most vehement precisely during the fertile period. It appears the Jews followed a more natural procedure in abstaining during sterile periods, as the Book of Leviticus indicates. Even Dr. Ogino, the originator of the method, viewed the method primarily as a means of having children. "Rhythm in reverse," having relations on fertile days just to have children, is natural.

Another hidden cost is infidelity. Women puzzled by male misbehaving at certain time periods might well remember the desires of the flesh respect no calendar. And remember, too, man's sexual life follows a monthly cycle of vehemence and subsidence, as well as a change of life later. Men not living a properly satisfactory sexual life with wives, too much calendar restriction, are easy victims to feminine wiles outside the home. The coolness and jittery bickering caused by Rhythm is incalculable. The fulfillment of marriage as a vocation demands that husband and wife minister to each other's needs through tenderness and understanding often best expressed through love-making and intimate union postponed by the Rhythm calendar. How stupid to live a love-life holding your breath.

Who shall estimate the hidden costs generated in a woman's finely adjusted emotional and psychical life through fear of having another baby. Once such fear is implanted, how difficult to eradicate it. How easily it leads to desperation about avoiding pregnancy at all costs. Be sure that Satan knows how to employ it to create despair about trusting God. Only in eternity shall we know the immortal souls denied a chance to have life because they were snuffed out through abortions caused by such fear.

### **The new synthesis**

What's the answer to all this bogeyman propaganda about babies? It could be expressed in a word Vivant (let them live). One group of splendid parents in Milwaukee have taken that word as their slogan and the title of their magazine circulated among young married couples. It's a vivid expression of the forgotten virtue of hope. God's providence still rules the world. True Christians, mindful of their supernatural birth at Baptism, the growth of that life of grace through Mass, Sacraments and prayer know that hope not only springs eternal but it brings eternity as its reward. It devastates right here on earth the creeping paralysis of despair born of these hard times. It cures insecurity by abandoning itself to the constantly supporting arms of God.

Married couples, so fearful of what to eat and wear with children arrived or coming, need frequent meditations on that famous sixth chapter of Matthew: "*Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you.*" Seeking His justice means doing His Will, doing it with hope in your heart that God will provide and reward generosity. He never is outdone in generosity, as we all should know from experience. Surprising how God fills your heart and life with pulsating affection of children, once you trust Him enough to have the children. Surprising how little warmth there is in the mink coat, the vacation, the television set, the car that you fought so hard for, while denying your arms the warm embrace of children. Or is all this surprising? God keeps His word.

It would be well to meditate frequently on Paul's vivid reminders about "*the great Sacrament*" married people give each other on their wedding day. Matrimony joins two hearts and souls and lives by fusing natural and supernatural bonds that day. God and husband and wife become partners that a great vocation might be fulfilled. The virtue of hope receives a mighty increase that day through the grace of Matrimony. At every instant of their married life, the married couple has God's assurance that His grace is sufficient for them. No obstacle is insurmountable to God.

As Fr. Orville Griesse, in his famous book, *The Rhythm in Marriage and Christian Morality*, says:

Christian couples ought to realize that it is a singular, providential blessing to be able to bring forth new life, thus assuring man and wife of a deeper, most lasting union, offering them means of personal sanctification and of contributing to the strength and growth of both Church and State. The mere fact that

the future looks a little uncertain or that the child might be frail or sickly is no reason for substituting faith in the biological computations of the safe period method for trust in God.