

Husbands and wives, you cannot serve God and mammon; you cannot be loyal both to Christ and to the contraceptionists. Be not fretful over your future baby's life, what the child shall eat, or for its body what you shall put on it. Consider the lilies of the field how they grow; they do not work neither do they spin. But I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory was clothed as one of these. Now if God so clothe the grass of the field which is today and tomorrow is cast into the oven, how much more you and your little ones, who are His little ones too! Be not solicitous therefore, saying what shall we eat if we have children; or what shall we drink; or wherewith shall we be clothed; or how shall we educate them—for after all these things do the heathen run. Your heavenly Father knows that you and your family have need of all these things. Seek first the kingdom of God and His justice; and all these other things shall be added unto you.

Notice that Christ does not say we may not seek earthly things within reason, in the second or third place, but He does tell us to seek *first* the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven for married couples is their *Christian marriage*.

When One Party Is Sinned Against. Sometimes, tragically, one party insists on practicing contraception against the real opposition of the other. Pope Pius XI referred to this when he said:

“Holy Church knows well that not infrequently one of the parties is sinned against rather than sinning, when for a grave cause he or she reluctantly allows the perversion of right order. In such a case there is no sin, provided that, mindful of the law of charity, he or she does not neglect to seek to dissuade and deter the partner from sin.”

This problem can take many different forms and can cause much anguish of conscience. It is impossible to give rules of conduct which would fit every case. However, when one partner wishes to practice contraception, the other is obliged to object and to resist. For those who find themselves in this unfortunate situation, it is most necessary to consult a confessor. The cases can become greatly involved and only the skillful confessor can unravel the problem and point out the right manner of action.

The Use of Rhythm

GOD MADE men and women so that, in marriage, they could become fathers and mothers. Parenthood is the task to which married people are called by God. God expects the couple which enters marriage and makes use of the marital privileges to have a family. It is, then, the fruitful marriage—and not the sterile

marriage—which fits best His plan for marriage and the human race. Consequently, the large family is the ideal—an ideal which is held up by the Church as something desirable and good, not, however, as an obligation or a duty binding under pain of sin.

A large family not only continues the human race, it also provides members for Christ's Mystical Body and citizens for the Father's heavenly kingdom. Children add to the happiness of the home and contribute to the welfare of the community and the nation. In addition, they have a good effect on one another for, other things being equal, character formation is better achieved in the large family than in the small. Think of all the opportunities for loving and being loved in the large family!

This does not mean, however, that every couple must have as many children as they possibly can. Nor does it mean that they may never under any circumstances limit their families or attempt to space their children. But it does mean that, if they are going to use their conjugal rights, they must sincerely and honestly be willing to accept the office and duties of parenthood. It does mean also that, granting the proper conditions for bearing and rearing children, it is better to have children than not to have them, and it is better to have many than a few.

Child-Bearing, A Duty. Having a family is not only an ideal, it is also to some extent a duty. The duty of a couple is stated by Pope Pius XII.

Marriage obliges to a state of life which, while conferring certain rights, also imposes the fulfillment of a positive work in regard to the married state itself . . . The marriage contract, which confers upon husband and wife the right to satisfy the inclinations of nature, sets them up in a certain state of life, the married state. But upon couples who perform the act peculiar to their state, nature and the Creator impose the function of helping the conservation of the human race. The characteristic activity which gives their state its value is the *bonum prolis* ("the good of the offspring"). The individual and society, the people and the state, the Church itself depend for their existence in the order established by God on fruitful marriage. Therefore, to embrace the married state, continuously to make use of the faculty proper to it and lawful to it alone, and, on the other hand, to withdraw always and deliberately with no serious reason from its primary obligation, would be a sin against the very meaning of conjugal life.

Legitimate Continence in Marriage. Nevertheless, despite the beauty of the Catholic ideal and the importance of the social duty, there are situations in which it is permissible, advisable, or perhaps

even obligatory to use some means to avoid or postpone conception. But the only morally sound means is continence, either continuous or periodic. A husband and wife practicing periodic continence have marriage relations during the times of the month when ovulation is not likely to take place. They abstain from intercourse at ovulation time—for some days before and after ovulation. This method of avoiding conception has come to be known popularly as rhythm.

MORALITY OF RHYTHM

Catholics sometimes say that they are much confused by what they read about the morality of using the rhythm method. One reason is the attitude that rhythm is just “the Catholic method of birth control.” This is a gross misunderstanding of Catholic teaching. The Church does not “approve” or “advocate” the use of rhythm, nor does She allow it indiscriminately regardless of circumstances. It would be nearer the truth to say that rhythm is regarded by the Church as a last resort. It is permissible, not whenever a husband or a wife wishes to use it, but only if certain conditions are met.

Any honest decision about using rhythm must be based on the careful consideration of three questions: (1) Is there a sufficient reason for avoiding conception? (2) Can the rhythm method be tried without doing more harm than good? (3) Are both parties willing to try it?

(1) *Is there sufficient reason for avoiding conception?*

If a couple uses the marital rights it has a duty to provide for the conservation of the human race. This duty, like other duties to do good, is limited by circumstances. There can be sound reasons freeing married people from the duty, either for a time or permanently. The following statement of Pope Pius XII makes this clear:

There are serious motives, such as those often mentioned in the so-called medical, eugenic, economic and social “indications,” that can exempt for a long time, perhaps even for the whole duration of the marriage, from the positive and obligatory carrying out of the act. From this it follows that observing the non-fertile periods alone can be lawful only under a moral aspect. Under the conditions mentioned it really is so. But if, according to a rational and just judgment, there are no similar grave reasons of a personal nature or deriving from external circumstances, then the determination to avoid habitually the fecundity of the union, while at the same time to continue fully satisfying their sensuality, can be derived only from a false appreciation of life and from reasons having nothing to do with proper ethical laws.

Pope Pius XII gives no concrete examples that justify the use of rhythm, but he gives us the key to such examples by referring to the "so-called indications." This statement refers to the reasons often suggested by doctors and sociologists to justify artificial birth prevention practices. The Church cannot admit these or any other reasons as justification of *contraception* which is intrinsically evil; but She can and does admit that these are justifying reasons for practicing continence, whether absolute or periodic. Contraception is unnatural, artificial; rhythm is not. Artificial birth control deliberately frustrates the natural power of the marriage act to generate life; rhythm does nothing to avoid a conception from the act of love. Because of this, it might be helpful to illustrate the reasons by some concrete examples.

Medical Reasons for Using Rhythm. The use of rhythm might be medically advisable when pregnancy would be dangerous, when either parent is too ill to take proper care of children, or when experience has shown that conception usually results in miscarriage or stillbirth.

Eugenic Reasons. There is a eugenic reason when there is real probability that children will be mentally defective, that they would have some other serious hereditary defect, or when the mental illness of one of the parents would seriously affect the rearing of the children.

Economic Reasons. There is an economic reason, not only when parents suffer from dire poverty, but also when they are financially unable to provide for children according to the standards of decent living frequently outlined by the popes and our hierarchy. These standards include frugal comfort in living conditions, the possibility of properly educating the children, and the possibility of saving reasonably for the future.

A Social Reason. Finally, social reasons for using rhythm would be a lack of proper housing conditions, over-population, employment that is not conducive to proper child-rearing, e.g. military service.

These are merely examples of the general reasons suggested by the pope. You will note immediately that, though all these reasons are to some degree serious, they vary greatly in their seriousness. The eugenic reasons or a medical reason such as danger to life in pregnancy might justify the use of rhythm (or absolute continence) throughout the whole of married life, but most of the

other reasons would usually be valid only for a temporary postponement of pregnancy or for the reasonable spacing of births. While the *use* of the marriage relationship can be suspended under certain conditions, its *right* can never be rejected, i.e., the husband and wife can, if they wish, ignore the reasons and exercise their basic right.

(2) *Can the rhythm method be tried without doing more harm than good?*

The first question was mainly concerned with the primary ends of marriage. But marital intercourse is also designed by God to foster love and safeguard chastity. These secondary ends of marriage are very important and no decision about using the rhythm method should ignore them. The use of rhythm can create tensions in married love and it can give rise to severe temptations against chastity which include the danger of self-abuse, of mutual fondling to the point of sinful orgasm, and even of infidelity. It can make marital intercourse itself distasteful to a woman because the one time of the month when she may have strong physical desire may be the time when rhythm calls for abstinence.

The degree of these and similar dangers differs greatly with different couples; and ability to adjust to them would differ, too. No doubt, a mature couple which has a good reason for avoiding conception can make the necessary adjustment and even deepen the spiritual quality of its love by using rhythm. But the adjustment must be made. Otherwise the harm resulting from trying the rhythm method might be so great as to nullify an otherwise good reason for avoiding conception. As for those who do not have good reasons, the attempt to use rhythm would rashly court these dangers.

(3) *Are both willing to try the rhythm method?*

Unless one partner has the right to refuse the marital act (cf. p. 10), as a general rule the use of rhythm should be by mutual consent. It would be a serious violation of the marriage contract for one party to insist on it against the reasonable opposition of the other. In some cases, of course, opposition to the use of rhythm would involve a real danger to a mother's life. But in many cases the judgment of reasonable opposition would have to take into account many personal factors such as those mentioned in the explanation to the second question. In general, it would be reasonable for one party to object to the use of rhythm if it in-

volved severe temptations against chastity for him or her which could not easily be overcome, and if there were no compelling reasons to struggle with the difficulty.

Counsel Advisable. Often a sincere and mature couple can readily answer the three questions and judge for themselves whether the use of rhythm would be permitted and advisable. 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 the priest talks to only one party, frequently does not know the person, and has too little time to question. For advice about using the rhythm method 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 in 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 decisions.

Some Special Problems

A WIFE WHO has been advised by a doctor that she may die if she becomes pregnant and attempts to bring forth another child is not forbidden to have intercourse. Many have found such predictions false, the dangers over-stressed by some doctors. Moreover, the danger connected with any individual act of intercourse is quite remote since conception and the development of the fetus is so uncertain. This danger ought to be made even more remote by the use of rhythm.

But it may happen that childbirth will be truly dangerous to the mother's life and the use of rhythm would not be effective. If the couple wishes to avoid the risk, the only morally permissible means is complete abstinence from intercourse. This is, admittedly, heroism. But it is not impossible when the couple is aided by God's grace. Rather than admit defeat too easily, listen to Pope Pius XII:

It is wronging men and women of our times to deem them incapable of continuous heroism. Today, for many reasons—perhaps with the goad of hard necessity or even sometimes in the service of injustice—heroism is exercised to a degree and to an

extent which would have been thought impossible in days gone by. Why, then, should this heroism, if the circumstances really demand it, stop at borders established by the passions and inclinations of nature? The answer is clear. The man who does not want to dominate himself is incapable of so doing. He who believes he can do so, counting merely on his own strength without seeking sincerely and perseveringly help from God, will remain miserably disillusioned.

Note that the Pope does not say that married people are obliged to avoid the risk of pregnancy. 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 be made only after much prayer and sound spiritual guidance.

Artificial Insemination. Some couples who are unable to have children through natural intercourse seek to satisfy their yearning for a family by turning to artificial insemination. This practice is morally wrong. The marriage contract gives the husband and wife the right to “natural acts” capable of generating new life, it does not give them the right to have children. Marriage does not give the couple any right to artificial insemination. Artificial insemination is opposed to the dignity of the husband and wife and degrades the marital act. Pope Pius XII says:

In its natural structure, the conjugal act is a personal action, a simultaneous and immediate cooperation on the part of the husband and wife which, by the very nature of the agents and the propriety of the act, is the expression of the mutual gift which, according to Holy Scripture, brings about union ‘in one flesh only.’ This is something much more than the union of two seeds which may be brought about even artificially, without the natural action of husband and wife. The conjugal act, ordained and willed by nature, is a personal act of cooperation, the right to which husband and wife give each other when they marry.

Is it not strange that the Church, so often accused of being opposed to sex, is the only voice raised in defense of the sexual act against the artificial inseminators who are reducing the human being to an experimental breeding animal!

Abortion. Abortion is the ejection of a living, non-viable embryo or fetus from the womb. (“Non-viable” means the fetus could not live outside the womb. The inducing of labor after seven months of pregnancy when proper indications are present is *not* abortion! With proper care the child could live outside the womb.) Deliberate abortion is a terrible crime since it is murder. Because such murders are so frequently undiscovered and unpunished, the Church has placed an automatic excommunication