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Joseph J. Ricotta

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Practice Rhythm? — Why Not?

JOSEPH J. RICOTTA, M.D.

There is no body of religious leadership more concerned with the dignity of human existence and with the integrity of the family than the Catholic Church. Christ, the Founder, died to prove God's love of man, and God's esteem for the individual.

The Catholic Church in the face of misunderstanding and abuse, has clung to its conviction regarding the inviolability of marriage and the family. This is not from whim nor from a malevolent insistence of imposing its will upon mankind. It is rather from its certainty that She is the guardian of the teachings of Christ, the true deposit of Faith.

The knowledgeable Catholic believes that there are two equally important basic purposes of marriage:

1. the procreation of children
2. the rendering of mutual love and comfort by husband and wife to each other, and the enrichment of this mutual love. This does include the giving of mutual pleasure and satisfaction through sexual intercourse.

The concept of responsible parenthood imposes the obligation to do more than beget children. The family is deeply enriched when father and mother are able to have the number of children they can adequately house, clothe, feed and educate without undermining the economic stability of the home, or the health and welfare of the family.

For this reason, much Catholic effort has gone into the study of natural, moral means of family

planning. This is why the problem of world population control was one of the most significant areas of study of the Vatican Council. Because the Pope has not yet given us an answer, an easy solution, is not to say that the honest Catholic will therefore abandon his allegiance to the Church. This would be analagous to the act of the American who finds himself in disagreement with the President or the Congress (in Viet Nam, for example) and therefore burns his draft card or even himself.

In a recent issue of a popular magazine a letter to the editor voiced a complaint commonly heard today. "As a non-Catholic," the letter read, "I have many times found the philosophies of Catholicism contrary to what I would call common sense."

Through the centuries, these philosophies have been accepted and respected by some of the greatest intellects. Many of these minds have left their mark in the field of literature, science, medicine. Many of them embraced Catholicism after much searching, when their mental faculties were most discerning—to wit: John Henry Newman.

Many charges frequently are made about Catholics: that they blindly follow and pretend to believe doctrines which they cannot possibly accept in their hearts; that Catholics believe in the existence of a power on earth, the Papacy, which at its own will imposes on its followers any new set of beliefs whenever it chooses, by a claim to infallibility; the charge that one's thoughts are not his own,

that the Catholic is held in degrading bondage; that inwardly he is bitter, resentful, fearful, rebellious; that he must mechanically say and do, without question, everything the Church commands.

Could any reasonable person be aware of the demonstration of democracy in action that has marked the recent Vatican Council and still harbor these delusions?

I do feel that it is important to discuss briefly the concept of obedience. The obedience of the Catholic to the teachings of the Church is not blind and unreasoning. Obedience is the union of mind and will through love. It is not abject or negative, but imbued with dignity, and positive. I obey because I love, and the more I love, the more I can understand. Understanding is not always easy or immediate, but it develops and unfolds as love deepens.

A parallel can be drawn to the relationship of husband and wife, or of any two humans. They help, obey, assist one another because they love, and then through their love, they come to know and understand one another better.

Rev. John Thomas, S.J. a world renowned demographer, sociologist and marriage counsellor has repeatedly reaffirmed his conviction that discussions about sex tend to be remote from reality, lacking in honesty and confirmed to a scope that is much too narrow. "Too much attention is given to sexual relationships as something separate from the rest of life."

Marital relations, sexual intercourse, should be treated as a mature relationship between two individuals who love and respect each other. This

mature relationship "in the Christian concept calls for control, cooperation and concern for the other partner."

Sex in the Christian concept involves both pleasure and responsibility. The Catholic Church recognizes the need for controlling family size. The Christian ideal of the family does not imply that all families must be large. The decision of family size is a matter of individual conscience, and may be influenced by medical, social, economic or eugenic factors. Indeed, the Church recognizes the need for complete and permanent avoidance of parenthood under special circumstances.

The Catholic position on artificial birth control has too often been inaccurately presented. Actually, until recently moral opposition to artificial birth control was the consensus of the entire Christian community. In 1920 the first Lambeth Conference held by leaders of the Episcopal Church declared: "We utter an emphatic warning against the use of unnatural means of avoiding conception, together with a warning against the grave dangers, physical, moral and religious thereby incurred." This decision was reversed by a subsequent Lambeth Conference.

The history of mankind is replete with man's effort to control population growth. Even in primitive times and primitive cultures man's concern for and fear of over-population is recorded. His efforts then as today, were directed at preventing conception, interrupting pregnancy, and in some cases infanticide and patricide. It is the extreme measures that I, as a Catholic, find untenable.

The cardinal truth is freedom of the individual conscience with pres-

ervation of human dignity and respect for God's gift of life. The doctrine that "Conscience is Supreme" implies the obligation of bringing conscience into conformity with the law of Christ. Persons truly convinced of the correctness of practicing at odds with Catholic teaching authority are certainly obliged to follow their sincere conviction.

The events of past centuries have borne out the wisdom of the Church's policy of careful study and deliberation before far-reaching and important changes are made. The church is not indifferent to this crucial problem. Will her teachings change? Time alone will give that answer.

As far back as 1853 the Bishop of Amiens established the validity and morality of natural methods of avoiding conception. Some 30 years later, this concept was reaffirmed by a Sacred Penitentiary in Rome. Pius XI (*Casti Conubii*) and Pius XII (*Allocution to Midwives*) and Paul VI have also reiterated this statement.

Reflect soberly for a moment upon the activities of some of the individuals who are critical of the current Catholic viewpoint on birth control. They have run the gamut of chemical and mechanical devices, pills, intrauterine devices, surgical procedures of various types, and more recently, abortion and techniques which suspend or destroy the physiologic function of the reproductive organs. Hopefully these changes are only temporary.

The Catholic Church is not insensitive to the problems of population control. If a safe, moral, natural, harmless effective method of concep-

tion control can be perfected she will not be content to be bound by traditional teaching of the past.

The easiest and most direct solution to a problem is not always the most effective and safe one. Many techniques have been offered to solve the child-spacing problem. Some of them have been direct and seemingly safe, easy and effective. As of today, however, no medical, mechanical or chemical technique of birth control enjoys a use of effectiveness greater than 80%. Even supposedly ideal contraceptives such as the pill or the intrauterine contraceptive device, which are unquestionably more than 95% effective have not been successfully applied by more than 80% of would-be users. The medical safety of the use of the pill has not been established to the satisfaction of all men of science, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. The long term effects of these powerful steroids may not be fully understood for another 10 years. Invariably couples who turn to the Family Life Clinic for help in birth control have failed to use effectively one or several techniques. A majority of them initially protest the inadequacy of Rhythm. Very few of this group were found to have understood Rhythm well enough to warrant success. You have heard of the organization "Parents Without Partners." Today, users of the pill, the loop, diaphragm and condom are flocking to join a new club "Parents Despite Planning."

It is quite obvious that the perfect child-spacing technique has not yet been developed. This goal may one day be achieved by one of two possible methods:

1. The use of a single dose safe medication that will cause ovulation to occur at a predictable time.

2. The perfection of a simple test easily done on one of the readily accessible body fluids such as saliva or urine that will anticipate ovulation by at least 48 hours.

Until that day comes however, the practice of periodic continence with coitus limited to the post ovulatory phase is as effective as any of the methods available today. There is only one important prerequisite for

the successful use of Rhythm: teamwork by man and wife. When each is sincerely motivated and can understand and communicate clearly, Rhythm does work.

DR. RICOTTA has been medical director of the Buffalo Family Life Rhythm Clinic since 1961. He attends five hospitals in Buffalo in obstetrics and gynecology. He is a Fellow of the American College and Diplomate of the American Board of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. He confines his work to speciality practice of obstetrics and gynecology.