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dressed their wounds with linen wrung out in strong wine, and these dressings prevented the growth of microbes and as the wine evaporated they called this procedure the dry dressing. They had wonderful results and boasted of getting union by first intention. That very expression, union by first intention, is from medieval Latin and means nothing in its English form unless you know something about the old medieval surgery. Some of them declared that they got linear cicatrices that you could scarcely see or at least notice and they evidently knew just what it meant to have union by first intention.

THE MORALITY OF THE USE OF THE SAFE PERIOD

By ETHICUS

TWO books by Catholics with ecclesiastical approval have appeared recently which have excited much discussion among Catholics and non-Catholics alike. They are The Rhythm by Leo J. Latz, M.D. and The Sterile Period in Family Life by the Very Reverend Canon Valère J. Coucke and James J. Walsh, M.D. It is not the intention of Ethicus to discuss the scientific aspects of the question raised by these two books. The Imprimatur of the Ordinary does not guarantee the scientific truth of the facts stated. The scientific aspect has been the subject of considerable interest in European circles, especially Catholic, clerical and lay, for some years past. Ethicus merely calls attention to the opinion of Dr. J. Holt of Doorn, Holland, who is now engaged in revising for a second edition Dr. J. N. Smulder’s book on the period of aogenesis, entitled Periodische Enthaltung in der Ehe. It is Dr. Holt’s opinion, quoted in the Catholic Medical Guardian for January, 1933, that, “Dr. Latz’s book has certain defects which must be revised to prevent misunderstanding and thus bring about disrepute of the method.”

Ethicus is solely interested in the moral questions raised on the assumption that the scientific aspect is sound. Is it in accordance with right Christian morality for husband and wife to use the safe period with a view to family limitation? In treating a question such as this, it is always wise to gain first the opinions of those whose voice is authoritative on such matters. Certainly no Catholic moralist of note ever denied that married couples might exercise their marital rights in order to obtain the secondary ends of matrimony, defined by the code of Canon Law as “mutual aid and a remedy of concupiscence,” even when from such an exercise no new life could arise. Such a condition exists

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in the time of pregnancy and in the period of sterility brought on by old age.

Pius XI writes in his encyclical on *Chaste Matrimony*: "Nor must married people be considered to act against the order of nature, if they make use of their rights according to sound and natural reason, even though no new life can thence arise on account of *circumstances of time* or the existence of some defect." On June 16, 1880, The Sacred Penitentiary, in answer to certain questions with regard to the morality of the use of the safe period, answered: "Married people who make the above-mentioned use of matrimony should not be disturbed, and the confessors are allowed with prudence to suggest this practice to those couples whom he has in vain endeavored by the use of other means to draw away from the hateful crime of onanism."

The moral principles underlying these authoritative decisions are plain to one who understands what moral theologians and ethicists lay down as the determinants of the morality of an act. First let it be said that an act cannot be good or bad, moral or immoral, unless it is a deliberate and free act. The moral goodness or badness of such an act must be judged, first, from the natural tendency of the act itself; second, from the circumstances of the act; third, from the purpose of the agent or agents in performing the act.

From what has been said it follows that only that part of marital intercourse can assume the quality of moral goodness or badness which is under the full control of the agents. Now the controlled part of marital intercourse from the side of both husband and wife is such a depositing of the spermatozoa in the vagina of the woman that fecundation will follow, if nature does her part and is not deficient. Outside of these acts on the part of the married couple, all else follows by the laws of nature without further intervention by man. Hence the natural end of the married couple's controlled and free activity in procreation is such a depositing of the spermatozoa that pregnancy will follow if nature is not deficient. The use of the safe period, then, involves no immorality from the natural end of the free and deliberate activity of husband and wife. Such activity is exactly the same, as far as they are concerned in their free activity, whether it takes place in the safe period or in the period of fertility. Exactly the opposite takes place in the use of contraceptives. For in that case, the free acts of the agents are deliberately frustrated in their natural power to generate new life; they do not terminate in such wise that new life may arise, if nature is not deficient.

If, then, moral evil is to be sought in the use of the safe period, it must be sought somewhere else than in the end of the act. It must be
sought either in the circumstances of the act or in the purpose and intention of the agents. With regard to the circumstances, abstinence from intercourse during the period of fertility can only be justified by the mutual consent of husband and wife. Each has definite rights and the refusal to exercise these rights over a given period must be arrived at by mutual agreement. It cannot be imposed by one party on the other. But supposing a mutual agreement to continence during a fixed period, no moral badness can be affixed to the limitation of the use of marriage to the period of agensis as far as the circumstances just considered are concerned.

When we come to consider the purpose and intention of the agents in the use of the safe period, namely, the limitation of offspring, certain difficulties arise. But these difficulties do not immediately arise because, as is very commonly thought, the non-intention to have children is wrong in itself. It is an old and valid axiom of the law that “the end of the law does not fall under the law itself.” In other words, to fill one’s obligation with regard to the observance of the law, one does not have to intend the purpose of the law-giver in making the law. His purpose will be attained by the fulfillment of his commands. When the subject does what is commanded by the law-giver, he fulfills his obligation whether he intends the purpose of the law-giver or not. If it were necessary to intend to have children in every use of matrimony, then the use of matrimony in the time of pregnancy and old age would be forbidden. For to intend to have children in those periods is a physiological impossibility. If one were present at mass on a week-day from mere devotion and afterwards discovered that it was a holy day of obligation, there would be no obligation to attend another mass on the pretext that the obligation to hear mass was not fulfilled, because there was no intention of fulfilling the obligation. That which was commanded, attendance at mass, was executed; there was no need to intend the fulfilling of the precept. “The end of the law does not fall under the law itself.”

Consequently in the exercise of marital rights it is not necessary to intend to have children; it is necessary to exercise those rights in a natural way so that from them new life may spring if nature is not deficient. But, you will argue, to make use of the safe period is to take advantage of nature, though it is certainly not to frustrate nature. Exactly! Then the moral goodness or badness of the act will depend upon the intention for which I take advantage of nature. If the intention is bad, selfishness, avarice, impatience with restrictions to liberty, then the act is bad, it is sinful. But notice this: The act is not mortally sinful, as selfishness in itself is not mortally sinful; the act is venially
sinful. It is true that the constant repetition of this sin weakens those who yield to it and hence disposes to mortal sin. In itself, however, it is venial sin.

But if the motive for family limitation is a good motive, such as well might be in these times, present and over-burdening economic difficulties, then the use of the safe period, which as we have seen is not morally wrong from the end of the action, and not morally wrong from the circumstances, is not evil from the purpose and intention of the agent.

It is on these principles that the authorities cited in the beginning base their decisions. How different in its morality is the use of the safe period from the use of contraceptives. The use of contraceptives is a frustration of nature; husband and wife freely use matrimony in such a way “that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life”—Pius XI. Nature is used and abused. The spermatozoa are not deposited in such wise that in accordance with nature pregnancy can take place if nature is not herself deficient. The marital act is thus essentially different from the marital act performed naturally. Whereas in the use of the safe period, the rights of matrimony are exercised in exactly the same way that they are exercised in the period of fertility.

All the moralists, in explaining the ethical principles involved in the use of the safe period, deprecate and warn against the broadcasting of these matters. All this concerns individuals. Information, advice, direction should be given by individuals to individuals. The use of the safe period is evidently open to abuse. It can be abused by unmarried people. It can be a great danger to married people; childless marriages, to indicate one danger, frequently end in divorce. The morally good use of the safe period can only be perceived in its proper perspective when the complete doctrine of marriage is understood and appreciated. All ought to understand that if fecundity is not the unique and necessary end of every individual marriage, it multiplies, especially when it can be abundant, benefits in the family. Only fruitful marriage answers completely to the desires of nature. The child and children are the benediction of the fireside from every viewpoint, biological, psychological, social, moral and religious.