Publicity and the Safe Period

Ethicus
PUBLICITY AND THE SAFE PERIOD

By ETHICUS

IN THE March issue of the Linacre Quarterly, Ethicus contributed an article entitled, "The Morality of the Safe Period." The opening sentence of the closing paragraph read: "All the moralists, in explaining the ethical principles involved in the use of the safe period, deplore and warn against the broadcasting of these matters." The editor of the Quarterly received a letter challenging Ethicus to produce the authorities in support of this statement. The Fortnightly Review quoted the sentence referred to in its July number. This brought forth a letter, printed in the August Fortnightly, from Martin Bower, in which he says: "Ethicus does not quote a single ‘moralist’ in support of his contentions, nor does he advance a single argument." The Reverend J. B. Culemans comments in the September number of the Fortnightly on Mr. Bower’s letter: "Until Rome rules definitely on the matter, it would seem that there is no compelling reason to try and keep this knowledge from married people or those about to marry.”

The Latz Foundation sent out a mimeographed sheet containing the letters of Martin Bower and the Reverend J. B. Culemans. It is a matter of regret that in this release the Latz Foundation made no reference to another article in the Fortnightly in the very number in which the Reverend Father’s letter appeared. It was entitled, “The Ogino-Knaus Method of Natural Birth Control.” It states in four theses, the conclusions, with regard to the method, of the Reverend Wenzel Grosam, D.D., professor of Pastoral Theology and Rector at the Seminary, Linz, Austria, and also one of the editors of the Theologisch-praktische Quartalschrift, in which magazine his ideas originally appeared. The original article devotes eighteen pages of the quarterly, in the March, 1933, number, to the Ogino-Knaus theory. The conclusions of the Reverend Professor are as follows:

1. “If married people, by mutual consent, and for serious and morally unobjectionable motives, limit their marital intercourse to the cyclic days, which, according to Ogino and Knaus, are infertile, no objection can be raised against their conduct from the moral standpoint.”

2. “It would, at least for the present, be very incautious and objectionable, if priests in charge of souls would advocate the theories of Ogino and Knaus as certain and reliable. (In support of this thesis Dr. Grosam quotes the fact that many eminent medical authorities have not as yet accepted the Ogino-Knaus theory, and a few positively reject it.)”

3. “Nevertheless, priests engaged in the cure of souls can and should call the attention of married people who are worried by con-
scientious scruples to the possibility of a licit and permissible birth control according to the Ogino-Knaus theory."

4. "Priests, especially those entrusted with the guidance of souls, should, at least for the time being, refrain from engaging in public propaganda for the so-called 'Natural regulation of births according to Ogino-Knaus.'"

Ethicus has consulted in this matter of publicity for the safe period a number of unquestionable and authoritative witnesses available to him. First of all, certain questions for solution, raised by the safe period, were addressed to the Sacred Congregation of the Penitentiary. The answer of that august body, delivered June 16, 1880, is illuminating: "Married people who make the above-mentioned use of matrimony should not be disturbed, and the confessor is 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." Now the most distinguished moral theologians of the Church support this view and quote explicitly this decree in their latest editions. Ethicus personally consulted the works of Ubagh, Lehmkuhl, Prummer, Arregui, Sabetti-Barrett, Ferreres, Genicot-Salsman, Aertnys-Damen and Noldin. There you have a list of names to conjure by in the realm of moral theology, representing South America, Germany, Spain, Belgium and America. In general, all these take up the question of the morality of the use of the safe period in their treatment of onanism. After laying down principles for the confessor in the treatment of onanistic penitents and suggesting various other means by which they may be withdrawn from their pernicious practices, they call attention to the liceity of cautiously advising those penitents whom they have failed to benefit by other means, of the possibility of a solution of their difficulties through a use of the safe period. It is in this connection that they all cite the decree of the Sacred Penitentiary.

Vermeerch, a moral theologian of international reputation, in his booklet, "What Is Marriage?" speaking of the right of the confessor to suggest the use of the safe period in the circumstances laid down by the Sacred Penitentiary and quoting the decree of the Congregation, says: "With prudent discretion we say; the uncertainty of the result is enough to suggest prudence; besides the confessor should not be a counsellor of infecundity. The insinuation of this course may be appropriate as a means of preventing formal sins, or as offering a way out of a critical situation where the danger of incontinence makes intercourse imperative, and yet where conception would be perilous for the mother." This booklet of Father Vermeerch, who is a professor in the Gregorian University in Rome, was published in 1932. He did
not think the decree of the Congregation outworn, and surely the opinion of such an authority should give pause to Mr. Bower, who impulsively puts the question: "Must we first commit mortal sin, before we merit the privilege to obtain the information mentioned?"

This whole question has been treated and is being treated anew by moral theologians as a result of the investigations of Ogino-Knauus. Ethicus remembers reading a scholarly article on the subject in a 1930 number of the *Nouvelle Revue Theologique* by the well-known Dr. Hurth, S.J., professor of Moral Theology at the Jesuit Seminary of Valkenberg in Holland. Unfortunately, Ethicus has mislaid that article. It was also treated in the *Collationes Brugenses* in 1930. The diocesan conferences of priests for the discussion of moral questions, under the guidance of skillful moral theologians, are held three times a year in all dioceses throughout the world. These discussions, in many European dioceses, are printed in magazine form, under the general title, "Collationes." Ethicus subscribes to some half dozen of these "Collationes." Ethicus has before him at the moment a copy of the *Collationes Tornacenses*, of the diocese of Tournai, in Belgium, September, 1931. In this issue the Reverend X. Nassaux completes his discussion of the Ogino-Knauus theory. I translate from the French, page 537: "As there is not a question [in the safe period] of a practical good for all and always, a wide publicity [of the safe period] in its favor would be indiscreet. Many could believe that one encouraged infecundity, desired even without plausible reasons, for one forgets easily the restrictive conditions of the permission given. To be prudent, the communication of the information ought to be given in individual fashion, then when it is useful or necessary. There can be a question of saving married people who have fallen into onanism, or of seeking a solution of one of those critical situations, either when incontinence is a danger by abstinence from intercourse, or great good would be endangered by intercourse become fruitful. Even in treating of particular cases precautions are to be observed; the incertitude of the result forthcoming, at least from a wrong use of the method; fear of scandal in appearing to counsel a diminished morality; risk of putting certain married couples in the occasion of sinning, when they find temporary continence too difficult; all this demands circumspection. . . .

As to physicians, like all specialists, they run the risk of neglecting the aspects of real life, which are beyond their specialty. In this matter they will be tempted to trait the medical problem without having sufficient care of the moral outlook. In particular, certain physicians ought to avoid finding too easily in their patients indications advising infecundity. Otherwise they will be inclined to prolong immeasurably
in the interest of greater security the periods of continence, when they ought to reduce them to the indispensable days to diminish the moral inconveniences of the method.” In the course of this scholarly article, informed with wisdom and prudence, Father Nassaux quotes the decree of the Sacred Penitentiary, evidently asserting that, in his opinion, the directive and permissive force of the decree has lost nothing of its force since the publication of the Ogino-Knaus method.

I have still further evidence of the interest of the moral theologians in the moral and prudential issues raised by the Ogino-Knaus method. The *Collationes Namurcenses* of Namur in Belgium take up the question in the issue for July, 1933. Saying that an action indifferent in the abstract is to be judged in the concrete by the circumstances and end of the agent and admitting the liceity of the use of the safe period under certain conditions and when the motive is valid, the writer proceeds (I translate from the Latin): “On the contrary, provision will have to be taken often of so many and so great injuries, both of bodies and souls of the married, both for individuals, and the community, that such a method may have to be reprobated or at least by no means counselled. At one time the taint of egoism may vitiate the intention of the agents, who are led solely by the force of materialistic ideas, by the fear of toil and the duty of education, by avarice, by devotion to trifles and external appearances. Sometimes the right of one of the parties who does not consent will be violated, who will be thrown into the danger of incontinence and adultery. Sometimes the restriction of intercourse, even accepted by mutual consent, will impose too great privations on the sexual instinct for a long time stimulated by continued familiarity. Hence there will follow, sometimes to those married people refraining from intercourse, except in a measured period, a restraint on the senses and an anxiety of mind altogether contrary to spontaneity of love, health of body and peace of soul. From this it will appear how rashly those proceed, who, without due restrictions, commend the ‘new method’ as a means apt for all as a solution for the difficulties common to the use of matrimony. It is thus better understood with what attention must be considered the words of the Sacred Penitentiary... From these words three things are to be remembered above all, *viz.*, the confessor can at most *insinuate*, and, furthermore, *cautiously*, and to those alone to whom other measures have been applied in vain. And, furthermore, it is to be noted with the illustrious D. Claes Boënaert (*Collationes Gandavenses*, August, 1931) that if the congregation so spoke at a time when the efficacy of the method seemed very doubtful to all learned men, although, on the contrary, today many hope that science will remove all doubt, *à fortiori* now there is
need of prudence to meet the evils, both individual and public, which
can follow from too much indulgence in this matter."

I think I have proved the truth of what has been challenged. "All
the moralists . . . deprecate and warn against the broadcasting of this
matter." I regret to say that Dr. Guchteneere, for whom I have the
highest admiration, in the review of Dr. Latz's book, appearing in the
July, 1933, number of his Catholic Medical Guardian, gives it as his
opinion that large dissemination of the knowledge of the safe period is
justified in America and England. May I humbly suggest that this is
not a matter for the laity to decide. Ethicus himself, who has been
studying this question for at least two years before any Catholic
publication in this country made any reference to the matter, as far as
he knows (there was a short reference in the American Medical Journal
on Dr. Knaus), was concerned about the question of publicity in a
matter which touches so nearly human hearts and souls. He did not
trust his own judgment in the matter, but looked for the teaching of
the mystical Christ, from whence alone we can hope for a sure and
certain guidance in such important moral matters. The mystical
Christ speaks through the teaching Church as well as through official
decrees. The unanimous teaching of scholarly and learned men who
occupy the difficult chairs of moral theology in the important centers
of Catholic teaching and who give forth their teaching in their pro­
found published volumes under an official imprimatur is not to be lightly
tossed aside. It is in these sources that Ethicus sought direction and
it was based on their teaching that he said: "All the moralists depre­
cate . . . and warn against the broadcasting of this matter."

And this elemental prudence, tending to the restriction of this
information to certain well-defined professional classes, characterized
the authors of the two American books we have on the safe period.
Dr. Latz writes in the introduction to the "Rhythm": "I feel under
obligation to bring the fruits of my readings and studies, and the
results of my own meager experimentation and observation, to the
attention of my colleagues." Again he writes: "that it may be placed
into the hands of such married people as are entitled to the information
which it contains." Again: "The clergy, as well as nurses and social
workers, will be able through this booklet to assist those who consult
them about a rational method of limiting the size of their families."
Again, Father Joseph Reiner, S.J., writing the introduction to this
book, says: "In view of all this, I do not hesitate to say, that no physi­
cian, no nurse, no social worker, no clergyman can afford to disregard
the information contained in this book." Here are well-defined profes­
sional classes.
In the other book, The Sterile Period in Family Life, by Coucke and Walsh, Canon Valere J. Coucke says: “Therefore, it is the duty of the confessor to cause married people to conceive a higher idea of matrimony and to incite them to a manly exercise of the Christian virtues and a moderate use of the satisfactions of sense. Then only may he suggest something to them about the time of agenesis, when there exist serious reasons for believing that generation would be fraught with danger or for limiting the number of children. He may also suggest this practice to those who are the slaves of onanism, when a vain attempt has been made to divert them from their sinful ways—when, namely, he has tried to convince them of the great malice of onanism, or to fill them with a salutary fear of God’s vengeance (which they draw upon their heads), and lastly, when he has shown the shallowness of their arguments and has tried to instill new courage in their hearts.”

In the face of these declarations, implicit in their avowal that the contents of the books are for restricted use, how is it that Ethicus hears that they are being read by convent girls still in their teens? What efforts have the publishers made in their clear duty to provide, as far as possible, that these books should only come into the hands of those who have a right to the knowledge therein contained? Why was it that the Latz foundations thought it necessary to send out mimeographed sheets reproducing the letters critical of the ideas of Ethicus and passed over the unquestioned authority of Dr. Wenzel Grosam, whose ideas were printed in the same issue in which the letter of the Reverend J. B. Culemans appeared? Ethicus is conscious of only one purpose in what he wrote in the March issue and writes in this issue, the purpose of promoting God’s glory and the salvation of souls. Ethicus has given years of his life to the fight against birth-control propaganda and to the fight against the spread of contraception amongst Catholics. Ethicus is ready to withdraw from the position he has taken and to join in the wide dissemination of this information when he sees a clear indication of what is the best course to follow for God and souls. That indication can only come from the mystical voice of Christ, whether in official decree or through the teaching Church. At the present moment Christ, speaking to us both by official decree and the teaching Church, directs us to avoid broadcasting amongst the Catholic laity information on the safe period. Ethicus seems to perceive that there has crept into this controversy, heat. He submits that what we all want and ought to want is light from the Giver of all light, the Holy Spirit. Ethicus embraces with fraternal love his critics. He admires them for their zeal in the cause of souls. In the presence of so many enemies against which all our efforts should be directed, Ethi-
Linacre Quarterly

The Linacre Quarterly

Ethicus deplores any controversy which might bring about discord of mind or heart. For that reason he has written these lines, after much delay and with much reluctance. Let truth, justice, and charity prevail. Ethicus knows no better way of ending this article than by quoting the closing lines of his previous remarks: "The morally good use of the safe period can only be perceived in its proper perspective when the complete doctrine of marriage is properly 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."

Guild Notes

Boston Guild.—The annual meeting of the Guild of Saint Luke was held at the University Club on June 14, 1933. There were about sixty members present, including our Reverend Chaplain Monsignor Splaine. The regular order of business was followed, which included election of officers for the year 1933-1934. The principal articles of business other than the election, which brought on serious discussion, were the question of accepting the constitution of the Federated Catholic Physicians’ Guild and the question of admitting female doctors to our local Guild. Both of these motions were passed favorably. The election of officers resulted in the following: President—William P. Coughlin, M.D.; Vice-President—Richard W. Sheehy, M.D.; Secretary-Treasurer—Edward L. Kickham, M.D.; Councilors—William T. Haley, M.D., Edward J. O’Brion, M.D., Fred P. Murphy, M.D., John F. Casey, M.D., and John D. Bennett, M.D.

The new President was escorted to the chair by a committee appointed by the retiring President and briefly addressed the meeting, pledging his earnest efforts to carrying on the work of the Guild and promising some innovations for the coming year in regard to the meetings and also advocating a drive for new members, especially the young men of the district who are eligible.