November 1969

Rhythm: I. Periodic Abstinence

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Recommended Citation
4) The code of ethics should be brief. It should be as positive as possible. It should state clearly that no one may be required to do anything which is against his or her conscience.

Once more I quote Dr. Wilbur: "When our Judicial Council and the House of Delegates (of the American Medical Association) condensed the nearly fifty detailed elements of our code of ethics into ten short principles and a preamble, they created an umbrella of ethical guidance under which every physician can find protection for his patient, himself and his colleagues".

Dr. Wilbur's use of the word "umbrella" prompts me to make a final tentative suggestion for the consideration, dialogue and criticism of the theologians. Would it be possible for a code of ethics, for use in Catholic hospitals, to contain a general introductory section which would be a statement of positive values to which the hospital subscribes and, after this "umbrella statement" because of the pluralistic composition of the communities served by the Catholic hospitals of this country, would it be possible to have several distinct and differing statements of medical ethics? For example, one in terms of the traditional Catholic moral theology, one in terms of contextualism, and one or more expressing the medical ethical principles of non-Catholic groups in the pluralistic community?

I make these suggestions and ask these questions in a purely tentative way realizing that many difficult details and applications would have to be worked out. I make them in the humble, prayerful desire of taking part in a dialogue which I think is essential if the concerned, religiously-oriented community is to produce a formulation of medical ethics that will suit the complex needs of our day. At the same time, everyone of us should be conscious of the fact that a statement of medical ethics means little if persons in the medical profession do not have a proper, basic life-orientation - for God and people as His children.

FOOTNOTES


2. Decree on Ecumenism, n. 6, p. 350.


8. Decree on Ecumenism, n. 23, p. 36.


The members of the National Commission on Human Life, Reproduction and Rhythm, the publisher of CHILD AND FAMILY, are a group of physicians who originally came together because of their common, deep, specialized interest in periodic coital abstinence as a means of fertility control—a method commonly known as the rhythm method. In their experience, they found that rhythm, based on the natural, physiologic, ovulatory cycle of the woman, contributed to marital unity, and was highly effective in controlling conception. In addition, they found rhythm enhanced the happiness of the conjugal act, was free from medical hazards and had wide applicability.

RHYTHM

I. Periodic Abstinence

Herbert Ratner, M.D.

Naturally, they were distressed with the poor reputation of the rhythm method in lay and professional circles.

On the part of the general public, they attributed rhythm's poor acceptance to perpetuated misinformation and error: to misleading and derogatory comparisons of rhythm effectiveness with other forms of birth control in articles published in widely distributed magazines and in seven's magazines; articles often generated by sales-oriented drug companies and written, not by scientific investigators of the rhythm method, but by hired journalists, science writers, and other "instant experts". Ignorance of scientific rhythm, unfortunately, is widespread. Scientific rhythmsympto-thermic or basal body temperature rhythm — introduces a precision to rhythm, which more accurately determines ovulation and which, when necessary, by limiting intercourse to the post-ovulatory period, can promise the patient a certainty that matches the effectiveness of the original 10 mg. birth control pill.

On the part of the physician, the members of the NCHLRR attributed rhythm's lack of popularity to physi-
cian ignorance of, and impatience with, the principles and practice of this method of conception control. It is well-known that the physician lacks formal medical school education in most matters pertaining to sexuality. As a result, his professional understanding of the cyclic nature of woman's sexuality, of her natural disposition to sex and maternity, and of the significance and value of the role of periodic abstinence in marriage, is negligible. Furthermore, in contrast to oral and other contraceptives, the physician is not bombarded by drug company advertisements and the recitations of drug detail men extolling the virtues of the rhythm method of conception control.

PILLS RATHER THAN PRINCIPLES

Despite the fact that doctor means teacher, the American physician is as restless in educating himself about rhythm as he is in imparting to patients the knowledge the patient needs and requests for the practice of rhythm. His restlessness reflects his general disinclination to listen and to communicate with patients. The contemporary physician, in fact, tends to respond automatically to patient's problems with pills rather than principles and with mechanical devices rather than instructive dialogue. In the logistics of office practice, the physician finds that rapid recourse to the prescription pad promptly propels patients outward in assembly line fashion.

This practice ignores the need of the woman patient. She needs understanding; understanding which recognizes that her expressed wants and her inner needs may not be identical. The area of family planning illustrates this well. Here, she particularly needs the help of a sympathetic and knowledgeable physician for she has a natural aversion to mechanical or original contraception and an underlying distrust of the powerful synthetic chemicals used in birth control pills, chemicals which tinker with and assault the natural balance of her hormonal system — the basis of her health and womanliness. Since her female rhythms are cyclic, she has a natural affinity for and a community with a method that harmonizes with her feminine, lunar rhythms.

Unfortunately, whether it be the private physician's office or the birth control clinic, she is seldom able to get the knowledge she seeks and needs or would feel comfortable with, nor the encouragement to take advantage of the ebbs and flows of her ovulatory process. As a result, far too many women turn either to the mechanism they consider distasteful or suspect are dangerous forms of contraceptives, or, hopefully but miscastfully fall back on medically unsupervised or carelessly prescribed calendar rhythm. Calendar rhythm, however, has notable limitations. It can be notoriously insensitive when not medically supervised by a knowledgeable physician.

Despite the ineffectiveness consequent to the rough approximations of calendar rhythm, and in the absence of any better instructive instruction, many women persevere with rhythm because of their fidelity to their nature and to their intuition that the habit of wholesome mutual sexual restraint, as contrasted to contraceptive indulgence, is protective of marriage and family.

POSITIVE VALUE

It is for such reasons that the editors of CF are initiating a continuing series of articles on rhythm. There are other reasons. One among them is the positive value of periodic abstinence intrinsic to the rhythm method.

Although the practice of rhythm is usually associated with Catholics, it is not exclusive to them. When family planning problems arise, other large groups of peoples or individuals either restrict themselves to this method or prefer it to all other forms of contraception. These include Moslems, Orthodox Jews and other religious groups, as well as large segments of the population who, despite the absence of an active religious or ethnic tradition, are attracted to rhythm because of its conformity with the natural order they deeply respect.

The deliberations of Catholics on the psychologic and spiritual values inherent in the practice of rhythm are only of recent origin, however. For the most part, Catholics became interested in periodic abstinence in the twenties when Ogino and Knau correctly established the time of ovulation which made calendar rhythm feasible. At that time Catholic interest was more expedient and exigent than theologically and psychologically informed. It was primarily the pressure of the depression years — which powerfully highlighted the needs of Catholics in modern times for morally acceptable methods of family limitation — that made the practical application of the new data on ovulation so attractive. Since that time their emphasis has been more on moral justification than on positive values associated with the method.

ALTERNATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Orthodox Jews, whose traditional interest in periodic abstinence was not with family limitation but with a religious teaching ordered to the preservation and strengthening of family life, had accumulated, on the other hand, a tremendous experience with the psychologic and spiritual values of periodic abstinence in marital love. Since the practice of periodic abstinence is the basic ingredient of the rhythm method, their rich experience with abstinence is of particular value to those interested in utilizing periodic abstinence for conception control. Furthermore, the Jews' experiential knowledge of sex regulation is most relevant to today's sex-indulgent and sex-preoccupied age in which social leaders, psychologists, physicians, writers, artists, cinema directors and the young and old of both sexes have become intoxicated with the notion of wide scale sexual permissiveness, sexual gratification and sexual exhibitionism, and correspondingly insensitive to the adverse effects of these practices on family life. In the light of these preoccupations, an alternative philosophy of tempered sexual activity, a philosophy and practice inextricably interwoven with the traditional high quality of Jewish family life (modern sociologists continue to find the authentic Jewish family exemplar when measured by social indices of the malfunctioning family), deserves the most careful study and consideration. The viability of the family in contemporary society, as well as the long range happiness of countless human beings and future progeny, is at stake.

The Orthodox Jewish tradition of periodic abstinence in marriage goes...
To bring this many-centered tradition and experience to our readers, the first of three installments of Rabbi Norman Lamm's book, A HEDGE OF ROSES, appears in this issue. That A HEDGE OF ROSES is not a treatise on birth control will be readily recognized in the reading.

**ADJUNCT TO FAMILY LIFE**

On the contrary, the book's purpose is the exposition of a religious practice which incorporates the natural and supernatural dimensions of periodic abstinence as a fundamental adjunct to optimum family life. Its approach, rather than directed by the negative concern of family limitation, exposes a norm of moral purity safeguarded by positive observances. The mikvah or sacramental bath in water which terminates the period of abstinence and prepares the woman for the renewal of the love act is essential to Jewish religious teaching on marriage. This Jewish religious practice builds upon the desire of women, in general, to approach the love act in a spotless state through the natural cleansing effect of water by incorporating the spiritual purification symbolized by the water itself. The water of the mikvah, however, must be seen not simply as symbol but as elevated and fortified by sacramental grace imparted to nature in the manner of a holy act fulfilling the promise of Creation.

The Jewish tradition of periodic abstinence in marriage cannot be dissociated from the rhythm method and its cyclic relationship to fertility and sterility. The institution of coitus in the first two weeks of the menstrual cycle results in the resumption of the marital act at the time of ovulation, the height of fertility. It is as if the injunction were ordered to the protection of a known people, the bearers of the Old Testament whose destiny was to enroll the human species with great intellectual and spiritual gifts. The history of their unique persecution which threatened their survival in both ancient and modern times bears this out. Thus, the proscription of the Book of Leviticus can be viewed as a prescription inspired by Yahweh which, when practiced, ensured the preservation of the Jews. (Modern Israel, which now forces immigration to maintain its population of occidental Jews, can well take note.) That Yahweh would utilize natural means to achieve His goal is supported by Augustine's teaching that the Lord of Creation does not lean on means when His ends can be achieved through the established natural order.

**ANTIDOTE TO SENSATE WORLD**

Finally, one last observation which cannot be overly stressed is that by its very nature periodic abstinence can function as an antidote to a sensate world in which uncontrolled sexual desires dominate and prevail over responsible interpersonal relationships.

The sexual revolution we are witnessing today extends far beyond its original goal of liberating man from unhealthy sex repression. What started as a spontaneous corrective of puritanism—that bodily pleasure is not sinful—has degenerated into a rampant pursuit of sex pleasure as an end in itself; radically dissociated from its intrinsic ordering to family and child-rearing and simplistically viewed as a solution to all personal dissatisfactions with life.

Kinsey introduced the modern notion that sex is "a normal biologic function, acceptable in whatever form it is manifested." (Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, W. B. Saunders & Co., 1948, p. 263). Some of his major acceptable forms are "self-stimulation (masturbation)... homosexual intercourse and contact with animals of other species." (Ibid., p. 157).

Kinsey's belief is implicitly espoused and abetted by foundations, government, and voluntary agencies whose prime, specialized concern is the contraceptive containment of what their public relations departments continue to call "population explosion," irrespective of birth rates. Birth control in all of these areas denotes no births and no control in total disregard of damaging effects on the family, the basic unit of society. The major question is, however, whether man can tolerate anything less than sex control if society is to flourish at a high human level or even survive.

In reprinting Rabbi Lamm's summation of the Jewish tradition on periodic abstinence, we are not unmindful of the possibility that again we may be recipients of another great, timely gift of the Jews to western civilization and to the world. Their message, if we take the effort to understand it and incorporate it into our culture, may be the means whereby today's democracies are rescued from the fate of an earlier sensate society, the Roman Empire.

**SEXUAL MATURITY**

Lest the reader look upon the Jewish teaching as the idiosyncrasy of a small religious group, it should be emphasized that the concept of personal sexual control is not limited to either the Jews or the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In one of his sections on family, Aristote gave the following norm for the sexual activity of the married man: As regards sexual intercourse, a man ought not to accustom himself not to need it at all nor to be unable to enjoy it, when it is lacking, but so as to be the content with or without it. (Economics, 1:4, 1344 a75).

Although all can readily perceive the advantages to person and society of the attainment of this type of sexual maturity—to be directed in one's act by a well-formed emotion rather than an erection, a truly free man as opposed to a slave—perhaps neither the teaching of an ancient Jewish religion nor an ancient Greek rationalism is sufficient for contemporary ears. It may be reassuring, therefore, to close with the testimony of a twentieth century feminist, a pioneer in the popularization of modern contraception, Margaret Sanger's intellectual counterpart, Britisher Marie Stopes, who was an advocate of periodic abstinence. Dr. Stopes, on the basis of her estimate of the woman's "wave crests" of desire (the mid-menses, a time of fertility, and the pre-menses, a time of absolute sterility), repeatedly urged fortnightly abstinence:

... the two should find a perfect mutual adjustment in having fortnightly unions.

A fortnight is not too long for a healthy man to restrain himself. And further: It should never be forgotten that without the discipline of self-control there is no lasting delight in erotic feeling. The fullest delight, even in a purely physical sense, can be obtained only by those who curb and direct their natural impulses. (Married Love, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1931, pp. 53, 56, 60).