

CHANGING PASTORAL EMPHASES ON THE PRACTICE OF PERIODIC CONTINENCE

Ever since the question became medically, and therefore theologically, a practical matter, the moral theology of periodic continence as a means of controlling or avoiding conception has remained substantially free of theological controversy. From the beginning theologians have always been in general agreement that married couples could legitimately make use of the so-called rhythm method provided only that both husband and wife were willing and able so to restrict their exercise of marital rights, and provided that they could in addition indicate sufficient reason for delaying or avoiding conception. The theological theory of periodic continence, therefore, has long been established and is substantially uncomplicated by disagreements or disputes among recognized theologians.

The same serenity, however, does not characterize the pastoral scene. Particularly among priests in the ministry, and to a considerable extent also even among professional theologians, the enormous diversity of pastoral attitudes toward this matter has long since become for the faithful a cause of extreme confusion and even grave scandal. Even today there are parish priests and priest authors whose pastoral thinking as regards periodic continence remains congealed in that mold which was first cast nearly a hundred years ago by the Sacred Penitentiary when that Congregation predicated its "*caute insinuari potest*" of the use of rhythm by couples who might otherwise resort to sinful onanism. There are priests who still look with hostile suspicion, or worse, on any married couple who might inquire as to the licitness of periodic continence in order to delay or avoid pregnancy—priests who at any suggestion of family limitation or fertility control, even by this most licit method, are immediately and instinctively provoked to angry accusations and denunciations of selfishness, materialism, distrust in God's providence, etc. These are pastoral attitudes which, I submit, are obsolete—if indeed they were ever tolerable as modes of pastoral thought.

It would seem that those of us who are responsible for the training of future priests, and those of us who may be in a position to influence the pastoral thinking of priests already in the ministry, have a serious obligation to exercise that influence wherever necessary and possible in order to eradicate, if we can, certain false notions which are so prevalent and to prevent, if we can, any further propagation of those false notions among priests of the future.

This is an undertaking which threatens to be as difficult as it is serious. Many a priest will continue to refuse to make pastoral concession in this matter beyond that "*caute insinuari potest*" of the last century. Many of the devout laity will no doubt profess to be scandalized at any suggestion that in some instances limitation of family size through periodic continence may be not only permissible but also in prudence highly advisable—or perhaps in some cases even morally imperative as an exercise of obligatory virtue. It may prove extremely difficult for us to communicate to certain husbands and wives that power of delicate discrimination which on the one hand can appreciate parenthood's sacred privilege of giving life to future citizens of heaven, and which on the other hand can humbly acknowledge the fact that their own supernatural vocations as husbands, wives, and parents can in some instances best be fulfilled by limiting their families to a greater or less extent by methods which are morally permissible. These are some of the obstacles and calculated risks involved in a process of re-education which I believe people in our position must undertake for the benefit of clergy and laity alike.

PASTORAL EVOLUTION OF THE QUESTION

From the middle of the nineteenth century up to the time of *Casti connubii*, the theology of periodic continence was more or less in process of gestation. The Sacred Penitentiary in 1853 had assured the bishop of Amiens that those who with good reason were practicing rhythm as it was understood (incorrectly) at that time were not to be disturbed in conscience as long as they were doing nothing onanistically to prevent conception. Almost thirty years later the same Congregation issued the response, already referred to, which

repeated the "inquietandi non sunt" as regards those who were practicing periodic continence, and added the "caute insinuari potest" for the benefit of confessors dealing with penitents who might otherwise have recourse to sinful onanism. But chiefly perhaps because of the lack of reliable medical information regarding the human ovulatory cycle, the moral question of rhythm was allowed to lie virtually dormant for the ensuing fifty years. Although many manuals treated the topic, and though there was general agreement that the practice of rhythm was licit provided that sufficient reason could be adduced for avoiding pregnancy, there was not enough knowledge of or interest in the question to provoke detailed discussion among theologians.

Several events of 1929-30 combined to revive theological interest in the question of periodic continence. (1) Almost simultaneously, but independently, Knaus and Ogino published the results of their findings with regard to the cycle of human ovulation. (2) The Seventh Lambeth Conference reversed the traditional teaching of the Church of England with respect to contraception. (3) Pius XI wrote the encyclical *Casti connubii* with its passing reference to the licitness of making use of marriage during the sterile periods. (However, that one statement by Pius XI was not entirely devoid of ambiguity, and it was not until 1958 that, thanks to Pius XII, we could be altogether certain that the practice referred to by Pius XI was the practice of periodic continence as now understood.)

Under the impetus of these several incidents, theological discussion of rhythm became standard material in the manuals and the periodic literature. And despite a number of disagreements on what might be called peripheral matters, the substance of our moral theology soon jelled into a solid unity of doctrine maintaining that for those husbands and wives who are truly able and willing to restrict conjugal relations to the sterile periods, the use of rhythm to avoid conception is licit, provided that sufficient reason can be adduced for postponing or avoiding pregnancy. But through it all there persisted in most quarters that original note of caution as regards communicating this theological information to the faithful—a caution which in some instances at the pastoral level was allowed

to degenerate from genuine prudence into base timidity and even at times into theological dishonesty.

Partial explanation for this regrettable fact may possibly be found in the 1944 condemnation of those who questioned the primacy of procreation and education among the several ends of marriage. Theirs was perhaps the inevitable reaction—unhappily exaggerated—to an antecedent theological attitude which stressed the biological and juridical aspects of marriage at considerable sacrifice of the concept of a love-union whose most intimate self-expression is the procreational act. But in any event, the twenty-odd years between *Casti connubii* and the allocution to the midwives found the standard authors still treating quite gingerly the pastoral aspects of periodic continence. The “caute insinuari potest” was still at least implicit in most of what they wrote.

Even after the publication of the allocution to the midwives, most of us continued pastorally to lag to a considerable extent. Perhaps that self-criticism, as a product of hindsight, is overly harsh; but it seems presently that we spent altogether too much time restating an already established moral theology of rhythm which the allocution merely confirmed, and remained too long oblivious of the lengthy step forward which Pius XII had taken on that occasion. Why, for example, when we were discussing the various categories of reasons justifying recourse to periodic continence, did we not stress sooner than was done that Pius had stated that such reasons are *frequently* verified among married people? Or that in his address to the Family Front a month later Pius delineated as “indeed quite broad” the grave motives of the prior allocution? Why was not more emphasis put sooner on Pius’ professed reason for his original discussion of periodic continence, viz., his desire “to put an end to the anxieties of conscience of many Christians”? And as Frs. Ford and Kelly have pointed out with respect to that old refrain of “caute insinuari potest”:

[Pius] did not discuss in so many words the prudence of publicizing periodic continence as a lawful method of family limitation. But the fact that he himself was discussing it publicly, in the vernacular, to a group of laywomen, and later returned to the topic before a nonprofessional audience of

both men and women, with world-wide newspaper publicity given to both these addresses, is a sufficient indication that he considered it prudent and desirable that the general public be instructed about periodic continence. Prudence obviously requires that this instruction of the public be accurate, serious, and adapted to the capacities of the audience, in order to avoid misunderstandings and abuses. But the "cautious insinuation" of the safe period which was the prudent course suggested to confessors by the Sacred Penitentiary one hundred years ago can no longer be considered the only norm of prudent procedure today. Premarital and marital instructions are incomplete today without clear instructions on the morality of periodic continence. (J. C. Ford, S.J., and G. Kelly, S.J., "Periodic Continence," *Theological Studies* 23 [Dec., 1962] 590-624 at 602.)

In the twelve years that have passed since the allocution to the midwives, several factors have concurred to make the general public more than ever before receptive to the concept of birth control, as that term is understood in its broadest sense, inclusive of both licit and illicit methods of regulating conception. At the secular level there has been an increasing concern over population expansion, particularly as it exists in certain critical areas of the world. That problem—exaggerated perhaps in some quarters, but ridiculously underestimated in others—is inextricably linked with the question of population control. One may seriously doubt how effective a solution of the population problem birth control would be—i.e., any method of birth control short of mass sterilization of a compulsory kind. But the fact nonetheless remains that in the minds of demographers, sociologists, and the public generally, birth control of one kind or another is considered to be of the essence of any discussion of the population crisis.

Then we have seen the development of the oral contraceptives to a point where they are apparently proven effective for their contraceptive purpose and as yet not proven to be seriously harmful to health. It is estimated that gross sales of the oral contraceptives will this year total some twenty-five million dollars as compared to last year's eighteen million. Add to this medical fact the almost total confusion which up to now exists among the laity, and even

among many of the clergy, as to what is licit and what illicit in the use of "the pill"—a confusion worse confounded by the writings and public statements of professedly Catholic Dr. John Rock.

At the theological level there has been renewed and increasing concern in the practical implications of "responsible parenthood." (The term itself is perhaps of Protestant origin, but the concept behind the term certainly should not be unfamiliar to the Catholic pastoral theologian). This trend of thought has necessarily led to reconsideration of the several ends of matrimony and to consequent replacing of emphasis on certain most important phases of our theology of marriage which previously had been to great extent neglected at the pastoral level. More and more often at the present time we are being reminded that the primary end of marriage is not the single purpose of procreation but rather a duality: procreation *and* education. It is also being brought to our attention that education must be understood in its plenary sense—not only as a matter of formal schooling but as the total upbringing of the total child, a responsibility which entails at least a continuing sufficiency of parental love and care, patience and providence, exercised in favor of each and every child within the family.

We very frequently hear it said—often less thoughtfully than it should be said—that the large family is the Christian ideal. However, this maxim is not universally applicable to each individual marriage; it obtains in truth only in circumstances wherein the decent raising of a large family is reasonably possible. Certainly it is nobody's ideal to have families, large or small, born and raised in an environment which precludes the reasonable expectation of their being reared in a manner consistent with Christian dignity. This observation is made in no criticism of parents whose extraordinary love, industry, and self-sacrifice enable them to overcome severe handicaps in their successful efforts to bring up large families properly. Nor does it imply that only the wealthy are justified in having many children. But it does call attention again to the fact that the adequate education of children—education again in its plenary sense—is no less an essential responsibility of marriage than is their procreation, and that magnitude of family size is not of itself necessarily indicative of parental virtue in the objective order.

Catholic writers are likewise in a sense "rediscovering" the so-called secondary ends of marriage, and stressing as they should the fact that, secondary though they are, they are also of the essence of marriage and of an importance not to be minimized. Particularly with regard to the mutual fostering of conjugal love, these writers are intent on restoring to its rightful place in the hierarchy of matrimonial ends the duty and right of husband and wife to discharge their vocational responsibilities to each other as well as to their children. While we may not invert the proper order of the several ends of marriage, no orthodox theology of marriage can ignore or disparage the personalist values of the conjugal state.

It is not only theologians who are thinking and writing along the lines I have briefly indicated. Increasing numbers of the more thoughtful laity are beginning to realize this plenitude of marital responsibility. These are not selfish, materialistic people distrustful of divine providence. They are intelligently devout people, sincerely desirous of living their vocation of marriage in all its supernatural fullness and increasingly aware of the fact that it is not by procreation alone that this goal is to be achieved. They are not seeking to be relieved of parental responsibility. Rather they are looking for the surest way of best discharging this responsibility in all its total complexity—responsibility for the proper upbringing of their children and their mutual responsibility of supernaturally efficacious love for each other. Theirs is not distrust of divine providence, but rather a dawning realization that reasonable trust in God must, whenever possible, be supplemented with human prudence lest trust degenerate into rash presumption.

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

What does the accumulation of all these factors add up to in relation to proper pastoral attitudes on the matter of periodic continence?

First of all, it would seem that we should make a serious attempt to impart to our seminarians, and also to priests who in one way or another may come under our influence, a more realistic awareness of what it means to bring up properly a family of any size—

what it means economically in this country at present, and what it means in terms of demands upon the physical and psychological stamina of parents, especially of mothers. It is true that the graces peculiar to the sacrament and the state of matrimony must include a special ability to cope with children twenty-four hours a day and seven days per week from the earliest diaper stage on through the boisterous teens. But those sacramental graces, efficaciously helpful as they certainly are, do not alter the fact that caring for children is extremely hard work, and that for some it can be physically and psychologically exhausting work. We can easily over-romanticize the patter of little feet and forget that sometimes in reality it is the clatter of little hoofs that is heard in the chambers above, below, and adjacent.

In other words, in our appraisal of reasons sufficient to justify periodic continence—especially as practiced temporarily by those who want merely to space pregnancies at reasonable intervals—it would be pastorally calamitous if we looked always for reasons equivalent to certain peril of death or of economic disaster. If we keep in mind the total complexity of the several essential ends of marriage, it should not to my mind be difficult to conclude in logical and theological truth that the average couple of normal fertility over the average span of married life can virtually always adduce more than sufficient reason for at least periodic recourse to periodic continence.

As moral and pastoral theologians we should not allow ourselves to remain preoccupied with what in relatively rare instances may be sinful in the decision to practice rhythm. It is time to devote ourselves more to discovering and communicating to others, including those of the laity who want and need this assurance, all that can be and often is genuinely virtuous in the practice of periodic continence.

Further I would suggest that we are pastorally deficient to a serious degree if, in dealing with genuine problems of threatened "overpopulation" within a given family, we content ourselves with the admonition, "Trust in God and don't practice contraception," with the addition perhaps of the dubiously helpful advice to "see

a Catholic doctor." There is perhaps nothing that we as priests can do to fulfill in a scientific way Pius XII's express wish for the development of a completely reliable method of periodic continence. But we may be able to give considerably more encouragement to those who are qualified to search out that scientific solution, if any exists. There is money available for research along these lines; yet several of our Catholic universities rejected the offer of such grants before Georgetown University recently accepted the project which is now in process of implementation. As one Catholic biochemist remarked recently, "The attitude seems to be that work in this field is still not respectable."

On the brighter side it might be mentioned that for almost two years now the Christian Family Life Bureau in the diocese of Buffalo has operated a Family Life Clinic. Diocesan funds provided a medical office and waiting rooms; twenty Catholic gynecologists in turn contribute an evening of their time and services gratuitously; members of the diocesan clergy rotate as on-the-spot spiritual counsellors; over five hundred married couples have availed themselves of the services of the clinic which offers the medical aid and follow-up supervision necessary for the intelligent practice of periodic continence; reports from doctors and patients have been generally most gratifying. Perhaps there are other such clinics around the country, but my own experience is thus far limited to that in Buffalo. It is this sort of positive encouragement and practical assistance that we owe our Catholic people if we truly want to protect the weak among them from the blandishments of Planned Parenthood and to facilitate for all who look to us for help the total fulfillment of their vocation to marriage and parenthood.

JOHN J. LYNCH, S.J.
Weston College
Weston, Mass.