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Official Statement on Rhythm

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IN HIS DISCOURSE to Italian midwives (Oct. 29, 1951) Pope Pius XII spoke at some length on the morality of using rhythm as a means of family limitation. It is my purpose here to outline what he said on this subject, then to compare his remarks with the article, "Morality of Rhythm," which is published in *Medico-Moral Problems*, II, 26-31.

What the Pope Said

The Pope opened the third part of his discourse by exhorting the midwives to try to inspire married women with an appreciative love of motherhood. Realizing, however, that many women would want to avoid children, the Holy Father pointed out to the midwives their duty to know the teaching of the Church on the moral aspects of family limitation. He recalled the official pronouncements against contraceptive practices and that more far-reaching form of contraception, direct sterilization.

As regards the scientific aspect of rhythm, he said it is expected that midwives should know this and be able to instruct others either verbally or by means of serious professional publications. On the juridical side, he posed a question familiar to canonists; is a marriage valid if the parties contract it with the intention of limiting intercourse to the sterile periods? And his answer to the question was given with a distinction that is also familiar to canonists. The marriage would be invalid if the parties intended to restrict the *right* to intercourse to those periods, because this would mean that they were not giving a *perpetual* right, which is essential to the contract. If, however, they merely intended to restrict their *use* of the marriage act to the sterile periods, the marriage would be valid; but this intention would be licit only according to the principles governing the use of rhythm.

In a final preliminary statement, the Pope pointed out that there can be no moral problem in the use of marriage during the sterile periods, when the use is not limited to those periods. For intercourse had at these periods is in itself a natural act and nothing is done by the parties themselves to frustrate its natural consequences. The moral problem, therefore, arises only when intercourse is restricted to the sterile periods. This is the problem ordinarily meant when we speak of using rhythm. The Pope then

proceeded to give the first official papal statement on the morality of this procedure.

The very nature of their state, said the Holy Father, imposes on married people who choose to exercise the marital act the duty of making some contribution to the preservation of the race. This duty is not sufficiently fulfilled (i. e., when the marriage act is restricted to the sterile periods) merely by placing the act in a natural manner, with the willingness to accept children if they are conceived. On the other hand, as an affirmative duty (i. e., a duty to do something), it admits of excuse for proportionately serious reasons. The habitual use of rhythm without such reasons is a sin against the duty to contribute to the preservation of the race.

Speaking of the reasons that might justify rhythm, the Holy Father referred to the "so-called indications" of a medical, eugenic, economic, or social nature. Obviously he had in mind the conditions that are sometimes proposed as "indications" for therapeutic abortion, contraception, or sterilization. The Church has consistently asserted that, since these acts are intrinsically immoral, there can never be any "indication" to justify them. But the Pope here suggests that these same reasons might sometimes be sufficiently serious to exempt married people from the duty of having children, and thus afford a justification for the use of rhythm for a long time or even throughout married life.

Such are the general principles concerning the morality of using rhythm. Having stated them, Pius XII then referred to extreme cases in which sound medical reasons absolutely contraindicate pregnancy and the use of rhythm is not feasible. In such cases, he said, the parties are not to be counseled, much less commanded, to run the risk of pregnancy. (In saying this, he hardly intended to say that the married people themselves would never be justified in running such a risk after they had prayerfully considered the matter). Even in these extreme cases, they are not to be aided in any of the intrinsically evil practices. The only permissible way of avoiding the risk is continuous abstinence from intercourse—a course of action which, though truly heroic, is certainly possible with the grace of God.

The foregoing is a digest of the Pope's statement on rhythm, as contained in the third part of his address to the midwives. About a month later (Nov. 26), in an address to the National Congress of the 'Family Front,' he again pointed to the essential difference between rhythm and contraceptive methods, and added: "One may even hope (but in this matter the Church naturally leaves the judgment to medical science) that science will succeed in providing this licit method with a sufficiently secure basis, and the most recent information seems to confirm such a hope."

Comparison with Article

I should like now to make a brief comparison between the Pope's remarks and the article, "Morality of Rhythm," in *Medico-Moral Problems*, II 26-31. The article is divided into three sections: (1) points on which theologians agree; (2) points of disagreement; and (3) some conclusions for doctors. The first and third parts are not affected by the papal pronouncement—except in the sense that much of what is said in these sections is explicitly confirmed by the words of the Holy Father. The material in these two sections is extremely valuable for doctors, and I would encourage them to read and re-read them.

The second section of the article outlines two points of controversy among theologians: the *reason why* the practice of rhythm, without justifying cause, is sinful; and the *gravity* of the sin. Both points should be carefully scrutinized in the light of the recent papal statement.

As regards the first point, there were many theologians who held that married couples have no positive duty to procreate. This opinion will no doubt become obsolete, because it is not consonant with these words of the Holy Father: ". . . matrimony obliges to a state of life which, while carrying with it certain rights, also imposes the fulfillment of a positive work connected with that state of life. . . The matrimonial contract, which confers upon the parties the right to satisfy the inclination of nature, constitutes them in a state of life, the state of matrimony. Now, upon the parties who make use of this right by the specific act of their state, nature and the Creator impose the function of providing for the conservation of the human race. This is the characteristic contribution from which their state of life derives its peculiar value: *bonum prolis*—the blessing of offspring."

As regards the second point of controversy, the majority of theologians held that the practice of rhythm, without sufficient reason, is not in itself seriously sinful, but it would be seriously sinful only by reason of special circumstances—e.g. *injustice*, if one party would unjustifiably impose it on the other; and *unwarranted danger*, if the practice of, or attempt to practice, the rhythm would involve the unjustifiable and serious danger of incontinence, discord, or divorce. A minority opinion held that the use of rhythm, without serious reasons, would in itself be a serious sin if continued over the space of five or six years.

Some proponents of this minority opinion have evidently concluded that Pius XII has "settled" this controversy in their favor. To me, and to several very competent theologians with whom I have discussed this matter, this seems a hasty conclusion. It is true, we believe, that the papal statement calls for some modification in what was formerly the majority opinion. The

Pope definitely said that married people who exercise their marital rights have a positive duty to provide for the conservation of the human race. He called this a primary duty, a duty expressing the very meaning of conjugal life, a duty very important to society, a duty that calls for serious reasons to exempt from it. It is hard to reconcile these statements with the opinion that the practice of rhythm can be mortally sinful only by reason of special circumstances of injustice or danger. In this sense, therefore, the majority view needs some modification.

But it is one thing to say that the practice of rhythm, without serious reasons, *can be* a serious violation of the duty to procreate; and it is quite another thing to say that the gravity of the violation is to be measured in terms of five or six years. The Pope did not assert this time rule; and it is at least debatable whether he even implied it.

One proponent of the time rule claims that it is implied in the following words of the Holy Father: "Therefore, to embrace the married state, continuously to make use of the faculty proper to it and lawful in it alone, and, on the other hand, to withdraw always and deliberately with no serious reason from its primary obligation, would be a sin against the very meaning of conjugal life." To some theologians (including myself) this passage refers, not to the practice of the rhythm over any given period of time, but rather to the total or almost total shirking of the duty of parenthood: e.g., by completely avoiding a family or by limiting the family to one or two children, when serious reasons do not call for such limitation. We do not propose this interpretation as certain; but we believe it is of at least equal merit with the view that any given length of time would constitute a mortal sin. Moreover, we believe that the point should be carefully discussed by theologians before any practical rule is publicized.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I should like merely to indicate one topic that will very likely become the object of interesting and profitable discussion, now that the Pope has definitely stated that married people who use their rights have a positive duty to contribute to the preservation of the human race. The question now arises: is this duty in itself a limited one, or is it limited only by the existence of one or more of the serious reasons that justify the practice of rhythm?

An example will clarify the point of discussion. Suppose a married couple, leading a normal married life, could have ten children during the space of their childbearing years. Would such a couple be justified in using rhythm, without any of the justifying reasons mentioned by the Pope, in order to limit their family to four or five children?

Before indicating the possible trend of answers to the question, let me make it perfectly clear that the problem concerns only the matter of *duty*. If this couple is healthy, if childbirth offers no exceptional danger to the mother and no special danger of defective offspring, if there is no special difficulty about housing, educating, supporting the large family—then certainly it is in keeping with sound Catholic *idealism* to have the large family of ten (or more) children.

The problem, therefore, concerns merely the duty; and specifically the duty of "providing for the conservation of the human race." Is this duty limited only by the excusing causes mentioned by the Pope; or is it, independently of these causes, limited to the making of a *reasonable* or *average* contribution to the preservation of the race?

If only the *words* of the Pope are considered, one might argue, I think that, for those who choose to exercise their marriage rights, the only limitation on the duty to procreate is to be found in the serious reasons of a medical, eugenic, social, or economic nature. Consequently, in the absence of these reasons, the couple who can have ten children by leading a normal sexual life are not justified in using rhythm to limit their family to less than that number.

On the other hand, if the duty to procreate is considered in the light of similar obligations toward society, as well as toward one's neighbor, it is in itself limited. It would bind each couple to make an ordinary, or an average, contribution in terms of the population needs. This would mean that every fertile couple that chooses to use their marriage rights should have a family of perhaps four or five children, if they can, because that seems to be approximately the number required of each couple in order to make proper provision for the population needs.

If the second interpretation of the duty to procreate were taken as a sort of working norm of obligation, it would allow for the following practical rules: To have more than four or five children is an ideal which should be encouraged. To use the rhythm to limit the family to four or five children is permissible, even without special excusing causes, provided both parties are willing and able to practice it. To use rhythm to limit the family to less than four children requires one of the justifying reasons mentioned by the Pope.

I would favor the second interpretation. But I would not propose it as certain. And, even supposing that the general idea of a limited duty to procreate were certain, I would not say that the norm I have suggested here—four or five children—is not open to debate.