

# Family Limitation

## *A Catholic Doctor's View*

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Within a very short time of entering the practice of medicine most Catholic doctors realize that by far the biggest single issue facing them in the arena of moral and professional responsibility is contraception. What may still be for us a controversial issue is a settled matter for our non-Catholic colleagues and almost a universal practice for our patients. As a community, Catholics have the tendency to protect themselves from disagreeable facts either by denying their existence or entertaining the most naïve notions about them. This is an outlook which hitherto has spelled disaster in our handling of this problem.

We can begin a useful reassessment by examining the size of this problem. One of the studies of the Royal Commission on Population in 1949 was devoted to the subject of family limitation. They took a representative sample of married women, covering all parts of the country and the years of marriage from 1900 to 1947. The following facts emerge. Before 1910, the percentage of women who used birth control was 15%; in the thirties it had risen to a figure of 66%. I would go further than this and suggest for practical purposes we have to accept to-day the fact that almost all childbearing couples at some time resort to some form of birth control. The only reasons for its exclusion in marital life appear to be religious opposition, sheer ignorance and, rarely, aesthetic considerations. It is a practice accepted as sensible and practical, and to entertain an alternative demands in itself an explanation and evidence of sanity from the person who proposes such a contrary view. What about Catholics? This same report gives an incidence since 1935 of about 20% using methods condemned by the Church. In a series of a hundred and fifty couples known to me personally, the use of illegitimate means was nearly 50%. Every priest who spends any time in the confessional is aware of the widespread prevalence of this evil. Of course neither priest nor doctor has any accurate knowledge of how many people are living their lives outside the faith because of this particular difficulty. Whatever the actual number may be, the size of the problem is clearly one which should be a constant challenge to our conscience.

What is the history of birth control? From the dawn of time, men and women have had the means of avoiding conception and, in the presence of a life, have tried to abort it. Until very recent times, the only common method was the means by which the man interrupted the sexual act and completed its climax outside the body of his partner, or 'coitus interruptus.' For the last hundred and fifty years but particularly the last fifty, there have been an increasing number of mechanical, chemical and now recently hormonal means designed for the deliberate exclusion of fertilization. As far as the Church is concerned, all these methods are intrinsically evil. By this it is meant, and it is very important to remember this, that they are wrong not because the Church says so and therefore the admonition confined to Catholics, but wrong in themselves and for anyone who uses them. What is the evil in question? This is simply the deliberate interference with the normal and complete function of the whole sexual act. Up to the early thirties, the only means available to Catholics with which family limitation could be accomplished was total abstinence and this was the advice given. At about this time, Ogino and Knauss, working quite independently, produced evidence suggesting that a woman can only normally conceive on a certain number of days each month. These days can be carefully assessed and, if sexual relations are avoided during this period, conception is unlikely to take place. The 'safe' or infertile period thus came into being. The development of the next phase has to be seen in retrospect in two ways. First, through the eyes of the Church and secondly, in the response of the doctors and scientists.

In any examination of birth prevention, we have to remember that we are dealing with a complicated subject, which involves the whole concept of the role that sex plays in the Christian life in general, and marriage in particular. From the very early days of the history of the Church, we find an unwillingness to expand on the subject of sexual experience except in the context of repeatedly warning the faithful of its dangers, real and imaginary. Spiritual writers and practice developed the main theme of man's purpose in this world which was to know, serve, and love God. In this scheme, the priesthood and virginity were considered to be the ideal means by which, while still living in this world, complete detachment for uninterrupted service to God can be obtained. Whereas the sacramental nature of marriage was maintained and emphasized, there was much opposition by some of the early Fathers, to the sexual act as a source of pleasure. Indeed St Augustine

maintained<sup>1</sup> that even in marriage sexual intercourse was at least venially sinful unless accompanied by an intention to procreate. This view, although no longer generally accepted in the sense St Augustine seems to have meant, has coloured the tone and outlook of the meaning the sexual act has within marriage. The impression has thus been gained that even the legitimate use of the sexual act is no more than a concession to those who have accepted the second best because of their weakness. It is therefore not surprising to find that when the Church was at long last in possession of a moral means of birth prevention she approved this particular method in principle but her support was tepid and her encouragement limited.

In this atmosphere, one disaster followed another in the use of the safe period. In their enthusiasm, medical authors, with good intentions but incorrect data, gave descriptions about the method which were inaccurate and led to frequent failures. No adequate enquiries were carried out to find out exactly what this method offered and the accurate means of using it. It is no surprise therefore that in a short time the method fell into disrepute, becoming a joke in the medical profession and a sad disillusionment for those Christians who tried to use it. In the meanwhile the second world war intervened and finally in 1945 the world began to settle down to a vastly different society with shortages of all descriptions and the need for some means of family limitation more imperative than ever.

In 1951 the late Holy Father made a very important pronouncement, which even now is little realized. He said, 'Both the individual and society, the people and the state and the Church itself, depend for their existence on the order which God has established in fruitful marriage . . . Serious reasons often put forward on medical, eugenic, economic and social grounds can exempt from that obligatory service for a considerable period of time, even for the entire duration of marriage. It follows from this that the use of the infertile period can be lawful from the moral point of view and, in the circumstances mentioned, is indeed lawful.' This pronouncement can thus be considered a vital turning point, and these carefully chosen words the signal for a fresh examination of the whole question. Of course, although this is a very authoritative and explicitly clear statement, personal opinion and outlook cannot be expected to change with equivalent speed. For many people, both priests and married couples, this is a subject which still provokes strong feelings of discomfort and uneasiness. On one side, the clergy as a result of

<sup>1</sup>*De bono conjugali*, cap 6

their training and background feel embarrassed and handicapped in any full exploration of the subject; on the other, married couples, uncertain about the Church's attitude, equally embarrassed by the subject but hard pressed by personal circumstances, reach a point of desperation. To meet these needs, and as part of the expansion of the lay apostolate, the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council provides a service in this field among its other functions. It offers expert advice on this subject by lay people, usually doctors, who are also familiar with the spiritual issues. This has made it far easier for married couples to seek help and it has also meant that the advice given is based on expert knowledge and is unlikely to lead to failure. Welcome though the papal announcement is, and the C.M.A.C. as an agency to put it into effect, the full use of the infertile period will ultimately depend on the attitude of people towards the sexual act. So long as priests, doctors and married couples visualize sexuality within marriage in terms of forbidden fruit then it will inevitably mean looking on the safe period as yet another concession in a situation where already too many exist. Without a proper understanding of the meaning of the sexual act, the exact status of the infertile period in Christian marriage is uncertain and becomes a matter of whimsical interpretation.

It is a matter for the theologian to assess and develop the spiritual status of this act. In this article a tentative outline is offered for consideration. Although without any shadow of doubt, the single state dedicated to the service of God, either through the priesthood or religious profession, is an extremely meritorious one and has precedence over the married state, we cannot ignore the fact that for 99% of the Church the vocation of the faithful lies elsewhere. What this means is that after careful consideration, prayer and guidance, an individual seeks to serve God in some other capacity, and this usually involves the sacrament of marriage. This then becomes their vocation and the instrument of love, perfection and sanctity. But this holiness must thrive with sex in its midst for it must be remembered that the sacrament of marriage is the conferring of the rights of one's body to one's spouse. All else is added to this and without it there is no marriage and no sacrament. For nearly two thousand years the words of St Paul have been there for our guidance. 'For this shall man leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall be one flesh. The mystery here is great indeed. I mean in reference to Christ and to the Church.' What the Apostle has done is to draw a very close analogy between the intimate union of Christ and his Church and that of husband and wife in the sexual act.

Furthermore, if we consider the consequences of this act we can see its tremendous significance. Here God has implanted in man and woman the ability to come together and from one act of love to initiate the existence of another human being bearing the image of God. He could have done this in a thousand and one ways but it was his intention to reward human beings by releasing through this act a flood of spiritual, emotional and physical love. The word spiritual is used because, as far as I can see, the sexual act in marriage is a recurrent act of prayer of the spouses offering themselves in perfect unity to God, at the same time forming one of the avenues by which sacramental grace can enrich and strengthen their marriage. Emotionally, it means the union of two people in the complete abandonment of one to the other which is the essence of love. Last but not least, there is a flood of physical excitement in which the biological part of man, in step with his other experiences, completes the unity of the act.

Against this background, the safe period can now be examined in more detail. Ogino and Knauss discovered that the monthly event of ovulation is a predictable one. The evidence on which the hypothesis rests is innumerable examinations of the genital tract for the presence of ova during surgical procedures for some independent pathology. The timing and period of viability are related to the next monthly period. Furthermore, studies of thousands of cases have established a clear relationship between ovulation and body temperature which, if accurately recorded during each month, will show distinctive changes both before and after ovulation. Having established an exact timing for ovulation, all that is required to be known is the duration of viability of the ovum and the sperm. These have also been extensively examined *in vivo* and found to have a short and predictable life span. With this information available, accurate calculation of the infertile period can be made. There are two main reasons for opposing the use of this method. Those who disagree with its use maintain that it is unreliable. An examination of the world literature on the subject does not support this fear. Extensive studies give figures of success in the region of 90%. This however depends on receiving expert advice and following it scrupulously. An incredible amount of folklore surrounds the details of this method and in these circumstances it is not surprising to find frequent failures. Another aspect which comes under criticism is the belief that the period of abstinence invariably coincides with the period of the greatest sexual need of the wife. Recent papers from non-Catholic sources categorically deny this belief and this view accords with our experience. Finally we

should consider what are the indications for the use of the infertile period. Following the division in the papal pronouncement into temporary and permanent use, theologians have considered the different circumstances applying to each. In the first category have been placed frequent pregnancies, the period immediately after a pregnancy, illness of a temporary nature and economic difficulties. For the permanent use, anticipated grave complications to the mother from a further pregnancy, incurable hereditary disease, and the impossibility of supporting further children are justifiable reasons.

In the presence of a reliable method of family limitation and with the basis of its use outlined, a comparison can be made between it and all other, condemned methods. This is very important because non-Catholics frequently protest that the infertile period is a dishonest stratagem allowing Catholics the freedom of using something which they readily condemn in others. When we try to defend ourselves from this accusation the resulting confusion is considerable. We find ourselves saying that the safe period is permissible because it is 'natural' and all other methods are wrong because they are not. If however we can now agree that both Catholics and non-Catholics are entitled under certain circumstances to limit, temporarily or permanently, the size of their families, what really matters is to define these conditions and to exclude evil means. The words 'good' and 'evil' are not synonymous with 'natural' and 'unnatural,' and the sooner these words make an exit from this discussion the better. What divides Catholic from non-Catholic practice is that the devices used by the latter interfere with the normal function of what God has designed in his eternal wisdom the act to be. It is neither God's nor the Church's intention that every act of sexual love should produce a child. Furthermore it is not expected of any married couple that they should love each other only with the explicit intention of procreating. The other two purposes of marriage besides procreation are the sacramental grace that flows from the state (and I have already indicated how this can be enhanced from the sexual act), and mutual love and fidelity. It is self-evident how love through sex can foster this. The safe period is designed to avoid procreation and with this intention there is no dispute provided the circumstances are legitimate. The means used however neither offend God, by insulting the nature of the act which he designed so lovingly and perfectly, nor do they offend the dignity of the human body which is the temple of God. But between these two different methods, there is in the long run a difference of much greater significance. The use of the infertile period requires a period of absten-

tion of between ten to fifteen days each month. During this period, two people, who love one another very much, freely and of their own accord, sacrifice and offer their mutual love to God. This is a source of grace as well as the means of bringing them much closer together, both physically and psychologically. Their love for each other grows and at the end of this period of abstinence, they come to one another strengthened and with their love renewed. Here we have the chief characteristic of the infertile period, namely sacrifice, and the opportunity for the growth of love. Both these qualities lie at the very centre of Christian life. On the other side of the picture, the governing principle for all birth control methods is the demand for immediate satisfaction and the complete absence of sacrifice. One method offers the means by which marital love can grow; all others fulfil a selfish satisfaction in, and very often outside, marriage. When we offer our non-Catholic friends this real and important difference, we are both talking in the universal language of love which is well understood and appreciated.

What then is the part that family limitation can play in the life of Christian marriage? It must be stated clearly and unequivocally that no greater privilege can be given to a married couple than to co-operate with Almighty God in bringing forth a new life. This is the primary purpose of marriage and in this end there can be no radical change. Bringing a child into the world however is only the beginning. It imposes a tremendous responsibility on the parents and it must not be forgotten that they live in the middle of the twentieth century. Every age has its own peculiar difficulties. Ours seem to be acute international strife and economic and social stresses. A child needs to be housed, fed and loved and, although in some parts of the country these provide no serious difficulties, there are many places in Great Britain and in other parts of the world where the opposite obtains. People marry younger to-day and for the first few years of their marriage they are struggling economically. As we discover more and more the factors that contribute to health and stability, we are becoming increasingly aware of the young child's need of a stable and loving environment which only his parents can provide. This demands in turn parents who are healthy, stable and relatively free from worry. The nine months of pregnancy imposes on the healthiest of women a physical and psychological strain, which is made no easier by the subsequent demands of a young baby. With the modern shortage of domestic help, to ignore a period of necessary recuperation is, to say the least, an act of calculated indifference. In addition we now know of a number of conditions which medically will threaten



the life of the mother and the health of the unborn child. In the face of such clear indications, further procreation seems to me to be an outrage against charity. Procreation is the first thing that God demands of any couple but it is certainly not the only thing.

It is possible that legitimate reasons will be misused, false ones created and an order of values developed which are so misguided that the Self with capital letters becomes the moral standard of conduct. If the refrigerator, the motor car, the continental holiday and full-time employment for the wife after marriage become the substitutes for children this is wrong and must be condemned. Far more often one is dealing with a conscientious Christian couple trying to know, love and serve God to the best of their ability. In this article it is suggested that given the right indications Christian marriage in these circumstances is compatible with the use of family limitation both temporarily and permanently as an end which is good in itself.

# Dogmatism Without Authority

*An examination of the critical method of*

*Yvor Winters*

ELIZABETH JENNINGS

This is the study of an anomaly, an inquiry into a paradox. It is an examination of how and why the apparently unexceptionable tenets and standards of one very distinguished literary critic can so often lead him to the most erroneous conclusions.

Yvor Winters is an American, a man who has had a formative influence on a number of young poets in the United States but who, until very recently, was almost unknown in this country save for a few of his stylish and fastidious poems which had appeared in anthologies of American verse. He is a great teacher, a teacher who has been honoured in a fine poem by Thom Gunn who has studied with him; he is also a self-appointed arbiter of taste who is spoken of by his devotees with an almost hushed reverence and awe.