

On Misleading the Clergy in Matters of Marriage

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by Michael Hoskin

So much has been written in recent months on the problem of family limitation that one must hesitate before adding to the mountain of literature. Yet the situation is desperate: as Catholics try to observe the recent teaching, marriages are wrecked and the toll steadily mounts of those who formally leave the Church, or lapse, or give up the sacraments, or live with a constant sense of bad conscience. Meanwhile we find ourselves isolated on this issue not only from the rest of the secular world – this in itself would not disturb us – but from other Christian bodies; and on a matter on which the New Testament has little to say.

The anguish of individual souls is matched by the physical suffering of whole nations that live in continual hunger. The problem is recognised at last but its vast scale is not always appreciated: on February 6 the Population Reference Bureau in Washington reported that if present trends continue the world population will more than double – that is, there will be over 3,500,000,000 *extra* mouths to feed – by the end of the century. None of us can grasp a number of such magnitude, so let us put the issue another way. In more and more countries the infant who survives his first few weeks is nearly certain to reach maturity; since the great majority of mankind marry and have children, it follows that if the average family contains only four children the population will almost double with each generation; and it is then only a matter of simple arithmetic to work out how long it will be before there is insufficient standing room on our planet and we shall literally have filled the earth.

To reduce the four children to three is only to postpone the evil day; the disaster can be avoided only if the figure is reduced to fractionally over two. How easily the Victorians produced families of eight, ten or twelve! My own four children were born in just over five years of married life. Man is naturally fertile far beyond the limits which the good of the race can tolerate in these days of advancing medicine and ever more frequent healing of the sick. Yet how often is this thought a relevant consideration in Catholic discussions of family limitation? Happily we are now encouraged to plan our families but, so far as I am aware, only within the context of the interests of the individual family,¹ never with an eye to the

¹For example, in *Beginning Your Marriage* (Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, 1963) we are told: 'COUPLES MUST HAVE SOUND REASONS FOR PRACTISING PERIODIC CONTINENCE since their habitual use of marital privileges obliges them to accept the duties of parenthood unless particular circumstances or conditions render the fulfilment of this obligation inopportune in their case.' (capitals in original, p. 108.)

needs of our race which has now fulfilled the injunction to increase and fill the Earth.

As an historian of scientific ideas I am accustomed to situations where people ignore the most obvious questions simply because they are operating within a conceptual framework that directs attention only in certain ways. It sometimes happens that in time the neglected issues force themselves to the forefront and compel a painful modification or even overthrow of the existing framework. The Church has already experienced this, as with the Galileo episode. I do not know enough of the history of natural law arguments to speak with confidence here, but I think it possible that our present thinking cannot assimilate problems of population precisely because it is conducted within a framework of ideas in which the essence of the situation is timeless; whereas we are now being forced to recognise that the human race is confronting a wholly *novel* situation, where fertility is not an asset but a danger. To abandon this present framework of our would be agonising, as it was for Galileo's contemporaries to abandon theirs; but it may none-the-less be inevitable, in which case delay can do great harm.

Whatever moral guidance eventually emerges from discussions within the Church, parish priests in countries like our own are daily faced with the most delicate pastoral problems, in which their own lack of experience of marriage makes it unusually difficult for them to give the counsel that springs from sympathetic insight. Some priests are fortunate enough to be on intimate terms with married couples, while others, especially the newly ordained, have to depend upon other sources of information: for example, on books and lectures by those Catholic specialists in marriage problems who are permitted to address audiences of priests and seminaries. The number of such specialists is small, but they work with exemplary devotion and their views have a sizeable impact on opinion within the Church, especially among the clergy. A good deal of their effort has been directed towards teaching and research into the safe period, and here they have had to contend with grave difficulties, not least the massive scepticism of the medical profession as a whole. To counter this hostile climate they have been forced continually to insist on the virtues of the safe period, and their message has found a ready welcome among a clergy which believed itself committed to support of the safe period on moral grounds.

In the past, however unsatisfactory the safe period in one's own experience, one felt a positive duty to encourage and help young couples to adopt this method, and so tried to avoid sowing doubts in their minds. But as discussion grows of the moral permissibility of 'the pill' and other methods of family limitation, so one comes to recognise the double-think involved in keeping silence about the defects of the safe period. If in public one must be careful not to give scandal, in the pages of a journal one may and should challenge

the falsely-sanguine view which is presented to the clergy and which must often be the basis on which they try to counsel their flock.

We must of course be careful not to centre any discussion on the hard cases: those whose ovulation is very irregular, or whose husbands are with them at rare intervals, or whose lives would be endangered by another pregnancy – though the proportion of hard cases is high. The question is rather whether, even for the lucky ones whose marriage is spared these crosses, the safe period offers an adequate physical and psychological basis for family limitation. To this the enthusiastic affirmative of some Catholic spokesmen on marriage is in sharp and surprising contradiction to one's own experience and that of one's friends. Can it be, one wonders, that these spokesmen no longer remember to mention the grave defects of the safe period method, and so, unwittingly and with the best of intentions, mislead a clergy among whom genuine discussion is already hampered by censorship and disciplinary threats?

This is not the place to go into precise medical details: everyone knows that the unsafe period is that of the wife's ovulation, the two or three days each month when she might conceive. It used to be thought that limits could be set for the wife's ovulation time *next* month on the basis of her shortest and longest menstrual periods in past months (though these limits might be so wide as to exclude intercourse altogether): if she was hopeless at arithmetic she could for a few guineas purchase a small computer to help her use the natural method of family limitation. But this approach is now regarded as too risky, and instead the temperature method is recommended. This depends on the fact that at the time of ovulation a woman's temperature rises by some half-degree; once this rise is past, ovulation is complete and intercourse is safe. Now half-a-degree is clinically negligible and not easy to read on an ordinary medical thermometer, but to aid nature one can purchase special thermometers with elongated scales and also charts on which to enter the daily readings. *If* the wife is in perfect health, and *if* she is free every day to lie in bed with the thermometer for several minutes on first waking, then this method usually does tell her when ovulation is past. She may need considerable guidance from specially-trained physicians in the interpretation of her charts, but it can be done. Yet to what does it reduce the act of love? To an exchange which is dictated by charts and thermometers, which takes place not as the realisation of a life-long bond of love and support and mutual giving, but because we can do it tonight and couldn't yesterday or mightn't be able to tomorrow.

'*If* the wife is in perfect health . . .': but she may have a slight cold or a headache. Is the tiny rise due to ovulation or to the indisposition? '*If* she is free every day to lie in bed . . .': but what if she has been up half the night with the baby and is awakened from exhausted sleep by the yelling of a hungry infant? Is she to ignore these cries,

or to answer them, start her active day, and so bring about a rise in her temperature which will for that day mask any rise due to ovulation? In practice, then, couples very often find themselves with incomplete or unreliable or ambiguous temperature readings, so that to the loss of spontaneity is added continual corroding anxiety. Indeed this is virtually inevitable during the months following childbirth when the resumption of ovulation is quite uncertain, and during the years of a woman's change of life, when ovulation becomes less and less frequent until it ceases altogether – years notorious for infidelity, and when the wife needs more than ever the demonstration of her husband's love.

Of course, were intercourse to be an optional extra to married life, a reward for enduring the problems of permanent union, we might reasonably be invited simply to ask for grace to forego this pleasure. But intercourse is not an optional extra; it is at the very foundation of marriage. Happily this is now recognised in our theology of marriage, on which writers will speak with dignity and sympathy – until they come to the problem of family limitation, when all-too-often a legalistic and domineering tone takes over.

Can the safe period be Providence's solution to the fertility problems now facing the human race in general and innumerable individual families in particular? We have talked only of the fortunate ones who do not have some special cross to bear in their married life. If their families are to be restricted to two or three children – as seems necessary on population grounds alone – then even for these more fortunate ones the act which lies at the very heart of family life must be restricted severely and for periods even totally; and *at best* there will be only a few days now and then when the charts are favourable and love may be risked. I do not believe that other known techniques of limitation provide an answer satisfactory to every couple; but can we say with certainty that the safe period is God's basis for the normal marriage?