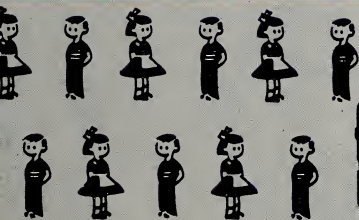


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D. F. MILLER, C.S.S.R.

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*Here is a clear and understanding
discussion of a great source of
anxiety for many married couples*

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DO YOU WORRY ABOUT SUPPORTING FUTURE CHILDREN?

D. F. MILLER, C.S.S.R.

Straightforward statements of an objection which many parents raise against having more children have recently been presented to us from two very different sources.

The objection boils down to this: *“How will we ever be able to raise and educate them? Where should trust in God for the future give way to prudence in this matter?”*

The first letter, surprisingly, was written by two single Catholic sailors from a ship in the Atlantic. It reads: *“Although you have quite beautifully handled the religious side of birth-control in your publications, in*

our estimate you have failed to answer the economic and social aspect of this problem, and this has been brought up to us again and again by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. As one of your readers wrote, the Church does not help financially in these matters, nor do Catholics expect it. But on the other hand, how can people bring into the world new souls when they rightly know they would never be able to raise them properly nor to educate them as Catholics (due to the high cost of a Catholic education)? It's fine to say, trust in God, but when the cupboard is bare, faith and trust are at a minimum, as is the case with many families today. To expect people to stop using their marriage rights if they cannot afford to have children is not to our thinking the correct solution. We do not advocate birth-control as it is preached today, but surely the Church

has some other answer besides prayer and abstinence for these 'brow-beaten Catholics.' We hope soon to see a more clear and explicit answer to what seems to be an ever increasing problem in our Catholic faith. Neither of us is married, but we have heard this question raised in our own families, and have seen the mental and social damage done to young couples who want to be good Catholics but cannot accept the teaching of the Church on birth-control. These are the people the clergy have got to help."

This quite moderate statement of a problem ties in with many much less moderate statements that we receive. For example, here is a quote from another letter: "From talking with many of the priests I know, I have learned that their attitude toward birth-control is that it is wrong, period. They give no sign

whatsoever of understanding the difficulties entailed in abstinence, but seem to have the idea that the mere declaration of what is right and wrong wholly answers the problem. I would say that this attitude of 'white and black' drives more people from the Church than any other reason. Don't misunderstand me. I fully grasp that priests cannot condone sin. What I am saying is that the clergy not only fail, but do not even try to understand the layman's outlook on this problem."

In commenting on such criticisms, we do not intend to deny that perhaps we ourselves, as well as other priests, have at times been guilty of a bluntness in answering married people's questions about the morality of birth-control that left them with the impression that we had no feeling for or understanding of their problem. Even here, however, it must

be said that very often the bluntness is read into a priest's words by the hearer for the simple reason that he wants to hear only one thing from the priest, and that is an approval of the practice of birth-control. A wife or husband may come to a priest (this has often happened to us) with a most tragic story as to why they cannot or should not have any more children, and why they must practice contraception. The priest begins his answer, as he must, with the statement that contraception cannot be the answer to any problem because it is a violation of the natural and eternal law of God. Then he may talk for half an hour trying to probe the case, trying to find some other solution for the harried couple than birth-prevention. All his words fall on deaf ears. He is accused of lack of understanding for one sole reason, that he did not say that contracep-

tion would be O. K. Moreover, too few people realize that one of the most terrible sins a priest can commit is that of cooperating, by advice or approval, in the sins of impurity of someone else.

Let's go back to the statement of the problem contained in the first letter quoted here. The nub of the matter is in these words: "How can people bring into the world new souls when they rightly know they would never be able to raise them properly, nor educate them as Catholics (due to the high cost of a Catholic education)?" And the words, "surely there is some other answer besides prayer and abstinence." Do the Catholic clergy have any understanding of these problems of married people?

Again admitting shortcomings of approach in actual interviews, we can

maintain that most priests have more understanding of the problem than they are given credit for.

First of all, take the actual case of a couple coming to a priest with the statement, "We cannot have any more children because it will be impossible for us to raise them properly." At once it becomes the priest's job to probe a bit into the prophecy the couple is making about the future: "It will be impossible to raise any more children properly." Perhaps he will find that, for the time being, the couple is in a pretty hopeless economic state. The husband is chronically ill and unable to earn a good living. Debts have piled up. There is nobody to help the family. In this case the priest will certainly tell them that they have more than adequate reason for practicing rhythm, and in most cases will even send them to a good Catholic physician who will work out

the details of the system for them. But he will be sure to add that even for this practice they need special graces, and must therefore be sure to receive Holy Communion often and take up a firm schedule of daily prayer.

Just as often, however, the priest will learn on questioning that there is little solid ground for the black prophecy that the future holds no hope of their raising children as yet unborn in a proper manner. Actually, the couple suffers from one of two things, either a morbid fear that four or five years later there may be a great depression, or from the American heresy that, if you cannot give a child the very best of everything in a material sense, you are not raising it properly.

It must be remembered that every priest with any experience has seen

countless examples of married couples with moderate or fairly low regular incomes who have raised large families and educated all their children in such a way as to make them a credit and a blessing to their parents, their Church, their community and their nation. Such a priest is hardly speaking without understanding when he questions the grounds on which other couples make the blanket prophecy: "We will not be able to raise any more children properly."

It is true that prudence must always be united to trust in God; but reason and faith do not make it an essential part of prudence to worry needlessly about the unknowable and unforeseeable future that is yet five or ten years away. If in the present, "the cupboard is bare" and the debts are deep, then prudence suggests and recommends rhythm until the situation betters. If the cupboard is fairly

full today, there is no good reason for renouncing fertility on the nebulous ground that someday the cupboard might be bare.

The understanding of the Church in these matters, and of priests who speak for her, goes much farther than trying to take care of each acute case as it arises. Our correspondents ask: What does the Church or the clergy do to meet the social and economic crises that arise in the lives of married people, often making birth-prevention very attractive? The long range program to which every priest contributes consists of three parts.

First, it is the wise advice and constant urging of the Church that couples should not decide to marry until the husband-to-be has a steady income assured which is, at least in a modest sense, sufficient for the needs of a family. If a kid of seventeen, just

out of high school, holding down his first job at \$40 a week, comes to a priest and wants to marry a certain girl, the priest's first words will usually be: "How can you expect to support this girl, and the children that will almost surely come along, on so meagre a salary? Why don't you wait until you improve your income?" He cannot stop the couple from marrying, if the parents consent. If the youngsters insist, he has to arrange for the wedding, no matter how reluctantly. Deep in his heart, however, he knows that this is the kind of couple that will be coming around later with the demand: "You must approve of our practicing contraception."

Second, the program goes farther than advising against marriage when a couple of teen-agers who have already fallen in love and determined to get married appear. The Church

and her spokesmen warn teen-agers against keeping steady company when they know they won't be able to support a family for several years.

The logic of this warning is simple. Middle teen-agers who keep steady company almost inevitably fall in love. Once in love they have a terrifically strong urge to indulge their passions with each other. Sometimes they cheat and do so contrary to God's command. But whether they do or don't indulge themselves, they know that the only sanction for indulging their bodies is marriage. They don't think of how they are going to live or support the children God will send them. They think only of their love for each other, and the first fruit of such love which is passion. Blind to everything else, they ballyrag their parents for permission and insist that the priest speed up their wedding. Only later do they realize their folly.

Third, the Church tries, against almost invincible odds, to preserve married Catholics from the disease of secularism or materialism, which may be defined as the desire to get the very best out of this world even at the expense of the eternal happiness of the next world. It is not always the married couples of inadequately low income brackets who try to make out a case for birth-prevention on economic grounds. It is often those who look upon birth-prevention as a necessary means to moving constantly upward in the social and economic realm; those who cannot think of education for their children except in the sense of the most expensive schools; those who think that a child without every material advantage and convenience is a neglected child. Materialism is a disease that hardens the heart and paralyzes the will. But the Church keeps battling against it.

She has thousands of happy, successful families to point to who made do with moderate incomes enhanced by a great love of God.

Let's conclude by giving a direct answer to the question posed to us by the two sailors. "How can people bring into the world new souls when they rightly know that they could not possibly raise or educate them properly?" Here is the answer: If they married prudently, that is, with a prospect of a moderate and steady income, and if they are free from the fever known as the blind desire to keep up with the better-off Joneses, and if they keep God on their side by unflinching loyalty to His will, they can never *rightly know* that they won't be able to raise future children properly. They can't even know whether they will have any future children. If an unexpected set-back overtakes them, despite their pru-

dence, the Church will have wise advice to give them if they humbly seek it.

One more word: It is not true to say that the Church never helps anybody financially. In a limited pastoral experience, we know of scores of families who have been helped economically, through priests and organizations such as the St. Vincent de Paul Society, when unforeseen catastrophes have befallen them. There is only one thing the Catholic Church or any priest cannot do, and that is to tell any married couple that in their case contraception is lawful.

The second letter attacks the problem from a slightly different angle. This person states: "I am a young married woman, and have reached a state of confusion (shared by others, I'm sure) as to just where trust in God for the future must give way

to the prudent practice of rhythm. I am aware that Pope Pius XII has set down certain specific reasons, such as bad health of a mother, grave financial straits, etc., as justifying rhythm. But I'm blessed with a wonderful husband who just does not believe that we have such grave reasons, and in my better moments I am inclined to agree with him. We are expecting our third child soon, (the older of our two is two and a half) and it would be so easy for me to say that we just can't afford another one until we have a down payment on a home and all our bills are paid up.

Naturally we look forward to our income growing with the years, but so will the bills with many children, especially when it's time to send them all through school and college. I'm sure that many Catholics use such reasons for practicing rhythm. But what I'm wondering is this: Is it

wrong for us not to use it; to expect that God Who gives life will also give the means to provide for it? Personally I would prefer to have babies two years apart, but at the same time I want to go along with my husband and leave these things to God. Am I justified in doing this, ignoring doctor's advice (they all seem to urge mothers to hold back in having children), my mother's advice, and the constant recommendations of the general public? Is it simply a matter of one thing being good, and another better?"

SOLUTION: For the present, there is one clear indication of God's will for this particular mother, and that lies in the fact that her husband, who has the economic responsibility for the family and obviously also a great love for his wife, sees no gravely cogent reasons for practicing rhythm, and therefore does not choose to agree

to its practice. It cannot be too often stated that rhythm is lawful only when a husband and wife fully and mutually agree on it. There are, to be sure, extreme cases in which a husband refuses to consider the serious illness of his wife, or in which he refuses to work hard enough to support his family decently. In such extreme cases his refusal to practice rhythm could be called unreasonable and even unjust.

But this is clearly not one of those cases. Indeed, it may be said that in any doubtful case, the husband's free consent to practice rhythm is necessary before it can be lawful. A wife may not insist on it because she alone, contrary to her husband's reasonable judgment, feels that she has reason for it.

Apart from this angle of the problem, a principle may be set down for

the guidance of married couples. It is this: In carrying out the primary duties of one's state in life, it is a far better thing to trust in God than to permit vague uncertainties of the future to induce fears and phobias that become obstacles to fulfilling those duties. It is true that in today's world, with its emphasis on material comforts, the best in educational conveniences, and the widespread propaganda against large families, rhythm is often adopted at the expense of trust in God. On the other hand there are those for whom rhythm is clearly an exercise of prudence, because of the serious illness of the wife or the hopeless economic situation of the family. But worries about the distant future, about the problems that, 10 or 15 years later may be connected with trying to give one's children the best possible education, can

always prudently give way to trust in God.

This is not popular teaching, we repeat, in the midst of the secularism that afflicts so many Catholics, and completely rules so many who are not Catholics. Yet experience proves that it is sound teaching. Thousands of parents, with never more than moderate means, have raised large families and give all their children an excellent education. They trusted God and loved God, and raised their families according to His will, and He did not let them down in regard to any of the essentials of a good life. They who want everything figured out for them beforehand, even how they will send a child to college 15 years later, and limit their families accordingly, often fall afoul of problems far greater than the ones they tried to avoid.

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