

## CASES AND QUERIES

### IS THE SAFE PERIOD *SAFE*?

My husband and I have seven living children. We feel that in fairness to them, we should not have a new baby any more. For the past five years, after the birth of our last child, we have had no intimate relations. For us, rhythm does not work and the only way we can avoid the risk of pregnancy is by complete abstinence. At first, it seemed alright, but lately, I have noticed that our marriage is starting to "head for the rocks." I am not trying to over-emphasize the role of sex, but I believe it does have an important part in a happy marriage. Although I believe one cannot reject the teaching of the recent encyclical on birth control and still remain a good Catholic, I nevertheless find it least to accept its doctrine knowing its effect on a marriage such as ours. What shall I do?

### ANSWER

Before we answer this query, it is necessary to make the following observations on this particular case.

1. We have here an example of a true Christian conscience. The wife speaks for herself alone, but we can clearly infer from her statement what kind of a Christian her husband is. The very words of the questioner itself is an evidence that this couple has entered the state of matrimony fully convinced of the Christian principles that should guide each partner's conduct with regard to the main purpose of this sacrament, its essential end which is procreation, and of the limitations, and sacrifices that the rearing of children demand. Sacrifice demands heroism and a conduct of patience that should spring from the genuine love of husband and wife for their children. The noble role likewise of marital love in matrimony is a motive that cannot be overemphasized, therefore to conform with it is a manifestation of a truly Christian conscience.

2. Although our inquirer confesses her acceptance of the papal letter *Humanae vitae*, the encyclical however, issued on the 25 of July 1968, could not have possibly inspired such conduct. The couple was already practicing continence for years before the Papal document. Only God through faith, only the Holy Spirit through the gifts of understanding and fear of the Lord, could have infused this remarkable regard for Christian values in their minds and lent support in more trying moments of their married life. To be able to explain such conduct, one should consider the life of prayer and the sacraments and, perhaps, the guiding hand of a priest or confessor since, these are the ordinary means of enlightenment and fortitude that God is wont to use. Thus, during all the years when all Catholics were impatiently awaiting the Pope's decision on the matter of periodic continence and birth control, when so many took as excuse a *dubious doubt* to turn to the pill in defiance of Church's teaching, this couple found light and strength in their faith and Christian commitment.

Let us now answer the anxious query. *What shall I do?*

The proper action to take here, we believe, without prejudice to your life of faith, prayer, and sacraments, is a reassessment of your present marital state. You should go back to your doctor, or engage a specialist for a start. One thing, nevertheless stands out — five years of complete continence, apart from the moderate advance in age, could signify a certain steadiness in your own physical set-up. However, it is not rare to hear complaints that rhythm does not work among certain couples. But a closer study afterwards reveals that rhythm in such instance, has been either wrongly understood or inadequately applied. It is hence, of no little wonder if it did not seem to work.

Although medical science has still a long way to go before perfecting the rhythm method, continuous research on the matter has yielded substantial rewards. Now, the modern methods of periodic continence rarely require a couple to abstain for more than two weeks in order to obtain the necessary security. The length of days of abstinence still vary according to each person, but the essential fact remains that rhythm does offer the *safe period*. And this spells the difference between total abstinence for years and periodic continence for a number of days in every cycle.

The competent authority in this field is not the priest but the doctor familiar with the latest researches in this matter and a Christian man of conscience. A genuine Christian conscience, is essential and necessary in this matter since rhythm requires a careful study and handling in each individual case. The doctor should always be on guard handling in each individual case. The doctor should always be on guard against all temptations to resort to the pill and other unapproved devices. Then again, it is now common knowledge that the old calendar method has been reliably perfected by researches done in different parts of the world. More accurate means of recognizing when ovulation is likely to occur have been discovered. One of these methods, based on the "oestrogen symptoms in the women's cycle" was carried out in Melbourne, Australia, by Drs. John and Lyn Billings. You may find the report on these findings in the *Boletin Eclesiastico*, May-June 1969, pp. 451-453.

A better tested and widely used method by several couples is the so-called *basal temperature system*. The following quotation would, perhaps, be useful to enlighten you in advance when you approach your doctor. It is quoted from the article *Scientific Basis of the Infertile Period* by Dr. John Marshall, a well-known authority on the matter. Dr. Marshall is chairman of the General Medical Committee of the Catholic Marriage Council, London. His article was reprinted in the *Medical Forum* on October-December 1965.

#### Ovulation and the Basal Temperature.

"When ovulation occurs the basal temperature rises by about half a degree Fahrenheit and persists at the higher level until the onset of the next menstrual period. By recording her temperature each morning before rising (the time required being three minutes) and marking it on a chart with a suitable scale, a woman can tell that she has ovulated. The life of the ovum as mentioned above is less than two days, so that by waiting until she has recorded the temperatures at the higher level a woman can be certain that she is infertile from that point until the onset of her next period, a span of 10 or 11 days in the average cycle. By this means prediction is eliminated; calculations are based, not upon the estimated date of the next period, but upon a fact that has already been recorded, namely the rise of temperature. The time of ovulation even in irregular cycles

can thus be determined. For this reason restriction of marital relations to the phase of the cycle after the third temperature at the higher level gives a pregnancy rate of less than one per 100 women per year which is better than conventional contraceptives and as good as intra-uterine contraceptives and 'the pill'. The evidence of this figure is given by Palmer, a distinguished French non-Catholic gynecologist in his communication to the National Society for the Study of Sterility and Fertility published in "La Contraception," Masson & Cie, Paris 1963.

#### "Intercourse before ovulation"

"The use of the time before the rise of temperature immediately re-introduces the element of prediction, for an estimate must be made in the light of past experience of how early in the cycle the temperature may rise. This brings in the inevitable possibility of error which in the report of Palmers is given as causing about 10 pregnancies per 100 women per year. Unfortunately the essential difference between the time before and after the rise of temperature is not always made clear to couples. Calculation of the infertile phase before the rise of temperature depends upon a prediction, hence must always carry some possibility of error; the time after the rise of temperature depends upon an observed fact and so is virtually free from error.

"The figure of 10 pregnancies per 100 women per year following use of the infertile phase before the rise of temperature is an overall figure for all types of cycle. The risk is highest in people with short cycles but as the phase after the rise of temperature constitutes almost 50 per cent of the total cycle, most couples find that restricting intercourse to the time after the rise of temperature is not too difficult. In people with long cycles the risks of using the phase before the rise of temperature is very much less, hence the difficulty of a long period of abstinence can be alleviated by use of a properly calculated pre-ovulatory phase.

#### "Common objections"

"It is often alleged that the safety of the phase after the temperature has risen may be jeopardised by a second ovulation of the kind which may result in dissimilar twins. Such an ovulation occurs within a few hours of the first and evidence that it may occur later has been assiduously sought by several authorities including Dr. Rock with negative results. This evidence is reviewed in the book by Hartman already quoted.

"It is also said that illness renders the chart useless, but the rise of temperature due to illness is quite different in degree from that due to ovulation and can readily be distinguished.

"Lack of intelligence is also advanced as an objection. Dr. Moore working in Mauritius with the Government medical service, Dr. and Mme. Guy working in the same island with Action Familial and Dr. Mme. Rendu working in the island of Réunion all found that even people who could not read or write could be taught to record their temperature. Dr. Rendu devised a chart with vertical columns only to fit a special thermometer. The woman laid the thermometer on the chart and put a mark opposite the mercury. In this way she obtained a curve without the necessity of reading figures.

"Following a statement of Lady Summerskill in the House of Lords it is frequently stated that it is at the time of ovulation that a woman most desires intercourse. The study of Hart (*British Medical Journal*, 1960, p. 1023) shows this to be untrue, the time of maximum desire being around the time of the period."

"So scanty is the regard for scientific criteria that the experience of an individual case is often quoted as proof positive that the safe period does not work: for instance the case of the couple is often advanced who had relations only once on the day before the period and yet conceived: When it is pointed out that if conception occurred surely the period not come, the statement is hastily amended to the day before the period was expected. The simple explanation is that because of neglect to use the temperature curve the occurrence of delay in ovulation was not recognised."

"Finally the impossibility of the mother of a large family recording her temperature is often asserted. A person better qualified than I to answer this objection is the mother of nine children living in two rooms who does record her temperature successfully. The influx of small children into the bedroom in the morning need not upset things for when they have finally been shooed away to get dressed the temperature can be recorded. One woman who records her temperature by mouth tells me that her small daughter solemnly hands her the thermometer each morning because she likes "being nurse. Distractions of this kind may worry the inexperienced, though they need not do so. For this reason a girl who is engaged should learn to keep her chart and study her cycle so that any difficulties can be ironed out before she marries. This is the kind of practical step which is demanded by the current phrase "responsible parenthood."