

In the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, Bl. Pope Paul VI insists three times that couples must possess what he calls (in the Latin) *gravi motivi*, *seri motivi*, and *iustae causae* for practicing periodic continence for the regulation of births.

When one considers this, there is a strong temptation to ask a question like, “How exactly is the Church a compassionate Mother if she knows that the whole world is on contraception, and yet she still tortures us, her children, with her insistence that even natural methods of birth regulation, like the Billings Ovulation Method (BOM), can be sinfully abused?”<sup>1</sup>

An adequate response to this question requires, first, a brief historical overview of the Church’s understanding of sex, procreation, and the regulation of birth; later, an examination of the three phrases used by Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*; afterwards, a moral analysis of the sin of Natural Family Planning (NFP) abuse; and finally a little reflection taken from the book of nature.

### **She Pondered all These Things in Her Heart...**

In the book of **Genesis**, God the Creator, who has just bestowed existence upon **Adam and Eve** adjures them to “be fruitful and multiply,” giving us the first indications of his creative intention in crowning their existence with the one-flesh union.<sup>2</sup>

In the **38<sup>th</sup>** chapter of **Genesis** we learn of the story of **Onan**, who, in a refusal to grant offspring to the widow of his deceased brother, spills his seed on the ground and incurs the lethal wrath of God; a further indication of the intrinsic connection between conjugal relations and procreation.

Nevertheless, in the book of the **Song of Solomon** a great deal of ink is spilt over the good of erotic married love by the sacred author with scant reference to fertility. Surely, the lovers’ obligation to “be fruitful and multiply” is present to the mind of the inspired author, but he who pines, “How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than wine!” (Sol 4:10) finds no need to dwell on it much less place it in *opposition* to the *unitive* meaning of the conjugal act.<sup>3</sup>

In the **New Testament**, the values of the Old Testament regarding marriage are taken up and reiterated, including marriage’s fundamentally procreative purpose.

Additionally, **Paul**, in his first letter to the Corinthians, explains something novel: that sometimes married couples will need to deny their conjugal rights to one another in periodic continence in order to devote themselves more intensely to prayer (1 Cor. 7:5).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, he does not mention such continence as a means of birth regulation.

In the Patristic Age, for **St. Augustine**, who, it must be acknowledged, carried with him the tremendous psychological burden of a past life dedicated to hedonistic excess,<sup>5</sup> the sexual act had only one respectable end: procreation. For this reason, in the mind of Augustine, any sexual act that did not have as its

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<sup>1</sup> In his *Theology of the Body*, reflecting on the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, St. Pope John Paul II writes, “The use of ‘infertile periods’ in conjugal shared life can become a source of abuses if the couple thereby attempt to evade procreation without just reasons, lowering it below the morally just level of births in their family” (TOB, 125:3).

<sup>2</sup> Later in the Old Testament, the book of Leviticus prohibits the sexual activity of a menstruating woman for a period of 7 days after her menstruation. As instructors of Billings well know, this period could correspond very often to the time of the woman’s *basic infertility pattern*. One could argue that this temporary moratorium worked, in effect, as the rhythm method in reverse, ensuring humanity’s fruitful multiplication.

<sup>3</sup> Here, referring anachronistically to the “unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act,” we anticipate a theological/anthropological concept from the modern Magisterium of the Church. Cf. esp. *Humanae Vitae*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> 1Co 7:5 “Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control.”

<sup>5</sup> E.g., St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. II, Ch. 2.

exclusive end the procreation and nurturing of children was at least venially sinful.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, he considered illicit the deliberate use of the conjugal act during pregnancy, old age, and in cases and periods of infertility.<sup>7</sup>

The bulk of moral theology subsequent to Augustine, especially among the **Scholastics of the Middle Ages**, subscribed part and parcel to the Augustinian theory that only procreation excused the otherwise (venially) sinful marriage act.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, this theological opinion remained just that and never became part of the Church's Magisterial teaching concerning marriage and sexuality.

In truth, the Magisterium remained quite hushed on the matter until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with Leo XIII's ***Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae***. Specifically, with regard to periodic continence, the magisterial story begins in 1853 – albeit on the level of an isolated case – with the **Bishop of Amiens, France, Louis-Antoine de Salinis**, who submitted the following question to the **Sacred Penitentiary**:

“Certain married couples, relying on the opinion of learned physicians, are convinced that there are several days each month in which conception cannot occur. Are those who do not use the marriage right except on such days to be disturbed, especially if they have legitimate reasons for abstaining from the conjugal act?”

On March 2, 1853, the **Sacred Penitentiary** (during the reign of Pope Pius IX) answered as follows:

“Those spoken of in the request are *not to be disturbed*, providing that they do nothing to impede conception.”

27 years later a similar inquiry was made to the Penitentiary by one **Fr. LeConte**, who asked:

“May a confessor suggest such a procedure either to the wife who detests the onanism of her husband but cannot correct him, or to either spouse who shrinks from having numerous children?”

To which the Penitentiary responded:

“The confessor may suggest the opinion in question, **cautiously, however**, to those married people whom he has tried in vain by other means to dissuade from the detestable crime of onanism.”<sup>9</sup>

This cautiousness was by no means arbitrary. It sought, rather, to preserve intact the basic meaning of human sexuality that the Church's Magisterium had inherited from ages past while, at the same time, attempted to prudently and compassionately apply it to new circumstances: principally, the developing scientific understanding of the female reproductive cycle, the increasing appreciation of the beauty of married love, and the growing concern for family sizes and world population.

50 years later, when **Pope Pius XI** penned the encyclical ***Casti Connubii***, in response to the 1930 Anglican Lambeth Conference's radical departure from Christian orthodoxy regarding the regulation of birth, the Church, “standing erect among the moral ruin which surrounds her,”<sup>10</sup> proceeded with the same cautious and compassionate prudence. While robustly reiterating the Church's condemnation of artificial birth control, Pius nevertheless, disavowed the Augustinian suspicion of the secondary ends of the conjugal act and taught, “husband and wife are not forbidden to consider [these secondary ends] so long as they are subordinated to the primary end and so long as the intrinsic nature of the act is preserved.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John C. Ford, SJ and Gerald Kelly, SJ, “Current Theology: Periodic Continence,” *Theological Studies*, Volume: 23 issue: 4, page: 590-624; Issue published: December 1, 1962; see p. 593. Additionally, St. Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, Bk. I, Ch. 17; *On the Good of Marriage*, § 1, § 6

<sup>7</sup> Ford and Kelly, *ibid.* St. Augustine, *Against Julian*, Section 3, Ch. 21, Subsection 43.

<sup>8</sup> Ford and Kelly, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> English translation available at <http://www.cmri.org/03-nfp.html>

<sup>10</sup> *Casti Connubii*, 56.

<sup>11</sup> *Casti Connubii*, 59.

Interestingly, however, the Pope makes no explicit mention of periodic continence for regulation of birth. That would not come until the following Papacy.

On October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1951 **Pope Pius XII** addressed an assembly of midwives and obstetricians on diverse themes regarding human procreation. He reiterated the Church's condemnation of artificial birth control, and, in a further development of the doctrine of *Casti Connubii*, taught, "Serious motives...may exempt husband and wife from the obligatory, positive debt [of marital relations] for a long period or even for the entire period of matrimonial life. From this it follows that the observance of the natural sterile periods may be lawful, from the moral viewpoint..."<sup>12</sup>

This marks the first time that the Vicar of Christ would personally pronounce on the matter. Nevertheless, it was delivered to a select sector, and could hardly be considered a Magisterial pronouncement with *universal implications*. That would have to await the termination of two pontificates and the beginning of a third.

On July 25, 1968, **Paul VI** definitively laid to rest, for the Universal Church, the **Augustinian suspicion** concerning the meaning of the conjugal act and the intrinsic goodness of its secondary ends, and assured the Church's compassionate support for those couples prudently practicing periodic continence in the times of fertility for the regulation of birth – affirming that through such a practice, "they certainly give proof of a true and authentic love."<sup>13</sup> At the same time he reiterated the caveat of his predecessor, that such regulation should only be practiced for *gravi motivi*, "...based on the physical or psychological condition of the spouses or on external forces."<sup>14</sup>

And here we enter into the thick of the theological/pastoral debate. In this brief historical review, we have attempted to give context to the caveat of Mother Church, who has long contemplated these matters in her compassionate heart. But *what* exactly does she mean by this *gravi motivi* caveat?

### **Gravi Motivi, Seri Motivi, and Iustae...Causae**

Anyone who has spent even a short amount of time in devout Catholic circles can attest to the sometimes heated but always on-going debate about just what sorts of reasons constitute *gravi motivi* for using periodic continence to limit pregnancies.<sup>15</sup>

On the one hand there are those whom we might call Providentialists,<sup>16</sup> who argue that truly responsible parenthood is open to "however many children God wants to send us," and that periodic continence should only be employed in the most dire of circumstances.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, there are those who maintain that such a posture is not truly responsible because it fails to take into account the ability of the parents or lack thereof to raise new children under diverse circumstances.

The Providentialists would seem, at first glance, to win the day, especially if one consults the first English translation of *Humanae Vitae* by Pauline Press, which regards *gravi* as the cognate of the English word, "grave" – as in, "dead serious." However, posterior to this translation, the Vatican released its own, in

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<sup>12</sup> *Allocution to Midwives*, October 29, 1951; accessed at EWTN.com, <https://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/P511029.HTM>

<sup>13</sup> *HV*, 16

<sup>14</sup> *HV*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> One will surely note the conspicuous absence of any *list* of just reasons in this brief presentation. This is due primarily to the fact that in the final analysis it is the parents in question, and them alone, who are capable of deciding what constitute just reasons for the spacing of their children. As the Church taught in *Gaudium et Spes* (#50), and as Pope Francis has recently reiterated in *Amoris Laetitia* (#222), "The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God."

<sup>16</sup> A term I encountered in an article by Seton Hall professor of Theology, Eric Johnston, entitled, "Natural Family Planning, Providence, and the Goal of Marriage," in *Crisis Magazine*, December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013

<sup>17</sup> Anecdotal examples of this viewpoint abound; for something closer to an official example, see Taylor Marshall, "You Can Only Use NFP for Serious Reasons . . . What Are These Reasons?" *Canterbury Tales Blog* (February 17, 2012), <http://cantuar.blogspot.com/2012/02/you-can-only-use-nfp-for-grave.html>

which *gravi* is translated as “serious.”<sup>18</sup> In total, *Humanae Vitae* speaks on three occasions of these motives calling them, respectively, (according to the Vatican edition) “serious reasons,” “well-grounded reasons” and “reasonable motives.”<sup>19</sup> The official Vatican translation is more in step with the posture taken by Pope Pius XII, who said, “...we have affirmed the legitimacy and at the same time the limits— **in truth, very wide**—of regulation of offspring...”<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, at the present moment we enjoy a sort of magisterial hindsight that helps to clarify the issue for us. Paul VI’s successors have all offered *some* elucidation on the theme – most notably, **Pope St. John Paul II.**

When John Paul delivered his series of Angelus addresses in the early 1980s, now known as the **Theology of the Body**, he dedicated the last dozen addresses to an analysis of *Humanae Vitae*, in which he spoke frequently of the *virtue* of periodic continence.

While he makes it clear that such continence *could be abused* by “evading procreation without just reasons,” he reiterates the sentiment of Pius XII that the limits of such reasons are *truly very wide*. He says that one must take “into account not only the good of one’s family and the state of one’s health as well as the means of the spouses themselves, but also the good of the society to which they belong, the good of the Church, and even of humanity as a whole.”<sup>21</sup>

Again, in *Familiaris Consortio*, he gives an important indication of the Church’s truly very wide lens when, in a section dedicated to the proximate preparation for marriage, the Holy Father expresses his desire that engaged couples receive formation in “**the nature of conjugal sexuality and responsible parenthood, with the essential medical and biological knowledge connected with it.**”<sup>22</sup> In the very next sentence he mentions the other necessary points of formation such as “stable work...financial resources...administration...and housekeeping.” If the Pope is willing to couple the necessity of formation in NFP with *housekeeping (!)*, then it would seem safe to say that he imagines a truly very wide base of (at least temporary) NFP users among the responsible parents of the 20th and 21st centuries.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, as **Kevin E. Miller** observes, in his outstanding article, *How to Talk About the Use and Abuse of Natural Family Planning*,

in another **Angelus address**, **John Paul** taught that spouses must be inspired, ‘not by selfishness nor by carelessness, but by a prudent and conscious generosity.’<sup>24</sup>

### **The Use of Contraception vs. the Abuse of NFP, a Moral Evaluation**

Which leads us to our next consideration: if the issue at hand is the importance of prudent and cautious generosity on the part of responsible parents, just what kind of sin is committed by parents who lack just reasons for their observance of periodic continence? Is it *similar* to the sin of contraception? Are they guilty of a “contraceptive mentality”?

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<sup>18</sup> For an excellent examination of these problems of translation, see “*Humanae Vitae*: Grave Reasons to Use a Good Translation,” Angela D. Bonilla, *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, March 25, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> *HV* 10, 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Address to the National Congress of the Family Front and the Association of Large Families*, Nov. 1951, (English translation in *Moral Questions Affecting Married Life* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Conference, n.d.), 24–29).

<sup>21</sup> TOB, 125:3

<sup>22</sup> *FC*, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Credit for this observation is to be given to the work of Franciscan of Steubenville University professor, Kevin E. Miller, in his exceedingly insightful article, *How to Talk About the Use and Abuse of Natural Family Planning*, *Linacre Quarterly*, 79(4), Nov. 2012: 393-408.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 399.

What is unquestionably true is that periodic continence *does* pose an ethical danger. If it weren't so there would have been no need for so much magisterial insistence on *gravi motivi*. **John Paul**, again in the **TOB** writes, "When one separates the 'natural method' from the ethical dimension, one no longer sees the difference between it and the other 'methods' (artificial means), and one ends up speaking about it as if it were just another form of contraception."<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, **John Paul**, in comparing contraception with the abuse of periodic continence, makes it clear that the latter "constitutes a separate ethical problem,"<sup>26</sup> just as **Paul VI** had taught in *Humanae Vitae* when he wrote, "In reality, these two cases are completely different."<sup>27</sup>

A brief consideration of the so-called "**three fonts of morality**" (object, intention, and circumstance)<sup>28</sup> and the three conditions necessary for a **mortal sin** (gravity, full knowledge, and complete consent),<sup>29</sup> helps to un-muddy these ethical waters. In the case of a contracepting couple, the object of their act is grave in itself and its gravity cannot be mitigated either by their intention or the circumstances (although their *personal culpability* might certainly be mitigated by these). In the case of the NFP couple, the object of their act (which might, in fact, more accurately be referred to as a "non-act") is good in itself (or at least morally neutral). When the object of the act is intrinsically grave,<sup>30</sup> one always runs the risk of committing a mortal sin. In the case of periodic continence, however, the Magisterium of the Church has never, to my knowledge, given the slightest indication that the object of that "act" might be grave. Consequently, the abuse of NFP does not seem to provide sufficient material for a mortal sin.

Similarly, the phrase, "**contraceptive mentality**," which does in fact occur in official Church documents, is nevertheless misappropriated and poorly applied when it is used in the context of **NFP abuse**. The phrase can be found in *Familiaris Consortio* and *Evangelium Vitae* (1981, 1995; both by John Paul II), as well as in *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* (1995; from the CDF). In all three cases the term is applied *not* to NFP, but to artificial birth control, sterilization, and abortion, especially with respect to the threat of the secular *imposition* of these practices.

Given this brief moral analysis we may conclude that the "selfishness and carelessness" involved in the *intention* of "evading procreation without just reasons," while certainly, in the words of Pius XII, "foreign to sound ethical principles,"<sup>31</sup> would not seem to constitute a mortal sin; moreover, that this "non-act," as it were, of periodic continence has a "completely different" object than that of contraception, and merits, therefore, the use of a separate set of vocabulary, which does not include the word, "contraceptive." It is a selfish and careless mentality, indeed, that motivates the abuse of NFP, but not a "contraceptive mentality."<sup>32</sup>

## **When Mother Church Reads to Us from the Book of Nature**

Finally, over the last year, through both study and lived experience, I have become increasingly aware of the following fact: a couple that decides to have an average size family (by today's standards), and decides not to contracept, would only have relations during the wife's fertile periods 2 or 3 times during the whole course of their married life together. All things being equal, that fact seems, at best, lamentable, and at worst down-right unnatural! Everything in the woman's nature (her hormonal, emotional, and physiological readiness) seems to cry out with the bride of the Song of Solomon, "Let my beloved come to

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<sup>25</sup> TOB, 125:4

<sup>26</sup> TOB, 122.3

<sup>27</sup> HV, 16.

<sup>28</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1750.

<sup>29</sup> CCC, 1857.

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II made clear that contraception is an intrinsic evil in *Veritatis Splendor*, 80.

<sup>31</sup> *Allocution to Midwives*

<sup>32</sup> Again, credit for this analysis goes to Miller, *How to Talk About the Use and Abuse of Natural Family Planning*,

his garden, and eat its choicest fruits” (Sol., 4:16). Yet, when periodic continence is practiced, she is left to lament, “Upon my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer” (Sol., 3:1).

Yes, BOM is something that “every woman has a right to know,” but, as you well know, that doesn’t mean we should try to sell pregnancy prevention to every woman that comes along. *Humanae Vitae* insists that the couple must “conform their activity to the creative intention of God.”<sup>33</sup> This creative intention is evident in the fact of the woman’s increased libido and her body’s physiological openness to and readiness for the realization of the conjugal act during her periods of fertility. Though reason may adjure in certain seasons with the bride of the Song,<sup>34</sup> “by the gazelles or the hinds of the field...stir not up nor awaken love until it please,” (Sol 8:4) nature, which insists, during the fertile period, “Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices” (Sol 8:14), cannot but, at the same time, cry out, “let us be fruitful and multiply!” Which is exactly why our compassionate and contemplative Mother, the Church, says to her children with a maternal pat on the head and a loving, knowing smile, “If you have a good reason for abstaining, then by all means abstain...but if not...why torture yourselves?”

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<sup>33</sup> *HV*, 10

<sup>34</sup> “Or even for the whole of matrimonial life,” as Pius XII reminds us in his *Allocution to Midwives*.

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