

Exercising Responsible Parenthood



Dr Caroline Terrnoir

Dr Terrenoir has a PhD in Medicine from Lyon Faculty of Medicine (France). She also holds a degree in Sports Traumatology - Paris Faculty of Medicine, a Master Degree in Bioethics - l'Institut Politique Léon Harmel (IPLH) and Jérôme Lejeune Institute, Paris (France) and a Master Degree in Fertility and Conjugal Sexuality - John Paul II Institute, Rome (Italy).

Dr Terrenoir is President of WOOMB France Billings LIFE (Leaders In Fertility Education) - association for the promotion of the Billings Ovulation Method™, affiliated to the IEEF (European Institute for Family Education) since 2009.

Since 2014 she is Ethics consultant for WOOMB International (World Organisation Ovulation Method Billings).

Introduction

Exercising parenthood is to exercise parental function, from the child's conception until its required education. And exercising it responsibly means thoughtfully, seriously, taking into consideration the consequences of its actions.

The concept of "responsible parenthood" has been used by the Church for half a century, namely for the first time in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council.

Paul VI *Humanae Vitae* #10

"Responsible parenthood" should be rightly understood. It is to be considered in the light of its varied legitimate and interrelated aspects.

With regard to the biological processes, responsible parenthood means an awareness of, and respect for, their proper functions. In the procreative faculty the human mind discerns biological laws that apply to the human person.

With regard to physical, economic, psychological and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised by those who prudently and generously decide to have more children, and by those who, for serious reasons and with due respect to moral precepts, decide not to have additional children for either a certain or an indefinite period of time.

Responsible parenthood has one further essential aspect of paramount importance. It concerns the objective moral order which was established by God, and of which a right conscience is the true interpreter. In a word, the exercise of responsible parenthood requires that husband and wife, keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties toward God, themselves, their families and human society.

In the service of transmitting life, they are not free, as if it were wholly up to them, to decide what is the right course to follow. On the contrary, they are bound to ensure that what they do corresponds to the will of God the Creator. The very nature of marriage and its use makes His will clear, while the constant teaching of the Church spells it out.

Anthropological Considerations

Natural law is written by God in the nature of every human being, that is to say, in his heart, or his moral conscience. The Church does not create the natural law, she is the custodian and interpreter of the law. The Church's Magisterium can speak with authority on matters within the natural law that concern all men. Jesus, incarnated Son of God, gave authority to Peter and the Apostles. He has made them the authentic guardians and interpreters of the whole moral law, of which the natural law is a part.

The control of instinct and passions can be learnt from youth, through the teaching of virtues, and particularly that of chastity. It is by a gradual education of reason and will that young people will gain such control. This is not just by voluntarism which would stoically avoid our passions, but it is to order our passions, which are good, to a much greater goodness.

Responsible parenthood requires responsible sexuality, it presupposes dialogue between the spouses and great respect. Periods of abstinence required by natural family planning methods require a learning stage but they are not times without love. There, there is a treasure of affection, delicacy, mutual love.

The spouses who have acquired the knowledge of the fertile and infertile patterns of the cycle, and who order the trends coming from instinct and passions to their love, can then choose to increase the size of their family or, if circumstances require, temporarily or permanently prevent a new birth, according to objective criteria.

Through knowledge of its fertility, the couple can enjoy a true love desiring the goodness of the spouse, including its health, living conditions, and welfare of the family.

By loving in a responsible manner means thinking about current and future conditions of the life of the beloved, of the children already born and to come. Knowledge of fertile and infertile periods of the cycle allows making a responsible choice, either to have intercourse during the fertile phase with the possibility of conceiving a new life, or to be continent during this phase, within dialogue and mutual respect.

The Billings Ovulation Method teaches the couple to manage its common fertility, by establishing a dialogue about it; it rests on the responsibility of the couple. It makes the spouses grow by allowing the necessary dialogue on the subject of fertility, showing them that they can love in a different way than in the conjugal act, increasing their mutual respect. Spouses then discover the value of the other as a person. Taking responsibility, in the practice of natural methods, is a mindset that understands that the conjugal union is an act open in and of itself to life and calls the couple to responsible fatherhood and motherhood.

The primary motivation of the conjugal act being love, by understanding their desire of intercourse, it is necessary that the spouses know their fertility well enough to be responsible in conscience either to have intercourse during the period which can be fertile, or for serious reasons to use the infertile periods for this act.

Ecology also takes into account the responsibility of potential childbearing: it is defined as "the science of living conditions". It therefore necessarily raises the question of birth, of conditions of responsible fertility, that is to say that we could respond, accepting the consequences today and tomorrow ... If we want to continue to give birth to children in an viable world, we must radically

change lifestyles. In other words, a balanced demographic growth requires some form of material decrease, which favors quality over quantity, and sustainability over profitability.

Theological Considerations

All parenthood comes from God, as St. Paul says (Eph 3:14). Human parenthood is a participation in the divine paternity, since man is created in the image of God. We can talk of cooperation in the work of creation, precisely what procreation is. God is present in human parenthood.

In Genesis, God gave to the first couple to be one flesh; this is the indissoluble conjugal union. The divine plan of man's destiny gives him the mission to rule the earth. What sense do we have to give to the words of Genesis (1:28) *God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it; Rule over the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."*?

Does the mission given to man have only to do with procreation or does it bind procreation and fertility regulation?

By equipping the man with reason, God gave him the ability to govern himself, to control his desires and decide independently the size of his family. This is the "right" autonomy Vatican II speaks of, the autonomy of man which is realized in generous love and in the total gift of self. Fatherhood and motherhood acquire all their meaning in the mutual gift of the spouses which is realized in the communion of persons. Thanks to their intelligence that allows them to discern the way to go, and to their will that allows them to engage in it voluntarily, spouses may participate in the project of God. But if God's love is limitless, human love is limited and wounded by sin.

The Church is neither pro-birth in the sense that it would invite couples to have as many children as possible, nor fatalistic in the sense that couples would rely on randomness! It invites men and women who have chosen conjugal life to have a responsible fertility, and find their way of regulating births that they want. However, all means are not necessarily good.

The Church addresses the whole person, present to his family and society, from the perspective of life on earth and eternal life. Its doctrine has no other purpose than human happiness through the fulfillment of his life in the freedom of God's children. The Church, Mater et Magistra, is inspired both by Revelation and by its knowledge of man, leading it to observe that the way of Christian morality is the only way that opens a future for humanity, in the loving plan of God.

When responsible parenthood obliges a couple to postpone a pregnancy, abstinence may be interpreted as an expression of love. But in this case there is a much more explicit reference to God himself: the spouses recognize that the creative love of God is present and incarnate in a special manner in the procreative power of their human love. They show their faith in this presence and their respect for this presence precisely by avoiding expression of their human love in sexual intercourse during the fertile time.

It is the responsibility of the couple to decide the size of its family, to see if the health conditions, of economic life, are sufficient to consider another pregnancy. A natural method of family planning should not however be used as an ecological contraceptive authorized by the Church. Love is and remains first, the love of spouses, and the love of children, which is always a gift from God, even if it comes at a time that was not intended by its parents. The conjugal act has by its nature this potential fertility. The husband and wife, who give themselves to each other the opportunity to become parents, have the responsibility to fulfill their potential fertility.

Learning self-control is possible, with the resources of self-knowledge, practice of the virtue of temperance, and prayer. Thus man can acquire the freedom to make choices according to reason, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

A key point is the requirement to form a right conscience.

The requirement of family planning is theologically linked to the duty of procreation and becomes, by extension, a duty towards life itself. This obligation corresponds to a free and responsible act of man, and not only of technology. It is therefore inherent in the chastity of marriage.

The cyclical management of fertility is willed by God. Responsible parenthood involves both dialogue between the couple, respect for natural law and compliance with the creative intention of God, which requires that the conjugal act remains open to the transmission of life. The husband and wife will then realize their responsibility in this “highest vocation of man to fatherhood.”

Gaudium et Spes #50, 2

The spouses must “fulfill their task with human and Christian responsibility and with docile reverence toward God”, that is to say “by common counsel and effort they will form a right judgment: they will take into consideration both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which the future may bring; they will reckon with both the material and the spiritual conditions of the times as well as of their state in life; finally, they should consult the interests of the family group, of temporal society, and of the Church herself. The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God.. ... But in their manner of acting, spouses should be aware that they cannot proceed arbitrarily, but must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive toward the Church’s teaching office, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel. That divine law reveals and protects the integral meaning of conjugal love, and impels it toward a truly human fulfillment.

This teaching of the Council emphasizes the importance for the spouses to follow their conscience and for this to form their judgment, taking into account the welfare of their family, society and The Church.

The criteria for a responsible behavior are to be determined objectively, depending on the nature of the person and of its acts. This nature is that of a person, reasonable individual, spiritual and physical unity, being for relationship created to love and be loved, accountable for his acts, even if the original sin weakens his will, and dismissed of his falls by the grace of Christ who also gives him to strengthen his will.

Past actions say something of ourselves. Our freedom is not always entire when we do an act, because of our personal history and circumstances that may obscure our consciousness.

The conjugal act is a total gift, exclusive and reciprocal between spouses, which means both their intimate union and the ability to become parent one by the other.

The responsibility for childbearing is human and has a particular meaning for Christians who seek to follow God’s will.

The encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is based on an integral conception of man (n. 7) and of conjugal love (n. 8-9).

The intimate structure of the conjugal act is such that its two meanings, unitive and procreative, are inseparable. This double meaning is to be attached to the truth and dignity of conjugal love. Every sexual act does not lead to procreation. But every conjugal act requires being open to life. Pope Francis recalled that “Openness to life is a condition of the sacrament of marriage.”

Pope Paul VI said: “If therefore there are well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile, thus

controlling birth in a way which does not in the least offend the moral principles which We have just explained. ... Neither the Church nor her doctrine is inconsistent when she considers it lawful for married people to take advantage of the infertile period but condemns as always unlawful the use of means which directly prevent conception, even when the reasons given for the later practice may appear to be upright and serious. In reality, these two cases are completely different.” (HV #16).

Then he adds: “This discipline (...) brings to family life abundant fruits of tranquility and peace. It helps in solving difficulties of other kinds. It fosters in husband and wife thoughtfulness and loving consideration for one another. It helps them to repel inordinate self-love, which is the opposite of charity. It arouses in them a consciousness of their responsibilities. And finally, it confers upon parents a deeper and more effective influence in the education of their children. As their children grow up, they develop a right sense of values and achieve a serene and harmonious use of their mental and physical powers.” (HV #21).

Paul VI addressed a major appeal to every man: rulers of nations, scientists, doctors, bishops, priests, so that they work for the promotion and defense of the family. He asked the couples to be apostles and guides for other couples, which motivates us to spread the Billings method in all countries.

Saint John Paul II states that God called the man and woman to a “free and responsible cooperation in transmitting the gift of human life” (FC #28). God gave us the intelligence to understand the laws of fertility. Knowledge of fertility leaves couples free in their decision to delay pregnancy or to expand their family. This decision is to be reviewed at each cycle. Man and woman are responsible for giving life and responsibility to regulate their fertility. Unlike animals that mate by instinct, man, thanks to his reason, has the faculty to adapt the transmission of life to circumstances. He can thus rule the earth.

In his catecheses, Pope John Paul II speaks about *Gaudium et Spes* of “the mature judgment of the personal conscience in conformity with the divine law, authentically interpreted by the Magisterium of the Church.” He adds about *Humanae Vitae*: “Paul VI seeks to clarify this concept [of responsible fatherhood] using its various aspects and eliminating beforehand its reduction to one of the “partial” aspects, as do those who only talk about birth control. ... In the concept of “responsible parenthood” is contained not only the decision to avoid “a new birth”, but also to grow the family according to criteria of prudence.”

Using a natural method of family planning, for John Paul II “corresponds to the truth of the person and therefore to her dignity: a dignity that comes” naturally “to man as a rational and free being. Rational and free being, man can and must examine with perspicacity this biological rhythm which belongs to the natural order. It can and must comply to it in order to exercise that responsible fatherhood and motherhood, which according to the plan of the Creator, has been defined as part of the natural order of human fertility. The concept of morally correct regulation of fertility is nothing other than the consideration of body language in the truth. Natural rhythms, immanent in the generative functions, belong to the objective truth of that language that interested persons should understand in its fully objective content. Account must be taken of the fact that the body speaks not only by the whole external expression of masculinity and femininity, but also by the internal structures of the body, of somatic and psychosomatic reactivity. All this should find its rightful place in this language by which the spouses interact as persons called to communion in the body union”(Catechesis of 5 September 1984)

John Paul II speaks in another catechesis (31 October 1984): “The problem of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is a moral one.” This responsibility means the control of reason and will over instincts and passions.

In the letter to families (1994), saint John Paul II affirms the need for the spouses “*that their fatherhood and motherhood draw from this source [God] the strength to renew themselves continuously in love.*”

For Fr Mattheeuws, teacher in theology, the technical aspects or the arguments surrounding the intuition of *Humanae Vitae* sometimes hide a central point: if it really is a vital issue, decisively to love God and the spouse, it is clear that the difficulties of living what is proposed and to integrate it deeply are signs of a spiritual struggle and not of a misunderstanding, of a failing argument or misunderstanding of historical situations. The horizon of the civilization of love and of respect for life illumines for all of us the challenge of this spiritual struggle.

Given the proper matter of chastity which is desire, it is necessary that man and woman know when they can satisfy that desire, using their responsibility in conscience either to have a sexual act during the fertile time or for serious reasons to use the infertile time for this act.

Conclusion

Making the choice of a large family requires generosity supported by the theological virtue of Hope. The materialism of our Western societies does not bring this generosity. But this large family brings shared joy, tenderness and solidarity, it helps to develop the virtues of each of its members, and is the source of half of the priestly and religious vocations.

The Council of Trent already said: "God does not command the impossible, but in commanding he warns you to do what you can and ask what you cannot, and he helps you to be able to do it" (Session VI - chapter II).

For St John Paul II in the Letter to Families: "fatherhood and motherhood represent such a sublime *"novelty"* and richness as can only be approached *"on one's knees."*"

Amoris Laetitia (Pope Francis)

Responsible parenthood does not mean unlimited procreation or lack of awareness of what is involved in rearing children, but rather the empowerment of couples to use their inviolable liberty wisely and responsibly, taking into account social and demographic realities, as well as their own situation and legitimate desires.