

## RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD

Parents should regard as their proper mission the task of transmitting human life and educating those to whom it has been transmitted. They should realize that they are thereby cooperators with the love of God the Creator, and are, so to speak, the interpreters of that love. Thus they will fulfill their task with human and Christian responsibility, and, with docile reverence toward God, will make decisions by common counsel and effort. (*GS*, #50)

Let them [husband and wife] thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which the future may bring. For this accounting they need to 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. (*GS*, #50)

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. (*GS*, #50)

[T]rusting in divine Providence and refining the spirit of sacrifice, married Christians glorify the Creator and strive toward fulfillment in Christ when with a generous human and Christian sense of responsibility they acquit themselves of the duty to procreate. Among the couples who fulfill their God-given task in this way, those merit special mention who with a gallant heart and with wise and common deliberation, undertake to bring up suitably even a relatively large family. (*GS*, #50)

Married love, therefore, requires of husband and wife the full awareness of their obligations in the matter of responsible parenthood, which today, rightly enough, is much insisted upon, but which at the same time should be rightly understood. Thus, we do well to consider responsible parenthood in the light of its varied legitimate and interrelated aspects. (*HV*, #10)

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. (*HV*, #10)

With regard to man's innate drives and emotions, responsible parenthood means that man's reason and will must exert control over them. (*HV*, #10)

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. (HV, #10)

Responsible parenthood, as we use the term here, 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. (HV, #10)

From this it follows that they are not free to act as they choose in the service of transmitting life, 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. (HV, #10)

No difficulty can arise that justifies the putting aside of the law of God which forbids all acts intrinsically evil. There is no possible circumstance in which husband and wife cannot, strengthened by the grace of God, fulfill faithfully their duties and preserve in wedlock their chastity unspotted. (CC, #61)

A particular aspect of this responsibility concerns the regulation of births. For just reasons, spouses may wish to space the births of their children. It is their duty to make certain that their desire is not motivated by selfishness but is in conformity with the generosity appropriate to responsible parenthood. Moreover, they should conform their behavior to the objective criteria of morality:

When it is a question of harmonizing married love with the responsible transmission of life, the morality of the behavior does not depend on sincere intention and evaluation of motives alone; but it must be determined by objective criteria, criteria drawn from the nature of the person and his acts, and human procreation in the context of true love; this is possible only if the virtue of married chastity is practiced with sincerity of heart. (CCC, #2368)

The work of educating in the service of life involves the training of married couples in responsible procreation. In its true meaning, responsible procreation requires couples to be obedient to the Lord's call and to act as faithful interpreters of his plan. This happens when the family is generously open to new lives, and when couples maintain an attitude of openness and service to life, even if, for serious reasons and in respect for the moral law, they choose to avoid a new birth for the time being or indefinitely. The moral law obliges them in every case to control the impulse of instinct and passion, and to respect the biological laws inscribed in their person. It is precisely this respect which makes

legitimate, at the service of responsible procreation, the use of natural methods of regulating fertility. (*EV*, #97)

Finally, it is for parents to take a thorough look at the matter and decide upon the number of their children. This is an obligation they take upon themselves, before their children already born, and before the community to which they belong—following the dictates of their own consciences informed by God's law authentically interpreted, and bolstered by their trust in Him. (Paul VI, *PP*, March 26, 1967, #37)

The moral lawfulness of such conduct [limiting the use of the marital act to times of natural sterility] would be affirmed or denied according as to whether or not the intention to keep constantly to these periods is based on sufficient and reliable moral grounds. The sole fact that the couple do not offend against the nature of the act and that they are willing to accept and bring up the child that is born notwithstanding the precautions they have taken, would not of itself alone be sufficient guarantee of a right intention and of the unquestionable morality of the motives themselves. (Pius XII, *Allocution to Midwives*, October 29, 1951)

To embrace the married state, to make frequent use of the faculty proper to it and lawful only in that state, while on the other hand, always and deliberately to seek to evade its primary duty without serious reason, would be to sin against the very meaning of married life. (Pius XII, *Allocution to Midwives*, October 29, 1951)

Serious reasons, often put forward on medical, eugenic, economic and social grounds, can exempt from that obligatory service even for a considerable period of time, even for the entire duration of the marriage. It follows from this that the use of the infertile periods can be lawful from the moral point of view and, in the circumstances which have been mentioned, it is indeed lawful. If, however, in the light of a reasonable and fair judgment, there are no such serious personal reasons, or reasons deriving from external circumstances, then the habitual intention to avoid the fruitfulness of the union, while at the same time continuing fully to satisfy sensual intent, can only arise from a false appreciation of life and from motives that run counter to true standards of moral conduct. (Pius XII, *Allocution to Midwives*, October 29, 1951)

Responsible fatherhood and motherhood include not only the couple's prudent decisions but also the refusal of artificial methods of birth control and, when there are serious reasons, the choice of the natural regulation of fertility. (PCF, *The Ethical and Pastoral Dimensions of Population Trends*, March 25, 1994, #46)

A truly responsible fatherhood and motherhood begin with the couple's responsibility before the author and Lord of life. Such fatherhood and motherhood are based upon generosity within marriage and the respect of the unborn child's right to life. (PCF, *The Ethical and Pastoral Dimensions of Population Trends*, March 25, 1994, #73)

Through their own experience spouses come to learn the meaning of responsible

fatherhood and motherhood. They learn it also from the experience of other couples in similar situations and as they become more open to the findings of the various sciences. One could say that "experts" learn in a certain sense from "spouses", so that they in turn will then be in a better position to teach married couples the meaning of responsible procreation and the ways to achieve it. (John Paul II, *Gratissimam sane*, February 2, 1994, #12)

They then experience a moment of special responsibility, which is also the result of the procreative potential linked to the conjugal act. At that moment, the spouses can become father and mother, initiating the process of a new human life, which will then develop in the woman's womb. If the wife is the first to realize that she has become a mother, the husband, to whom she has been united in "one flesh", then learns this when she tells him that he has become a father. Both are responsible for their potential and later actual fatherhood and motherhood. (John Paul II, *Gratissimam sane*, February 2, 1994, #12)