

# The Perfect Storm

By John F. Kippley July 26, 2008

As viewers of *The Perfect Storm* know, this refers to a horrendously destructive North Atlantic storm caused by the convergence of several factors. Any one of them would have made for a bad storm; but it was their convergence that caused a storm of epic proportions.

I think that the same can be said about the storm of discontent and dissent that arose after the publication of *Humanae Vitae*. Seven factors can be identified that contributed to make a perfect storm that battered the Church with great destruction at the time and whose damaging legacy still continues.

1. Very short birth intervals.
2. Widespread ignorance about all forms of natural family planning.
3. The appearance of the Pill
4. The lack of defense of the Catholic Tradition in the years preceding *Humanae Vitae*.
5. The effects of irenic ecumenism.
6. A post-Vatican II attitude of change.
7. The loss of breastfeeding, especially the ecological breastfeeding that postpones the return of fertility.

1. The late 1940s, the entire decade of the Fifties, and the early 1960s were marked by an almost unprecedented high birth rate. The veterans of World War II married in the Forties and wanted nothing more than to raise a family. Perhaps the experience of so much death and destruction helped them to appreciate the value of life and family. This was the age of the baby boom and real estate developments, new schools and double sessions. This was also the age of babies coming every year, especially among Catholics and other Christians who eschewed unnatural forms of birth control. By the mid-1960s, the frequency of birth intervals had led to generally large families. In addition, many mothers were feeling extremely fatigued, and some were experiencing health problems related to having a baby every 12 months or so.

2. Ignorance about all forms of natural family planning was amazingly widespread. Many Catholics and other Christians and even seculars had used Calendar Rhythm in the Thirties and Forties. Our landlord in 1964 told us that they had used the rhythm method with 100% success in spacing the births of their three children in the Thirties. Further, there was a general reluctance on the part of the Catholic clergy to inform couples about the rhythm method out of fear that they would use it selfishly. I heard of an older priest in the Seventies who was opposed to our teaching modern NFP because he thought that couples should have ten children before resorting to NFP. He was quite an exception at that time, but he may not have been so unusual in the Fifties. It almost seems that there was a considerable loss of common knowledge about the rhythm method during the Fifties. The highly accurate calendar-temperature method had been taught and promoted in some areas since the 1940s, but the most widely read Catholic marriage manual in the

50s and 60s mentioned only calendar rhythm and provided no rules. Readers were advised they could get those from their pastors. Rhythm then came to get a bad name because many had picked up the general idea but didn't know the rules. We were a classic example. We had heard that ovulation was supposed to take place about mid-cycle, and we had heard that egg life was short, but we had never heard about the calendar-temperature method. So in 1963 we thought that to abstain for a couple days on either side of the presumed day of ovulation was to practice the rhythm method. Since we had hoped only to delay the first birth for a year, we were pleased to postpone pregnancy for a few months with our first child coming 13 ½ months after our wedding.

3. There is no question that the development of the birth control Pill in the 1950s and its mass marketing in 1960 added a whole new dimension to the birth control issue. It added the aura of something "scientific," and it brought birth control advertising from little ads for foams and jellies in women's magazines to four-color full page ads in all sorts of publications aimed at women and doctors alike. It raised theological confusion because some were saying that it was just a form of regulating ovulation and was not a contraceptive. This in turn led to the appointment of the papal birth control commission, and the very fact that the issue was being studied was enough for some to think that the whole birth control teaching was under review and therefore doubtful and therefore not binding, at least until it was clarified. That wasn't so, but that was a not uncommon perception, especially among some of the liberal clergy who were not bashful about sharing their opinions.

4. During the early and mid-1960s, there was no shortage of articles calling for a reexamination of Catholic teaching on the birth control issue, and this was particularly true in 1964-1968. The problem that also contributed to the perfect storm was the lack of articles both in the popular Catholic press as well as in the more theological journals to respond to advocates of change. Pope Paul VI had said some things in 1964 that could be interpreted as saying we should cool it. It had no effect on the agents of change, but when I wrote my first article on the subject in 1966, I felt almost a bit guilty of publicly entering the fray. But I felt something had to be said, and the article, "Holy Communion: Eucharistic and Marital," was published on February 25, 1967.

5. Also important was the irenicism that characterized the ecumenical movement within the Church since the 1965 end of Vatican Council II. Some Catholics who read certain Protestant theologians seemed to think that about the only thing that separated us was the birth control issue, so let's not say anything about it. That's an almost verbatim quote from one of my theology classmates who was also engaged in parish adult education. That get-along attitude diminished considerably as one Protestant body after another climbed on the abortion bandwagon, but it was still pervasive at the time of *Humanae Vitae*.

6. Important also was an overall atmosphere of change. The discipline of Friday abstinence had been changed. The Liturgy had been changed. We were singing hymns written by Protestants. Writers were advocating a change in the teaching on birth control

and not being excommunicated or penalized in any way. The sexual revolution was in full swing. Change was in the air.

7. Of special importance to us are the effects of the bottle-feeding culture within the Church as well as in the culture. Pope Pius XII took time out from his busy wartime schedule in the fall of 1941 to urge all mothers to breastfeed their babies if at all possible. This was very important. Here we had the Vicar of Christ urging mothers to breastfeed their babies. But who ever heard of it? I know we had learned about it by 1995—54 years after the event—when we were writing the Fourth Edition of *The Art of NFP*, but I cannot remember if we knew of it much before then. We probably learned of it through Dr. Herbert Ratner, who wrote about it in *Child and Family* magazine, and Fr. W. Dennis Virtue who quoted it in his 1994 doctoral dissertation, *Mother and Infant*.

What if the Church in general had picked up on the exhortation of Pius XII? What if bishops and priests had really welcomed, encouraged, and promoted the work of La Leche League when it was founded in 1956? What if a very significant proportion of Catholic mothers were doing the sort of breastfeeding then promoted by LLL, something quite close to eco-breastfeeding, and what if the mothers were having babies on the average of every two years instead of every year? For these moms the panic and fatigue factors of annual babies would have been greatly reduced, and they would have a much better appreciation of God's way of doing things.

If we look back and ask "What if?" we can see that there is little that could be done about some of the factors that made up the perfect storm of discontent and dissent. There is nothing that dioceses and parishes could do about the invention of the Pill or the lack of responses to the agents of change, although much more could have been done in the pulpit. There is not too much that the local Church could have done about an overly irenic ecumenism or the spirit of change. What the local Church could have done is to make sure that parishioners knew as much about NFP as was then known including both the highly effective calendar-temperature form of NFP and a very natural form of breastfeeding. This combination would have greatly helped families to avoid the duress of annual births and sometimes having three children in diapers.

What if there had been a large proportion of young Catholic families who had been well informed about breastfeeding and the calendar-temperature method (today's STM without the mucus)? I think this would have robbed the dissenters of the huge percentage of parents in their 20s and 30s who were feeling panicked and therefore discontent. There would have been large numbers who could cite their own experience in favor of the Tradition. In short, the dissent movement would have made a big fuss, but it would not have been the perfect storm whose damage still surrounds us.

Applied to today, it seems to me that the modern parish is making a big mistake if it does not require engaged couples to attend a full course on NFP. By a full course I mean one that includes specific teaching on marital chastity and teaches ecological breastfeeding for the natural spacing of babies as well as for the well-being of mother and baby. It has to happen. The question is, how long it will take for pastors to do it?