

Birth Control: Private Initiative and Public Debate

A reminder that the population control movement still needs its nongovernmental friends came last week with the simultaneous announcement that the Ford Foundation will support a comprehensive research program in New York City, and renewed eruption of Catholic antagonism to the government's increasing involvement with the issue.

Six million dollars of the \$14.5-million Ford grant will go to the Population Council for expansion of the facilities and the research and training programs of its biomedical laboratories. The remaining \$8.5 million has been given to Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons for the creation of a major new facility for work in human reproduction and fertility control. The center, to be known as the International Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction, will study psychological and sociological aspects of fertility and contraception as well as physiological ones, and will provide training and research opportunities for both American and foreign physicians. The hope is, according to a statement by Ford Foundation president Henry T. Heald, that "together the Columbia center and the Population Council's laboratories will constitute a research, training, and clearinghouse complex with the stature and resources of a prime international center for work in reproductive biology and fertility control." The Columbia center, which is to be housed in a new building at the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, will be headed by Howard C. Taylor, Jr., former chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology of the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

While private initiative was making headlines in New York, moves to expand governmental initiative in establishing birth control programs in the U.S. and abroad were being denounced in Washington. Catholic reaction surprised many observers who had hoped that bitterness in the birth control debate was a thing of the past. The forum was the panel on population of the White House Conference on International Cooperation. Its object was the report of the committee on population, headed by Richard Gardner, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations and now a professor of law at Columbia University, which recommended, among other things, that the government spend up to \$300 million over the next 3 years to help other countries run family planning services and that it greatly expand assistance to states and municipalities at home.

On its surface, the quarrel that broke out during the panel discussion between Catholic panelist Father William Gibbons, S.J., a demographer at Fordham University, and other panelists and members of the audience was a debate over form. Father Gibbons was reported in the press to have complained about inadequate representation of "religious forces" on the committee, which included only one representative of a Catholic institution. (A similar dispute arose after the

close of the White House Conference on Health last month, after a report on family planning was issued which also called for direct governmental advice and services. The White House meeting, charged an official of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, deliberately shut out Catholics and was used as a "propaganda forum for an anti-life philosophy.") Father Gibbons also felt that the form of last week's meeting was improper in that descriptions of the committee's report appeared in the morning papers the day the debate was scheduled to take place, leaving the panelists and audience debating something of a *fait accompli*.

But procedural questions were not at the heart of the matter. The political fact is that, even without the encouragement of advisory panels, the government is moving quietly ahead, with the Public Health Service, the Welfare Administration, and the poverty program all increasingly in the business of providing birth control services to lower-income women and sponsoring varied research and demonstration projects. As for the Church, the plain fact is that it is in confusion. Father Gibbons criticized the Catholics who have taken stands at variance with Church teachings on birth control. But a Catholic official of the Agency for International Development was quoted as saying, "you can choose your own theologian these days." Recent reports from Rome indicate that the special papal commission studying marriage and family life may end by restating the ban against artificial means of contraception—but the liberal elements in the Church have made no secret of their efforts to obtain modification.

At one level the argument is an old one, involving definitions of freedom. The authors of the committee report believe that governmental assistance is required "to preserve and extend human dignity. . . ." But Father Gibbons believes that "coercion of any kind, even by propaganda, is not consonant with democracy and freedom of choice." What elements of the Church may actually fear, according to one veteran observer of the birth-control struggle who is critical of Catholic attitudes, is not loss of freedom to choose but loss of its own authority to instruct. "The Latin American church is in virtual rebellion," he pointed out, "and there is evidence that even in this country Church communicants are doing pretty much what they please."

In this situation, where the public is leading its leaders and the Church is speaking with many voices, the meaning of last week's flare-up is difficult to assess. To some observers it appeared that the *ancien régime* was making a final attempt to reassert a dying order. But, as the *Washington Post* pointed out in an editorial, "To the non-Catholic world, population control is not a religious matter; it is a quite practical matter of finding an effective means of bringing birth into harmonious relation to the ability of parents to discharge the obligations of parenthood." And it seems that the government is finally beginning to do just that.—ELINOR LANGER