

References

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News and Comment

"Population Explosion": Bishops' Proposal for Study Conflicts with Some Popular Conceptions of Church

Among the major institutions of the Western world, the Catholic Church is perhaps least subjected to critical scrutiny by the press. There are various reasons for this, but a principal one appears to be that the Church hierarchy is well disciplined, and contending elements do not employ publicity as a tactical device; in addition, the press does not consider it good taste or good business to subject religious bodies to the sort of probing that is traditionally applied to nonreligious institutions. One result of this combination of factors is that controversy within the Church rarely comes to public attention and the Church therefore tends to take on a monolithic appearance that may not altogether reflect reality.

In the public mind, this image of the monolith applies to a broad range of issues with which the Church is concerned, but it is perhaps most widely and uncritically held on the subject of birth control. The official position of the Church is adamant opposition to any birth control technique but the rhythm method; and when the subject has arisen in the form of a public policy issue, the Church has contributed to its monolithic reputation by coming down hard against efforts to promote chemical or mechanical contraception. At the same time, however, considerable

evidence has accumulated in recent years to indicate that many persons within the Church are dissatisfied with the official position.

The extent and potency of this dissatisfaction has been difficult to discern, since its manifestations have been limited to scholarly and theological journals, private conversations, and occasional speeches. Earlier this week, however, the rumblings came to the surface in conspicuous fashion when the Associated Press reported that a "number" of bishops of unspecified nationality at the Ecumenical Council were preparing a petition calling for the Church to establish a special group to study various problems of economic development, including population growth. The AP report, in quoting an unidentified source, said the proposed group would study steps the Church might take to meet "certain worrisome problems of the moment: the consequences of the population explosion, the existence of two-thirds of the world in a constant state of under-development and hunger, lack of true evangelization of the poor, and universal peace."

The prospects for this proposal should not arouse any large measure of optimism on the part of those who would like to see the Church revise its position. The petition is yet to be formally presented; when it is, it will be subject to study by a specially appointed commission of the Council, and the study will be made against a background of great investment of effort and

emotion in opposing artificial birth control.

Nevertheless, the Church is not the rigid institution that it is popularly assumed to be, nor is it committed to a policy of unrestrained population growth, despite its consistent and furious battles against the use of public funds for family planning efforts in the United States and in American foreign aid programs. At issue, as far as the official Catholic position is concerned, is not the question of whether or not family growth should be limited, but rather the motivations for limitation and the techniques to be employed.

The sanction for limiting births was explicitly given in 1951 by Pope Pius XII, when he stated that "people can be relieved from this positive obligation (to procreate) over a considerable length of time and even for the whole duration of marriage, if there are adequate bases, which sometimes exist for medical, eugenic, economic and social reasons." The rhythm method, he added, is "compatible with the law of God," and he expressed the hope that "medical science will succeed in giving this permissible method a sufficiently safe basis and the most recent information seems to confirm this hope."

In recent years, in response to adverse public opinion, a number of Catholic theologians have been publicly addressing themselves to the question of birth control. Many of them have taken a cue from the late Pope's reference to "medical science" and have gone on to urge the quest for a solution that would be compatible with the positions of the other major religious groups. Outsiders' interpretations of their motives include the uncharitable view that the Church would be quite pleased to be provided with a gracious retreat from a position that is becoming increasingly untenable. But whatever the motivation may be, the fact is that leaders of the Church have been paying a great deal of attention to the misery and social unrest present in

over-crowded, impoverished lands, and a lot is being said and written about the development of birth control techniques that would satisfy theological as well as medical requirements. One consequence is that, despite popular notions that depict the Church as adamantly opposed to anything that smacks of birth control, the Church is acutely interested in birth control research. It is evident that a number of Kennedy administration officials who should have made it their business to know better were, until recently, operating under the assumption that if it bears a birth control label, hide it. The Church's generally explosive reaction to federal involvement in birth control provides a sound basis for caution, but it would perhaps be useful if it were more widely recognized that in much of Church thinking on the subject, there has been a warm spot for research. (Last year, for example, the Rev. John A. O'Brien, research professor of theology at Notre Dame University, wrote in *Look Magazine* that "a program to perfect the rhythm method, which promises much for the peace and happiness of the world, surely should receive . . . Federal support.") With considerable justification for wariness, however, public officials generally tend to steer away from the issue, which was the case several months ago when the Public Health Service decided that it would not be discreet to release a survey of research and training in population and fertility control in the U.S.

Research Favored

The PHS report, which also included recommendations for increased research, was scheduled for release following a flareup of adverse publicity and the threat of a congressional investigation. Significantly, the most prominent reaction from within the Church was an expression of puzzlement over fears that Catholics might be opposed to fertility research. In a speech to the National Catholic Family Life Convention, the Rev. John C. Knott, director of the Family Life Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, stated that "we, as Catholics, should support and encourage basic, objective research, whether through governmental or private agencies, in those areas intimately affecting family life in this country and throughout the world. One of our most effective exports should be truth. As a nation we are especially

well endowed with money, scientific techniques and personnel to uncover the secrets of nature and make them available to the world."

The object of the PHS survey, he said, should be to "point up not only what is known, but more importantly, those areas of great ignorance in which much more intensive and basic research is necessary. One such area in which there is little knowledge and much theorizing is that of the physiology of human reproduction. Why not concentrate money and personnel on this particular topic? Certainly any objective knowledge gained here by basic scientific research would be of benefit to all mankind."

Rhythm Method

When justice has been done to the Church's generally unrecognized interest in fertility research, it is necessary to note that the stated goal of this research is not *any* birth control method; rather it is to bring greater reliability to the rhythm method, which, even at its foreseeable best, holds relatively little promise for use in the impoverished, illiterate nations where population growth is a serious burden on economic development. Even if the method were perfected to the point where periods of fertility and sterility could be easily and accurately determined, it still calls for periodic abstinence, an ingredient that is difficult to attain in societies where sexual gratification is one of the few pleasures available to the masses.

Some Catholic writers, notably John Rock, director of the Rock Reproductive Study Center, have argued that research may develop a reliable technique that will be compatible with the Church's position, but Catholic theologians are yet to reconcile the doctrinal requirement for the exercise of will with statistics which show that when self-restraint is a requirement, reliability diminishes. Thus, oral contraceptives satisfy a variety of medical and cultural requirements for a contraceptive, but the very act of taking the pill to prevent conception renders it unacceptable to Catholic thinking.

Underdeveloped Nations

The impression of Catholic immobility on the subject of birth control is often accompanied by the view that the Church bears a major responsibility for the underdeveloped nations' failure to cope with their population prob-

lems. It is true that the Church has not been in the vanguard of those who have been spreading alarm over the "population explosion," and it has reacted violently to proposals to incorporate population control measures in American foreign aid programs. It is also true, however, that the Church's likes and dislikes in this matter bear little relationship to the enormously complex factors that go into a national birth rate. If the Church were to reverse its position tomorrow, the consequences in India, for example, would very likely be negligible.

American family planning personnel who have worked there under the auspices of private foundations have often lamented that high level officials within the Indian government seem to be incredibly indifferent to their nation's population problems. And American pharmaceutical firms that have sought to produce and sell contraceptives in India have not found an abundance of cooperation within the Indian government. If the religious factor did not make the subject so politically sensitive in the United States, there is no doubt that the administration could press its aid recipients to take a closer look at reality; and it could make family planning assistance part of economic assistance. But the heart of the problem is that family planning cannot be dictated, especially when it is a white-skinned nation that is in effect telling a dark-skinned nation that there should be fewer of you.

At present, the policy of the Kennedy administration is compounded of domestic political caution and a desire to arouse the underdeveloped nations to an accurate appraisal of their population problems. Private foundations are being encouraged to make assistance available upon request, and administration officials are *talking* publicly about population problems, which is a notable step forward from the embargo that was imposed in the later days of the Eisenhower administration. There is no inclination to antagonize the Church, but there is an openly stated concern about the misery created by overpopulation, and it is not improbable that in the complex book-keeping of foreign aid, any nation that wishes to help itself will find that, in effect, American assistance is available. Meanwhile, the Church is yet to express any displeasure with the administration's concern over population problems.—D. S. Greenberg.