

■ Population explosion stirs ferment among U.S. Catholics on family planning.

## BIRTH CONTROL BATTLE

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The subject of birth control, long regarded by members of the Roman Catholic Church as a dangerously sensitive issue to discuss, is today stirring a profound ferment in the Catholic community in the United States.

Until fairly recently, parish approbation customarily has been reserved — for the big Catholic family. Mothers with plans to limit the number of their children have often faced parish censure.

But new trends in living, new discoveries in medicine and science, and increased exchanges with non-Catholic groups have raised fundamental challenges to the traditional Catholic attitudes and customs; consequently, throughout the Catholic world, increasing numbers of theologians, demographers, moral philosophers and sociologists are pursuing a

close, and frequently bold, re-examination of many aspects of birth control. One development in this expanding Catholic inquiry is the establishment of a population study centre at Georgetown University, a Catholic institution in Washington.

The birth-control issue has been stirred by many forces, but the population explosion, probably more than any other single development, has focused widening Catholic attention on the subject. There are other factors that have plunged areas of the Catholic world into ferment over birth control. For example, in the Catholic Press, and in public and private dialogues, Catholics speak with candour these days of the membership "leakage from Church." Cardinal Suenens, Primate of Belgium, who is a leader of the "progressive" group in Rome's

Sacred College of Cardinals, has bluntly asked "whether many people, baptised as infants, do not fall away from the Church because of birth control."

Birth control has become a problem for many Catholics who faithfully attend Mass. Parish priests report that many Catholics have had to be denied the sacraments because they insist on using artificial contraceptives. Parishioners who cannot afford to have more children, who are afraid to rely on the present rhythm system, are making choices that disturb them and disturb their pastors. They continue to go to church — but they go in guilt.

When the questioner tries to find out why there has been an apparent upsurge in the spirit of inquiry into birth control matters, the answer is always the same, and even the words are very close:

"It's John."

"Credit John."

Or, simply and affectionately:

"John."

While the late Pope John

XXIII has not been identified with any strong position on the birth control and population problem, his historic role as the most "tradition-shattering figure ever to occupy the Chair of Peter" (the description is by "The Pilot," the Catholic newspaper in Boston) has inspired those in the Church who are seeking reforms, including reforms in Church attitudes on birth control. Some say that Pope John cleared the way for the re-examination of the sensitive issue when he convoked the Ecumenical Council.

A woman physician in Belgium, a Catholic mother of five, has reported that she wrote to the Vatican about her confusions over the Church's official insistence that it is moral to practice birth prevention through rhythm but sinful to use artificial contraceptives. In her appeal for clarification from the forthcoming Council, she wrote that "in each case the intention is precisely the same." and commented that "God will not be deceived." She has quoted a reply from the Palace of the Holy Office stating that "the

question is under consideration and will certainly be dealt with at the Council." Many bishops were "well informed of the difficulties," according to the Vatican reply, "so much so that the decision of the Council will certainly be sought as a result."

In Puerto Rico, too, the birth control question is paramount. Behind the pastel walls of the Government offices in San Juan, overlooking the sun-baked court and the palm trees see-sawing in slow motion, the Health Department spokesman talked guardedly about "Catholic doctors" who, he said, were still bitterly fighting birth control in Puerto Rico. He noted that the Caribbean Commonwealth had set up one of the most extensive systems of public and private birth control clinics in the world, to help reduce a fertility rate that has made Puerto Rico one of the most densely-packed areas on this globe.

At one village clinic the medical director discusses the whole range of artificial contraceptives — all of them banned by the Catholic Church — and says that they

have been a boon for some of the poverty-ridden parents who wish desperately to have no more children. But the devices are not good enough, he adds; they are "too sophisticated" for the uneducated and therefore too unreliable. He speaks of sterilization, a birth control measure particularly condemned by the Catholic Church but widely practiced in Puerto Rico.

"Only sterilization really works," he says. "After six or seven children these people come in here and they agree that sterilization is what they really want." "But what about the Catholic doctors?" the director is asked. "Isn't it true that the Catholic doctors in Government health clinics discourage all these birth control services?" The medical director looks up. There is a quick frown and then a quick grin: "What do you mean, Catholic doctors? You're in Puerto Rico. We're all Catholic doctors!"

The Government's network of health centres has long been the target of the Catholic hierarchy. One parish priest draped the belfry of his church in black strips for mourning when the birth

control programme reached his community. An agreement, however, has just been reached between Church and Government under which Catholics may now go to the centres without incurring condemnation by the Church.

No formal pronouncement has been made, nor will it be made out of fear that an official public declaration may jeopardize the programme, but the agreement calls for the Department of Health to disseminate full information on the Church-approved rhythm system of birth control. (Up to now, most of the personnel in the island's health centres have been reluctant to prescribe the rhythm method, which they consider complicated and unreliable.)

In exchange for offering a full and fair presentation of all methods of birth control, and leaving it to each applicant to make the specific choice, the Department of Health understands that the Catholic hierarchy will cease blanket attacks against the Government's programme.

A few weeks ago an eminent priest-theologian of the Catholic Church directed

some words of his own to another "heretic" — Dr. John Rock, a pioneer in the development of the oral contraceptive pill and Catholic author of the new book "The Time Has Come." The book, published by Alfred A. Knopf, has shocked many Catholics by advocacy of birth control methods challenged by the Church and by insistence that the Catholic Church has changed major doctrines in the past and can do so now on the issue of birth control. Dr. Rock has been attacked as a "maverick Catholic," a "mischief maker," a "Catholic renegade."

"Tell John," said the priest theologian softly, "that there are things I can't put into my writing but please remind him of Cardinal Newman; tell him, 'please, that when things get rough to take courage, to remember the Newmans of the Catholic Church; tell him to remember that there have been others before him in our Church who have also had to live *sub luce maligna* — for a while."

Lay Catholics have traditionally avoided debate on the

birth control question, but letters to Dr. Rock, most of them from readers who are sympathetic and many of them from grateful Catholics, give evidence of a new spirit of inquiry and challenge:

From a surgeon in Beverly Hills, California — "Your stand is the most heartening thing that has come out of our Roman Catholic faith for years." A terse note from Chattanooga, Tenn. — "Be assured that the hopes and

prayers of many Catholic parents are behind you." And from a Catholic mother of four (a fifth expected), in Worcester, Mass. — "God forgive me, but I would terminate this pregnancy if I could. I hope and pray that you are able to go ahead with your work. I can't eat or sleep, and I cry all the time. I pray God to help us both." — *This article has been extracted from a series which appeared in the New York Times.*

## KNOWLEDGE AND FISH

Knowledge does not keep any better than fish. You may be dealing with knowledge of the old species; with some old truths; but somehow or other it must come to the students, as it were, just drawn out of the sea and with the freshness of its immediate importance. — *Alfred North Whitehead.*