

► *Should the tenet of one faith be imposed on all?*

## CATHOLICS AND BIRTH CONTROL

BY J. H. J. UPHAM, M.D.

I AM writing as a physician, not a theologian. I do not propose to argue the planned parenthood idea with fellow-Americans who regard birth control as *sinful*, nor am I equipped to do so.

That there is nothing inherently irreligious in birth control seems clear enough from the fact that it has been repeatedly approved by leaders of practically all religious groups except the Roman Catholics.

The Federal Council of Churches, the General Council of Congregational and Christian Churches, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Lambeth Conference of Bishops of the Church of England are only a few of the ecclesiastical bodies which have voiced approbation.

What is involved, therefore, is not a universal spiritual principle but a specific religious taboo pe-

culiar to one group, the Roman Catholics — and even among them, as I shall show below, subject to important exceptions. I respect that taboo. But after all there is nothing in the planned parenthood program which *compels* anyone to acquire or use birth control knowledge.

The only issues, in all conscience, are whether this vital medical information shall be made available to the overwhelming majority of American wives and husbands who want it, or whether any religious group, large or small, shall be permitted to impose its own taboos upon the whole population.

Let's skip fine-spun arguments and take a common-sense view. There are Americans whose religion forbids the eating of pork. What would the Catholic Church say if this minority conducted a high-powered campaign to bar pork from all butcher shops? Christian Scientists are profoundly op-

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posed to nearly any sort of medical treatment. Shall we therefore abolish the entire medical profession and raze all clinics and hospitals?

The religious phase of the problem must obviously be put aside. In a democracy, it is something between individual men and women and their consciences and therefore outside the realm of discussion. Our heterogeneous population includes a large variety of faiths and a goodly number without any formal religious affiliation. Any attempt by some group to force its special tenets upon everybody is on the face of it repugnant to a democratic nation.

Yet that is precisely the attempt being made, with great success in some areas, by the Catholic Church, directly and through lay Catholic organizations and individuals under its domination. Its aggressive, relentless campaign to deny birth control information and guidance to those who may want it is not restricted to Catholics but is directed to the entire American people.

Its full force as a powerful minority pressure group is being used to influence legislation, to bar medical advice on birth control from public hospitals, to deny meeting halls to planned parent-

hood speakers, to frighten radio stations, newspapers and magazines into silence on the subject.

The people of two of our states, Massachusetts and Connecticut, are being denied a type of medical service available in the other forty-six states largely through Catholic political threats and pressures. Dr. Karl Sax of Harvard University, analyzing the Massachusetts election on the birth control amendment in 1940, declared that "the only important opposition came from the Roman Catholic hierarchy" which carried on "a campaign of lies, scare propoganda, suppression of press and radio and intimidation of voters." He found that "three of the major metropolitan Boston newspapers, and the only newspaper in Fall River, and the three major Boston radio stations refused to accept advertising in favor of the amendment" for fear of Catholic reprisals.

A contraceptive clinic in the General Hospital of Cincinnati, Ohio, sponsored by the local Academy of Medicine, was forced to move under Catholic pressure. In a Catholic hospital in Elizabeth, New Jersey, supported largely by public funds, doctors who refused to sign a pledge that they would not prescribe birth control either in the hospital or in their *private*

*practice*, were told that they would be excluded from the hospital. A clinic in Austin, Texas, supported by many of the city's leading physicians, was driven out of the Brackenridge Hospital after a Catholic priest launched an attack on this public service.

These are random examples from the records of the Planned Parenthood Federation. Dozens and scores of others could be cited. Public halls have been barred to birth control meetings through Catholic threats; often the proprietors of halls have rescinded permission under this religious pressure. Dozens of newspapers have been warned to expect Catholic boycotts for running articles or even paid advertisements on the planned parenthood idea. The Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal* is one of the publications which defied such threats, but many another has knuckled under.

I submit that this sort of activity by the Roman Catholic hierarchy is a direct and dangerous invasion of civil rights, as well as a startling infringement of the American principle of separation of church and state. No one for a moment disputes the complete right of the Catholic Church and any groups under its control to preach against planned parenthood among their

members. Since that is what they believe, it is not only their right but their duty. Any effort to limit them in this respect would be a shameful abridgment of religious freedom. But when their campaign is carried beyond their own membership, when it goes beyond moral suasion, employing every conceivable device of political power and economic boycott, it becomes a no less shameful invasion of other people's rights.

## II

There are some who, honestly or disingenuously, advance the religious argument against birth control disguised in laymen's language. They would enforce their religious taboo upon non-Catholics or upon Catholics unwilling to accept it by appeals to "nature." Planned parenthood, they declare, "interferes with the Creator's or nature's design"; it "thwarts a deep and sacred biologic urge."

Those are statements that the physician can and should discuss. Throughout its history, medical science has been confronted with prejudice against its discoveries on the ground that they "go against nature." Medical missionaries among primitive peoples often find that their scientific methods of healing

and surgery are looked upon as horrifying interference with "natural" processes. In the more backward and illiterate corners of Europe and the Americas, physicians constantly run into ignorant hostility against electro-therapy, X-ray, vaccination, internal surgery and other procedures among people who want "nature to take its course."

The use of contraceptive methods which have been scientifically studied and approved, and which have received a millionfold test in practice, is no more *unnatural* than any other type of medical knowledge or medical appliances. It does not wreck nature's intentions any more than the use of vitamins or the removal of tonsils. If bringing God-given human intelligence to bear on the care of the body and its functions were in truth a violation of "nature's design," then we should be obliged to let wounds suppurate unchecked and to forbid the use of chemical or mechanical appliances in the interest of bodily health and comfort. A priest who has some decaying teeth fixed or permits the amputation of a gangrenous leg is "thwarting nature" more violently than a woman who follows a physician's advice in preventing an unwanted or dangerous pregnancy.

Planned parenthood clinics, as is generally known, also offer help to would-be mothers who cannot have children because of some physical or psychological trouble. Many women and men are given expert medical advice that enables them to have children. Is that, too, interfering with nature's own decisions? Yet medical information and aid are in these cases no less "unnatural" than those made available in the planning of parenthood.

But more important: the same Catholics who stress the nature argument against planned parenthood recommend the so-called Rhythm System of postponing pregnancy as the one permissible method. The theory is that by abstaining from sexual intercourse during the period of the woman's ovulation, in accordance with a complex calculated system of fertility, inception can be avoided. Here is what Dr. John Rock, an eminent Catholic medical scientist of Harvard University Medical School, has to say about the Rhythm System approved by the Catholic Church:

Continence throughout most of the menstrual cycle is theoretically feasible. It fails because, somewhat like coitus interruptus, it requires in the careless, ignorant, drunken or otherwise impetuous male, qualities that are missing; and in the female, a low sex drive, plus a degree of attentiveness and of mathematical ability found only

in those of high intelligence who are not unduly preoccupied with other pressing domestic affairs. Thus does this much advertised and obviously useful but unwarrantedly approved method fail to offer adequate protection in case pregnancy would be tragic for mother, child or society. Furthermore, it is to be considered an unnatural method, for it is during the fertile period that the whole psychosomatic physiology of the healthy normal female is prepared and intended by her primate nature for coitus.<sup>1</sup>

Judged in terms of "thwarting nature" and "striking at the well-spring of life" — I quote the expressions from actual attacks on birth control — this method is the most drastic of all. It frustrates the female of the human species precisely when she is most ready for the sex act and for the inception of new life. If the injunction to be fruitful and to multiply is to be applied literally this would be the very time to make continence a crime. The Catholic propagandists thus contradict and cancel out their own most effective arguments based on "nature's intentions."

The contradiction, however, goes a lot deeper. As long as the Catholic Church opposed birth control of any and all types it was at least consistent. But since 1932 it has endorsed the Rhythm System. It

is not difficult to understand why this was done — birth control enlightenment was proceeding so fast, as much among Catholics as non-Catholics, that the Church was obliged to offer an expedient compromise. But whatever the reason, it meant that the Catholic hierarchy had in effect *accepted the principle of planned parenthood*. In recommending the Rhythm System while condemning all other types of birth control Catholics today are no longer disputing principles but *methods* — and that, I submit, is a matter that can more properly and competently be decided by medical experts. The highest Catholic authorities, it seems to me, have no more warrant for recommending one as against another birth control procedure than the highest medical authorities have to make pronouncements on religious dogma.

### III

The Catholic propaganda always warns that planned parenthood means economic disaster for America through falling birth rates.

To begin with, countries with the greatest birth rates, such as China, India and Russia, have not exactly been the best off economically or culturally. In pre-war Eu-

<sup>1</sup> *Medical and Biological Aspects of Contraception*, by John Rock, M.D., research associate in obstetrics, Harvard University School of Medicine, Boston, 1943.

rope, nations with a declining rate of births, such as Norway, Sweden, Belgium and Switzerland, had higher living standards than others with far higher rates. It is not the number but the quality of the population that seems to be decisive. The denial of birth control guidance affects primarily the great mass of poorer families — the privileged minority finds ready access to it — so that the declining births among the “better” classes which Catholic exhortations on the subject emphasize do not even enter the discussion.

But it happens that the whole issue is mythical. Knowledge of planned parenthood is certainly more widespread today than a decade ago, yet the birth rate in the United States has soared to its highest point in a quarter of a century. Catholic Ireland, where birth control information is outlawed, saw a drop of its birth rate from 22.6 per thousand population in 1911 to 19.1 in 1939. In our country, the only two states which make birth control illegal, Massachusetts and Connecticut, were recently shown to have considerably lower birth rates than neighboring states where married women have the legal right to decide when and how often they should become mothers.

It is possible, perhaps even likely, that another Shakespeare, Napoleon or Lincoln may never have been born because his destined mother postponed a pregnancy — by the Rhythm System or contraceptives. But those alarmed by this thought may console themselves with the compensating thought that the birth of another Ivan the Terrible, Genghis Khan, Hitler or other super-criminal may have been prevented. Some geniuses have come from large families, others have come from small ones or have been only children. This kind of speculation makes good after-dinner conversation but not very good sense.

On a purely statistical basis it would seem a lot more likely that the “skipped” offspring would have been sub-normal rather than geniuses. I shall not rehearse the familiar and ever shocking facts of crime and insanity in our country, except to point out that they run hand-in-hand with over-large families, poverty, neglect, and the psychological horror of children who are “unwanted” because there are too many to be properly cared for. Sheer numbers are scarcely an unmixed blessing when we look at the fact that of the first two million drafted for military service, one million had to be rejected.

But let's cut through the hypocrisies: Catholic economic and political arguments against planned parenthood are merely debating tricks. Their real opposition is theological. Assume that we could demonstrate beyond the shadow of a doubt that birth control was economically and politically desirable for a given country or area — India or one of our Southern States, let us say — would the Catholic Church thereupon withdraw its objections in that area?

To ask the question is to answer it. What is involved is not a dispute on economics or medicine, but simply a campaign to enforce a religious dogma upon the entire nation; a campaign that would prevent the vast majority of American women from obtaining medical information and services which they want.

That they do want it is by now clear enough. The extent to which qualified private physicians and planned parenthood clinics are used holds the practical proof. Every poll on the subject has confirmed it. A poll conducted in 1938 by the *Ladies' Home Journal* disclosed that 79 per cent of our women favored birth control. A *Fortune* poll in 1943 showed that the percentage had increased to 84.9 among women in the child-bearing ages. Other

results of the first poll are significant: 98 per cent of the mothers interviewed were glad they had children, 40 per cent wanted more, the majority felt four to be an ideal number. Clearly American women do not approve birth control because they dislike or fear children and families — but simply because they want women to have the deciding voice as to *when* and *how often*.

And that is the essence of the matter. Individual men and women must make decisions in harmony with their own human dignity. To prevent access to information and guidance on planned parenthood is to deny Americans freedom of choice in the most vital phase of their private lives. It is to condemn them to unrestricted fertility not because they want families of unlimited size but because they do not know how to avoid them. It is to prohibit an honest, dignified, self-respecting choice to the woman who may prefer three or four children to whom she can give the advantages of care and education rather than eight or ten children who would be deprived of these advantages.

A recent Catholic article against planned parenthood said at one point: "Carefully controlled experiments with a large group of

women demonstrated that clinical instruction in birth control was followed by a fertility reduction of 86 per cent.”<sup>2</sup> Whatever the facts about those experiments may be, what is the implication of such a complaint? The implication is that women should be kept ignorant or they may use the newly acquired knowledge! Clinics should be shut down because women will flock there! Ignorance should be enforced by law precisely because American women want the knowledge!

Inadvertently the person who wrote those words provided the clew to the whole issue. That issue is *whether ignorance shall be made obligatory* in our free land. The Catholic Church must not — and I believe cannot — succeed in this because its success would mean the

<sup>2</sup> *Reader's Digest*, December, 1943.

end of the democratic American way of life.

Speaking both as a physician and a leader in the Planned Parenthood Federation, let me end by stating concisely the objective of our movement. Our aim is the safe birth of physically and mentally normal children, in a number consistent with the wishes and intellectual and social capacities of the parents.

These children, we believe, should be so spaced that they will have the best likelihood for maximum development, and their mothers the best chance of complete physical and emotional convalescence between births. Not even the most conservative critic can say that this is a radical aim. Only dogmatic obscurantism can block the path to its achievement.



## *Lest We Forget*

THE history of Liberty is a history of the limitation of governmental power, not the increase of it. When we resist, therefore, the concentration of power, we are resisting the processes of death, because concentration of power is what always precedes the destruction of human liberties.

— WOODROW WILSON



## FROM A SOUTH PACIFIC NOTEBOOK

BY IRA WOLFERT

THE airplane fights a very good kind of war. If I could choose whether to fight in the air, on the ground or on the sea, it's the air I would pick. For in the air it's over very quickly, one way or the other.

If you're a fighter pilot, you're in it for about three seconds at a time. The decision is made and delivered, the appeal taken, judgment rendered and collected in somewhere between two and a half and three seconds. If you're in a bomber, it takes a little longer — an average of something like ten minutes.

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The biggest battles our warships have fought thus far have all lasted about thirty minutes. One I watched went thirty-one minutes and another went twenty-nine. Two others finished in half an hour on the dot.

Submarines are different. They're in it like the infantry — over their

ears. One of our submarines this summer was depth-bombed for thirty-six hours without intermission. The men sat around listening. Sometimes it was like sitting in a barrel that was being broken into with a sledge hammer. Sometimes it was like sitting in a barrel that was going over Niagara Falls.

Early in the action, the storekeeper broke out the ship's stores and divided all the candy on board equally among officers and men. Nobody saved any. From the old man down, they all decided there was no longer any point in being frugal. "Pogie bait" wasn't something you could take with you.

And what the men remembered most acutely of their sufferings when they returned was thirty days at sea after the attack without any candy.

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According to the infantry, a thirty-six-hour battle is a half-

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