

Conway, Bertrand L.
The Church and...
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By
Bertrand L. Conway
of the Paulist Fathers



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R. CHARLES P. BRUEHL, Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the Seminary of St. Charles Borromeo, Overbrook, Pa., has recently published a most thorough treatise on the attitude of the Catholic Church with regard to birth control and eugenics.¹ In it he analyzes carefully the false ethical theories current among non-Catholics, and corrects them in the light of the fundamental principles of Catholic morals. His book is a serious indictment of the moral bankruptcy of the modern world, which has followed logically from its wanton squandering of the riches of the Gospel, begun by the leaders of the sixteenth century revolt.

Religion and morality are bound together in a close and intimate union. Dogma is the solid foundation on which all morals are built. The modern world, because indifferent to dogmatic truth, has logically become indifferent to ethical truth. Declaring first: "It does not make any difference what a man believes," it asserts as a matter of course: "It does not make any difference what a man does." Human happiness is still its goal, but it hopes to attain it by the utter ignoring of ultimate spiritual values, and the deliberate setting aside of the fundamental principles of both the

¹*Birth Control and Eugenics in the Light of Fundamental Ethical Principles.* New York: Joseph F. Wagner, Inc. \$2.50.

natural and the supernatural law. Social expediency has become its aim, with the consequent destroying of all apparent obstacles to a materialistic and narrowly understood social welfare. Its short-sighted and harmful remedies for present-day evils—birth control, sterilization, easy divorce, companionate marriage, and euthanasia—are all prompted by a total ignoring of the spiritual factor, “the most potent lever for the uplift of the race.” As Dr. Bruehl well says: “In the higher regions of the spirit lie untapped sources of energy that can be made available for physical regeneration. Individuals as well as races can receive an access of physical vitality and bodily vigor through the spirit. On the other hand, where the spiritual side of man remains undeveloped, his physical stature will also be stunted. Human dynamics are chiefly spiritual. In them the soul plays the leading part.”

Catholic Doctrine of Marital Relations

The Catholic Church, while extolling virginity with Jesus Christ and St. Paul as a counsel for the *élite* few, has the highest possible concept of marriage, which she regards as a sacrament of the New Law, and blesses with a special blessing at her Nuptial Mass. She has always condemned every heretical sect, which, like the Gnostics and the Albigenes, maintained that marriage was unlawful, and the begetting of children a sin. She has always denounced fornication and adultery as grievous sins against the sixth commandment, for

such temporary unions tend to bring children into the world without any provision for their permanent care, without any certain determination of paternity, and without the necessary protection of motherhood.

The marital relation is in no sense degrading or sinful, but on the contrary lawful and holy, inasmuch as it was planned and sanctioned by Almighty God for the spread of the human race. It is also a strict right binding on both parties until death, and voidable only for good reasons, such as drunkenness, insanity, and grave danger to life and health. Only by mutual consent may husband or wife forego their rights, either permanently or for a time (1 Cor. vi. 5).

Non-Catholics often misunderstand our position on birth control, for they seem to believe that Catholic married couples are bound to have children to the mother's utmost capacity for child-bearing. This is not our teaching. It is perfectly ethical to limit the family, if the method used is self-control by abstinence and continence. This may even be obligatory, when a mother's life or health would be seriously jeopardized by further childbearing, or when real destitution would result from further additions to the family.

Birth Control Immoral

The Catholic Church absolutely condemns birth control as essentially immoral, because it implies the limitation of the family by voluntary and arti-

ficial prevention of conception. It is an unnatural perversion, for it goes against the order intended by nature and by God, and defeats the immediate end of a natural human act. Left to themselves men and women instinctively regard contraception as unnatural and unclean, an emotional reaction which evidences a profound moral intuition, which ought not to be lightly set aside. True indeed this natural sense of right and wrong may be blunted or entirely deadened by a persistent pagan propaganda, which laughs at these intimations of conscience, and declares them superstitious survivals of a discredited tradition. But there are few indeed who really persuade themselves that in practicing birth control they are actuated by high moral motives, and not yielding to the dictates of selfishness and the promptings of sensuality.

Dr. Bruehl weighs in the balance the chief arguments for birth control, and finds them of no weight whatever. The argument that birth control is in reality self-control he rightly dismisses as ridiculous. He says: "There is in the whole proceeding no evidence whatever of moral restraint. There is no question of a discipline imposed on the passions, not the shadow of self-denial. In fact, there is no restraint at all, but merely an artificial prevention of consequences which has not the least moral value."

Instead of promoting the interests of women, birth control in reality makes for their degradation. It places a severe strain upon their nervous system,

permanently injures their health, lowers their dignity and self-respect, and frequently leads to the break-up of the home. "There is no evidence that the child of the voluntarily limited home is in any way superior to the child of the large family. The control exercised is merely quantitative, and in no sense qualitative." The leaders of men usually come from large families, whereas the one-child régime usually makes for selfishness and self-indulgence.

Birth control was supposed at least to further the betterment of the race. As a matter of fact the desirable stocks from the eugenists' viewpoint have not increased as they were expected to do. The practice of birth control the world over leads to underpopulation and national decline, besides bringing about widespread moral disintegration.

The justification of birth control on the plea of poverty is another specious plea, because as a matter of fact the poor do not practice "this detestable thing" (Gen. xxxviii. 8-10) as much as the wealthy. It is not the high rents, the cost of childbearing, or of child rearing that fosters contraception, but the irreligion of the modern parent, who is eaten up with the love of ease and of pleasure. As a rule the size of the family stands in inverse ratio to its economic prosperity.

Catholics of course are not dependent upon the vagaries of private judgment in this matter, for they know there is a divine law against the practice of birth control, as is clear from the teaching of

the Church and of the Scriptures. "The future will prove that, by condemning this practice as inherently and unalterably wrong, the Catholic Church has rendered a service of transcendent value to humanity, and has forestalled the most horrible corruption. By her high-principled resistance to a separation of the sex-life from its restraining responsibilities, she protects the race against the tyrannical subjugation of the sex-instinct by which fallen humanity is always threatened."

Having in a preliminary chapter eliminated birth control from all place in any scheme of Christian eugenics, Dr. Bruehl proceeds to spend the major part of his treatise on the morality of the sterilization of the unfit.

Sterilization

Most medical men agree that sterilization as practiced today is a comparatively harmless operation, entailing but slight inconvenience, and, so far as men are concerned, entailing no danger whatever. Yet physiologically and morally the operation is a serious mutilation of the human body in a most important organ. Is such an operation allowed by Catholic ethics?

God alone has the supreme dominion over life, as man's Creator and Lord. Neither the individual nor the State possesses such absolute power. The individual may not wantonly take his own life, nor may the State arbitrarily take the lives of its citi-

zens. The individual also has a right to his bodily integrity, and mutilation may not be inflicted upon him save for urgent and just cause.

The surgical removal of a diseased organ, *i. e.*, ovariectomy, even though it results in impotence or sterility, is undoubtedly lawful, although many surgeons perform this operation without sufficient reason merely to follow out a questionable therapeutic theory. Vasectomy is probably lawful, as theologians like Prümmer and De Smet maintain, when there is danger of death or idiocy because of evident pathological sexual erethism.²

"As a penal measure," writes Dr. Bruehl, "sterilization is totally inadequate, because it secures none of the ends for which punishment is supposed to be inflicted. It has neither deterrent, nor reformatory, nor reparative value. Hence, though we concede in general the right of the State to inflict mutilation as a penalty for crime committed, we do not regard sterilization as justifiable on account of its ineffectiveness as a punishment. We can see in it nothing but a gratuitous degradation that serves no reasonable purpose."

Eugenical Sterilization

Eugenical sterilization is neither therapeutic nor punitive. It is purely preventive and prophylactic, its one purpose being to prevent the transmission of undesirable hereditary traits to posterity by entirely depriving the individual of the faculty of procreation. This is a vital problem for us

²O'Malley, *The Ethics of Medical Homicide and Mutilation*.

in the United States today, for the whole tendency of the eugenists is to abolish punitive sterilization as repugnant to our institutions. Therapeutic sterilization can be left in the hands of the reputable, conscientious physician.

Is the State justified in passing laws for the sterilization of persons in State institutions where procreation on their part would, in the judgment of a "competent examining board, be likely to produce children with an inherited tendency to crime, insanity, feeble-mindedness, idiocy or imbecility"? Many States have passed such laws. Oregon, Indiana, Wisconsin, New Jersey, Connecticut, Virginia, and a short time ago the United States Supreme Court, strangely enough, declared a Virginia statute to that effect constitutional.

Dr. Bruehl rightly answers this question in the negative. He gives his readers many reasons, theoretical and practical, for his position.

In the first place he asks:—Who are the unfit? Catholics cannot accept an ideal of excellence that is expressed merely in physical or mental terms, while it totally ignores the spiritual factors of the problem. We have no sympathy whatever with the Nietzschean ideal of the Superman, and we are well aware that the most disastrous assaults upon civilization have been made not by the weak but by the strong. We have no sympathy whatever with those who emphasize unduly man's intellectual qualities. Nature is far wiser than the eugenist, who breeds for points like the breeders of cat-

tle. She seeks to develop all the faculties of man and to prevent all onesidedness. If the eugenists had been in power down the ages, the world would have been robbed of many a genius, who came from the most unpromising antecedents. Catholics have no sympathy with the eugenist's utter contempt for the men and women he classes as unfit. While the Gospel does not glorify disease, or pauperism or feeble-mindedness, it regards the sick, the poor and the mentally defective as children of God, possessed of immortal souls, created for eternal blessedness, and entitled to the respect and reverence due to every human personality. They are not utterly valueless, for they enrich us by calling forth the virtues of pity, tolerance, sympathy and gratitude to God for our unmerited blessings.

Legitimate Segregation

It is good to segregate mental defectives of the lowest grades, for they cannot rationally shape their own lives, and must have their existence planned out for them. But what need is there of such a drastic method of sterilization? It is right to prevent them from marrying, for they would only bring misery upon themselves and their children, and become an intolerable social burden.

The higher grade defectives are in a class apart. The experience of expert educationalists in our institutions and in the special classes of our public schools proves that they can be taught many a useful trade, and with proper care molded into

good, peaceful citizens. To allow soulless materialists to experiment upon them on the basis of an unproved theory is criminal in the extreme.

Again while the fact of hereditary transmission of character cannot be doubted, the laws of such transmission are as yet shrouded in the greatest obscurity. The State physician in order to perform an operation in a particular case, ought not merely to possess a knowledge of the fact of heredity, but he ought also to have a well-grounded certainty that this particular couple will give birth to defective and degenerate offspring. This is often mere guess work on his part. We do not convict criminals until the individual is proved guilty in a well-ordered court. Are not the feeble-minded entitled to as much consideration?

Abuses in State Sterilization Laws

Practically speaking, the inherent possibility of abuse lurking in all State sterilization laws ought to erase them from our statute books. The New Jersey Supreme Court recognized this a few years ago, when it declared the Sterilization Act of April 10, 1911, unconstitutional. A law to be good must be enforceable in such a way that the enforcement does not give rise to evils greater and more serious than the abuses at which it aims. We have only to read the classification of the unfit in H. Laughlin's *Eugenical Sterilization* to realize how wide a field the modern eugenicist asks for his unwise experiments. We read:

"The socially inadequate classes are the following: 1. Feeble-minded; 2. insane, including the psychopathic; 3. criminalistic, including the delinquent and wayward; 4. epileptic; 5. inebriate, including drug-habitueés; 6. diseased, including the tuberculous, the syphilitic, the leprous, and others with chronic, infectious and legally segregable diseases; 7. blind, including those with seriously impaired vision; 8. deaf, including those with seriously impaired hearing; 9. deformed, including the cripples; and 10. dependent, including orphans, ne'er-do-wells, the homeless, tramps, and paupers." Few fishes would escape such a net.

We have only to read also the powers imparted to the State Eugenist by a model sterilization law to realize how the liberties of millions would be nullified, were not all such laws practically a dead letter among us. It reads: "It shall be the duty of the State Eugenist: to conduct field surveys, seeking first hand data concerning the hereditary constitution of all persons in the State who are socially inadequate personally, or who, though normal personally, carry degenerate or defective hereditary qualities of a socially inadequate nature, and to cooperate with, to hear the complaints of, and to seek information from individuals and public and private, social welfare, charitable and scientific organizations possessing special acquaintance with and knowledge of such persons, to the end that the State shall possess equally accurate data in reference to the personal and family histories of all per-

sons existing in the State who are potential parents of socially inadequate offspring, regardless of whether such potential parents be members of the population at large or inmates of custodial institutions, regardless also of the personality, sex, marital condition, race, or possessions of such persons; to examine further into the natural, physical, physiological and psychological traits, the environment, the personal histories, and the family pedigrees of all persons existing in the State," etc., etc.

The tyranny of the prohibition enforcement law with its disregard of life and liberty in many an instance is a trifling matter indeed compared with this arbitrary State inquisition. The Statue of Liberty in New York Bay will indeed be a monument "in memory of our dear departed," if these immoral faddists have their way.

Evil Results of Sterilization

Moreover the existence of a vast number of unsexed individuals in the community would, as Doctors Hayes, Davenport, Queen and Mann hold,³ inevitably lead to the spread of immorality and of venereal disease. As Dr. Davenport says: "Is not many a man restrained from licentiousness by recognizing the responsibility of possible parentage? Is not the shame of illicit parentage the fortress of female chastity? Is there any danger that the persons operated upon shall become a pe-

³Dr. E. C. Hayes, *Introduction to the Study of Sociology*; Queen-Mann, *Social Pathology*.

cular menace to the community through unrestrained dissemination of venereal disease?"⁴

Finally sterilization by State law is utterly inadequate to free society from the evil of feeble-mindedness and its attendant ills. Heredity at best is only one of the several sources of mental defectives. It is wrong to place the emphasis on negative eugenics, for as Dr. Arthur James Todd says: "After all, will mere extinction of the known defectives touch the core of the problem? Not at all. Indeed, some critics hold that negative eugenics is not eugenics at all. The defectives who would thus be eugenically exiled, so to speak, constitute but a tiny fraction of society, only one-half of one per cent."⁵ Dr. Potter of Letchworth Village, New York, and Dr. Fernald of Waverly, Massachusetts, both declare that at least one-half of the inmates of their institutions are defectives of the non-hereditary type. In view of these assertions is it wise for Legislatures to pass laws at the behest of men who juggle with the facts?

It is a matter of common sense and good ethics that men and women who know they will transmit grave diseases or serious mental defects to their offspring, should in the interests of posterity and society abstain from marriage. More than once in our ministry in nearly five hundred of our cities have we come across heartless Catholic parents who for money and social position have married off

⁴*Heredity in Relation to Eugenics.*

⁵*Theories of Social Progress.*

their daughters to wealthy *roués* cursed with the scourge of syphilis. And that too despite evidence furnished of the fact. But these are rare cases. Moral restraint will suffice wherever worldliness is not dominant, whereas legal restraint can readily be evaded by the unscrupulous. Laws without public opinion back of them become practically useless, as the many fortunes made by bootlegging in these United States amply prove.

Civil Rights

After a thorough discussion of the problem, Dr. Bruehl thus sums up the ethics of the State's claim to sterilize the unfit:

AB "Society has the right to protect itself adequately against the danger resulting from the presence and the increase of the mentally diseased. If sterilization can be proved to be the only sufficient means by which this purpose can be accomplished and national degeneration staved off, public authority cannot be denied the right to use it for the protection of the common good, which, according to the teaching of moral theology, prevails over private interests. From the abstract argument, however, it is a far cry to the practical conclusion that the State in the present condition of affairs actually may exercise this theoretical right. For, as things are at present, national degeneration is not imminent, and consequently the right of national self-preservation may not be invoked. Besides, sterilization is not the only means available

for the protection of the community, and as long as other means (*i. e.*, segregation) more consonant with human dignity and less subject to serious abuses can achieve the same purpose, the State may not resort to this drastic measure, which cannot but be regarded as a grave mutilation, and constitutes a violation of human personality that requires for its justification a commensurate cause. In practice eugenical sterilization cannot be justified in the present state of affairs, and must be condemned as an unwarranted assault on human rights."

Catholic Viewpoint

"The Catholic Church yields to no one in her zeal for the betterment of the race, but she uncompromisingly sets her face against all materialistic social experiments that outrage human dignity, go counter to elemental ethics, encourage sexual immorality inside and outside of marriage, and lead to a callous disregard of the weak elements of the community. As usual she separates the chaff from the wheat in the matter of eugenics, condemning what is evil in the movement and commending what is good. As Father Slater puts it in his *Questions of Moral Theology*:

"The physical and mental good and improvement of the race of mankind is part of the object of Charity. If the spiritual good of mankind be added to the list of objects, the end of eugenics would be identical with that for which the Catholic Church exists and works. . . . Theology teaches

that Charity is well ordered. . . . While, then, theology is quite at one with eugenics as to the end to be aimed at, it very cautiously scrutinizes the means proposed for the attainment of that end."

The Church has always fostered the mental and physical well-being of the race by her unfaltering insistence upon the supremacy of man's spiritual welfare. By her teaching of chastity and temperance she combats the great evils of alcoholism and venereal disease; by her laws of fasting and abstinence she cultivates self-abnegation and self-restraint; by her uncompromising denunciation of birth control, divorce and adultery she safeguards the purity of the generations to come; by her divine charity she cares for the weak, the sick and the poor, in whom she sees Christ the Lord; by her great respect for the body, created to the image of God, and worthy by His condescension to enshrine the Eucharistic Lord, she warns the State not to interfere with man's inherent right to preserve that body's sacred integrity. We conclude with Dr. Bruehl's final words:

"A stronger assertion of the spiritual nature of man, a more general observation of the moral law, a consistent application of Christian principles to social life, a reënforcement of the sense of personal responsibility and of social duty, and in general a remolding of life after the Christian pattern, will do infinitely more for the elimination of racial poisons and the improvement of the race than all hysterical eugenic agitation."

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