

Church Report Urges Both Sterilization and Birth Control

Resolutions approving principles of birth control and sterilization of the unfit and recommending ordination of women to the ministry proved high points, Friday, in deliberation of the seventh general council of the United Church of Canada.

The birth control-sterilization report, presented by a special committee appointed at the last council to study the subject, recommended that the council approve establishment of birth control clinics, under public control, and "the legalizing of the minimum operation yielding sterilization."

Its recommendation asked that approval be given to measures for promotion of birth control and sterilization where those measures were advisable and provided safe guards were insured for prevention of abuses. It emphasized its belief sterilization at present should be practiced only on request of the subject and that means be taken to afford legal protection to surgeons performing operations.

Before the report of the commission on birth control and sterilization was referred to the committee on evangelism and social service, the secretary of the commission, Dr. Ernest Thomas, made a statement.

The problem of birth control was far from being new, he said. There was evidence that as far back as 850 B.C. contraceptives were used. "In all ages and among all races there have been efforts by women to have their babies when they want them," he added.

It was a mistake to think the effort was one on the part of women to stop having children altogether. "There is no evidence that women don't want babies," said Dr. Thomas. Clinics to help women avoid sterility were as busy as those endeavoring to control periods when babies came. There was absolutely no indication women did not want babies. They wanted control.

The extent of the use of contraceptives was not appreciated at all. Fifteen manufacturers alone turned out 1,500,000 contraceptive devices a day. This figure was obtained from records of druggists and doctors, but it was estimated at least as many more were sold through cigar stores and filling stations.

Refers to Roman Catholic Stand

There was a popular conception that the Roman Catholic church was opposed to birth control, the secretary stated. This was not the case. The Roman Catholic church, however, wanted birth control, if practiced, to be performed by regulation of occasion of intercourse rather than by use of contraceptive devices.

Referring briefly to that part of the report dealing with sterilization, Dr. Thomas said it was at present of doubtful legality to sterilize idiots or imbeciles for the benefit of society generally. The commission favoured enactment of statutes making provisions for regulation and control of the sterilization process.

In its report on birth control and sterilization the committee quoted from medical authority to show sterilization operations no more serious in cases of males than a tonsillectomy and in that of females than an appendectomy, did not interfere with the desire for or performance of sexual intercourse except insofar as they prevented conception.

The report said any obligation which might arise to control population was not urgent in Canada, but that on the other hand, the church felt it might “well foster the desire for and emphasize the advantages of families larger than those now prevalent in the Protestant parts of the nation.”

The report of the commission, which has not been accepted yet by the general council, may be discussed late Friday.

The report was divided into two parts, the first dealing with birth control. It dealt first with the attitude of the Roman Catholic church on the subject, emphasizing it “definitely approves of birth control so long as this control is exercised by selecting occasions for marital intercourse, which will probably exclude the commencement of human life.” Similarly, Rabbinical teaching, based on the Talmud, approved birth control after the birth of two children.

“With these declarations before us,” the report reads, “we find substantial unanimity in the voices of the major bodies of Christendom and of Jewry affirming that there is no religious obligation to have intercourse only when no precaution is taken against resulting conception; but, on the contrary, marital intercourse brings its own contribution to Christian life when it is definitely divorced from the quest of parenthood.”

Discuss Statistics

Having reached this conclusion, it was necessary to consider regulating the frequency in the light of statistics governing infant mortality, the report continued. Washington statistics showed a death rate of 86.5 in 1,000 when births were three years apart and 98.6 when two years apart. “It is fair to conclude that deliberate regulation of the occasion and frequency of births is a prime factor in the saving of the life of babies and the protection of the mother’s vitality.”

Science had mastered famine and pestilence, two of the agencies by which nature controlled population, the report continued. “The tremendous effects of our success in curtailing the power of death compels us to consider whether there is any obligation to control births. As regards our own situation in Canada, this consideration is not urgent. Indeed the failure of the Canadian people to populate their great open space invites longing eyes from congested lands....

Favor Clinics

“...In favoring the establishment of birth control clinics, we have in mind only such activities as will be protected by this provision as it has been interpreted in the courts. Advance beyond this should be both cautious and experimental, lest a desirable object become subject to commercial exploitation and means of depravity. On the other hand, for reasons given, we do not favor any amendments to the Act which would purport to prevent young people obtaining devices which are now open to purchase in most respectable stores.

Until experience shall indicate the need or advisability of amendments we favor the retention of the section as it stands, relying on wise administration to promote social good.”

Sterilization Question

The report of the commission then turned to sterilization to stamp out hereditary defect and disease.

“Little inquiry,” it said, is required to discover that great numbers of men and women exist in the community who are mentally subnormal, yet not to such a degree that they are unfit to be at large. They are quite capable of entering into a fairly happy married life. The prospect becomes serious only as one considers the probable character of at least some of their children.

Unfortunately, in many of these cases the mentality is such as not to assure sufficient sense of responsibility or sufficient skill and intelligence to make use of contraceptive devices. Yet once the legitimacy of contraception within the married state is affirmed, there is no good reason for depriving these people of the satisfaction which marriage affords and which may contribute to the mental health of the patients themselves.

Segregation of such persons in institutions is the only other means of guarding against the birth of offspring either within or outside the marriage relation.

Segregation is out of the question for the great numbers of person who must be considered. Moreover, in addition to those who themselves manifestly suffer from mental defect there are several times their number who have an inheritance which warrants them in wishing to avoid the begetting of children in view of high probability of their inheriting positive mental defect. Should such persons feel obliged to refrain from marriage, or as an alternative bear the strain of constant uncertainty lest contraceptive device should fail.

This last question leads to the consideration of another large group in whom there is beyond doubt a heritage of transmissible physical disease which will be almost certainly transmitted to on-coming generations, together with great suffering and deprivation. The diseases included in this class are sufficiently serious and sufficiently numerous to justify the most kindly consideration. While in such cases there is still the mentality which might resort to contraceptive devices, the surgical sterilization would in most cases, and especially among men, be preferred....