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Author(s): Kathleen Tobin-Schlesinger

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# The Changing American City: Chicago Catholics as Outsiders in the Birth Control Movement, 1915-1935

Kathleen Tobin-Schlesinger

Americans readily equate religious opposition to birth control with the Catholic Church. While it is true that the Church still opposes the use of artificial contraceptives, it is a mistake to portray the religious birth control argument in so simplistic a manner. The debate began as a complex one — one in which Catholics were not alone in their opposition. It evolved in the 1920s, a decade in which Americans became increasingly concerned about the state of the American family, overcrowding of the nation's cities, and worsening conditions of the poor. All religious denominations officially opposed the use of contraceptives in 1920, but these social issues helped pave the way for a doctrinal shift toward acceptance of contraception among most denominations by the 1930s.

Catholic authorities might well have joined in the shift, as they demonstrated the same concerns. But certain circumstances placed Catholics on the opposing side, resulting in a Catholic/non-Catholic debate to unfold in the way that it did. To a large degree, that atmosphere was shaped by a tremendous surge in immigration of a new stock into America's urban centers — a stock considered strikingly different from the old Anglo-Protestant stock. This development was exemplified in the city of Chicago.

Margaret Sanger, the leading proponent of the birth-control movement in the United States, was largely responsible for forcing American religious leaders to take a stand on birth control. She turned her attention to the cause in 1914 as a result of her work as a nurse among the poor in New York City. Initially influenced by her associate Emma Goldman, who wanted to free women sexually through legalizing contraceptives, Sanger began promoting legalization in order to allow poor women the same information that middle- and upper-class women had quietly obtained from their family physicians, and to decrease the number of self-induced abortions.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 62-65.



***Margaret Sanger (Copy from the The Birth Control Review, March 1917)***

The dissemination of contraceptives and contraceptive information through the U.S. mail had been restricted in 1873 by what came to be known as the Comstock laws, with various states following suit in legislating their own restrictions. Anthony Comstock, a Methodist and head of New York's Society for the Suppression of Vice, had succeeded in listing contraceptive information among obscene materials to be prohibited from the mail. In the early years of her birth-control activism, Sanger directed her attacks at Comstock, but when he died in 1915, her battle had just begun.

Following World War I, Sanger began a strong appeal to the American mainstream to further her cause of legalizing contraceptives. No longer focusing solely on the liberation of women, Sanger insisted that birth control would cure many of the social ills about which Americans were concerned. She said the poor were getting poorer by having more children than they could afford, and told stories of women begging her as a nurse for

information about preventing pregnancy. Increasingly, the middle class became convinced that access to birth control among the poorer classes was desirable, in part because of compassion, but also in part because of fear of overpopulation among the poor.

This sentiment was also expressed by physician Rachel Yarros, who spearheaded the birth-control movement in Chicago. In 1923, she headed a committee which attempted to open a "Parents' Clinic" at 1347 N. Lincoln to extend health services to the city's poor, including the provision of information about preventing pregnancy. Through her eyes, and the eyes of other birth-control advocates, the poor desperately wanted access to birth control information. Yarros related stories of deaths due to self-induced abortions in Chicago, much

in the same way Sanger did in New York. she gained the support of University of Chicago demographer James Field, and attorney and future New Dealer Harold Ickes and his wife, who promoted “practical and feasible methods of decreasing dependency and delinquency” among the poor, and “to seek the reduction of the burden of charities and taxation resultant from the support of the dependent and defective classes.”<sup>2</sup>

Illinois had less restrictive birth control laws than many other states so the task of opening a clinic was somewhat easier for Yarros than it had been for Sanger in New York.<sup>3</sup> But Yarros met with opposition from a number of Chicagoans, including Archbishop George Mundelein and the city’s health commissioner, Herman N. Bundesen.<sup>4</sup> Bundesen, an Episcopalian, denied a permit to operate the Parents’ Clinic, pointing out that Yarros failed to describe fully the “nature and kind of treatment” that would be offered at the clinic. The distribution of contraceptive information was the point of contention, Bundesen noted, arguing less on legal grounds than on moral grounds. In addition to citing biblical passages which he maintained prohibited the prevention of conception, Bundesen concluded:

The fact that there is no statute in the State of Illinois prohibiting the teaching of prevention of conception does not justify me in approving the licensing of any practice or teaching which in my opinion, would tend to corrupt morals, am of the opinion that the practice or teaching of prevention of conception would tend in any of these directions, I feel that it is my duty to disapprove the application.<sup>5</sup>

Birth-control activists attacked this kind of action vehemently. Much of their rhetoric showed them competing with critics for a place on higher moral ground with those who condemned contraception. Bundesen’s statement fueled this kind of fire in Chicago, and Helen G. Carpenter, a proponent of the clinic, took the case to Cook County Circuit Court. Within two months, Judge Harry M. Fisher overturned the permit’s denial stating “However much the courts may respect religious doctrines, they must look to the law of the land alone for guidance in their judicial action, leaving the enforcement of purely theological principles to the power of moral persuasion of the ministers of the church.”<sup>6</sup>

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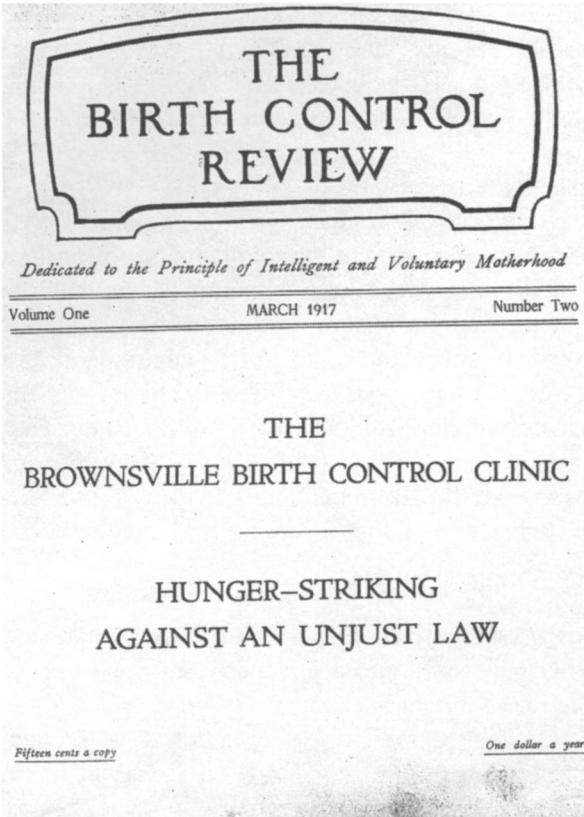
2. *Ibid.*, 226-227. Also see Bernice Guthmann, *The Planned Parenthood Movement in Illinois, 1923-1965*. (Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Chicago Area, 1965), 3-6.

3. In Illinois, physicians could legally prescribe contraceptives to married patients.

4. Bundesen was an epidemiologist, educated at Northwestern University and the U.S. Army Medical School. He also served as President of the Morals Commission of the City of Chicago.

5. Letter from Bundesen to Helen G. Carpenter, September 19, 1923, Archives of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

6. *Birth Control and Public Policy, Decision of Judge Harry M. Fisher of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Chicago, Illinois* (Chicago: Illinois League for Planned Parenthood, 1923), 7.



The “church” of which Judge Fisher was speaking was not specifically the Catholic Church because all denominations still opposed the use of artificial contraceptives. However by this time, Catholics were already being singled out as the religious opposition to the movement. As early as 1921, Sanger had succeeded in portraying Catholics as the enemies of birth control. During November of that year, New York City police disbanded a meeting of the newly-founded American Birth Control League, reportedly as the result of a phone call from Archbishop Patrick

Hayes. A series of public attacks between Hayes and Sanger ensued, making the religious debate over contraception a public and sometimes vicious one, drawing the nation’s attention to New York. It is impossible to say whether Sanger understood at the time how much her movement would benefit from antagonizing the Catholic clergy, but the opening paragraph in the December issue of her *Birth Control Review* demonstrated how quickly she worked to intensify the Conflict:

[The Town Hall incident] has shown up the sinister control of the Roman Catholic Church, which attempts — and to a great extent succeeds — to control all questions of public and private morality in these United States. . . . All those who resent this sinister Church Control of life and conduct — this interference of the Roman Church in attempting to dictate the conduct and behavior of non-Catholics must now choose between Church Control or Birth Control.<sup>7</sup>

7. “Church Control?” *Birth Control Review*, 5 (December, 1921): 3.

In one of his many responses, Archbishop Hayes contended:

The law of God and man, science, public policy, human experience are all condemnatory of birth control as preached by a few irresponsible individuals, without endorsement or approval, as far as I know, of a reputable body of physicians or medical society whose province it is to advise the public on such matters.<sup>8</sup>

Though the essence of the arguments in Chicago were similar to those in New York, they certainly differed in intensity. Very importantly, the battle in Chicago was not nearly as public. For example, it did not reach the pages of the *Chicago Tribune* in the same way that it reached the *New York Times*. However, Cardinal Mundelein had actively opposed the opening of the Chicago Parents' Clinic from the beginning. In July of 1923, he wrote to Health Commissioner Bundesen, "I am sure that your stand will be approved by all clean minded people irrespective of their religious beliefs," recognizing that not only Catholics opposed birth control and suggesting that he was already sensitive to the fact that the debate was becoming defined as a Catholic/non-Catholic one. Following Fisher's decision, Mundelein enlisted the support of Chicago's Catholics, non-Catholics and physicians to support city officials' appeal.<sup>10</sup> However, the decision stood, and the clinic was opened in 1924."<sup>11</sup>

The national religious debate over birth control became a Catholic/non-Catholic one primarily because of the religious/political environment of the 1920s. Although it is true that Catholics were voicing their opposition to birth control, as demonstrated by Hayes and Mundelein, so were Protestants. Many of the Protestant arguments were expressed in theological terms based on Scripture, and many expressed moral concerns for what were perceived as emphases on materialism and the decay of the family. In these respects the Protestant opposition differed little from Catholic opposition.

But one major difference drastically affected the way in which the religious birth control debate unfolded by 1930, drawing the battle line between Catholics and non-Catholics. Though theological and moral arguments appeared similar among Protestants and Catholics, the religious/political positions against birth control which some Protestants argued were deeply rooted in anti-Catholicism. Illustrating this sentiment was a *Current Opinion* editorial

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8. *New York Times*, November 21, 1921, 1.

9. Letter from Mundelein to Bundesen, July 31, 1923, Archives of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

10. For a description of Mundelein's involvement in the case, see a letter to Mundelein from Perry S. Patterson of McCormick, Kirkland, Patterson and Fleming, legal advisors for the archdiocese, dated January 16, 1924, Archives of the Archdiocese of Chicago. Also see a letter to Mundelein from Mary Onahan Gallery regarding the Catholic Women's Clubs of Chicago.

11. For a description of the appeals process, see Rachelle S. Yarros, *Birth Control and Its Relation to Health and Welfare* (Chicago: Illinois Birth Control League, 1925), 4-5.

in 1915 which warned that the number of Catholics in America was multiplying at an alarming rate, especially in New York, Massachusetts and Illinois. According to *Current Opinion*, in Illinois alone, there were “about a million Roman Catholics, while the strongest Protestant body (the Methodists)[could not] show more than 300,000 adherents.”<sup>12</sup>

Though mainstream Protestant leaders opposed the use of artificial contraceptives in the early years of the twentieth century, some of them did so because they saw their own numbers as failing to compete with Catholic numbers. They did not want to encourage any further decline among their own birth rates, which had already steadily fallen for the past century. The issue of birth control, which was brought to light by Sanger, instilled fear within the Protestant mainstream which viewed itself as losing political strength. Continuing high birth rates among numbers of Catholics and Jews from southern and eastern Europe, were posing a threat to a traditionally Protestant America.<sup>13</sup>

Birth control activists were able to shape the debate into a Catholic/non-Catholic one largely because of anti-Catholicism already pervasive in American society. Evidence was found at the highest levels in the anti-Catholic rhetoric condemning Al Smith’s bid for the presidency, the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, and the severe restriction of immigrants from Catholic regions in southern and eastern Europe. These developments were all related to changing demographics in the United States in which a growing proportion of the American population was Catholic.

According to the *Yearbook of the Churches*, of the 39,000,000 American churchgoers in 1915, an estimated 143,000 were Jews and more than 14,000,000 were Roman Catholics. Just five years later, of the 45,000,000 churchgoers, an estimated 260,000 were Jews and 17,550,000 were Roman Catholics. Though a comparatively small percentage, the number of Jews had nearly doubled, while the increase in the number of Catholics had accounted for more than half of the overall increase.<sup>14</sup>

The fear was certainly great in Chicago, where the overall population dou-

12. “Protestantism Falling Behind Through Unproductive Marriages,” *Current Opinion* 58 (January, 1915): 40.

13. Without specifically addressing birth control, the following works examine the religious/political confrontation which developed out of changing demographics in the United States: Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion, Volume 2: The Noise of Conflict, 1919-1941* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); William R. Hutchison, ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989); Robert Moats Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues: 1919-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958); and Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for American Realism: 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

14. H. K. Carroll, ed., *Federal Council Yearbook* (New York: Missionary Movement of the United States and Canada, 1916), 196-201; and Stacy R. Warburton, ed., *Yearbook of the Churches, 1920* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1920), 197-199.

bled between 1900 and 1930, growing from 1.7 million to nearly 3.4 million. Addressing what the Chicago Americanization Council termed the “immigrant problem,” a Chicago Community Trust survey noted that during the 1920s, 44 per cent of the city’s inhabitants were “of English-speaking groups” and 56 per cent were “of foreign born groups.”<sup>15</sup> During this same period, approximately one-half of the city’s population was Catholic.<sup>16</sup> In real numbers, the Chicago archdiocese was second only to New York.<sup>17</sup>

Though historians have studied significantly the concerns over the effects of turn-of-the-century immigration on the nation’s cities, comparatively little has been done to include similar concerns regarding birth rates. Americans were justifiably concerned over the growing number of poor in cities like Chicago, but increasingly, birth control activists were able to convince middle and upper middle class Chicagoans that disseminating contraceptive information to the poor was the answer to alleviating the problem. In her 1925 booklet, *Birth Control and Its Relation to Health and Welfare*, Yarros argued this case when she outlined the progress of her work in Chicago. In describing the founding of the Parents’ Clinic, Yarros stated:

About two years ago it was decided that the time was ripe to open a birth control clinic in one of the thickly populated districts of Chicago. Such a location was selected because it is the poor and less educated who have the greatest difficulty in obtaining the right sort of birth control information, and by whom this knowledge is most needed.<sup>18</sup> She added that another clinic had been opened in March of 1925 “in one of Chicago’s thickly populated foreign districts.”<sup>19</sup>

Yarros emphasized her good intentions, maintaining that poor women were demanding access to contraceptives, that they deserved better than “quack preventives,” and that abstinence took a toll on marital relationships and household tranquility. But her presentation of birth control rhetoric which was understood as part of a larger political movement angered Catholics. For instance, her statistical surveys of what kinds of people were using the clinics included categories of religion and nationality (i.e. Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, American, Polish, German, Italian and Bohemian), a method commonly used by clinics which were keeping statistics.<sup>20</sup> By distinguishing such categories, birth control activists clearly indicated that it was important to them,

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15. “Twenty-five Year History of the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago, 1914-1940,” 28-29, Chicago Historical Society Archives.

16. *The Official Catholic Directory* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1930), 66.

17. *Ibid.*, 66, 143.

18. Yarros, 4.

19. *Ibid.*, 5.

20. See Sanger’s own reports through the 1930s.

and to the society at large, that certain kinds of people use contraceptives.

In the battle to present her case as the moral one, Yarros quoted from a paper she presented at the recent Sixth International Birth Control Conference:

It is not actually immoral, according to our present ideas, to keep on reproducing hundreds of thousands of mentally, morally and physically unfit? That conduct is ethical which leads to the higher development of the individual and the race. It is, therefore, distinctly immoral to let people reproduce in a way that is bound to lower their standards and bring them down to the level of animals.<sup>21</sup>

The use of phrases such as “mentally, morally, and physically unfit,” which were increasingly used by birth control advocates in the nation’s cities, posed a particular problem for Catholics. Catholics in Chicago would never assume that Yarros was speaking about them. But a growing number of social scientists and reformers in the early twentieth century were blaming various forms of mental and physical inferiority on urban poverty. To Catholics, birth control activists were not simply medical professionals working in local neighborhoods to make contraceptive information available to women who desperately wanted it. They were viewed as part of a much larger movement directed at limiting the numbers of poor who were lowering their status even further by having children; poor who happened to be of southern and eastern European descent, and Catholic.

The Catholic position against birth control had only recently been defined, primarily under the vision of Monsignor John A. Ryan. The timing as well as the foundations of his arguments illustrate the fact that they were not based in centuries-old dogma, but constituted a reaction to the situation at hand. As head of the newly created social action department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, Ryan outlined what he understood as the Catholic birth control position in terms of social justice. Ryan first decried Neo-Malthusianism in 1907,<sup>22</sup> claiming small families caused, or were the cause of, varying degrees of egotism, materialism, and self-indulgence.<sup>23</sup> He more clearly defined what he held as the Catholic position regarding the sinfulness of contraception in 1916 without identifying any particular church teaching.<sup>24</sup>

21. Yarros, 12.

22. Malthusianism experienced a resurgence near the turn of the century as social reformers addressed ills they saw as directly related to an overcrowded world. Critics of this movement, however, insisted that in all his concerns regarding overpopulation which he voiced in the 1790s, Thomas Malthus never recommended contraception.

23. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* 12 (1907): 279, in Chesler, 211.

24. John A. Ryan, “Family Limitation, Church and Birth Control,” *American Ecclesiastical Review* 54 (June, 1916): 687. The Pope did not specifically address the issue of birth control until the encyclical *Casti Connubii* in 1930, which was a response to the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops’ guarded approval of contraceptive use, the first official religious sanction of contraception.

Though in these arguments Ryan outlined the relationship between contraception and natural law which has been referred to by Catholic authorities throughout this century, he also commented on the specific arguments of birth control activists of that time which helped place the Catholic Church on the defensive. Ryan criticized claims by leaders of the movement that the quality of children should take precedence over the quantity. Recognizing the apparent prevalence of contraceptive practice among the middle and upper classes, he maintained that the underlying purpose of recent birth control rhetoric had been "to make known and recommend to the poorer classes devices for the limitation of their families."<sup>25</sup>

The Catholic Church represented many from the lower classes and was now speaking for them on the birth control issue. But the sentiment did not lie exclusively in the arguments of John Ryan. Chicago's Catholic clergy saw increasing evidence of the middle class desires to limit the numbers of people considered part of the inferior class in their own city by the early 1920s. About Chicago's poor, an editorial in the archdiocesan publication *The New World* noted:

Years ago in Chicago . . . [most of the city] consisted of alleys, unpaved streets, top-heavy cottages, stove heated flat buildings, men in Blue Island Avenue clothes, women with shawls on their heads and no manners, and children hilariously happy on piles of sand and mud. According to the Birth Control orators these were "undesirables." At the present time they are decidedly the most desirable of our citizens. They have survived and have succeeded.<sup>26</sup>

Catholics also recognized the struggles of the poor, but did not see a solution in birth control. Rather, charitable assistance and economic opportunity were viewed as solutions to poverty.

Chicagoans of the poor immigrant class were viewed by the middle and upper classes as vastly ignorant and in need of guidance from the well-educated. One significant organization which considered itself a representation of the educated middle and upper classes and their concerns was the Chicago Woman's Club. By the early 1920's, the Woman's Club had established a bureaucracy of committees, many of which addressed the city's population and problems of poverty. For instance, the committee on the Education of the Adult Foreigner was founded in October of 1923 in order to teach the English language and American ways to immigrants, but the committee also eagerly sponsored lectures such as that entitled "Heredity and Environment in Relationship to Immigration," and supplied immigrant women with a popular

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25. Ibid.

26. "The Outlook," *New World*, November 9, 1923, 4.

“child welfare primer” entitled *Our Babies*.<sup>27</sup>

The additional founding of the Committee on Family Limitation demonstrated the growing concern among members of the Woman’s Club that working-class parents were having too many babies. Some of the actions of the Family Limitation Committee suggested its intention was one of keeping Woman’s Club members informed on the status of birth control, and of lobbying for contraceptive legislation, neither of which addressed the lower class specifically. For instance, the committee mailed copies of Judge Fisher’s decision on the Parents’ Clinic case to members, calling it “the sanest contribution on scientific birth control that could be placed in your hands.”<sup>28</sup> The committee also worked to secure an audience for Mary Ware Dennett, who sponsored the Vaile-Cummings bill — a piece of federal legislation which would have allowed the mailing of contraceptive information, and one which Mundelein actively opposed.<sup>29</sup>

However, in increasing their support of Sanger and more lenient birth control laws, Woman’s Club members indicated that they were not so much interested in contraceptive information for themselves, but for lower class women. In 1916, when she was still considered a radical, the Woman’s Club denied Sanger an audience, forcing her to cancel her scheduled speaking engagement in Chicago. Brushing off the incident, Sanger responded that she would rather speak to “the women of the stockyards, the women of the factories . . . I am interested in birth control among working women chiefly.”<sup>30</sup> She did speak to a group of 1,500 near the stockyards.<sup>31</sup>

Very often in declaring her intention to bring contraceptives to the poor, Sanger maintained that she was simply attempting to provide a service to women who wanted it. However, the suggestion that she hoped to decrease the numbers of poor in Chicago appealed to the middle and upper classes. By the 1920s, members of the Chicago Woman’s Club had been persuaded that limiting birth rates among the city’s working class was a good idea.

In 1923, the Woman’s Club’s Committee on Family Limitation proudly sponsored a luncheon in honor of Margaret Sanger, who had actively organized

27. Chicago Woman’s Club, Minutes of Weekly Meeting, January 16, 1924, Chicago Historical Society Archives.

28. Chicago Woman’s Club, Minutes of Annual Meeting, April 23 and April 25, 1924, Chicago Historical Society Archives.

29. *Ibid.*; Letter from Weymouth Kirkland to Mundelein, May 21, 1924, Archives of the Archdiocese of Chicago. For evidence of Mundelein’s opposition to other legislation, see a letter from William H. Symmes to Rev. E.F. Hoban, March 19, 1925. For general archdiocesan sentiment, see *The New World*, May 24, 1929, 4.

30. Linda Gordon, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right: Birth Control in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 228-229; Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1931), 145.

31. Planned Parenthood Association of the Chicago Area, History, Chicago Historical Association Archives.

the American Birth Control League's Conference of the Middle Western States, held at the Drake Hotel. Sanger considered this visit to Chicago one of the most successful in the early stages of securing middle class support of her efforts. John J. S. O'Reilly, a passionate Catholic physician from New York, wrote to Archbishop Mundelein regarding the pending conference, warning that "Margaret Sangerism would be exploited to an audience of Chicago citizens."<sup>32</sup>

However, Sanger was only one of many participants in the conference who promoted birth control as an effective solution to poverty. According to Sanger, it was important to address

the high and increasing cost of Charities and Corrections, which is necessarily borne by the self supporting and fit members of society, and [to ask] whether it was sufficient to keep on attempting to ameliorate conditions for the defective and delinquent. Birth Control strikes at the root of evil and offers a way by which the unfit can gradually be eliminated from society and by which also the perils of overpopulation . . . can be avoided or overcome.<sup>33</sup>

Other arguments against large families were also introduced in the conference. Dr. Helen Wooley of Detroit cited statistics "gathered over many years [which] show that more than 50 per cent of the mothers with more than three children are failures and their children are failures,"<sup>34</sup> and Dr. Dorothy Bocker of New York stated that Teddy Roosevelt and Chicago's Health Commissioner Bundesen were wrong when they promoted families of six children in order to prevent race suicide.<sup>35</sup>

Among the conference's most influential speakers was Eugene A. Ross, a University of Wisconsin sociologist of national prominence. According to Ross:

It has been shown that one-quarter of the population of the United States produces as many children as the other three-quarters. In this quarter are the charity cases, the feeble-minded, often the criminal. It is this fact that the least desirable are producing from two to three times as fast as the desirable that makes us fear for the safety of the world.<sup>36</sup>

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32. Letter from John J. A. O'Reilly, October 1, 1923, 1, Archives of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

33. "The Chicago Birth Control Conference," *Birth Control Review*, December 1923, 316; "Birth Control Poverty Cure, Advocates Say," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 30, 1923, p. 7; *Chicago Daily News*, October 31, 1923, p. 7. Also see Adolf Meyer, M.D., ed., *Birth Control, Facts and Responsibilities: A Symposium Dealing with this Important Subject from a Number of Angles* (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins Co., 1925).

34. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 1, 1923, 4.

35. *Ibid.* Also see Theodore Roosevelt, *The Foes of Our Own Household* (New York, George H. Doran Company, 1917), 251, 258-259.

36. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 31, 1923, p. 14.

Ross had already encouraged births among the “superior” and promoted the distribution of birth control among the lower classes in an article entitled “Controlled Fecundity,” published the previous year. Ross wrote: There ought to be bigger families among the rising, and smaller families among the stagnating, more progeny left by the gifted, and fewer by the dull, less prudence in the good homes and less recklessness in the hovels and tenements.<sup>37</sup>

Ross had also become a popular supporter of immigration restriction, and his criticism of reproductive practices among the poor focused on the foreign born. By 1920, he accurately predicted the future passage of immigration legislation:

There is no doubt that barriers to immigration will be reared which will give notice to the backward peoples that enlightened humanity is not willing to cramp itself in order that these peoples may continue to indulge in thoughtless reproduction.<sup>38</sup>

The efforts of Sanger and Yarros, with support of advocates from across the nation, proved successful in Illinois, and in 1925, the Illinois Birth Control League was chartered.

By 1926, America’s Catholic bishops firmly denounced those in the academic world who called for birth control among certain groups of people, and the National Catholic Welfare Conference condemned the “propaganda of birth control” that was being introduced as legislation in various states under terms such as “a form of care for the feeble-minded” or “sterilization of the unfit.”<sup>39</sup> Ross’s arguments stood out as perhaps the most contemptible in Catholic minds, but the kind of discourse supporting birth restriction was pervading the growing field of sociology, with proposals to address “the burden of care and support of dependent children”<sup>40</sup> and eugenicists’ programs to “eliminate those who have been proved defective,”<sup>41</sup> becoming commonplace in universities.

It is possible that Chicago’s Catholics were even more sensitive than those of other cities because the American Sociological Society was based at the

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37. Edward Alsworth Ross, “Controlled Fecundity,” *New Republic*, January 25, 1922, p. 246. Also see Robert Bierstedt, *American Sociological Theory: A Critical History* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 172-173.

38. Ross, *The Principles of Sociology* (New York: The Century Press, 1920), 37.

39. “Programme for the Meeting of the Bishops at the Catholic University, Washington, D.C.,” September 15-16, 1926, 5-6, Archives of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

40. Day Monroe, *Chicago Families, A Study of Unpublished Census Data* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), 107. Monroe’s research was based on 1920 census statistics, and was first written as a Ph.D. dissertation in Home Economics and Household Management. Her work does not reflect a prejudice against immigrants, but does demonstrate concern for those with large families.

41. Warren S. Thompson, “Eugenics, as Viewed by a Sociologist,” *Papers and Proceedings, Eighteenth Annual Meeting, American Sociological Society, The Trend of Population* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924), 72.

University of Chicago.<sup>42</sup> A sample of articles published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, which was edited by the university's most prominent sociologists, including Albion W. Small, Robert E. Park, and Marion Talbot, published Jeannette Halverson's "The Profligacy of Depended Families" and Edwin E. Grant's "Scum of the Melting Pot."<sup>43</sup> Cardinal Mundelein already had had an antagonistic relationship with the University of Chicago, maintaining that the "tendencies are in many of [the University of Chicago's] courses atheistic, are materialistic and are socialistic,"<sup>44</sup> and now Catholics saw poor and immigrant families being portrayed as objects of disdain.



**Cardinal George Mundelein** (Courtesy: *Sulpician Archives Baltimore*)

As public opinion regarding birth control began to shift, so did the Catholic response to the needs of the poor in Chicago. Archbishop Mundelein had actively established programs to serve the poor long before birth control had become a heated issue; however, as the contraceptive movement gained strength, his anti-birth control sentiment became increasingly evident in his promotion of charity work. What began as a concerted effort to aid the poor before 1920, became one directed at providing alternatives to birth control by 1930.

Catholic Charities of Chicago was incorporated in 1918, just two years after

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42. For a comprehensive history of Chicago's sociology department, see Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity and the Use of Sociological Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

43. H. Jeannette Halverson, "The Profligacy of Dependent Families," *American Journal of Sociology*, (November, 1923): 338-344; Edwin E. Grant, "Scum of the Melting Pot," *American Journal of Sociology*, (May, 1925). 641-651.

44. Statement from the Archbishop's Retreat, 1919, 6, Archives of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Mundelein's move to the city.<sup>45</sup> During the first nine months of operation, Mundelein proudly announced that the Central Bureau had helped more than 10,000 Chicagoans, granting \$70,000 in money, clothing, doctor's care and medicine, and another \$80,000 to various agencies and institutions. Under the leadership of Rev. Moses E. Kiley, Catholic Charities served tens of thousands more through the 1920s.<sup>46</sup>

In 1919, Mundelein assumed responsibility for the operating deficit of the Angel Guardian Orphanage, by making it a member agency of Catholic Charities. Angered by a 1917 Cook County Circuit Court decision that Catholic child care agencies could not receive financial aid from the city or county, Mundelein made raising money for orphanages one of his primary goals. He had already promised Chicagoans that he intended to focus much of his work to aiding poor children, in a well-known speech to the Knights of Columbus in 1916. Regarding recent growing concern over the "bad boy," Mundelein responded, "I would rather help save the soul of a kiddie of the streets than erect the finest monument in Chicago."<sup>47</sup> The Circuit Court's action set the stage Mundelein told parishioners:

No, my dear faithful Catholic People, the Archbishop is not going to desert the orphan children, he will not abandon them to the cold soulless care of the State, he will take the place of father and mother to them until they grow old enough to take care of themselves. Even if the great State of Illinois and the rich city of Chicago do not contribute a penny towards their support, he will manage somehow. If need be, he will beg from door to door for them, for their little souls are on his conscience and for each of them he must one day answer at the judgment seat.<sup>48</sup>

In 1920 alone, Mundelein raised \$44,000 for the Angel Guardian orphanage, and oversaw building expansion throughout the 1920s.<sup>49</sup>

Mundelein also recognized a need to help unmarried pregnant women give birth to their babies and established a Misericordia Hospital and Home for Infants (later the Misericordia Home for Special Children) on West 47th Street in 1921 for that purpose. At the dedication of Misericordia, Mundelein hinted at his opposition to birth control when he commented, "We have built this maternity hospital, not for sentiment or philanthropy, or to shield the sinner,

45. On his refusal to allow Catholic Charities to cooperate with United Charities, see Edward R. Kantowicz, *Corporation Sole: Cardinal Mundelein and Chicago Catholicism* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 134-135.

46. *Caritas Christi Urget Nos: A History of the Offices, Agencies, and Institutions of the Archdiocese of Chicago, vol. II* (Chicago, The New World Publishing Company, 1981), 811-813.

47. *New World*, February 25, 1916, 1, cited in Kantowicz, 128.

48. Letter from Archbishop George W. Mundelein, February 9, 1917, 3.

49. *Caritas Christi Urget Nos*, 844.

but because we realize the great value of a baby's soul."<sup>50</sup> Misericordia Hospital was affiliated with the Loyola University School of Medicine, and provided medical services for the women and children as well as social services, including adoption, through Catholic Charities.

Mundelein more explicitly denounced birth control when he announced plans for the Lewis Memorial Maternity Hospital in March of 1929. Birth control advocates had gained significant support, convincing many Americans that contraceptive use was acceptable, and probably desirable, among couples facing economic hardships. The construction of Lewis Hospital, at 3001 S. Michigan Avenue, was a direct response to this, and was intended to help working-class Catholic married couples "to meet the mounting cost of each new birth in the family."<sup>51</sup> According to *The New World*:

It is believed that this new venture will receive the hearty cooperation of the Catholic People of Chicago and that in this way a crushing answer will be made to the arguments of birth control advocates. . . . It is to combat birth control and to relieve the economic pressure on families of moderate circumstances that His Eminence, Cardinal Mundelein has labored to bring into actuality this new Catholic Maternity Hospital, but it was also to insure more healthy children for the glory of God and for the welfare of the nation.<sup>52</sup>

By the end of the 1920s, a significant portion of Catholic social action had become directly linked to the birth control movement.

Though Catholic social action was generally put to work in the streets of the nation's cities, the term referred to a larger intellectual and political movement. John Ryan was perhaps the most visible proponent of Catholic social action in the 1920s, as well as the first to define American Catholic contraceptive opposition, but his ideological arguments for economic reform and social justice influenced Catholic bishops and academicians throughout the United States. This was certainly true at Loyola University of Chicago.

Just as Chicago's Catholic charity work expanded in response to what was considered a disregard for Catholic needs among secular and primarily Protestant organizations, so did Chicago's Catholic system of higher education. Loyola, chartered in 1909,<sup>53</sup> expanded tremendously in the first decades of the twentieth century, adding a School of Sociology in 1914 to answer "the

50. *Ibid.*, 943.

51. John Gibson, "Catholic Maternity Hospital Will Soon Open," *The New World*, March 15, 1929, 1. The hospital did not officially open until January of 1931.

52. *Ibid.* The National Catholic Welfare Conference lauded Mundelein's efforts in an article published in *The New World*, June 28, 1929, 7.

53. The 1909 charter was essentially a recharter of St. Ignatius College, founded in 1870. For an examination of the intended purposes of Loyola and other Catholic universities, see Lester Francis Goodchild, "The Mission of the Catholic University in the Midwest, 1842-1980: A Comparative Study of the Effects of Strategic Policy Decisions Upon the Mission of the University of Notre Dame, Loyola University of Chicago, and De Paul University," Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1986.

crying need of Catholic ideals in social thought and of Catholic workers in the field of social service.”<sup>54</sup> In proposing the first such school in an American Catholic university, Rev. Frederic Siedenburg, planned a curriculum combining theory and practical applications, and a list of courses offered in the 1920s suggests Loyola addressed the same issues that the University of Chicago did (e.g. juvenile delinquency, child welfare, the family, social legislation). However, many of the courses allowed for a Catholic point of view, particularly in “Social History,” “Social Ethics,” and “The Church and Social Work,” and probably in “Americanization,” “Immigration,” and “Labor Problems.”<sup>55</sup>

It is impossible to determine exactly how and when the subject of birth control was addressed in these courses, but the publication of one particular book suggests the Catholic position was clearly defined for students. In *Talks to Nurses: The Ethics of Nursing*. Henry S. Spalding, S.J., devoted an entire chapter to birth control.<sup>56</sup> Formerly a lecturer in social science at Loyola,<sup>57</sup> Spalding recognized that nursing students would be faced with the issue when they began working in the field. He provided students with theological arguments against contraception with regard to natural law, and examined what he considered the global consequences of limiting births, but his also raised issues relevant to Chicago in particular.

First, he disputed Dr. Alice Hamilton’s study of child mortality among the families in the Hull House area which found significant increases in deaths per thousand births in families with six or more children. He claimed the numbers were exaggerated and pointed to a recent survey conducted by the Guardian Angel (Madonna Center) settlement house, very near Jane Addams’ Hull House. That survey found the numbers of deaths were generally much lower, and did not consistently rise with and increase in the number of children in a family.<sup>58</sup> Spalding cited further statistics demonstrating that Chicago’s Court of Domestic Relations most often serviced one-child families, adding that “domestic troubles decrease in proportion to the number of children.”<sup>59</sup>

Spalding noted the prevailing attitudes against immigrants in the United

54. *Loyola School of Sociology Bulletin*, no. 12, May, 1923. From an article previously published in *The Catholic Charities Review*, June, 1921.

55. *School of Sociology, Loyola University Bulletin, 1929-1930* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1929), 12-15, Loyola University of Chicago Archives.

56. It is important to note that a portion of the chapter was published in *The American Journal of Sociology* in 1917, under the title “Ethics and Neo-Malthusianism,” making it one of the first substantial Catholic pronouncements on the subject, and demonstrating that vehicles for Catholic and non-Catholic social thought were not always deeply divided. Spalding’s other publications include *Introduction to Social Service* (Boston: D. C. Heath & Company, 1923), and *Social Problems and Agencies*, (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1925).

57. At the time of publication, Spalding was teaching ethics at St. Xavier College in Cincinnati.

58. Henry S. Spalding, S.J., *Talks to Nurses: The Ethics of Nursing* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1920), 78-79.

59. *Ibid.*, 81-82.

States, recognizing that they were often the target of birth control advocates, countering:

Are there any signs of degeneration among these foreigners? Their ways may not be our ways — many of them are aliens among us — but they are strong of limb and muscle. . . . [W]e need the Italians, the Poles, the Russian Jews — we need all those who have come from large families.<sup>60</sup>

Though he differed with Monsignor Ryan on immigration policy,<sup>61</sup> his general social argument mirrored that of Ryan and other academicians supporting Catholic social action. Responding to New York public health activist Dr. S. Adolphus Knopf's claims that infant mortality rates rose in large, poor families, Spalding argued:

To the disgrace of our civilization be it said that the toiling classes . . . have been overworked and underfed. And they have been underfed because they have been underpaid. We do need a propaganda for the poor man, but it is not a propaganda to give him a decent wage — a wage that will enable him to have a home, to clothe and feed his family; we need social insurance in its best forms; we need cooperation and profit-sharing — all these things we need to give the toiler the just reward of his labor. Then will infant mortality, tuberculosis, and poor housing disappear.<sup>62</sup>

One very important aspect of Spalding's argument addressed abstinence. Though Spalding repeatedly argued against claims that large families were detrimental, he noted that there was nothing wrong with abstaining periodically from intercourse. In the use of contraceptive devices, or "artificial prevention" as he termed it, was where the Church drew the line, stating: "Married people can refrain from the use of these [marital] rights, and in that sense they may decide when to have a child."<sup>63</sup> Spalding presented this opinion by 1920, but the question of abstinence remained the focus of religious birth-control debate well into the 1930s — a debate which drew the nation's attention to Loyola.

In December of 1930, Pope Pius XI made the first official papal pronouncement against the use of artificial contraceptives in *Casti Connubii: On Christian Marriage*. The encyclical responded to the Lambeth Conference of

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60. *Ibid.*, 70-71.

61. Francis J. Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer, John A. Ryan* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1963), 93; Richard M. Linkh, *Catholicism and European Immigrants* (New York, Center for Immigration Studies, 1975), 175.

62. *Ibid.*, 77-78.

63. *Ibid.*, 76. Spalding cites Thomas J. Gerrard, *Marriage and Parenthood — The Catholic Ideal* Chapter vii, on "Conjugal Restraint."

Anglican Bishops, August, 1930, which marked the first notable religious sanction of contraceptive use.<sup>64</sup> Anglican approval was guarded as the bishops reminded followers that abstinence was the preferred method, and subsequent changes which took place among other denominations reflected a similar attitude. However, the Catholic Church maintained its stance against artificial contraceptives, making abstinence not the preferred method, but the only method. Subsequently, an examination of “rhythm” began at Loyola.

Dr. Leo Latz, a physician and faculty member of Loyola’s medical school was reportedly asked by a Jesuit priest, also a Loyola faculty member,<sup>65</sup> to investigate recent research by two gynecologists into women’s fertility cycles,<sup>66</sup> in order to develop a practical method of periodic abstinence. Latz’s book *The Rhythm* was published in 1932, just as it had become clear that a majority of denominations were shifting toward approval of contraceptive use, and that the Catholic Church would not. *The Rhythm* was embraced by many Catholic couples, and sold 60,000 copies in the first two years of publication.<sup>67</sup> But, it was highly controversial because there was no official Catholic sanction of the rhythm method. Though Latz gained the approval of Cardinal Mundelein, and donated all proceeds to the Church, the controversy led to his dismissal from his teaching position at Loyola.<sup>68</sup>

Rapid acceptance of the rhythm method had become impossible primarily because of the tone and character of the birth control debate in the previous decade. The debate had not focused on method alone, but on much larger theological and political issues, discussing such notions as human attempts to control nature and the limitation of numbers of working class poor in the United States through birth restrictions. In addition, as Catholics were placed on the defensive and portrayed as the sole enemies of the birth control movement, they became deeply entrenched in their position, making it impossible to change their stance easily.

64. *The Lambeth Conferences (1867-1930)*, 166. The comparatively large, international organization of Anglicans gained the most attention in its decision, but a number of smaller American religious groups had given their approval in previous months. See *Annual Report of the American Unitarian Association, For the Fiscal Year May 1, 1929-April 30, 1930* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1930), 41, 67-68 for the Unitarian position; *The New York Times*, April 8, 1930 for the New York East Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church position, and Isaac E. Marcuson, ed., *Report of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1930*, 78-79 for discussion of Reform Jews.

65. Though unnamed in Latz’s obituary, the priest was probably Joseph Reiner, S.J., who wrote the introduction for Latz’ book.

66. *Chicago Sun Times*, May 4, 1994, 79, Leo Latz biographical file, Loyola University of Chicago Archives. Dr. Ogino of Japan and Dr. Knaus of Austria had determined what were considered more accurate calculations of female fertility, which encouraged those who wanted to practice periodic abstinence.

67. *Ibid.*; Ellen Skerrett. “Tales Recall Pain, Piety of Post-War Marriages,” *The New World*, September 17, 1993, review of Alice Halpin Collins, *The Rhythm Girls*, privately printed.

68. *Sun-Times*, 79; Leo J. Latz, M.D., “The Latz Foundation — Its Aims and Achievements,” *The Lincare Quarterly*, December, 1934, 8-15, a clipping in the Office of the President, Samuel Knox Wilson, 20-4, Loyola University of Chicago Archives.

Some denominations, especially the more liberal Unitarians, Universalists and Reform Jews, allowed for changes in doctrine to adapt to a changing society. The onset of the Great Depression facilitated their shifts in contraceptive doctrine because concerns about economic pressures in large families intensified. Economic concerns also affected moderate Presbyterians, Methodists and Lutherans who debated within their own denominations until they, too, accepted contraceptive use by the mid-1930s. Fundamentalists condemned shifts on birth control and other issues in the 1920s as evidence of a modernist threat, and not even the economic devastation of the 1930s enough to change their anti-birth control position. Still, Catholics were viewed as the enemy.

The shift was a complicated one, and by no means one that was divided solely along Catholic/non-Catholic lines. And in many ways, the religious birth control debate between 1915 and 1935 was a product of its time. Yet, the anti-birth control discussion and activism among Catholic officials in Chicago, and elsewhere in the nation, compounded with anti-Catholic sentiment among birth control advocates and American society in general, helped contribute to a simplistic view of religion and birth control which remains prevalent today.