

“For the Poor, the Sick and the Needy”:
How Socially Conscious Catholic Priests Navigated the Birth Control
Debate in the U.S. in the Early Twentieth Century

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 4 |
| Chapter One 1891-1920: Defining Catholic Social Justice in the United States | 13 |
| Chapter Two 1921-1929: The Church's Initial Collision with the Birth Control Movement | 31 |
| Chapter Three 1930-1939: The Depression, <i>Casti Connubii</i> , and The Rhythm Method | 61 |
| Conclusion | 81 |
| Bibliography | 85 |

Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.

(Psalm 82:3)

To my grandmother, Elizabeth Ford Manza (1921-2010), for her unfailing faith and dedication to family; and to my parents, Robert and Kara Manza, for challenging me to have an independent mind, tempered by a compassionate heart, through their daily examples.

Introduction

One cold spring day in 1910, seminarians filed into the Basilica of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City to receive the Sacrament of Ordination. Much like the saint to whom the Basilica was dedicated, these men would be sent from St. Patrick's as missionaries, ministering to a largely foreign population in a nation that was often hostile to both immigrants and Catholicism. Below a statue of the Crucifixion, the men dedicated themselves to their God and Church. As the prayers, hymns, and holy water sprinkled over the men prostrated on the floor, they asked the Holy Spirit for the grace to guide and defend the Catholic Church with "gratuitous love for all and a preferential love for the poor, the sick and the needy."¹

When these young men rose and became full fledged members of the priesthood, they began a journey into challenges that would have been unfathomable in 1910. In the next thirty years, New York's priests would be called upon to console their parishioners numbed by the unprecedented carnage of the first World War, and serve families after the country plunged into massive unemployment and poverty during the Depression. The men would also participate in the Church's growing commitment to social justice, and confront the ill effects of industrialization on the working class. However, perhaps the most surprising mission awaiting these new priests would be the constant need to defend the Church's teachings on contraception.

In the early twentieth century, all Catholic seminaries taught their students about the Church's uncompromising stance on birth control. These teachings were rooted in Scripture, the writings of the Church Doctors, natural law, and tradition. At no point in their careers could these priests publicly challenge the Church's teachings without teetering on the edge of heresy.²

¹ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), paragraph 1586.

² Flann Campbell, "Birth Control and the Christian Churches," *Population Studies* 14(2) (Nov 1960): 131.

Priests cited God's mandate to "increase and multiply" in the Book of Genesis as the foundation for Jewish and Christian teaching on sexuality. They argued that sex should be strictly utilitarian--a means to continue both the human race and the faith.³ They also interpreted the fate of Onan from the Book of Genesis as a powerful warning against contraception. When Onan was instructed by God to perform "the duty of a husband's brother unto her and raise up seed to thy brother," he instead "spilled [the seed] on the ground, lest he should give seed to his brother." The Book of Genesis went on to describe his actions as "evil in the sight of the Lord," and God slayed Onan for his deeds.⁴ Although theologians have debated whether or not God punished Onan for his disobedience or his intentional prevention of conception, priests began to call contraception "onanism," thus deliberately linking contraception with punishment from God.⁵

In addition, seminarians read the writings of St. Augustine, a Doctor of the Church who heavily influenced the direction of Christian theology since the fourth century. As revealed in his *Confessions*, Augustine spent the first part of his life in what he described as lustful and sinful pursuits before his radical conversion to Christianity. As the Bishop of Hippo, his past experiences heavily influenced his writings on sex and marriage. "Procreation is the reason for marriage," he wrote in *De bono conjugali*, "it is the sole excuse for the conjugal act."⁶ St. Augustine's writings reiterated the idea that sexuality is only licit when the goal is procreation within marriage. The secondary fruits of the marital act, such as mutual help between husband and wife or the alleviation of concupiscence, were regarded as significantly less important.⁷ Most of the writings and discussions about contraception in the Catholic Church continued to

³ Kathleen Tobin, *The American Religious Debate Over Birth Control, 1907-1937* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2001), 40.

⁴ Genesis 38:8-10.

⁵ In nineteenth century literature, authors also used the term "onanism" for masturbation.

⁶ quoted in Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 40.

⁷ Campbell, "Birth Control and the Christian Churches": 131.

build upon his limited view of the role of sex in marriage and his absolute opposition to contraception.⁸

However, in 1910, birth control would not have been a likely topic of contention. Every other Christian denomination publicly denounced contraception and validated their opposition with the writings of the Protestant founders, Martin Luther and John Calvin. In addition, United States legislation aligned with the Catholic Church's opinion. Since 1873, the federal Comstock Laws suppressed the publication and circulation of "obscene literature, and illustrations, advertisements, and articles of indecent and immoral use," including literature dealing with "the prevention of conception."⁹ The federal law banned any type of contraceptives and prohibited the distribution of information on abortion or birth control. Similar legislation soon passed in twenty-four states. These laws reflected Victorian views of sexuality, as well as concerns about the dwindling population of "good stock" Americans and the massive casualties from the Civil War.¹⁰

Thus, when these seminarians were ordained to the priesthood in 1910, they would not have anticipated that contraception would be a hotly contested issue during their careers as priests. No voices publicly challenged the status quo regarding birth control, although declining birth rates among America's upper classes suggest that many couples privately took advantage of new ways to limit their family sizes. The birth control movement, the primary threat to the Comstock laws and the public discussion of sexuality, had not yet taken shape in the United

⁸ See Noonan, *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, for an in-depth chronicle of how the Church's doctrine on contraception evolved since St. Augustine.

⁹ Anthony Comstock, "The Suppression of Vice," *The North American Review* 135, no. 5 (November 1882): 485.

¹⁰ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 4.

States. In fact, the principal figure of the American birth control movement, Margaret Sanger, was still a housewife with three children in Saranac, a small town in the Adirondacks.¹¹

However, when birth control advocates did finally capture the public's attention, they placed socially conscious clergymen in a paradoxical position. Although birth control advocates concentrated on themes such as women's health, a more liberated sexuality, and women's rights, they often found that the alleviation of poverty was an effective rallying cry that could bring even conservatively minded Americans to their cause. The advocates argued that contraceptives were an easy "one stroke solution" for various social problems that greatly concerned middle class Americans in the Progressive Era, such as poverty, child labor, and the eugenic integrity of the population.¹² In particular, Margaret Sanger cast herself as the protector of poor workingwomen, thus lobbying for the same role as the Catholic priests, who promised in their ordination to dedicate themselves to "the poor, the sick, and the needy."

Both parties' concern with social problems led to a unique historical collision. The birth control movement's initial goals—to better the lives of working class families—aligned with Catholic endeavors, a peculiar commonality that priests recognized. "Abject poverty is to be deplored," wrote a Jesuit priest in 1932. "[Birth control advocates] do not want it; neither do we. They apparently want a more just and equitable distribution of wealth; so do we."¹³ However, the Church's opposition to contraception automatically ruled out any opportunity for collaboration between priests and birth control advocates. Thus, Catholic social workers passed

¹¹ For a history of the birth control movement, see Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977) and *The Moral Property of Woman: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); David Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

¹² Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger*, 110.

¹³ R. M. Hitchcock, "Economic Argument for Birth Control," *America* 47(3) (Spring, 1932): 520.

through the same destitute neighborhoods as nurses who dispersed contraceptives, while each demonized the other in the press.

Historians have investigated the Church's response to the birth control movement, but they usually concentrate on the theological and moral arguments priests used to defend the Catholic position to the public and to their own parishioners. John T. Noonan's *Contraception. A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* focuses on theologians and canonists from St. Augustine to Pope Pius XI for their perspectives on contraception. His conclusion has set the foundation for all other historical research on the topic. He asserts that although "the teaching on contraception is clear and apparently fixed forever," it has not been "isolated from the environment in which Christians live" and has "developed" through history in relation to these environments.¹⁴

Two other historians have further investigated how environmental factors influenced the way Catholic clergy approached contraception in the United States. In *Catholics and Contraception: An American History*, Leslie Woodcock Tentler shows how Catholic clergy in the United States dealt with the ban on contraception in the twentieth century. She effectively demonstrates that, despite the theological history chronicled by Noonan, the Church's publicized opposition to contraception is relatively recent—post-World War I—due to pressures from the American birth control movement. She names birth control as the "major crisis among American Catholics,"¹⁵ and argues that the Church's position on contraception created an irreparable schism and sense of distrust between the clergy and most of the laity. Kathleen A. Tobin, in *The American Religious Debate Over Birth Control, 1907-1937*, concentrates on the same time frame as Tentler, but places the Catholic Church within a broader dispute between all

¹⁴ Noonan, *Contraception*, 6.

¹⁵ Leslie Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 2.

religious denominations in the United States over contraception. She argues that although other Protestant and Jewish denominations also disapproved of artificial contraception, they became reluctant to ally with the Catholic Church due to anti-Catholicism, nativist sentiments, and Margaret Sanger's intuitive decision to paint the Church as the sole enemy to the birth control movement. Although other Protestant denominations ultimately changed their positions on contraception due to the pressures of the Depression and liberalized views of love and marriage, she argues that the Catholic Church did not change its position on contraception due to Catholic moral and theological doctrine.

Although my thesis builds on each of these works, these past approaches ultimately fail to address at length how priests confronted birth control advocates' frequent use of social arguments for contraception. By concentrating on priests' theological arguments, the scholarship paints the clergy as alienated from and out of touch with the real concerns of married couples. In contrast to this portrayal, I argue that many priests possessed a complex understanding of the intersection between contraception and poverty. Some of the most vocal and nationally recognized priests in the public conversation about birth control helped orchestrate American clergy's agenda for social justice. A recognition of this complexity uncovers their struggle to comply with their Church's absolute ban on contraception while they attempted to address the severe social problems of the day.

In this thesis, I analyze the intersections between the American Catholic clergy's response to the birth control movement on social issues and their own efforts to fight poverty as they built a Catholic form of social justice. Although many priests did concentrate solely on theological arguments, my focus is on the socially conscious priests who attempted to confront Margaret Sanger's social, economic, and eugenic arguments for birth control. These individuals

were more equipped to see the social benefits of contraception, but were also better prepared through their pastoral work to provide practical alternatives. In fact, my approach mirrors the way Monsignor John Ryan instructed priests to combat the birth control advocates--by moving out of abstract, theological arguments into the practical, social and economic reality made bare by the birth control movement. Thus, the questions guiding this thesis are the following: How did members of the Catholic clergy who were deeply invested in social justice respond to birth control advocates' arguments for the social benefits of birth control? What alternatives could and did they give? How did they puncture holes in the birth control advocates' arguments? And perhaps most interestingly--what happened when the Church's stance on birth control began to hinder the priests' ability to administer social justice and serve a heavily burdened laity during the Depression?

This approach deepens in particular our understanding of the Church's eventual adaptation of the rhythm method, or "natural" birth control, in the 1930s. Like other historians who have covered the topic, I interpret the altered rhetoric and actions of the clergy as an expression of their ultimate compromise with the birth control movement.¹⁶ However, an analysis of the priests' social arguments against contraception before and after the introduction of the rhythm method demonstrates more clearly how the rhythm method freed priests to discuss family limitation as a solution for poverty. Socially conscious clergymen propelled the Church toward its unofficial adaptation of the method because they recognized Catholic couples' severe need to limit their families during the Great Depression. The rhetoric and motivations behind this change cannot be fully understood without recognizing the way priests dealt with both poverty and artificial contraception before and after this compromise was made.

¹⁶ For other works on the Catholic Church and the rhythm method, see David Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger*; John Noonan, *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*; and Leslie Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History*.

My thesis covers the early decades of the twentieth century when the United States was transitioning from a complete, official ban of contraceptives to a growing consensus that birth control could have positive contributions to both married life and wider society. The setting remains largely urban. Not only were cities such as New York and Washington, D.C. the sites for Margaret Sanger's clashes with prominent members of the Catholic clergy, but they were also the areas where the majority of poor, working class immigrants--the very population both parties were trying to serve--lived after arriving in the United States.

Chapter One explores the shaky beginnings of the Catholic social justice movement in the United States. Provoked largely out of fear about the potential rise of socialism in American cities, the clergy finally began to organize on a national level to combat poverty and represent the grievances of the working class. However, family limitation was never considered a possible option to relieve stress on struggling couples. Instead, Catholic priests continued to encourage working class families to have more children, while they attempted to provide these families with the environment and resources to do so.

Chapter Two proceeds into the 1920s, when the American public began to observe greater interaction and tension between Catholic clergy and the birth control advocates. After a very public collision between Margaret Sanger and the New York Archbishop, Patrick Joseph Hayes, Sanger utilized the publicity as a launch pad for her campaign to legalize birth control. Throughout the decade, the advocate successfully related her message to the public—birth control could end poverty and reduce the number of undesirable people in the United States. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, began to campaign against birth control more forcefully in their parishes and in the public sphere. Priests already familiar with the social justice movement utilized previously constructed arguments to call for a living wage and greater social securities as

an alternative to contraception. It is an ironic twist of history that many of these reforms were made under President Roosevelt during the Great Depression just as the Catholic Church began to compromise on birth control.

Chapter Three explores the complications created by the Great Depression for the clergy's opposition to birth control. *Casti Connubii*, the papal encyclical enforcing the Church's hard line on contraception, hit the press just as the global economy crumbled in the early 1930s. This caused the Church to campaign more intensely against birth control just as more families stumbled into poverty and unemployment. Although some American Catholics remained fiercely loyal to the Church's position, others began to argue for the necessity of contraception. Without official approval of the Vatican, American priests began to recommend a new rhythm method that utilized a woman's natural sterile period each month. Despite the Church's insistence that she was still against birth control, the rhetoric surrounding the rhythm method suggests that Catholics finally began to concede that family limitation could play a vital role in the solutions for economic, social, and medical problems.

This paper is not intended to be a work of Christian apologetics, but rather an attempt to give more depth and understanding to the struggles Catholic priests faced when attempting to combat both contraception and industrial poverty. It explores the ethical dilemmas clergymen experienced when tension arose between ancient dogma and their desire to provide practical help to struggling families. It illustrates how priests acted when couples' immediate needs and concerns seemed to conflict with their souls' eternal well being. It also gives us the opportunity to evaluate the motivations behind charity and population control, as well as the way money pervades the complicated decisions to build or limit a family.

Chapter One

1891-1920: Defining Catholic Social Justice in the United States

Father Bernard Vaughn, a priest in New York, was present for the consecration of St. Patrick's Cathedral, the nucleus of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York and a symbol of Catholic strength in America. For many New Yorkers walking under its shadow on Fifth Avenue, the Cathedral served as an unsettling reminder of the myriad immigrants flooding the city, many with little education, no knowledge of English, and feared to be more strongly allied with the pope in Rome than the president in the White House. However, Father Vaughn welcomed the new Catholics enthusiastically, interpreting their arrival as a sign of the unstoppable potential of Catholicism in the United States. "Try to restrain the growth of the Church," he boasted. "You may do it when you have held up the falls of Niagara; when, with an extinguisher you have quenched the forest fire; when, my brethren, with a little shove you have flung back the mountain avalanches."¹⁷

Over a million Catholics poured into the country each decade between 1880 and 1920, with over two million arriving from 1901 to 1910. The Catholic population skyrocketed from 6,259,000 in 1880 to 16,363,000 in 1910.¹⁸ Reporters at the time estimated that between fifty and sixty percent of all immigrants arriving in the United States were Catholic.¹⁹ The consequences of this massive influx of immigrants were two-fold. First, the intense growth of the Catholic population gave the Church greater potential to exert a political force in American society. This created both excitement and anxiety about the way the social fabric of the United

¹⁷ "Will Roman Catholicism Ever Conquer North America?" *Current Literature* (November 1910): 527.

¹⁸ James Hannesey, S.J., *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 173.

¹⁹ Kathleen Tobin, *The American Religious Debate Over Birth Control, 1907-1937* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc, 2001), 28.

States might change. Second, the arrival of so many poor, unskilled workers put intense pressure on the clergy to organize an effective social justice program and assist their parishioners. Understanding how priests initially handled these issues before the increased visibility of the birth control movement in the 1920s will illuminate how the birth control advocates changed and complicated the way the Church considered poverty and family limitation.

In the early twentieth century, many native Americans watched with concern as the nation's demographics began to shift. Not only were large numbers of immigrants coming to the United States, but they also were creating larger families than native middle and upper class Americans. In fact, new immigrants often raised three times as many children.²⁰ This demographic shift was most apparent in large, industrial cities because these were the locations where most of the immigrants concentrated and where the native populations had the lowest fertility rates.²¹ In New York City, for example, four out of five people were either immigrants or the children of immigrants in 1890.²²

This visible influx of immigrants caused some Americans to worry about how this would change their country. Scientific journals published articles extolling the superiority of northern European white races, and asserted that America's strength laid in its Anglo-Saxon heritage and dominance. They warned that America's progress could be threatened by race degeneration due to the rapid procreation of racially inferior immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Lothrop Stoddard, in his book *The Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy*, complained that recent immigration trends had "deluged" the United States by "the truly alien

²⁰ Miriam King and Steven Ruggles, "American Immigration, Fertility, and Race Suicide in the Turn of the Century," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Winter, 1990): 349.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 360.

²² Hennessey, *American Catholics*, 173.

hordes of the European east and south.”²³ Madison Grant, another American writer, warned about the “dangerous foreign races . . . [who plead] for admittance to share our prosperity. If we continue to allow them to enter they will in time drive us out of our own land by mere force of breeding.”²⁴ Even politicians like Theodore Roosevelt began to inject warnings about “race suicide” into their speeches, and encouraged native Anglo-Saxon and Nordic mothers to have more children.²⁵ Thus, the Catholic immigrants arriving from southern and eastern Europe were not welcomed into American society. Many native Americans feared that their presence would degenerate American institutions and society due to the immigrants’ origins in seemingly backwards and subordinate countries.

Catholic immigrants were seen as a threat to American society for another reason as well. The high levels of immigration, coupled with native Americans’ low fertility levels, threatened to change the religious organization of the country. In 1910, a New York Baptist minister described Catholics as “a class of people who are the most prolific in this country, among whom the birth rate is immensely higher than in some other sections of the community.”²⁶ Catholic immigrants’ infamously high fertility provoked Protestant ministers to encourage their own parishioners to increase their family sizes. The Presbyterian Ministers’ Association of New York encouraged their parishioners to have more children because “our nation was born a Protestant nation . . . and has attained its present high place as a Protestant nation.”²⁷ However, statistics published in popular journals suggested that the religious landscape was already shifting. *The*

²³ Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1920) quoted in Tobin, 13.

²⁴ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 28.

²⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, “On American Motherhood,” March 13, 1905, <<http://www.nationalcenter.org/TRooseveltMotherhood.html>>.

²⁶ Charles Aked, “Will Roman Catholicism Ever Conquer North America?” *Current Literature* (November 1910), quoted in Tobin, 29.

²⁷ quoted in Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 29.

Literary Digest in 1912, for example, reported that there were more Catholics in the United States than members of any other single denomination by a long stretch. The next largest denomination, Methodism, was barely half as populous.²⁸

A potential religious shift among the American population provoked fear from Protestant leaders who identified Catholicism as an inherently anti-modern and anti-democratic institution. Many Americans questioned Catholics' allegiance to the United States due to their possibly political allegiance to a foreign pope. "Here, then, are men who have sworn allegiance to two different powers," wrote Josiah Strong, a Protestant minister, in his book *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*. "Each claim to be supreme, whose spheres of authority are 'inseparably' bound together and which, therefore, afford abundant opportunity for the rise of conflicting interests and irreconcilable requirements."²⁹ Strong believed that Catholics in the United States were "hostile to our free institutions" and asserted that the "avowed purpose of Romanists is to make America Catholic."³⁰ The press fed the hype. An editorial to a secular newspaper in 1913 reported that the American government was "formally condemned by the church of Rome" for her commitment to democracy, and asserted that the Vatican "repeatedly attacked the free will of the people."³¹ Multiple writers played on this fear of the Catholic Church to encourage their denominations to have more children, or else encounter the "spiritual tyranny of Rome."³² John Moore, who investigated the changing demographics in his book, *Will*

²⁸ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 28.

²⁹ Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker and Taylor for the American Home Missionary Society, 1885), 66.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 60 and 82.

³¹ "A Question Answered," *Independent* (12 June 1913): 1321.

³² Charles Aked, "Will Roman Catholicism Ever Conquer North America?" *Current Literature* (November 1910), quoted in Tobin, 29.

America Become Catholic?, ominously concluded that “the days of supremacy for the ancient church seems not only assured but not far remote.”³³

The perception that Catholics would soon overcome all Protestants in population size led many Protestants to believe that Catholics were procreating for this very reason.³⁴ In fact, the Catholic press did encourage couples to have more children—sometimes even as many as eight or ten. “It is the large families who are the best,” wrote a Belgian Cardinal,³⁵ while Cardinal Gibbons from Baltimore asserted, “A large family is a blessing.”³⁶ The Catholic press also anticipated how a large Catholic population could catapult them politically into American society. *Western and Sunday Watchman*, a Catholic newspaper in St. Louis, excitedly predicted that “the higher birth rates among Catholics would soon make America Catholic.”³⁷ Additionally, a priest giddily wrote in *The Ecclesiastical Review*, the premiere periodical for American clergymen, that “mere preponderating numbers” would shortly allow Catholics “to dominate American life.”³⁸ Thus, Protestant ministers’ fears were not completely unwarranted because they paralleled many Catholic priests’ hopes. Both believed Catholic immigrants’ high fertility had the potential to influence the direction of American policy and society.

However, some members of the clergy, sensitive to the anxieties expressed by native Protestant Americans, were also careful to demonstrate their patriotism and support of American institutions. Cardinal James Gibbons attempted to assuage fears about Catholicism by asserting that Catholics loved the democracy they enjoyed in the United States. He argued that Catholic immigrants held a unique appreciation for the virtues of America because either they or their

³³ John F. Moore, *Will America Become Catholic?* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1931), 96.

³⁴ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 29.

³⁵ quoted in Carl Reiterman, “Birth Control and Catholics,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 4(2) (Spring 1965): 216.

³⁶ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 65.

³⁷ Moore, *Will America Become Catholic?*, 96.

³⁸ John Ryan, “The Small Family and National Decadence,” *Ecclesiastical Review* 30 (1904): 154.

parents endured persecution in Ireland, Germany, or Poland. “[Catholics] love their country with the spontaneous and ardent love of all patriots,” Gibbons wrote. “They accept the Constitution without reserve, with no desire, as Catholics, to see it changed in any feature. They can with a clear conscience swear to uphold it.”³⁹ Even Gibbons, however, expressed his hopes for a strengthened American Catholic Church to be “the bulwark of law and order, of liberty, of social justice and purity” in the United States.⁴⁰

However, there were concerns among priests that Catholics would begin to follow the footsteps of their Protestant neighbors and use contraceptive devices before the Church reached her full potential. In fact, native born Catholics often had only two or three children, the same number as other middle class Americans.⁴¹ Although this could have been a function of delayed marriages, some priests feared that a number of Catholics were using contraceptives.⁴² *The Ecclesiastical Review* expressed concern that other Americans’ “pestilent example” could corrupt the Catholic population and make it “physically, mentally, and morally decadent.”⁴³ Thus, priests often instructed couples to reject what they believed was the chief catalyst for contraception--materialism. “The duties of conscience [in regards to contraception] are above worldly considerations,” wrote one Cardinal in 1909.⁴⁴ Cardinal Gibbons wrote, “the question of economics has no place, should have none, in regulating the size of families.”⁴⁵ Actual poverty never figured into the priests’ dismissal of birth control. In fact, clergymen tended to

³⁹ James Gibbons, “The Church and the Republic,” *North America Review* 189 (640) (March, 1909), reprinted in James T. Baker (ed.), *Religion in America: Primary Sources In U.S. History Volume II* (Canada: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), 291.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁴¹ Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca: Corney University Press, 2004), 17.

⁴² King and Ruggles, “American Immigration,” 358.

⁴³ Ryan, “The Small Family and National Decadence,” 155.

⁴⁴ quoted in Carl Reiterman, “Birth Control and Catholics,” 216.

⁴⁵ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 65.

romanticize poverty when they discussed the benefits of large families. In 1916, a Jesuit reminded readers that many famous men came from “poverty-stricken families” and suggested that “poverty can be an effective whip on the road to success oftener than riches.”⁴⁶ After the advent of the birth control movement, priests would need to engage with the impact of finances on large families in a much more sophisticated and sympathetic way.

Before the 1920s, however, family limitation was not a part of the Catholic solution to poverty. Although the spiked population of Catholics gave the Church endless potential to become more politically involved, it also placed enormous pressure on the clergy and the Church’s resources. Intensive industrialization and urbanization created new social problems in the United States that did not exist when the poor lived in the countryside. The majority of immigrant Catholics lived in urbanized areas plagued with poverty, disease, and overcrowding. Meager wages created the necessity for child labor as well as a scarcity of food. Parishes filled with poor, unskilled immigrants with limited English, who were at the mercy of factory management. Thus, the pressures placed on the Church by the massive numbers of immigrants compelled clergymen to find new and more effective ways to serve the poor and administer social justice.

The Catholic Church was not the only religious organization that found itself burdened by industrial poverty. Since the Civil War, Protestant churches became increasingly involved in the alleviation of poverty, and tackled the problems of modern industrial society, from child labor, to education, to prison reform.⁴⁷ However, their earthly work, like the Catholics’ work, often had a more eternal purpose—to evangelize and convert the men, women, and children their services assisted. At a Southern Baptist Convention in 1911, a minister related these goals:

⁴⁶ quoted in Carl Reiterman, “Birth Control and Catholics,” 216.

⁴⁷ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 22.

“Evangelize these foreigners and you evangelize the cities. Evangelize the cities and you evangelize the nation. Evangelize the nation and you do much to evangelize the world.”⁴⁸

Thomas Mulry, a Catholic social worker, recognized the consequences of Protestants’ evangelical mission for the Catholic Church when he visited the St. Vincent de Paul society in New York City in 1900. After the organization could not find assistance from other Catholic clergymen, conferences, and societies, the men and women from St. Vincent de Paul began to receive help from Protestant denominations. Mulry observed how destitute Catholic children were being “weaned from the Church,” and recognized “the danger” for Catholics to “[neglect] this great means of doing good.”⁴⁹

The Archbishop of New York, Patrick Hayes, also emphasized the importance of charity for the Church. “What a terrible indictment of Christ’s prelates, priests, and people to have it said of them that members of Christ’s own body come to their own and their own receive them not!” he warned.⁵⁰ However, Hayes’ words also suggest that the Catholic emphasis on charity stemmed from the need to keep Catholics in the pews and confessionals. As head of a church with fragile roots in American society, Hayes had little guarantee that all the Catholic immigrants arriving from Germany, Poland, Ireland, and Italy would remain loyal to the Church. In fact, by 1918 twenty-five thousand Italian immigrants in New York City alone had already converted to Protestant denominations.⁵¹ This gave the clergy a very pragmatic reason to reach out to the industrial poor. The intense pressure placed on the Church underlies Hayes’ words when he concluded, “How even more terrifying the judgment on us, if the [poor], through our

⁴⁸ *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1911*, quoted in John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Conflict: A history of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972), 72.

⁴⁹ Thomas Mulry, “St. Vincent de Paul Society (ca. 1900),” reprinted in James T. Baker, *Religion in America Volume II*, 286.

⁵⁰ Patrick Hayes, *The Catholic Charities Review* 8(5) (May 1923): 169.

⁵¹ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1973), 122.

want of charity, receive from the unbeliever in Christ or the scoffer of Christ the welcome and the aid denied them by their own!"⁵² Springing from the Christian doctrine of charity, the clergy's actions and thoughts were also conditioned by the pragmatic need to assimilate new immigrants into the American Catholic Church.

There was yet another catalyst for the creation of a Catholic social justice movement in the United States. By the 1910s, socialism had gained sizable followings in France, Russia, and Germany. Immigrant priests and Catholic reporters from abroad related stories about socialists' intense hostility towards the clergy and their religion in European countries. Clergymen feared that Catholic workers would respond to the socialist movement in America with as much vigor as the Catholics in Europe. Already, there were multiple ways for Catholics to become involved with socialists. Catholic immigrants brushed elbows with socialists, communists, and anarchists at the workplace. These individuals showed sympathy for their plights and offered them concrete ways to improve their lives professionally and personally. Some immigrants from traditionally Catholic countries, especially Italy, already subscribed to anarchist and socialist ideas before entering the United States. Additionally, clergymen watched with concern as some of their parishioners joined the Knights of Labor, the largest labor organization of the 1880s, and witnessed firsthand the secrecy, violence, and radical reform generated by the group.⁵³

Thus, in the early twentieth century, the American Catholic Church faced an enormous dilemma. The clergy needed to successfully minister to the growing number of immigrant and poor Catholics, while also ushering them away from the temptations of socialism and other Christian denominations. The pastoral demands of a largely immigrant church made the workers' issues a priority to many parish priests, who began to ask the Vatican for more

⁵² Hayes, *The Catholic Charities Review* 8(5) (May 1923): 169.

⁵³ Marvin L. Krier Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2003), 41.

guidance. Within this context, Pope Leo XIII offered an encyclical that addressed the grievances of the international working class in 1891. *Rerum Novarum*, or “On the Condition of Labor,” attempted to make the Church relevant in the face of rapid industrialization and ensure the loyalty of the working class.⁵⁴ In the words of the pope, the encyclical recognized “the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class,” and provided concrete ways to improve their lives.⁵⁵ The rhetoric of the encyclical attempted to stir sympathy for the poor and appeal to the working class, as illustrated in this passage:

Labor is not a thing to be ashamed of, if we listen to right reason and to Christian philosophy, but it is an honorable calling, enabling a man to sustain his life in a way upright and creditable; and that it is shameful and inhuman to treat men like chattels, as means for making money, or as machines for grinding out work.⁵⁶

Ironically, in an attempt to dissuade Catholic workers from joining the socialists, Leo XIII made many similarly liberal arguments. The pope recognized the difficult reality for the majority of the masses while a select few continued to accumulate wealth under the capitalist system. Additionally, the pope conceded that Christian charity could not fully solve these social problems, and appealed to federal governments to protect the interests of poor wage workers. The pope also argued that a just reward for labor was a living wage that would “enable him, housed, clothed, and secure.”⁵⁷ Condemning the use of “starvation wages” that made poor workers the “victims of necessity,” he explained that an ethical distribution of wages would ensure that a workman and his family could live comfortably and modestly.⁵⁸ Finally, the pope affirmed the actions of many socialists when he declared that workers have a natural right to

⁵⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁵ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), paragraph 3.

<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html>.

⁵⁶ Ibid., paragraph 20.

⁵⁷ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, paragraph 34.

⁵⁸ E.B. Brady, “The Pope and the Proletariat,” *The Catholic World* 53 (1891): 633.

organize in order to advance their interests and that the government needed to protect this right.⁵⁹ These recommendations were radical at the time. The pope made these prescriptions twenty-three years before the United States legally protected unions' right to organize and forty-eight years before the federal government mandated a minimum wage.

However, the pope deeply disagreed with socialists on the fundamental principles behind their ideology. Leo XIII condemned socialists' disrespect for private property. He warned that the socialist concept of a "community of goods . . . only injures those whom it would seem meant to benefit, is directly contrary to the natural rights of mankind, and would introduce confusion and disorder into the commonweal." Instead, he affirmed the "inviolability" of private property as the "first and most fundamental principle" in the alleviation of poverty because it maintained harmony and incentive in society.⁶⁰ The pope also emphasized the necessity for classes to collaborate with each other, a direct antithesis to the socialist demands for class warfare. "The great mistake made in regard to the matter now under consideration is to take up with the notion that class is naturally hostile to class," Leo wrote, "and that the wealthy and the working men are intended by nature to live in mutual conflict."⁶¹ Confronting socialists' anti-clericalism, Leo asserted the clergy's right and duty to speak out on social issues and emphasized the importance of Christianity in the final solutions for workers' problems. "Religion is a powerful agency in drawing the rich and the bread-winner together," he wrote, "by reminding each class of its duties to the other and especially the obligation of justice."⁶² Furthermore, he reminded parish priests, often paralyzed by fear or lack of compassion for the working classes, that their responsibilities included educating parishioners, both rich and poor, on social justice.

⁵⁹ Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 21.

⁶⁰ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, paragraph 15.

⁶¹ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, paragraph 19.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Despite the pressing needs of the Catholic laity, the American Church did not immediately internalize all the recommendations made in *Rerum Novarum*. Instead, Catholic priests tended to concentrate on the criticisms of socialism while ignoring the recommendations to protect the labor movement. Thus, even after the pope's encyclical, the American clergy remained fundamentally defensive in her approach to social justice. This is why, even twenty-five years after *Rerum Novarum*, socially conscious clergymen were still attempting to convince other priests to support the working class and labor unions. "Our workingmen join associations no way in conflict with religion," wrote Cardinal Gibbons in 1916, "seeking nothing but mutual protection and help, and the legitimate assertion of their rights. Must they here also find themselves threatened with condemnation, hindered from their only means of self-defense?"⁶³ The overall reluctance of the Catholic hierarchy to respond to social issues both added ammunition to the socialist accusations that the Catholic clergy were indifferent to the workingman's welfare and demonstrated that the Church still risked losing the loyalty of the working class.⁶⁴ A priest in Brooklyn recognized this problem in 1910 when he wrote, "It is time for us to awake to the fact that if we wish to keep our workingmen practical Catholics, we must give them some tangible proof that the Church is alive to the struggle they are making to better their material conditions."⁶⁵

Creating this "tangible proof" became the lifework of Father John Augustine Ryan. His work for social justice helped to start transforming the American Catholic Church from a reactionary institution, burdened by immigration and fearful of socialism, into a progressive and

⁶³ James Gibbons, *A Retrospect of Fifty Years* (Baltimore, MD: John Murphy, 1916), reprinted in James T. Baker (ed.), *Religion in America*, 272.

⁶⁴ Joseph McShane, *Sufficiently Radical* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 54.

⁶⁵ quoted in *Ibid.*, 54.

active force for social change.⁶⁶ Born in 1865, Ryan grew up on a farm community in Minnesota with his Irish parents and ten siblings. From an early age, he learned about farmers' economic problems and was entranced by the rhetoric of the Populist movement.⁶⁷ Thus, he entered the seminary with ingrained principles of American progressivism. In St. Thomas Seminary, he increasingly devoted his time to the Catholic perspective on economic conditions, institutions, and problems. He saw these studies as complimentary to the care and welfare of his future parishioners' spiritual lives. "It seemed to me that the salvation of millions of souls depend largely upon the economic opportunity to live decently," he wrote.⁶⁸

The Vatican issued *Rerum Novarum* during Ryan's years in the seminary. Suddenly, Ryan had a papal document that affirmed his commitment to social reform. In his memoirs, he related the importance of the encyclical in his own priestly development. "The doctrine of state intervention which I had come to accept and which was sometimes denounced as 'socialistic' in those benighted days, I now read in a Papal encyclical," he wrote. "Leo's teachings on the state seemed almost revolutionary."⁶⁹ Ryan now had ecclesiastical approval for his interests in social justice and the alleviation of poverty.

John Ryan published his own perspective on social justice with the provocative *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects* in 1906. He argued that man had a natural right to a decent standard of living and criticized the modern economic practices that valued the individual over the common good. Echoing the pope's views on starvation wages, Ryan insisted that employers have an ethical obligation to pay sufficient wages and provide the worker and his family lives of adequate comfort. His work was revolutionary. In the introduction, Protestant

⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁷ Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 49.

⁶⁸ John Ryan, *Social Doctrine in Action: A Personal History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), 59.

⁶⁹ Ryan, *Social Doctrine in Action: A Personal History*, 44.

economist Richard Ely called *A Living Wage* “the first attempt in the English language to elaborate what may be called a Roman Catholic system of political economy . . . an attempt to show exactly what the received doctrines of the Church signify in the minds of a representative Catholic when they are applied to the economic life.”⁷⁰

For the next three decades, Ryan served as the most prominent Catholic voice for progressive social reform.⁷¹ In addition to his published work, Ryan taught moral theology at the Catholic University of America from 1915 to 1939 and served as the editor of *The Catholic Charities Review* from 1917 to 1922. He also worked with secular organizations such as the National Consumers’ League and the National Conference of Charities and Corrections to pressure state legislatures to pass protective legislation for women and children, and served as a member of the national board of the American Civil Liberties Union in the 1920s.⁷² As the Director of the Social Action Department of the Catholic Bishops’ National Catholic Welfare Conference from 1920 to 1945, he encouraged both capital and labor to recognize their unique and mutual dependence on each other.⁷³

Not all Catholics or even members of the Catholic clergy agreed with John Ryan’s radical assessment of American social problems. Indeed, Catholic priests often attempted to dissuade their parishioners from joining strikes or unionizing, and many never entered into the social justice movement at all. However, clergymen began with increasing frequency to invest themselves in social justice programs due to the enormous influx of poor immigrants into Catholic Churches.

⁷⁰ Richard Ely, “Introduction,” *A Living Wage* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1906), xii.

⁷¹ Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 49.

⁷² Rebecca Kasper, “Ryan, John Augustine.” *American National Biography Online*. Feb. 2000. Mar 29 2011.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

A flurry of activity began to address the severe social problems in the 1910s. The newly founded Catholic University of America, where John Ryan taught, began to incorporate new social sciences in the curriculum for priests and sisters involved in charitable work. Jesuits founded the Loyola School of Sociology in Chicago and the Fordham School of Philanthropy and Social Services in New York in 1917 to study social problems and the application of Catholic doctrine to these issues.⁷⁴ The clergy formed the National Conference of Catholic Charities in 1910 due to increased pressure for trained social workers within Catholic organizations.⁷⁵ This greater emphasis on professionalism and education demonstrated that American Catholics were becoming receptive to more modern and scientific modes of poverty alleviation, characteristic of the Progressive Era, through a uniquely Catholic Christian lens.

Although multiple initiatives were being organized at diocesan levels, the greater American hierarchy remained silent on a unified vision of social reform. It ultimately took the outbreak of World War I to provoke the hierarchy into unified action. Bishops staunchly supported America's involvement in the war in order to demonstrate their patriotism and support of American military efforts.⁷⁶ These clergymen were acutely aware that anything less than complete enthusiasm of the war could lead to harsh retaliation against American Catholics, especially the large numbers of Irish and German immigrants whose loyalties to the United States were being questioned with increasing frequency.⁷⁷ Within this ominous atmosphere, American bishops met for the first time in thirty years to coordinate and unify all Catholic activities related to the war effort. The result, the National Catholic War Council, established Catholic visitor centers in military training camps, assigned chaplains and social service workers

⁷⁴ McShane, *Sufficiently Radical*, 54.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷⁶ James Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants: A History of Catholics in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 97.

⁷⁷ McShane, *Sufficiently Radical*, 63.

to duty on Europe's battle lines, and coordinated the laity's charity endeavours.⁷⁸ Historian Joseph McShane called this council the "midwife of American Catholic unity" toward social problems because it became the first effort on a national scale to confront an issue as a unified whole.⁷⁹

After peace was declared in 1918, bishops recognized the need to continue operating an organization that could represent their views on social issues. Like many Americans reeling from the massive casualties and destruction of the war, the bishops argued that they needed to confront the potential manifestations of socialism, poverty, and unemployment on a national level in order to maintain peace.⁸⁰ There was another, less ideological, reason to entice the bishops to continue a national social justice program. The work of the National Catholic War Council garnered an enormous amount of positive press for the Catholic Church during World War I. In the crucial years following the war, the clergy needed to continue proving that she was dedicated to solving American problems and belonged as a critical actor in American society.⁸¹

Within this context, the bishops decided to form a permanent National Catholic Welfare Council (NCWC), using the same organization and structure as the War Council. Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore, who originally called together the meeting that formed the War Council, related the goals for the new organization. He said the bishops wanted to promote more clearly defined Christian social principles, find the most effective ways to administer Catholic social work, and put these principles and methods into actual practice. "The Church has a great work of social education and social welfare lying before it," he wrote. "The Hierarchy must take

⁷⁸ Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants*, 97.

⁷⁹ McShane, *Sufficiently Radical*, 62.

⁸⁰ U.S. Catholic Bishops, "The Lessons of War (1919)," reprinted in James T. Baker, *Religion in America Volume II*, 400.

⁸¹ McShane, *Sufficiently Radical*, 62.

the lead.”⁸² The creation of the Welfare Council signified the first institutional step, by the hierarchy as a whole, towards realizing Pope Leo XIII’s vision of social justice in *Rerum Novarum*.⁸³ The creation of the National Catholic Welfare Conference reverberated throughout the international Catholic community as well. A papal official told *Catholic World* in 1919 that “Rome now looks to America to be the leader in all things Catholic, and to set an example to other nations.”⁸⁴

As an acknowledgement of John Ryan’s extensive work for the Catholic social justice movement, the bishops asked the clergyman to write a document expressing the goals and purposes of the National Catholic Welfare Council. The NCWC published Ryan’s *The Bishops’ Program of Social Reconstruction*, which called for both political and spiritual reforms, on February 12, 1919.⁸⁵ Although the letter largely repeated many of the social reforms suggested by both Leo XIII and John Ryan in the past, it was the first declaration by the collective American Catholic hierarchy on social and economic issues, and exposed more Americans to the Catholic agenda for social justice.

Ryan viewed the proposals put forth in *The Bishops’ Program* as largely conservative since they were founded on the writings of Pope Leo XIII. However, most readers perceived *The Bishops’ Program* as extremely innovative and even radical, which created excitement among labor groups and concern among members of the business community. *The New York Times* applauded the letter as “unique in its support of the highly progressive attitude taken toward the solution of present day industrial problems.”⁸⁶ Upton Sinclair, the radical author and political

⁸² quoted in Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 54.

⁸³ McShane, *Sufficiently Radical*, 188.

⁸⁴ “The National Catholic Welfare Council,” *Catholic World* 109 (July 1919): 436.

⁸⁵ Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants*, 97.

⁸⁶ *The New York Times*, Apr 27, 1919: 26.

activist, called *The Program* a “Catholic miracle.”⁸⁷ *The Bishops’ Program* also established the Catholic Church’s new role in the United States. While most Americans saw the Church as a conservative player interested only in internal affairs prior to World War I, the creation of the National Catholic Welfare Council inserted the hierarchy into American politics.⁸⁸

In *The Church and Labor*, published in 1920, John Ryan summed up two decades of advocacy for social justice. He emphasized the “dignity of human labor” as the “cardinal point” in the pursuit of social justice. “By treating the laborer first of all as a man, the employer will make him a better workingman,” he wrote. “By respecting his own moral dignity as a man, the laborer will compel the respect of his employer and of the community.”⁸⁹

However, a new voice would soon emerge on the national stage with an alternative solution to poverty. Since she began working as a nurse in Manhattan’s Lower East Side in 1911, Margaret Sanger diligently constructed her arguments for the social purposes of birth control, a phrase she coined herself. Her prescriptions deviated wildly from John Ryan’s. “While there is a struggle between the forces of Poverty and Plenty,” she argued, “the workingwoman should have no more children.”⁹⁰ Thus, rather than concentrating on changing the living and work conditions of impoverished families, like John Ryan and other Catholic reformers, Sanger focused on women’s immediate problems—the lack of autonomy over their bodies and the inability to decide when have children. Her collision with the Catholic clergy in the next decade challenged the social justice arguments the Church had constructed since the publication of *Rerum Novarum* and threatened to diminish the population size, and thus power, that Catholics had so recently begun to enjoy.

⁸⁷ Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants*, 98.

⁸⁸ Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 57.

⁸⁹ Ryan & Hasslein (eds.), “Commentary on *Rerum Novarum*,” *The Church and Labor* (New York: MacMillan, 1920), reprinted in James T. Baker, *Religion in America Volume II*, 277.

⁹⁰ Margaret Sanger, “When Should A Woman Avoid Having Children?,” *Birth Control Review* (Nov 1918): 6-7.

Chapter Two

1921-1929: The Church's Initial Collision with the Birth Control Movement

Early in November 1921, Patrick Hayes received an unusual letter in the mail. The relatively young clergyman had been Archbishop of New York for only three years and epitomized the changing shape of the Catholic Church for many Americans. The son of Irish immigrants, Hayes bore the distinction of being New York's first native bishop.⁹¹ He symbolized a more rooted Catholic generation, one that had never worshipped in churches across the Atlantic Ocean and one that demonstrated great eagerness to become more centrally involved in American society. Hayes also embraced the American Church's renewed zeal for social justice and charity. He served on the administrative committee of the National Catholic Welfare Conference and was one of the four bishops who signed *The Bishops' Program* by John Ryan in 1919.⁹² Just a year before he received this letter, Hayes opened New York's chapter of Catholic Charities and allowed the national publication of *The Catholic Charities Review* to be headquartered within his archdiocese. Catholic Charities was growing rapidly within the city, already supporting two hundred welfare agencies.⁹³

As the Archbishop for one of America's largest and most politically prominent dioceses, the clergyman undoubtedly received an enormous volume of mail each day. This particular letter, however, was different. The return address bore the name of Margaret Sanger, the leader of the newly formed American Birth Control League. This would have created immediate concern for Hayes, as Sanger was regarded as a radical socialist and feminist. She had already

⁹¹ "Religion: Catholics in Cleveland," *Time*, September 30, 1935.

⁹² Newly-elected Pope Pius XI asked the National Catholic Welfare Council to change its name to the National Catholic Welfare Conference in 1922 in order to more clearly demonstrate that membership in the Conference was voluntary.

⁹³ Thomas J. Shelley, "Patrick Joseph Hayes," *American National Biography Online*, 2000. 4 Apr 2011.

been exiled from the country for a year and thrown into jail for her attempts to circulate information on contraception, which was still legally barred from public distribution by the Comstock Laws instituted almost fifty years earlier. Sanger's interactions with socialists, flirtations with eugenic ideology, and almost religious zeal for birth control would have made her an especially unpleasant figure for the new archbishop who was still establishing his authority within the diocese.

"Dear sir," the letter began,

It would give me great pleasure to have you attend a meeting at the Park Theater Friday evening and to express your opinion upon the subject of 'Birth Control—Is It Moral?' In view of the fact that the Catholic Church expresses its opposition to the cause of Birth Control on moral grounds, I think it is only just and fair that such opinion as you might wish to express be done at this time.

Sincerely,
Margaret Sanger
Chairman.⁹⁴

Although a birth control advocate like Margaret Sanger would be well versed in the Catholic Church's position on birth control, few outside the clergy could boast the same. In fact, the first time family planning was even mentioned in *The Ecclesiastical Review*, one of the most important Catholic periodicals, the author focused on the laity's ignorance of Church doctrine. Writing exclusively to clergy, John Ryan put into words what many Catholic leaders feared: large masses of lay Catholics were intentionally limiting their families through artificial means and, even worse, were unaware of the spiritual consequences. Importantly, Ryan did not portray Catholic couples as deliberately committing mortal sin. Instead, he described the majority of Catholics using contraception as performing "wrong conduct in good faith."⁹⁵ If Catholic couples were not aware of the Church's teachings, he urged, then they must be educated.

⁹⁴ Margaret Sanger, "To Archbishop Patrick Joseph Hayes," Esther Katz.(ed.), *Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 327.

⁹⁵ John Ryan, "Family Limitation," *The Ecclesiastical Review* 54 (1916): 685.

However, Ryan prescribed gentle persuasion within the privacy of the confessional rather than a more aggressive approach from the pulpit to remedy this delicate issue.

Archbishop Hayes' initial response to Margaret Sanger's letter is unknown. Certainly, like most clergymen at the time, he publicly agreed with John Ryan that contraception was intrinsically evil and an act of mortal sin. In fact, no clergyman could have professed anything different without severe consequences. "There is no possibility of a legitimate difference of opinion on this subject [of artificial contraception] among Catholics," wrote Ryan.⁹⁶ Faced with a rapidly mobilizing birth control movement, however, Hayes would not respond in the nuanced way John Ryan advocated. Instead, he would embody the article's words more literally when Ryan wrote, "the priest is often called upon to vindicate the Church's attitude, to justify the ways of God to men."⁹⁷ Hayes' decisions and actions during and after this infamous birth control meeting would ensure that many more individuals, both Catholic and non-Catholic, would know the Church's teachings on the controversial subject.

Sanger intended the symposium on "Birth Control: Is It Moral?" to be the capstone of the first American Conference on Birth Control at the Town Hall in New York City, but the symposium also signified an important milestone in her long and laborious career. Sanger first became interested in the social benefits of birth control in 1911 when she worked as a visiting nurse in Manhattan's Lower East Side, an impoverished neighborhood populated primarily by recent immigrants. She witnessed first hand the graphic and often devastating consequences of frequent childbirth, illegal abortions, and unsanitary miscarriages in an impoverished context. According to her memoirs, after her experiences as a nurse she "resolved that women should have knowledge of contraception . . . [and she] would tell the world what was going on in the

⁹⁶ John Ryan, *Family Limitation*, 685.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 696.

lives of these poor women.”⁹⁸ She began publishing *The Woman Rebel* in 1914, which asserted the right of every woman to be the “absolute mistress of her own body.” After she was indicted for violating postal obscenity laws by discussing contraception in her periodical, Sanger jumped bail and set sail for England from Canada. While there, Sanger conversed with British neo-Malthusianists, such as Havelock Ellis, who helped her refine the socioeconomic justifications for birth control. After returning to New York in 1915 when her charges were dropped, Sanger opened the nation’s first birth control clinic in Brooklyn on October 16, 1916. The former nurse intended the clinic to serve lower class immigrant women in the area, but police forcefully closed the clinic nine days later. After a sensational trial showcased in the press, Sanger spent thirty days in prison. However, even the experience of jail did not deter the activist. A year later she started to publish *The Birth Control Review*, a more conservative periodical that promoted contraception as a medical and socioeconomic remedy.⁹⁹

Ten years after her campaign for birth control began, the people of New York responded to her symposium at the Town Hall with exuberance. When the doors first opened, hundreds swarmed in, leaving more clamoring outside with tickets in their hands. Even half an hour before the discussion was to begin, 1,500 curious New Yorkers had filled every seat besides the few reserved for important dignitaries and speakers.¹⁰⁰ It would not have been a shock to anyone well-versed in the Church’s position on contraception that Archbishop Patrick Hayes’ seat remained empty.

Soon, however, the mood began to change. Under orders from Captain Donohue, policemen barred the doors, locking a crowd inside the Town Hall and hundreds outside on Forty-Third Street, where one hundred reserve officers remained stationed. Inside, the crowd’s

⁹⁸ Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Ferris Printing Company, 1931), 56.

⁹⁹ Esther Katz. “Sanger, Margaret.” *American National Biography Online* Feb. 2000. Jan 29 2011.

¹⁰⁰ *The New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1921: 1.

mood began to teeter on the edge of chaos. When Margaret Sanger attempted to address the audience, policemen clamored onto the stage and physically pulled her away. Men jumped onto the stage in attempts to protect her against the officers. As the police hauled the advocate through the crowd, onlookers became increasingly agitated and violent.¹⁰¹ Sanger continued to incite them. “The captain informs me that this meeting has been stopped by an order by telephone,” she called out to the audience. “I asked him who was at the other end of the wire and he couldn’t tell me!”¹⁰²

Although the mysterious instigator for the complaint was unknown, rumors began to spread almost immediately. *The New York Tribune* noted multiple women who laid the blame on the corrupt, Irish-dominated, and pro-immigrant Tammany political machine. “The Tammany gang’s behind this,” called one woman. “Are we going to let them have their way?” Another woman grumbled to reporters, “That’s what you get for voting [Tammany politician] Hyland into office again.”¹⁰³ Others began to suspect another institution identified with the Irish and immigrants—the Roman Catholic Church. Suspicions about the Catholic Church’s involvement were aggravated by the presence of a clergyman in the Town Hall lobby who refused to clarify whether or not he helped instigate the police interference.¹⁰⁴

These rumors and initial fears about both Tammany politicians and Catholic clergy expose the political climate of New York City at the time. Tammany Hall was the center of a powerful political machine that dominated the Democratic Party in New York City since 1865. The politicians it cultivated had a reputation for--among other activities--courting votes from

¹⁰¹ Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*, 214.

¹⁰² *The New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1921: 1.

¹⁰³ *New York Tribune*, Nov. 14, 1921: 15.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

immigrants and the industrial poor by providing charitable services and support.¹⁰⁵ Paralleling Catholic priests' efforts to maintain the loyalty of their poor parishioners, Tammany politicians pursued workers' compensation and maximum hours legislation in order to keep the support of the working class.¹⁰⁶ Due to the political advantages of assisting immigrants, many of whom were Catholic, Tammany Hall also created strong bonds with local Catholic parishes. Parish priests often visited the local Tammany district leader in order to help a parishioner find a job, or keep someone out of jail. Many Irish Catholic men, and loyal Catholic parishioners, rose through the ranks of Tammany politics, culminating in the nomination of Alfred E. Smith as the Democratic presidential candidate in 1928. Multiple New York Archbishops, including Patrick Hayes, wielded their influence to support Tammany politicians who promised to promote their interests in government.¹⁰⁷ In return, Tammany politicians used public funds for Catholic charitable institutions and opposed legislation harmful to Church interests.¹⁰⁸

By the 1920s, however, Tammany Hall was increasingly under attack by progressives for being undemocratic, corrupt, and inefficient due to their emphasis on winning elections at any cost.¹⁰⁹ The Catholic Church's close association with Tammany Hall further corrupted her reputation and fueled more accusations that Catholicism was inherently undemocratic. A year earlier, a bitter prohibitionist blamed the Catholic Church in *The New York Times* for a Tammany-dominated Democratic convention that fought for the repeal of a prohibition amendment. "You understand Tammany's religious affiliations," he wrote, insinuating and

¹⁰⁵ David Colburn and George E. Pozzetta, "Bosses and Machines: Changing Interpretations in American History," *The History Teacher* 9 (May, 1976), 455.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 453.

¹⁰⁷ *The New York Times*, May 12, 2000: <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/05/12/opinion/politicians-of-the-cloth.html?src=pm>.

¹⁰⁸ *The New York Times*, June 4, 2006: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/04/nyregion/thecity/04cath.html?fta=y>.

¹⁰⁹ Colburn and Pozzetta, "Bosses and Machines," 455.

criticizing the close relationship between Tammany Hall and the Church.¹¹⁰ Once Sanger realized that the Catholic clergy could be involved in the Town Hall incident, she capitalized on the Church's shady political reputation in the city. In her memoirs, she wrote, "I grew hot with indignation. It was one thing to have halls closed by a mistaken or misguided ignorant police captain, but a very different thing to have a high dignitary of the Roman Catholic Church order me to stop talking."¹¹¹

Indeed, she did not stop talking. The incident gave Sanger and her movement unprecedented exposure. The day after the meeting, *The New York Times* and *The New York Tribune* printed accounts of the event on their front pages. While the press had previously dismissed Sanger as a radical, these articles portrayed her as a hero, relating how crowds cheered for her as she entered the police station, and again when police brought her into the court room. The established authority became the chief villain in the saga. The press promoted a heavily anti-police slant, applauding the defiance of the crowd and criticizing the legality of the police's actions. *The New York Tribune* called Captain Donohue's actions a "gross outrage."¹¹² It seemed that many reporters agreed with Sanger when she ironically screamed from the chaos on the stage: "One would certainly suppose that this display of liberty and freedom of speech was in Germany, not in America!"¹¹³

The incident made the front page of *The New York Times* the next day as well. This time, however, the mysterious individual who called for the disbandment of the meeting was identified as Archbishop Patrick Hayes. The article unveiled that the complaints about the meeting came from Hayes' residence on Madison Avenue, known as "The Powerhouse" due to his strong

¹¹⁰ *The New York Times*, 6 Mar 1920: 4.

¹¹¹ Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*, 216.

¹¹² *New York Tribune*, Nov. 14, 1921: 1.

¹¹³ *The New York Times*, Nov 14, 1921: 1.

influence on Tammany politicians.¹¹⁴ Monsignor Joseph Dineen, the Archbishop's secretary, was identified as the mysterious clergyman who met Captain Donohue at the Town Hall before the meeting began with orders to stop the event. The anti-police position of the first articles dissolved rapidly and was replaced by a chilling depiction of a Church with too much power and too little respect for democracy.

Monsignor Dineen, quoted heavily in the article, never mentioned the legality of the police's actions. Instead, he defended the police on the basis of morality and appropriate public behavior. He told the newspaper, "Decent and clean-minded people would not discuss a subject such as birth control in public." Stating that both he and the Archbishop were "delighted and pleased" with the police's actions, Dineen further solidified the image of a Church that was out of touch with democratic ideals such as freedom of speech. Sanger capitalized on these stereotypes when she wrote, "The question I am desirous of settling is, by whose authority our meeting was stopped? From the facts presented to me it would seem that Captain Donohue, a recognized officer of this State, was taking his orders directly from someone other than the recognized governmental authority."¹¹⁵

Sanger had thus found a way into the minds and imagination of the American public. Although she had been arrested many times before and was constantly censored by groups other than the Catholic Church, she capitalized on the press' fascination and the public's indignation over this specific event. In the next edition of her own periodical, *The Birth Control Review*, Sanger expanded the division further, naming her article on the event, "Birth Control or Church Control?" With this uncompromising rhetoric, Sanger implored individuals still on the fence about artificial contraception to pick a side. By deflecting the issue from birth control to free

¹¹⁴ Shelley, "Patrick Joseph Hayes," *American National Biography Online*.

¹¹⁵ *The New York Times* November 15, 1921: 1.

speech, Sanger equated her own movement with democracy while demonizing the Church and its supporters as “tyrannical” and “medieval.” The article quoted from a wealth of periodicals that also framed the event in these diabolical terms. *The New York Tribune* satirized those who may choose “Church Control.” Playing on traditional fears about the despotic tendencies of Catholicism, the poem gave haunting predictions of what could follow in an American city dominated by “Church Control”:

And if [the Archbishop] should tell me to take and go,
 And shut up a play or a movie show,
 To break up a dance or perhaps a strike,
 Or burn a few books that he failed to like,
 To lock a few lads in a dungeon cell,
 And smash a few heads in the bargain—well,
 What else would I do when I’m just a cop,
 And he is a Reverent Archbishop?¹¹⁶

The Town Hall meeting gave Sanger an identifiable enemy. Although most physicians, religious leaders and politicians professed their public disapproval of birth control at this time, the Catholic Church emerged as the movement’s most visible opponent through the work of a single clergyman, an outraged press, and an intuitive activist. Sanger would still fight an uphill battle to convince Americans of the morality of birth control, but the Town Hall event and the press’ response provided her with some of the first occurrences of positive, national press since she started her campaign. She would continue to capitalize on this attention, as well as the compromised position of her new adversary, to keep the public focused on the debate over contraception.

How did the American clergy respond? Archbishop Hayes initially found himself left alone to deal with the fiery Margaret Sanger due to the Church’s lack of preparation to deal with the issue. He at first attempted to appeal to the same themes as Sanger did, democracy and the

¹¹⁶ Margaret Sanger, “Church Control?” *The Birth Control Review* 5(12) (December 1921): 5.

law. Hayes reminded the public that Sanger was the one who was advocating for an unlawful practice, not the Catholic Church. "The federal law excluding birth control literature from the mails and the New York penal law making it unlawful to disseminate information on the subject reflect the will of the people most emphatically," wrote Hayes. "The latter law was enacted under the police power of the Legislature for the benefit of the morals and health of the community."¹¹⁷

A month later, Hayes responded again, this time with more vigor and within his own sphere of influence. The Archbishop's annual Christmas homily was read to over three hundred New York City parishes, reaching the ears of thousands of the Catholic faithful. Although he had previously denounced the public discussion of birth control and even used this as a reason to shut down Sanger's meeting at the Town Hall, Hayes now used the opportunity to instruct his flock on the dangers of birth control from a religious and moral perspective.¹¹⁸ Hayes' uncompromising words were published in *The New York Times*, a manifestation of how public the mudslinging between Sanger and Hayes had become. Incited by the events of the past two months, the Archbishop infused his plea with passion and left no room for flexibility or debate on Church doctrine. Using the most extreme language possible, he wrote, "To take life after its inception is a horrible crime, but to prevent human life that the Creator is about to bring into being, is satanic."¹¹⁹ In the same way that Margaret Sanger divided the lines between "birth control" and "church control," Hayes asserted that this division separated the heaven-bound from the damned. Threateningly, he wrote, "Woe to those who degrade, pervert, or do violence to the

¹¹⁷ *The New York Times*, November 21, 1921: 1.

¹¹⁸ *The New York Times*: December 18, 1921: 16.

¹¹⁹ As Leslie Tentler explains on pg. 62 of *Catholics and Contraception*, Hayes' assertion that birth control was a worse crime than abortion is not theologically sound. Instead, this statement, and the letter as a whole, should be read as a deeply emotional appeal written in the midst of a heated political battle.

law of nature as fixed by the eternal decree of God Himself! . . . Children troop down from Heaven because God wills it. He alone has the right to stay their coming.”¹²⁰

Hayes also dismissed the various social arguments Sanger used to demonstrate the need for birth control. This was one of the first public instances in which a Catholic clergyman ventured out of the realm of theology and morality to discuss other, more immediate implications of contraception. His first attempt signified a lost opportunity to provide an alternative to contraception, rooted in Catholic social justice, to a large audience. Using the example of Jesus Christ, he simply wrote, “The Christ Child did not stay His own entrance into this mortal life because His mother was poor, roofless, and without provision for the morrow. He knew that the Heavenly Father who cared for the lilies of the fields and the birds of the air loved the children of men more than these.”¹²¹

As detached from the poverty and struggles of many destitute Catholics as this appeared, Patrick Hayes was no stranger to poverty. In addition to his extensive work with Catholic Charities and the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the Archbishop had personal experience with destitution. Born of Irish immigrants, Hayes became an orphan early in life, relying on the charity of his relatives who put together their resources to ensure his Catholic education.¹²² In 1931, at a benefit that honored the newly promoted Cardinal Hayes as the “Cardinal of Charity,” the emotional clergyman said,

I was born very humble and, I may say, of poor people. I have never forgotten it and I shall never forget it, and when I realized that I was in a position where I might serve the poor, the suffering, those in need, that I might make them conscious of our common Father, even now I feel that there was an obligation to do so.¹²³

¹²⁰ *The New York Times*: December 18, 1921: 16.

¹²¹ Patrick Hayes, “Christmas Pastoral Letter,” December 14, 1921.

¹²² “Religion: Catholics in Cleveland,” *Time*, September 30, 1935.

¹²³ “Religion: Roman Senator,” *Time*, March 16, 1931.

Although Patrick Hayes frequently makes an appearance in the historiography on the Catholic Church and birth control, his intimate experiences with poverty are usually not explored or even acknowledged. This fails to provide a full picture of the alternative ways he attempted to solve the problems Sanger brought into the conversation. His condemnation of birth control, even when considering extreme poverty, did not spawn from an ignorance of the working class' problems. Rather, his religious convictions led him not to perceive birth control as the solution to the social problems he encountered as a youth, through his work with Catholic Charities, or during his vocation as Archbishop of New York. Instead, his condemnation of birth control arrived from a deep conviction that it was morally wrong and dangerous, not just for the earthly lives of his flock, but also for the eternal consequences they may be forced to bear for engaging in activities he deemed "heinous." According to the words of clergymen like Hayes, the eternal consequences of hell bore more weight than the temporary consequences of hunger.

A day later, Margaret Sanger responded to the Archbishop's homily in the pages of *The New York Times*. Addressing the severe supernatural consequences Hayes related, Sanger wrote, "What he believes concerning the soul after life, is based upon theory and he has a perfect right to that belief."¹²⁴ However, she skillfully cast doubt on the clergyman's authority to make such severe pronouncements by asserting that his arguments "are purely those based on assumption and he knows no more about the facts of the immortality of the soul than the rest of us human beings." More importantly, Sanger intuitively recognized the seemingly indifferent way Hayes dealt with poverty. To provide a stark contrast, she aligned herself with other humanitarians who "are trying to better humanity fundamentally." She wrote that "a healthy, happy human race is

¹²⁴ Margaret Sanger, "Reply to Archbishop Patrick Joseph Hayes' Statement" December 19, 1921, *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger Volume I*, 335.

more in keeping with the laws of God than disease, misery and poverty perpetuating itself generation after generation.”¹²⁵

Thus, within a matter of a month, the image and scope of the birth control movement had changed dramatically in New York City. Margaret Sanger and her followers, formerly dismissed as radical feminists, gained respectability by concentrating on the value of free speech and democracy. Rather than attempting to prematurely persuade the nation on the necessity and morality of birth control, Sanger used the dramatic chain of events to assert the right to engage in dialogue about artificial contraception, effectively turning the drama into an issue over free speech. She made it clear that Americans could still make up their minds about birth control, but to deny her right to speak was an insult to democracy.

The Catholic Church, in contrast, did not fare so well in the public sphere after the scandal over the Town Hall meeting settled down. Although most clergymen like John Ryan desired private and gentle instruction for Catholics within the confessional, public opposition to birth control almost immediately became a “Catholic issue,” a role the Church was not ready to assume. Despite the positive press the Catholic Church earned during World War I, anti-Catholicism was gaining momentum due to the propaganda generated by the Ku Klux Klan, anger at the Church’s opposition to the Prohibition, and increased immigration scares that finally provoked Congress to severely restrict the entrance of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe.¹²⁶ These factors made it easier for Sanger to paint the Catholic Church as the enemy, and allowed ingrained caricatures of a tyrannical church to rear its ugly head again.

The end of Sanger’s response to Hayes in *The New York Times* demonstrates the Church’s compromised position in the birth control debate. She wrote,

¹²⁵ Ibid., 335.

¹²⁶ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 93.

There is no objection to the Catholic Church inculcating the theories and doctrines in its own church and to its own people; but when they attempt to make these ideas legislative acts and force their opinions and code of morals upon the Protestant members of this country, then we do consider this an interference with the principles of this Democracy and we have a right to protest.¹²⁷

A New Yorker flipping through the newspaper could almost forget that Sanger, not the Church, was the actor attempting to “make ideas legislative acts” and introduce new opinions to the American public.

After her overwhelming victory against Archbishop Hayes, Margaret Sanger continued to ride the wave of momentum ignited by the Town Hall incident. Her next actions demonstrated how she began to shift the way her movement related to poverty in order to become more compatible with a larger, conservative public. At the start of her career, Sanger presented birth control as a powerful tool with which the working classes could free themselves from capitalist exploitation and alleviate the financial and emotional burdens of raising children in severely impoverished circumstances.¹²⁸ However, she began to take a more conservative turn when she started to court the support of doctors, eugenicists, and wealthy donors.

These changes complicated the way she depicted and interacted with the urban poor, as demonstrated in her periodical *The Birth Control Review*. Although the paper carried the eugenic motto, “to create a race of thoroughbreds,” and often complained that the poor were unfit to be members of American society, it also was peppered with images of the poor as exploited by the upper classes. Sanger often published highly empathetic descriptions of the urban poor’s struggles, but also accused the poor of being an intolerable financial burden.¹²⁹ Despite her complicated relationship with the working class, Sanger marketed birth control as a

¹²⁷ Sanger, “Reply to Archbishop,” 335.

¹²⁸ Diane B. Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995), 94.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

convenient “one-stroke solution” that the upper classes could use to effortlessly eradicate multiple social problems with increased frequency in the 1920s.¹³⁰

Sanger’s complicated relationship with the urban poor became apparent with the publication of *The Pivot of Civilization* in 1922, the year after the Town Hall arrest. Harnessing the various scientific trends of the day, she argued that a union between science and birth control would be a powerful tool to stop race degeneracy and could also provide new solutions to social problems.¹³¹ Through the title of her book, Sanger attempted to show how civilization was at a pregnant pause of possibility. Either society could continue to be burdened by poverty and illness, or it could transform into a new, enlightened, peace-loving world. According to Sanger, the only people that stood in the way of this new, exciting society were the “ill-bred, ill-trained swarms of inferior citizens” who continued to multiply through uncontrolled breeding. In light of this danger, Sanger implored Americans to see “sex as a factor in the perpetuation of poverty” and birth control as “a necessary step to the further improvement of human life as a whole.”¹³²

The Pivot of Civilization demonstrated the birth control movement’s increasing dedication to eugenic rhetoric and thought. The book began with an enthusiastic introduction by H. G. Wells, an influential British social theorist who also applied eugenics to the perceived problem of race degeneration in the United States and Britain.¹³³ He applauded Sanger for having the foresight to unite birth control with “the future improvement of human life as a whole.”¹³⁴ Like most educated people at the time, both Wells and Sanger believed that heredity determined an individual’s intellect, moral fiber, and physical fitness. Eugenics became the

¹³⁰ David Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 109 and 113.

¹³¹ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 12.

¹³² Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization* (New York: Brentano’s Publishers, 1922), 10.

¹³³ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 12.

¹³⁴ H. G. Wells, “Introduction,” *The Pivot of Civilization*, xvii.

widely popular study of how to encourage the breeding of the “fit,” or individuals with favorable hereditary traits, and how to deter the breeding of the “unfit,” or individuals with unfavorable hereditary traits.¹³⁵ Eugenacists shared a common conviction that reproductive decisions were not a private matter, but should be guided by wider social concerns.¹³⁶ Although eugenacists said they were primarily concerned with heredity, the “unfit” were frequently members of the lower classes.

In his introduction, Wells made it clear he did not see birth control as a religious issue.¹³⁷ He wrote: “It will be a great misfortune if the issues between the Old Civilization and the New are allowed to slip into the deep ruts of religious controversies that are only accidentally and intermittently parallel.”¹³⁸ However, Sanger continued her attack on the Catholic Church throughout *The Pivot of Civilization*, and especially undermined the Church’s traditional role as provider of the poor. She bitingly accused the clergy of “exploit[ing] the ignorance and the prejudices of the masses, rather than [guiding] their way to self-salvation.”¹³⁹ She argued that the clergy did not care for “the least of these brothers” as Jesus mandated in the Gospel of Matthew, but instead kept the laity in medieval bonds of servitude and backwardness. In a deliberate attack on Archbishop Hayes, Sanger borrowed the phrase “children troop down from heaven” from his Christmas homily to title her chapter on the evils of child labor. While Hayes used the phrase to celebrate the birth of large numbers of children as a blessing for parents, Sanger used the phrase to argue that “uncontrolled breeding and the large family” directly

¹³⁵ Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*, 1.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹³⁷ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 91.

¹³⁸ Wells, “Introduction,” xiii.

¹³⁹ Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 11.

contributed to the constant flood of children “trooping” towards the factories to make money for their destitute families.¹⁴⁰

Likewise, Sanger lamented what she described as the “cruelty of charity,” another tenant of Christianity and the name of Hayes’ Catholic Charities. She emphasized how the lowliest members of society burdened the rest, and blamed charitable work for helping these people reproduce and perpetuate the cycle of poverty instead of allowing nature to root out poverty after the first generation. “Fostering the good-for-nothing at the expense of the good is an extreme cruelty,” she wrote. “It is a deliberate storing up of miseries for future generations. There is no greater curse to posterity than that of bequeathing them an increasing population of imbeciles.”¹⁴¹ Sanger argued that care for unworthy, miserable groups of people deterred the proper cultivation of talented and intelligent people, “the bearers of the torch of civilization.” Using an analogy of a garden, Sanger warned that the “choking human undergrowth” threatened to “overrun the whole garden of humanity.” She blamed the “anaesthetized” and optimistic “cushions of Christian resignation” for cultivating these weeds, instead of pruning the garden and allowing the best members of society to flourish.¹⁴²

Margaret Sanger was not alone in criticizing the dysgenic consequences of charitable work. By the 1920s, many Americans believed the Social Darwinist concept that nature selection can and should eliminate the unfit. Social Darwinists argued that charity impeded the work of nature by prolonging the survival of the “unfit” and burdening society’s resources.¹⁴³ Florence Tuttle, a frequent contributor to *The Birth Control Review*, wrote, “We have built asylums for the insane, institutions for the epileptic, and prisons even to punish them often for

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 55.

¹⁴¹ Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 105.

¹⁴² Ibid., 265.

¹⁴³ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 16.

prenatal sins, then applauded ourselves for having overcome evolution which would have refused to perpetuate this human wreckage.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, to a large extent, the Catholic Church, not Margaret Sanger, was the outlier in the way clergy approached charity. Catholics were often viewed as sentimental, unrealistic, short-sighted, and blamed as contributors to the degeneration of civilization by helping the poor.¹⁴⁵

However, *The Pivot of Civilization* also demonstrated that Sanger had not completely relinquished her advocacy of the working class. Unlike other eugenicists, she did not support the use of sterilization, but instead trusted in women’s ability to decide when to procreate and when to prevent conception. She argued that if women were given the instruments and education they needed, they would make the choice on their own to have small families or even remain childless. “The great majority of mothers realize the grave responsibility they face in keeping alive and rearing the children they have already brought into the world,” she wrote. In the pages of *The Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger never considered an alternative solution if these women did not decide to limit their procreation. However, she quite correctly asserted that her adversaries did not offer these women the same luxury of choice or confidence in working class women’s abilities to make decisions for themselves. “For it is never the intention of philanthropy to give the poor over-burdened and often undernourished mother of the slum the opportunity to make the choice herself,” she wrote, “to decide whether she wishes time after time to bring children into the world.”¹⁴⁶

Another contemporary movement that intersected with eugenics and contraception was Neo-Malthusianism. Margaret Sanger hosted the Sixth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference that convened at Manhattan’s Hotel McAlpin in 1925. Physicians,

¹⁴⁴ quoted in Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*, 96.

¹⁴⁵ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 16.

¹⁴⁶ Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 116.

eugenicists, economists, sociologists, and birth control advocates from both Western Europe and the United States swarmed the hotel to discuss topics related to population concerns. Although the event was the first international gathering of birth control advocates in the country, almost none of the participants or members of the press mentioned the dramatic ending of the first national conference three years earlier at the Town Hall.¹⁴⁷ Margaret Sanger no longer needed scandal to capture the country's attention. The issues now warranted enough attention themselves, and the conference received heavy coverage from *The New York Times*.

Neo-Malthusianism stemmed from the British author, Thomas Malthus, who first ignited this study on population growth with his *Essay on Population* in 1789. He argued that rapid population growth would adversely affect the progress of the human race. Malthusianism experienced a resurgence in the early twentieth century as people began to cite overpopulation as the cause for disease, starvation, and even the outbreak of World War I.¹⁴⁸ Unlike Malthus who believed that only natural disasters, famine, or war could curb population size, Neo-Malthusianists in the 1920s believed that they could harness science to humanely lower birth rates, namely through contraceptives. Neo-Malthusianism became prevalent among the upper classes, and like the eugenics movement, often presumed that the poor were not the equals of the rich.¹⁴⁹ The Neo-Malthusianism Conference thus provides an opportunity to see how birth control advocates and other individuals interested in population control viewed contraception and poverty.

The conditions of the working class became a predominate topic of conversation throughout the conference. Dr. Alice Hamilton, a professor at Harvard Medical School, argued that impoverished children were unfairly limited by the large size of their families. She told the

¹⁴⁷ *The New York Times*, March 25, 1925: 12.

¹⁴⁸ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 10.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

conference that during her time working in immigrant communities, she encountered “promising boys and girls for whom a high school education had been produly planned” but who “had been forced to leave school at fourteen and take any possible job, because there were so many mouths to feed.”¹⁵⁰ She implored the Conference to support the birth control movement in order to ensure the welfare of poor women and children.¹⁵¹

Dr. Owen Lovejoy, the Executive Secretary of the National Child Labor Committee, discussed the problems of child labor. Lovejoy echoed Margaret Sanger when he argued that large families, beyond the capacity of one salary to support, remained the most important cause of this severe social problem. “Children must work to keep the wolf from the door,” he argued, “and all too often this dire necessity is the direct result of having so many mouths to feed that the chief breadwinner is economically incapable of feeding them.”¹⁵² He related how child laborers usually came from families with an average of seven children, while children who did not have to work came from families that averaged four. Unlike clergymen such as Hayes who taught that every child, no matter how pitiful his life may be, gave glory to God, Lovejoy gave another perspective: “Every child has a right to be well born or not to be born at all.”¹⁵³

The conference also passed motions urging organized labor to support the birth control movement in order to create better living conditions for workers. Although members of the Catholic clergy also advocated for this, Neo-Malthusianists blamed the problems on the workers themselves. Dr. Schlapp, a Professor of Neuropathology and Director of the Children’s Court Clinic, claimed that emotional stress endured by workingwomen caused the births of many “unfit

¹⁵⁰ Alice Hamilton, “Poverty and Birth Control,” *The Sixth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference: Medical and Eugenic Aspects of Birth Control* Volume III (New York: The American Birth Control League, Inc., 1926), 181.

¹⁵¹ *The New York Times*, March 28, 1925: 9.

¹⁵² Owen Lovejoy, “Birth Control in Relation to Child Employment,” *The Sixth International: Volume II*, 58.

¹⁵³ *The New York Times*, March 28, 1925: 9.

persons” and emphasized the burden these people placed on the system. “The careful preservation of the unfit, instead of allowing them to be weeded out by nature, had made the life of the fit and useful harder,” he argued, “as they have to carry the burden of the defectives and incurables, and all the waste of modern life.”¹⁵⁴ In the debate over whether heredity or environment had a larger role in human development, eugenicists and Neo-Malthusianists were more likely to construct an almost exclusively genetic explanation, while ignoring the influences of environment.¹⁵⁵

On the last day of the conference, the participants passed a final resolution appealing to religious leaders on the importance of the birth control cause as “a moral and religious force for the betterment of the human race and the establishment of the Kingdom of God among men.”¹⁵⁶ Although Margaret Sanger publicly attempted to frame birth control as a Catholic versus Protestant issue, in reality most conservative Protestant ministers did not openly support contraception within marriages either. In fact, the Lambeth Conference, in which the Anglican Church first gave tentative approval to birth control, would not take place for five more years. The conference’s appeal to churches, then, reflected how convicted the advocates felt about the morality of their movement. It also demonstrated how important it was for them to gain the support of religious leaders if they wanted birth control to continue gaining respectability and acceptance in mainstream society.

Attempting to unite religious advocacy, eugenics, and birth control together, the advocates promised religious leaders a future of “monogamy, morality, peace and health” if birth control became widespread in American society. On the other hand, the conference warned that

¹⁵⁴ *The New York Times*, March 29, 1925: 16.

¹⁵⁵ Elof Carlson and David Micklos, “Engineering American Society: The Lesson of Eugenics” (2000), quoted in Steven Selden, “Transforming Better Babies into Fitter Families,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 149(2) (June 2005), 199.

¹⁵⁶ *The New York Times*, March 31, 1925: 7.

a lack of birth control would only lead to “poverty, disease, immorality, and war.”¹⁵⁷ One vocal member of the conference, Dr. Potter, argued that Christians were obligated to support the movement because they were responsible for the increase of the feeble-minded and socially unfit through their emphasis on charity. “The Christian effort to save every child that is born in the world means that more and more imbeciles are being saved to become a burden upon civilization,” he pronounced. “It is clearly the duty of Christianity, then, to prevent the birth of these unfit.”¹⁵⁸

A month after the Neo-Malthusian Conference, Patrick Hayes, now a newly-ordained Cardinal, addressed these social, eugenic, and economic arguments at a fundraiser for Catholic Charities. This fundraiser celebrated the opening of a drive for \$1,000,000 to support the welfare agencies federated in the organization. Over a thousand clergymen and laity were in attendance. Addressing both the audience and the New York diocese in a subsequently published pastoral letter, Hayes reiterated the Church’s commitment to organized charity, as well as her opposition to birth control. His attention to contraception at such an important event demonstrated how closely individuals had begun to associate poverty and birth control even within Catholic circles. Appealing to the Church’s emphasis on the dignity of each human person, Hayes started his speech with an emotional appeal to help the poor. “All that we do here is not to be measured in terms of \$1,000,000; it is to be measured in the sighs, the tears, the yearnings of the poor, of the suffering,” he proclaimed. “This work can only be made permanent not by money but by the spirit of service, so that charity shall reign supreme in all that we do.”¹⁵⁹

Despite Sanger’s constant demonstration of workingwomen’s desire for contraception, Hayes asserted that it was only the upper classes that wanted to stem the birth rate of the lower

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ *The New York Times*, March 31, 1925: 7.

¹⁵⁹ *The New York Times*, April 24, 1925: 21.

classes. He wrote, "Children are welcomed among the poor and humble as angels and are treasured as jewels." Although Hayes did not approve of contraception as a solution to poverty, this time he did provide concrete alternative solutions that would not "[interfere] with the fountain of human life," such as "better housing and living conditions" for the destitute and "a proper home for every child."¹⁶⁰ Thus, Hayes wanted to provide the working class with the conditions to have large families, rather than giving them contraceptives in order to limit their families and improve their living conditions themselves.

Hayes viewed Catholic Charities as a chief proponent in changing the working class's conditions. Despite Sanger's criticisms of the dysgenic nature of charity, Hayes argued that organizations like Catholic Charities lead to better economic conditions and would eventually lessen the need for charitable endeavors. The Cardinal attacked the common prejudice against charitable organizations and suggested that criticisms stemmed from selfishness and materialism. "There is a pronounced tendency at the present hour to test nearly every human relation, from the cradle to the grave, by a purely economic valuation," he wrote. Dismissing such arguments as "reactionary," Hayes warned that such an ideology would ensure that "the philosophy of might against right, of selfishness against kindness, of indulgence against duty, and of sin against virtue would be sanctioned and followed." Hayes also criticized eugenicists' tendency to associate poverty with the "imbeciles" of society. "Imbeciles and the deformed are as likely to be born of the learned and the affluent," he argued. "Nature is no respecter of persons or class in such matters." However, Hayes reminded his listeners that the Catholic Church taught that even "defectives" still "have immortal souls, redeemed by the blood of Christ and destined to share with the sound and the whole the vision of God for all eternity."¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ *The New York Times*, April 24, 1925: 21.

Hayes' challenge of Sanger's eugenic arguments for contraception reflected the larger Catholic opposition to the eugenics movement. Although many Protestant denominations incorporated eugenic theory into their social work, Catholics remained largely opposed to eugenics due to its anti-Catholic and classist undercurrents.¹⁶² Perhaps influenced by their social justice doctrine, most Catholics tended to see environment, rather than heredity, as the chief factor in social problems.¹⁶³ "Is a person who is sick from overwork or contagion unfit to survive?" wrote an emphatic contributor to *The Catholic Charities Review*. "Is the man whose morale has been broken by fruitless searches for work or for a living wage unfit for survival? Is he who has been crippled by an accident unfit? Is the individual who loses everything in the failure of a bank or a business or a corporation thereby unfit to survive?"¹⁶⁴ Armed with these convictions, organized efforts of Catholic laymen and clergy led to the defeat of many eugenic legislative proposals in the 1910s and 1920s, especially sterilization policies.¹⁶⁵

However, a greater receptivity to eugenics among Catholic clergy did exist than one would first expect. In fact, John Ryan and John Montgomery Cooper, another influential Catholic writer on contraception, both were active participants in the American Eugenics Society during the 1920s.¹⁶⁶ Catholic clergy who supported eugenics did so by differentiating between eugenics means and ends, arguing that the improvement of the human race could enjoy Catholic support as long as the means were legitimate.¹⁶⁷ "The Catholic Church yields to no one in her zeal for the betterment of the race," wrote Father Bertrand Conway in *The Catholic World*, "but she uncompromisingly sets her face against all materialistic social experiments that outrage

¹⁶² Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 61.

¹⁶³ Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 146 and Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 62.

¹⁶⁴ John A. Lapp, "Justice First," *Catholic Charities Review*, 11 (1927): 201.

¹⁶⁵ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 139.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 140

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

human dignity, go counter to elemental ethics . . . and lead to a callous disregard of the weak elements of the community.”¹⁶⁸

Unlike the Town Hall incident, Patrick Hayes no longer found himself alone to condemn birth control and engage with Sanger’s social arguments. A small number of priests began to confront the issues put forward by birth control advocates, eugenicists, and Neo-Malthusianists. John Ryan in particular recognized that the birth control movement targeted the lower classes and understood the importance of incorporating social justice into any discussion about contraception. He warned other priests that simply focusing on the theology behind the Church’s teaching was “too remote and abstract to make a very moving impression.” Instead, he instructed priests to explain the virtues of abstinence within the framework of social welfare so the clergymen’s message may be relatable and harmonize with “our concrete, flesh-and-blood interests and emotions.”¹⁶⁹

Tackling the social arguments of birth control could be potentially dangerous. The priests who did engage in this conversation had to carefully illustrate that even if contraception could improve the poor’s living conditions, it would still be forbidden by the Catholic Church, because, as Ryan explained, “the end does not justify the intrinsically immoral means.”¹⁷⁰ This predicament made many clergymen define poverty carefully. Ryan argued that more people used contraception due to egotism, materialism, and self-indulgence than abject poverty.¹⁷¹ Father Bertrand Conway agreed. “It is not the high rents, the cost of childbearing, or of child

¹⁶⁸ Bertrand Conway, “The Church and Eugenics,” *Catholic World* 123 (1928): 150.

¹⁶⁹ John Ryan, “Family Limitation,” 689.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 67.

rearing that [usually] fosters contraception,” he wrote, “but the irreligion of the modern parent, who is eaten up with the love of ease and of pleasure.”¹⁷²

When poverty did truly exist, however, Catholic priests still questioned the motives of birth control advocates when they offered contraception as the solution. Harnessing the Catholic opposition to eugenic methods, they took great pains to demonstrate how the birth control advocates’ actions were exploitative and repressive towards the lower classes and had ulterior motives. Ryan warned that birth control advocates fastened “upon the working classes the guilty responsibility for their insufficient incomes.”¹⁷³ He also suggested that when birth control advocates discussed the “welfare of the race,” they really were seeking to protect the “welfare of the fortunate majority who do not desire the inconvenience of helping to support any considerable number of defectives.”¹⁷⁴ John A. McClorey, a Jesuit priest, agreed with Ryan. He warned that birth control advocates desired to “annihilate the unfortunate.”¹⁷⁵ John Montgomery Cooper, in a pamphlet published by the National Catholic Welfare Conference, warned that the “contraceptive solution to poverty” actually impeded the growth of actual industrial justice. “[The birth control movement] is shunting attention off the real causes of and remedies for modern poverty,” he wrote, “and is playing into the hands of those who, having more than their fair share of this world’s goods, are interested in maintaining unmodified the present industrial and economic conditions.”¹⁷⁶

Instead, priests offered an invigorated pursuit of social justice as the alternative to family limitation. Like earlier social justice pronouncements, these prescriptions were perceived by

¹⁷² Conway, “The Church and Eugenics,” 150.

¹⁷³ Ryan, “Family Limitation,” 694.

¹⁷⁴ John Ryan, *Social Reform on Catholic Lines* (New York: Paulist Press, 1914) quoted in Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 69.

¹⁷⁵ John McClorey, *The Republic and the Church; a series of Lenten lectures mainly on divorce and birth control* (St. Louis, Mo.: B. Herder Book Co., 1927), 143.

¹⁷⁶ John Montgomery Cooper, *Birth Control* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Council, 1923), 61.

many to be quite radical. Ryan advocated for industrial education, immigration restriction, a better distribution of “industrial opportunities,” and a higher wage rather than “forbidding [the working class from living] normal family lives.”¹⁷⁷ McClorey also argued that concerned individuals should concentrate on the reduction of misery rather than the birth rate. Instead of blaming poor people for their own destitute situations, the priest identified “the injustice of many of the rich, inadequate wages, excessive work, and lavish expenditure” as both the true culprits that perpetuate poverty and the areas that must be reformed.¹⁷⁸ John Cooper wrote at length about the need to redistribute wealth more fairly, and also argued that the “obvious remedy on any ground of ethical justice” is a living wage. “Pay him a living wage,” he wrote, “and he will be in a position to take advantage of his right to normal family life.”¹⁷⁹ Cooper concluded by stating,

Even were artificial birth control ethically defensible, such propaganda is condemnable as a matter of mere policy, because it tends in actuality to block social movements for the living wage and economic justice to the poor . . . Wholesome family life among the great masses of the people is of infinitely more concern to human welfare than is the accumulation of great fortunes among the few and the multiplication of luxuries and the satisfaction of ever increasing and ever more costly whims and desires.¹⁸⁰

Despite these priests’ efforts to combat birth control with social justice arguments, other clergy began to concede that limiting a family might sometimes be necessary. These concessions carried eugenic undertones. In an article entitled, “The Church and Eugenics,” Father Bertrand Conway heavily criticized common eugenic methods such as sterilization or birth control to manager the fertility of the “unfit.” However, he also admitted that at times it may be “ethical” or even “obligatory” to limit a family--either through abstinence or by avoiding

¹⁷⁷ Ryan, “Family Limitation,” 694.

¹⁷⁸ McClorey, *The Republic and the Church* 107.

¹⁷⁹ Cooper, *Birth Control*, 61.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

marriage altogether. He especially cited cases when a mother's life would be jeopardized or when "real destitution" would result from an increasing number of mouths to feed.¹⁸¹ Interestingly, like Margaret Sanger, Conway trusted individuals' ability to discern for themselves not to have children. However, he believed that they should, and would, choose to abstain from marriage and intercourse altogether rather than use contraception. He wrote: "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."¹⁸²

The Catholic writings of the late 1920s began to take a more defensive tone as priests began to delve into the social consequences of large families more deeply. "This austere Catholic teaching does not ignore the realities of life," insisted one Catholic priest. "It views with sympathetic understanding existing difficulties, and in this case especially the difficulties of women; and because it sees clearly, it refuses to offer a remedy which is worse than the evil [of poverty]."¹⁸³ The deep conviction many of these clergymen held that contraception would condemn their parishioners to hell tied their hands when discussing solutions to these complicated social and personal problems. Thus, even if priests did see birth control as a potential solution, they could not advocate for it because the Church taught that the practice would endanger their parishioners' souls.

The increasingly complicated approach to birth control converged with a growing anxiety among priests that the Catholic laity may not be following their advice. Some authorities reported that as many as 36% of women entering birth control clinics in New York, Chicago,

¹⁸¹ Conway, "The Church and Eugenics," 149.

¹⁸² Conway, "The Church and Eugenics," 153.

¹⁸³ Charles Bruehl, *Birth Control and Eugenics in the Light of Fundamental Ethical Principles* (New York: J.F. Wagner Inc., 1928), 37.

Newark, and Cleveland were Catholic between 1921 and 1928.¹⁸⁴ In an article on Christian marriage in *The Ecclesiastical Review*, Father Joseph Nevins expressed fears that many Catholics were not receiving the Sacraments or even attending mass because they wanted to use artificial contraception and knew that it was against the Church. With horror, he related to other priests in *The Ecclesiastical Review* how “talk goes on among [his parishioners] about the size of a family or about not having a family for a time or at all.”¹⁸⁵ Other clergymen also voiced their concerns. Bishop Christopher Byrne of Galveston frankly told *The New York Times*, “There is no denying that these doctrines [on contraception] are corrupting the hearts of Christian women today and the glamour of some great secret is no little part of its power.”¹⁸⁶ Father Henry Woods remembered a time when there “was no question about” the grievous nature of birth control. Now, he wrote, “An elder generation stands aghast at the blindness of men and women not only not apologizing for the practice, but also stoutly defending it.”¹⁸⁷

Thus, the end of the 1920s was marked by increased anxieties for the Catholic clergy in America. The birth control movement continued to gain momentum and successfully communicated an agenda to the public about how contraception could help alleviate poverty and serve eugenic objectives. On the other hand, Catholic writers attempted to explain the Church’s teachings on contraception and social justice, but became increasingly defensive. What was actually happening in the bedrooms of Catholic couples remained a mystery to the celibate men writing in *The Ecclesiastical Review* and *Catholic World*, but the hope that these couples may be practicing contraception in ignorance became a relic of a former decade. Even more alarmingly for the international Catholic Church, birth rates in traditionally Catholic countries, from Italy to

¹⁸⁴ Leo Latz, *The Rhythm of Sterility*, (Chicago, Ill: Latz Foundation, 1933), 149.

¹⁸⁵ Joseph Nevins, “Education to Catholic Marriage, Part II: Adverse Influences,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 79 (December 1928), 624.

¹⁸⁶ *The New York Times*: September 30, 1929: 52.

¹⁸⁷ Henry Woods, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 76 (1929), 523.

Belgium and from Germany to France, began to drop significantly as well.¹⁸⁸ Thus, the end of the 1920s put increasing pressure on the pope to make a statement to both clarify the Church's teachings and instruct the Catholic laity on proper behavior. In a cruel coincidence of history, Pope Pius XI's encyclical would hit the press the same time the world economy collapsed, an event that would radically and quickly change many people's views on solutions to poverty.

¹⁸⁸ Noonan, *Contraception*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 410.

Chapter Three

1930-1939: The Depression, *Casti Connubii*, and The Rhythm Method

On January 9, 1931, the front page of *The New York Times* bore the headline: POPE PIUS XI, IN ENCYCLICAL, CONDEMNS TRIAL MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND BIRTH CONTROL. The encyclical, entitled *Casti Connubii* or “On the Christian Family,” forcefully banned divorce, abortion, sterilization, and eugenics. However, the prevailing theme was the immorality of birth control.¹⁸⁹ Unlike other papal encyclicals, this letter was highly anticipated by readers who transcended religious, national, and economic lines due to its intimate and controversial subject matter. In fact, the encyclical received more press than any papal letter preceding it.¹⁹⁰ This edition of *The New York Times*, along with other secular newspapers, published the encyclical in its entirety. Both the National Catholic Welfare Conference and *Catholic Mind* issued the encyclical in pamphlet form as well.¹⁹¹

However, even a casual reader flipping through the newspaper would recognize how deeply the circumstances surrounding family limitation had changed. The rest of *The New York Times* that day dealt with relief checks, growing breadlines in Arkansas, the Red Cross’ efforts to distribute money to the unemployed, the dramatic drop in foreign trade, the various hunger riots in New York, the food guides issued by the government to the poor, and rising concerns about how slums may be affecting children. The international depression radically changed the way Americans, including Catholic Americans, viewed and experienced poverty. It also further

¹⁸⁹ Flann Campbell, “Birth Control and the Christian Churches,” *Population Studies* 14(2) (Nov 1960): 138.

¹⁹⁰ Leslie Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 73.

¹⁹¹ Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 160.

aggravated the social and economic problems Catholic social justice had tackled in previous decades. Thus, *Casti Connubii* forced Catholic priests to intensify their crusade against birth control just as the economic situation worsened for most Americans.

The pope issued his encyclical at the beginning of a decade in which more American couples were making reproductive decisions based on their newly difficult economic circumstances. For the first time, birthrates were falling below replacement levels.¹⁹² Despite invigorated efforts on the part of the clergy to educate Catholics on their opposition to birth control, Catholic birth rates continued to fall as well. In fact, Catholic birthrates declined at a faster rate than non-Catholic in most urban areas outside of the South.¹⁹³

Catholic writers expressed concern at this stunted growth. After the hubris Catholic authorities displayed toward their denomination's growth earlier in the century, priests began to debunk the myth of the abundantly reproductive Catholic family. *Echo*, a Catholic periodical published in Buffalo, New York, reported, "With Catholics practicing 'race suicide' in the same manner and to nearly the same extent as non-Catholics, we really do not see why Protestants need fear a predominance of Catholics in this country."¹⁹⁴ John Ryan expressed similar concerns in *Commonweal*, one of the most prominent Catholic lay periodicals. He wrote, "We Catholics have been living in a fools' paradise as regards our assumption that we are having larger families and increasing our proportion of the inhabitants of America."¹⁹⁵

Most authorities, including Catholics, agreed that contraception played a larger role than ever before in the declining birth rate. The onslaught of the Depression and the work of the birth control movement made contraceptives more prevalent, more socially acceptable, and, some

¹⁹² Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 75.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ quoted in John O'Brien, "Private Judgement and Family Limitation," *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 33 (June 1933): 919.

¹⁹⁵ John A. Ryan, "Large Catholic Families," *Commonweal* 19, (2 Feb 1934): 384.

argued, more necessary than ever before. Despite legal restrictions and an overall decline in consumerism, birth control grew into an enormous industry in the 1930s. In 1933, a Catholic physician estimated that, based on sales, 27,000,000 contraceptive devices were used each week.¹⁹⁶ Over two hundred types of mechanical devices were produced by 1935, as well as a wealth of other chemical solutions and spermicides.¹⁹⁷ Three years later, *Fortune* named birth control one of the most prosperous new industries of the decade and reported that the industry accumulated \$250 million in annual sales.¹⁹⁸ Birth control became more acceptable in the public sphere as well. Newspapers, magazines, medical associations, sociologists, economists, hygienists, and clergy from other Christian denominations began to express their support of birth control with more vigor. The Roman Catholic Church was becoming increasingly alienated for her complete ban of contraceptives, and the clergy became increasingly alarmed at this isolation.¹⁹⁹

The clergy's position on birth control alienated them from their own parishioners as well. Nurses reported that a quarter to a half of the women entering their clinics were Catholic.²⁰⁰ Catholic authorities finally stopped scoffing at the birth control advocates' numbers as merely a cheap form of propaganda. "It is not well to sneer at the claims of the medical advocates of birth control that good Catholic women practice it," wrote one priest. "Many apparently good Catholic women not only do so but instruct some about to be married in its technique."²⁰¹ Lay Catholics began to quote the social and economic issues Margaret Sanger had used as

¹⁹⁶ Dr. Leo Latz, quoted in Frank A. Smothers, "New Light on Birth Control," *Commonweal* 17(19) (8 March 1933): 511.

¹⁹⁷ John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), 408.

¹⁹⁸ Andrea Tone, "Contraceptive Consumers: Gender and the Political Economy of Birth Control in the 1930s," *Journal of Social History* 29(3) (Spring 1996): 485.

¹⁹⁹ O'Brien, "Private Judgement and Family Limitation," 920.

²⁰⁰ Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 77.

²⁰¹ Rev. Ambrose Adams, "The Handwriting on the Wall," *Acolyte* 7(19) (5 Sep. 1931): 5.

justification for artificial contraception to their confessors: health of the mother, number of existing children, and the earning power of the father.²⁰² Catholic priests also started to worry about how the use of contraception would affect the rest of their parishioners' spiritual lives. Rather than falling away from the Church when they disagreed on this issue, priests observed that most Catholics remained in the pews while allowing "private conscience . . . to supplant authoritative guidance."²⁰³ Could this supplanting of authority leak into other issues within the traditional realm of ecclesiastical guidance as well?

Notwithstanding the dire economic conditions facing couples throughout the world, Pius XI offered an uncompromising response to the discussion on family limitation. The hardened rhetoric of the encyclical suggests that factors other than the Depression were at the forefront of the pope's mind. Five months before *Casti Connubii*, Anglican bishops passed a resolution that allowed married couples to use artificial contraception.²⁰⁴ Suddenly, the church most theologically similar to the Catholic Church no longer prohibited contraception. Other Protestant denominations also began to quietly surrender their own stances against birth control in the face of an international depression. Additionally, rumors continued to waft like incense toward the Vatican that some priests were not enforcing the Church's teaching on contraception in their parishes.²⁰⁵ Within this context, the pope's advisers strongly suggested that Pius XI reiterate the Catholic Church's absolute ban on contraceptives and implore priests to more vigorously teach and enforce the Church's stand.

In *Casti Connubii*, Pius XI dismissed the social and economic justifications for birth control as "false and exaggerated." He wrote: "There is no possible circumstance in which

²⁰² O'Brien, "Private Judgement and Family Limitation," 917.

²⁰³ W. Parsons, "Is This 'Catholic' Birth Control?" *America* 48 (Fall 1933): 497.

²⁰⁴ Noonan, *Contraception*, 409.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 424.

husband and wife cannot, strengthened by the grace of God, fulfill faithfully their duties and preserve in wedlock their chastity unspotted.”²⁰⁶ Even the mother’s health or extreme poverty were not enough to create exceptions. If a mother suffered from illness or previous birth complications, the pope wrote that the Church would be filled “with the greatest admiration” as it observed a mother “risking her life with heroic fortitude.”²⁰⁷ In regards to poverty, the pope wrote: “We are deeply touched by the sufferings of those parents who, in extreme want, experience great difficulty in rearing their children.” However, the pope deemed the use of birth control as an even “more calamitous error” than not rectifying their economic situation. If couples were having economic or health problems, he instructed them to “cooperate diligently [with God’s grace],” and promised that “they will be able with ease bear the burdens of their state and to fulfill their duties.”²⁰⁸

Margaret Sanger lambasted the pope’s dismissal of the way contraception could alleviate poverty in *The Nation*. In retaliation, she tagged the pope as “definitely against social welfare.”²⁰⁹ She highlighted the fact that he would force mothers with dangerous physical conditions or couples battling poverty to limit their families only through abstinence, a practice she believed was detrimental to individuals’ health and to the institution of marriage. Ridiculing his perceived ignorance of the social needs for contraception, Sanger skillfully painted him as detached from and unsympathetic to the plights of common people. With searing words, she wrote:

He speaks of himself as ‘looking with paternal eye . . . as from a watchtower.’ . . . In that remote tower he sits comfortably, takes counsel from the pile of old books and from bachelor advisers, and then writes scolding sermons about the marriage

²⁰⁶ *Casti Connubii*, paragraphs 60-61.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, paragraph 58.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, paragraph 41.

²⁰⁹ Margaret Sanger, “The Pope’s Position on Birth Control,” *The Nation* (27 Jan. 1932), www.thenation.com/article/popos-position-birth-control.

problems of intelligent people. I wish he could come down into real life for a few weeks, walk the earth and mingle with the poor 'ye have always with you.' He would hear true stories from Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish women, which I should think would be enough to shake sense into the head of any man.²¹⁰

Margaret Sanger could make these accusations because she overlooked a very important clause at the end of *Casti Connubii*. However, she was not alone in her neglect. Most of her contemporaries, and contemporary historians for that matter, failed to recognize or engage with Pius' brief but important recognition of socioeconomic concerns in his encyclical. In order to justify his harsh restrictions on birth control, Pius invoked the social justice arguments made by his predecessor Leo XIII. He recommended that "such economic and social methods should be adopted as will enable every head of a family to earn as much as, according to his station in life, is necessary for himself, his wife, and for the rearing of his children."²¹¹ Pius XI continued to build on these simple prescriptions for social justice in *Quadragesimo Anno*, or "In the Fortieth Year" (after *Rerum Novarum*), an encyclical published five months after *Casti Connubii*. This encyclical stressed the responsibility of the state to protect the well-being of every segment of society.²¹² Thus, Pius XI did recognize the need to address poverty and the pitfalls of industrial life. Like the priests in the 1920s, he offered social justice as the alternative to contraception. Despite Sanger's accusations that he was unsympathetic toward the working class, Pius continued the Church's commitment to, and construction of, a social justice doctrine, even though he refused to use contraception as a quick fix to economic and social problems.

A minority of priests already well versed in *Rerum Novarum* recognized the significance of Pius XI's nod to social justice in an encyclical on contraception. In an article powerfully titled, "Neglected Part of *Casti Connubii*: The Living Wage," Father Franklyn Kennedy, editor

²¹⁰ Margaret Sanger, "The Pope's Position on Birth Control."

²¹¹ *Casti Connubii*, paragraph 117.

²¹² Marvin Krier Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998), 76 and 79.

of the *Catholic Herald Citizen*, argued that priests could not ethically enforce the Church's ban on contraception without also vigorously campaigning for social justice. He wrote,

Has the confessor done his duty when he has answered the "we can't afford to" argument [from a parishioner] by saying: "You'll have to, or I can't give you absolution?" Is there an obligation on the priest's part to apply the remedy suggested by the Pope? The occasion for the practice of birth control in three cases out of ten is a factual lack of money. Is it not a duty incumbent upon those who denounce the sin to put forth some effort towards the eradicating of the occasion? Is such expecting too much of the clergy?²¹³

Kennedy accused priests of enforcing the ban on contraception while ignoring the Church's teaching on social justice. He reminded them that just like contraception, "depriving the worker of his rightful remuneration is a grave injustice and is placed among the greatest sins by Holy Writ."²¹⁴ Instead, Kennedy argued that priests must simultaneously advocate for a living wage and campaign against birth control in order to eradicate an environment in which contraception could be considered a necessity. Reginald Ginns, a Dominican priest, agreed in *The Catholic World*. He asserted that "to fight against birth control propaganda without attacking vigorously the economic conditions which provide the proximate occasions of this sin is simply beating the air."²¹⁵ Kennedy summed the qualms of socially conscious priests like Ginns and himself when he concluded his article by asking, "Will *Casti Connubii* be truly effective if it is not bulwarked with *Rerum Novarum*?"²¹⁶

Although both the pope and other members of the clergy demonstrated their continued support of social justice doctrine, the immediate pressures of the Depression converted the laity's private dissent into public questioning of the Church's position for the first time. The way large families influenced poverty and parents' ability to care for their children finally began to play

²¹³ Franklyn J. Kennedy, "Neglected Part of *Casti Connubii*: The Living Wage," *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 31 (July 1931): 1085.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1087.

²¹⁵ Reginald Ginns, O.P., "Financial Control and Birth Control," *The Catholic World* 131 (August 1930): 607.

²¹⁶ Kennedy, "Neglected Part of *Casti Connubii*," 1087.

into the conversation about contraception in Catholic circles. Ernest Dimnet, a Catholic lay commentator, expressed “indignation at the unconscious cruelty with which unimaginative priests would give two poor workers cooped up in one room no alternative between damnation or an impossible increase of family.”²¹⁷ *The New York Times* published a speech by Rafael Menendez Ramos, the Governor of Puerto Rico and a practicing Catholic, when he signed the bill that legalized birth control on the island in 1937. He argued that high birth rates were creating severe unemployment, poverty and “mounting misery,” and that the island had to “attack the evil at the source through sane and humane birth control.”²¹⁸ Perhaps most eloquently, Frank A. Smothers, a lay journalist for the Catholic periodical, *Commonweal*, admitted that “there always will be a most urgent economic need for some form of regulation of births.”²¹⁹ The publication of his article, only two years after *Commonweal* exuberantly endorsed *Casti Connubii*, demonstrated how deeply the Depression changed the discussion of birth control. He argued:

Objectors [to contraception], in the face of the plight of millions of husbands and wives must be diminishing rapidly in number. The fact that some 11,000,000 workers are unemployed in America today cannot be pondered without pondering the question of unregulated births. The fact that millions more are without reasonable economic security cannot be considered without considering birth and sizes of families. The fact that hosts of other men and women are living at incomes far reduced from those upon which their respective stations in life have been based, cannot be dissociated from the problem of family limitation.²²⁰

In the midst of this unrest, advances in science created what almost appeared to be a modern Catholic miracle. Two gynecologists, Hermann Knaus in Austria and Kyusaku Ogino in Japan, concluded in 1930 that ovulation normally occurred between twelve and sixteen days before the beginning of a woman’s next menstrual period. These findings suggested that a

²¹⁷ Ernest Dimnet, “Communications: New Light on Birth Control,” *Commonweal* 17(24) (12 April 1933): 663.

²¹⁸ *The New York Times*, May 2, 1937: 32.

²¹⁹ Frank A. Smothers, “New Light on Birth Control,” *Commonweal* 17(19) (8 March 1933): 513.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

normal woman could conceive only during a relatively short period of time in the monthly cycle.²²¹ If a couple avoided intercourse during this time, their supporters boasted, there was “no true probability” that a woman could conceive.²²²

These findings were quickly converted into a form of family limitation known as “the rhythm method.” Supporters believed it had the potential to allow Catholic couples to practice family limitation without risking mortal sin. Father O’Brien, an enthusiastic supporter of the rhythm method, summed up its promise when he wrote: “These findings of modern science disclose a rational, natural, and ethical means to space births and to regulate intelligently the number of offspring.”²²³ Despite the enormous publicity first generated by *Casti Connubii*, the rhythm method ultimately had a more lasting affect on the way Catholics talked about, practiced, and viewed the social value of family limitation.

Many priests and rhythm method advocates wrote about the discovery of the rhythm method in providential terms. This demonstrated how heavily both contraception and the Depression weighed on their pastoral problems. Leo Latz, an author of one of the most popular pamphlets on the Knaus-Ogino method, told his readers, “Divine Providence has come to the assistance of mankind at critical periods by unfolding nature’s secrets.”²²⁴ Father Daniel Lord went even further in his book, *What of Lawful Birth Control?* He argued that God helped man discover the rhythm method specifically to solve the economic and social problems instigated by the Depression. “The world collapsed economically,” he explained. “Catholic families, even more in some instances than non-Catholic families, felt the terrible privations of unemployment

²²¹ Campbell, “Birth Control and Christian Churches,” 140.

²²² Rev. Valere J. Coucke, *The Sterile Period in Family Life* (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, Inc., 1933): 5.

²²³ Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 106.

²²⁴ Latz, *The Rhythm of Sterility* (Chicago, Ill: Latz Foundation, 1933), 1.

and want.”²²⁵ Thus, the rhythm method was presented as “the way out--without compromise in any way”²²⁶ of these serious problems that had not yet been solved by social justice initiatives. Catholic clergy in the United States hoped that these scientists discovered the way to alleviate struggling families’ economic stress while remaining within the boundaries of Catholic doctrine.

Although many priests believed the rhythm method had the potential to alleviate the laity’s severe problems during the Depression, it was not officially approved by the Vatican. The only precedent priests could find was a ruling by the Penitentiary, a tribunal responsible for resolving issues relating to the forgiveness of sins, in 1880 on a largely ineffective predecessor of the Knaus-Ogino method. The Penitentiary had decided that a confessor may cautiously recommend periodic abstinence to spouses “whom he has vainly tried with other reasons to lead from the detestable crime of onanism.”²²⁷ However, the ruling was unclear on whether the use of the sterile period was sinless on its own, or if it was a sinful act that led a Christian away from an even greater sin--birth control.²²⁸ To make matters even more complicated, some clergymen argued that the earlier method only diminished the likelihood of conception while the Knaus-Ogino method definitely avoided conception. Would this have changed the Penitentiary’s ruling in 1880? Priests were unsure.

When Pius XI issued *Casti Connubii*, the earlier form of the rhythm method was widely discredited and the Knaus-Ogino method was not well known. Thus, the pope did not discuss the morality of the rhythm method at all in his encyclical. Although he neither condemned nor condoned the deliberate avoidance of birth, he did create an unintentional loophole when he declared it lawful for married couples to have intercourse even if new life cannot result,

²²⁵ Daniel A. Lord, S.J., *What of Lawful Birth Control?* (St. Louis: Queen’s Work, 1935), 11.

²²⁶ Latz, *The Rhythm of Sterility*, 1.

²²⁷ *Decisiones*, p. 24-26, quoted in Noonan, *Contraception*, 441.

²²⁸ Noonan, *Contraception*, 442.

“provided always the intrinsic nature of the act is preserved.”²²⁹ When the encyclical was first issued, almost all readers, including Margaret Sanger, interpreted this clause to refer to women who were barren, already pregnant, or menopausal.²³⁰ However, after publications of the rhythm method began to hit the press, supporters used this clause from the encyclical to validate their new form of family limitation. According to them, all women fell into the category the pope described every month.²³¹

Despite the dubious legality of the rhythm method under Catholic doctrine, many priests still promoted it enthusiastically within the United States. This clerical approval legitimized the practice in the eyes of many lay Catholics, even without the Vatican’s official approval. Missionary priests often ordered Latz’s book in bulk, preached about the rhythm method at retreats, and even reportedly gave pamphlets on the rhythm as prizes at parish bingo games.²³² In addition, every major pamphlet on the method carried the seal of Ecclesiastical Approbation, an enormous honor in which a bishop grants a piece of literature the actual exercise of his ministry.²³³ John Ryan enthusiastically explained the significance of these approbations for the rhythm method in *The Ecclesiastical Review*. “While none of the [approbations] is endowed with the prerogative of infallibility,” John Ryan explained, “[the bishops’] sanction for the publication of the books conveys ample authorization for the practice and creates an overwhelming presumption that the corresponding doctrine is morally sound.”²³⁴

Approval for the rhythm method even stretched to two of the most public opponents to birth control. Patrick Hayes gave *The Sterile Period in Family Life* his imprimatur in New York

²²⁹ Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, paragraph 59.

²³⁰ Sanger, “Birth Control Advances: A Reply to the Pope.”

²³¹ Noonan, *Contraception*, 442.

²³² Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 109.

²³³ Richard Burtzell, “Approbation,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907).

²³⁴ John Ryan, “The Moral Aspects of Periodic Continence,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 87 (July 1933): 29.

on December 8, 1932 while John Ryan liberally encouraged the use of the Knaus-Ogino method for “any married person with a serious reason for avoiding offspring.”²³⁵ He assured readers of *The Ecclesiastical Review* that “when marital intercourse is restricted to the sterile period, it is in itself quite as lawful as intercourse during pregnancy and intercourse when the wife has passed the menopause.”²³⁶ Although the laity wrote the most extensively on the rhythm method, this approval from the clergy suggests that they promoted the method and agreed with the writers’ suggestions that it could provide solutions for social and economic problems.

With the clergy’s endorsements of an opportunity to limit families while remaining within Church doctrine, Catholics bought literature on the rhythm method in enormous quantities. The success of the books demonstrated both the laity’s demand for a form of family limitation and their willingness to remain, or try to remain, within the Church’s boundaries. A listing of both the authors and the titles of the pamphlets demonstrate that the publications were targeting a Catholic audience. Dr. Leo Latz, an American Catholic physician, first published a pamphlet on the rhythm method in America, entitled *The Rhythm of Sterility and Fertility in Women: A Discussion of the Physiological, Practical, and Ethical Aspects*, in 1932. His book sold eleven thousand copies in its first six months, and went through nine editions in the first ten years.²³⁷ Closely following Latz’s pamphlet came *The Sterile Period in Family Life*, coauthored by Valere J. Coucke, a Belgian moral theologian, and James J. Walsh, an American physician. An American Catholic priest, Father John A. O’Brien, published *Lawful Birth Control: According to Nature’s Laws in Harmony with Catholic Morality* in 1934.²³⁸ His book sold over

²³⁵ quoted in David Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 151.

²³⁶ John Ryan, “The Moral Aspects of Periodic Continence,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 87 (July 1933): 29.

²³⁷ *Commonweal* 17(26) (26 April 1933): 724.

²³⁸ Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 106.

75,000 copies by 1935.²³⁹ To the chagrin of birth control advocates like Margaret Sanger, these pamphlets easily passed through the mail, while mail authorities continued to intercept information on other types of contraception.²⁴⁰

Why did the Catholic clergy so hastily recommend a practice not approved by the Vatican? It may not be coincidental that social justice advocates, such as Patrick Hayes and John Ryan, were among the first priests to support the method. As the rhetoric of the rhythm literature demonstrates, concerns with social justice, punctuated by the immediate problems of the laity during the Depression, pushed forward the rhythm method's acceptance and application in Catholic communities. The literature painted approval of the rhythm method as a way to demonstrate to members of the laity, who were rebelling "against God and His Church for seeming to make demands beyond human nature," that the Church was still benevolent and aware of the suffering of poor people.²⁴¹ Rhythm author, Father John O'Brien, deemed it "an additional evidence to fathers and mothers of the deep solicitude of our Holy Mother the Church, whose heart is responsive to all their cries for life and love and happiness."²⁴²

The introduction of the rhythm method freed priests interested in social justice to integrate family limitation into their solutions for industrial poverty. Father O'Brien even boasted that the method "would . . . solve practically every difficulty."²⁴³ Leo Latz exuded the same confidence in the rhythm method as O'Brien. In *The Rhythm and Fertility of Women*, he discussed the socioeconomic merits of the method at length. He argued that the method could alleviate problems associated with poverty, inadequate income, and unemployment--all issues

²³⁹ Ibid., 108.

²⁴⁰ "She's Got Rhythm? A Safe Period for Sanger and the Church," *The Margaret Sanger Papers* #31, Fall 2002.

²⁴¹ Latz, *The Rhythm*, 147.

²⁴² John O'Brien, *Lawful Birth Control: According to Nature's Law, in Harmony with Catholic Morality* (Fort Wayne: IN: Courtney Company, 1934), 29.

²⁴³ John O'Brien, "Birth Control and Catholic Leakage," *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 33 (May 1933): 820.

previously addressed by Catholic social justice writers.²⁴⁴ However, unlike earlier times when priests could only tell expecting couples to trust in Divine Providence, the rhythm method allowed Latz to assert that parents should be able to “give their children and themselves the food, the clothing, the housing, the education, and the recreation they are entitled to as children of God.”²⁴⁵ Until Catholics succeeded in administering social justice and a redistribution of resources, Latz suggested that this could only occur through family limitation.

John O’Brien also explicitly linked the rhythm method with the socioeconomic problems addressed by Catholic social justice writers. “The problem of family limitation is an intensely real and personal one today,” he told *The Nation*. “There is unemployment, lack of sufficient means to provide food and clothing for children already born, [and] worry over the prospect of even greater economic privation and suffering.”²⁴⁶ In order to demonstrate the necessity of the rhythm method, he published some of the letters that Catholics had written him about the method. These letters sound eerily similar to letters by poor mothers published by Margaret Sanger in *The Birth Control Review*. Both emphasized the difficult economic circumstances of poor families and offered family limitation as a potential solution to these problems. However, the letters in O’Brien’s book also demonstrated how the rhythm method could help families remain in harmony with the Church. One letter read,

We want to be good Catholics and obey the law of the Church. But how can we have more children when we already have seven, and are worried as to how we will get food and clothing for them? I have been without steady employment for over eighteen months. The prospect is still dark. Many a day my wife and family have suffered the pangs of hunger. Can either God or man ask us to bring more children into the world when we are without funds to pay either for their coming or to support them after they arrive?²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ Latz, *The Rhythm*, 147.

²⁴⁵ Latz, *The Rhythm*, 147.

²⁴⁶ Dorothy Dunbar Eromley, “Sanctified Birth Control,” *The Nation*, 26 September 1934,

<http://www.thenation.com/archive/sanctified-birth-control>.

²⁴⁷ O’Brien, *Lawful Birth Control*, 26.

Rhythm method advocates boasted that this licit form of family limitation could alleviate other problems as well. Although the pope in *Casti Connubii* wrote that women should endure pregnancy even if it risked their health, Latz boasted that the rhythm method would alleviate “the burdens of depleted energies and exhausted vitality resulting from a previous birth or miscarriage . . . or conditions that threaten the life of the mother in case of pregnancy.”²⁴⁸ In addition, advocates asserted that the rhythm method could relieve emotional trauma. The arguments for the emotional relief of the Catholic laity particularly criticized the Church’s former approach to birth control. Clobbering the Church for making “demands beyond human nature, beyond human powers to endure,” Latz promised that the rhythm would relieve “burdens of uncontrollable fear, anxiety, irritability, or rebellion against God and His Church.”²⁴⁹ John Ryan also wrote more candidly about the emotional stress of prolonged abstinence once an alternative was discovered. He wrote: “Let us not forget that rapidly growing army of individuals who with mounting bitterness find themselves condemned to a life of involuntary celibacy because they cannot undertake the responsibility of the unlimited family which they believe is the normal result of Catholic marriage.”²⁵⁰ Thus, the rhythm method freed Catholic clergy to concede that complications no longer had to be endured, but could be avoided.

Now that the clergy could concede that there was a legitimate form of contraception with social value, some Catholic writers began to push for family limitation more forcefully. Their language began to use an increasingly eugenic tone. Reverend Antony Koch in *A Handbook on Moral Theology* wrote that married couples “have not the right” to produce children they could

²⁴⁸ Latz, *The Rhythm*, 147.

²⁴⁹ Latz, *The Rhythm*, 147.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

not support materially because they would “inflict a grievous damage upon society.”²⁵¹ *The Rhythm of Sterility in Women* went so far as to say that the use of the rhythm method “may even be required by the will of God” and named it “an obligation in conscience” when “pregnancy is undesirable because of physiological, economic, or social reasons.”²⁵² Father O’Brien called it “un-Christian” to have “a larger family than the parents can bring up properly.”²⁵³ According to Father John O’Connel, poverty could be “frequently not only a legitimate reason but can be an obligatory reason for child limitation” until “social justice principles are made operative and a better distribution of wealth is obtained.”²⁵⁴ Historian Christine Rosen has argued that the Catholic clergy permanently ceased their flirtations with the eugenics movement after eugenicists officially began to collaborate with birth control advocates.²⁵⁵ However, this rhetoric suggests that the rhythm method allowed priests to express their eugenic concerns and utilize a licit eugenic method, while still opposing other methods of eugenic control such as artificial contraception and sterilization.

Of course, the priests who conceded that there were eugenic, socioeconomic, and physiological purposes for the rhythm method inevitably began to unravel the carefully crafted social arguments against birth control that had been constructed in past decades. “Catholic writers in the past have wasted time and energy in attempting to refute the alleged reasons for practicing birth control,” wrote one priest, “when in truth they could frequently be forced to agree that sufficient cause exists for practicing birth control, but a birth control that is natural, not artificial.”²⁵⁶ In fact, priests, and the rhythm method authors they publicly supported, began to

²⁵¹ Koch-Preuss, *A handbook of Moral Theology*, p. 472, quoted in Latz, 134.

²⁵² Latz, *The Rhythm*, 134.

²⁵³ John O’Brien, “Birth Control and Catholic Leakage,” 87.

²⁵⁴ John O’Connel, C.S.C., “Birth Control Clinics Needed,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 103 (Sept 1939): 250.

²⁵⁵ Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 153.

²⁵⁶ John O’Connel, C.S.C., “Birth Control Clinics Needed,” 249.

echo arguments previously raised by birth control advocates. Guy Burch, a secular reporter, recognized this irony. He sarcastically advised Catholics ignorant of the birth control movement's arguments to read *The Rhythm* in order to understand the social objectives of the birth control movement. "The following arguments for birth control from 'The Rhythm' should make for a better understanding among Catholics of what the advocates of contraception have been working for," he wrote.²⁵⁷ Father John Montgomery Cooper, who wrote the popular pamphlet against birth control in the 1920s, privately remarked, "I think [Leo Latz] makes an excellent case for the birth controllers without intending to do so."²⁵⁸

In fact, Margaret Sanger and other birth control advocates did begin to quote from rhythm literature in their arguments for artificial contraception, revealing the irony of the Church's position and the strength of their own.²⁵⁹ A Jesuit complained that at a birth control conference in New York, "the lady president read a passage which apparently gave all the reasons for birth control. She then stopped and said that [it] was written by the Catholic priest, Dr. John O'Brien."²⁶⁰ In another case, a non-Catholic physician, Dr. Sophia Kleegman, commented on Leo Latz in a speech:

The Catholic Church, therefore, heretofore held up as the most powerful adversary of birth control education, has in reality become one of the clearest and most forceful proponents. The principle has been accepted that family limitation is not only a Right but a Duty where physiological, psychological, economic, or social conditions demand it. The only difference of opinion lies in the choice of method.²⁶¹

In light of these accusations and connections to birth control advocates, Catholic priests in support of the rhythm method had to carefully demonstrate both the morality of the rhythm

²⁵⁷ Burch, "Catholics on Birth Control," 99.

²⁵⁸ John Montgomery Cooper, quoted in Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 113.

²⁵⁹ Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 114.

²⁶⁰ quoted in Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 114.

²⁶¹ quoted in O'Connell, "Birth Control Clinics Needed," 248.

method and the differences between their method and artificial contraception. Many priests emphasized how the rhythm method utilized a natural process in a woman's body rather than an artificial deterrent. Catholic supporters equated naturalness with both morality and harmony with God's plan. Father Coucke explained that "unfruitfulness [from the rhythm method] does not follow from a disturbance of the plan of nature, but because this very nature has determined that intercourse at that time should be sterile."²⁶² A Catholic physician wrote, "Natural birth control is the making use of a natural act, i.e., an act of nature, and, as such, is not a violation of the laws of morality."²⁶³

Catholic advocates also consistently equated artificial contraception with immorality, prostitution, and intercourse out of wedlock. They argued that couples with loose morals would not have the discipline to use the rhythm method but instead would "give free reign to passion" and use artificial devices. On the other hand, they painted the rhythm method as "a moral force" with its own "social value" because it required couples to control themselves and use discipline within their marriage. Thus, priests advocating for the rhythm method went further than simply differentiating it from artificial contraception. They depicted the rhythm method as having moral, along with economic and social, value. While the use of artificial contraception was a mortal sin, potentially condemning its users to hell, the use of the rhythm method had the potential to elevate its users to an even higher plane of morality and discipline.

However, by the mid-1930s, many conservative members of the Catholic hierarchy began to mute their enthusiasm for the rhythm method, driven by the obvious similarities in rhetoric to the promotion of artificial contraception. The rhythm method gained popularity in the United States during the same time that Catholics spoke at Congressional hearings about the legality of

²⁶² O'Brien, *Lawful Birth Control*, 7.

²⁶³ Alfred J.M. Treacy, "Communications: New Light on Birth Control," *Commonweal* 18(4) (26 May 1933): 105.

contraception. Believing that the rhythm method was undermining their arguments against artificial birth control, bishops began to curb publicity for natural contraception in 1934.²⁶⁴ Thus, the National Catholic Welfare Conference issued a report in 1934 that begged more caution in the discussion of the rhythm method and cited the Penitentiary's ruling in 1880. "If the confessor in the sacred tribunal must be cautious in suggesting this means," the report read, "certainly writers of popular books and pamphlets who give indiscriminate instruction on this delicate subject disregard the caution imposed by the Holy See."²⁶⁵

Despite the hierarchy's efforts to quell support for the rhythm method, they ultimately could not stop the legalization of artificial contraception. Although Catholics like John Ryan successfully deterred Congress from overturning the Comstock Laws, Margaret Sanger found success through the judicial system. In 1932, a Japanese physician illegally mailed Sanger a packet of pessaries. Although custom officers confiscated the package, her attorney, Morris Ernst, recognized a legal opportunity. He advised Sanger to have the physician send the packet again, but this time to another physician, Hannah Stone. When the packet was confiscated for a second time, the birth control advocates took advantage of the opportunity to go to court and fight the ruling on the basis of medical exemption. The court ruled in Stone's favor in 1936, stating that the federal government could not interfere with doctors providing contraception to their patients.²⁶⁶ The judge commented that the Comstock's design "was not to prevent the importation, sale, or carriage by mail of things which might intelligently be employed by conscientious and competent physicians for the purpose of saving life or promoting the well-

²⁶⁴ Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 115.

²⁶⁵ Archbishop Edward J. Hanna [San Francisco] to "Your Excellency, 22 Dec 1934, ACUA, NCWC papers, quoted in Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 116.

²⁶⁶ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 206.

being of their patients.”²⁶⁷ Margaret Sanger had begun to win her battle to legalize artificial contraception.

Despite the hierarchy’s eventually conservative position on the rhythm method, and the increased availability of artificial contraception due to *U.S. v One Package of Japanese Pessaries*, the rhythm method continued to play an important part in Catholic circles. Bishops did not attempt to deter their parishioners from buying pamphlets and sharing information on the method, and priests continued to suggest the method to struggling Catholic couples in the confessional.²⁶⁸ Most importantly, by the mid-1930s, the rhythm method had already radically changed the way priests sensitive to social justice discussed family limitation and the alleviation of poverty. After finding a suitable method that would not tarnish Catholics’ morality, priests were free to concede that a form of contraception had social, economic, medical, and even eugenic merit. Unlike the priests in the 1920s, clergymen could now admit that family limitation should play a pivotal role in the Church’s pursuit of social justice and the alleviation of poverty.

²⁶⁷ *US v. One Package*, 86 F 2d 737 (1936), quoted in Tobin, *The American Religious Debate*, 206.

²⁶⁸ Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 117.

Conclusion

In 1951, Pope Pius XII, Pius XI's successor, addressed the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives. It had been six years since John Ryan passed away, and twenty years since Leo Latz's *The Rhythm* hit the press. Coincidentally, that same year a seventy-one year old Margaret Sanger met Gregory Pincus and John Rock, who both agreed to create a contraceptive pill after hearing her stories about the living conditions caused by overpopulation among the poor.²⁶⁹ Before the advent of this next major challenge to the Church's position on birth control, Pius XII finally clarified the Church's stance on the previous challenge—the rhythm method.

“Matrimony imposes a fulfilment of positive work connected with that state of life,” he began,

From the obligation of making this positive contribution it is possible to be exempt, for a long time and even for the whole duration of married life, if there are serious reasons, such as those often provided in the so-called “indications” of the medical, eugenical, economic, and social order. It therefore follows that observance of the infertile period may be licit from the moral point of view; and under the conditions mentioned, it is so in fact.²⁷⁰

Through these words, the Vatican finally legitimized the intentional prevention of conception—albeit only through one specific, and often faulty, method. Perhaps even more importantly for the purposes of this thesis, the pope's speech also demonstrated how radically the Church changed her position in regards to contraception. In 1903, Cardinal Gibbons asserted the common Catholic belief that “the question of economics has no place . . . in regulating the size of families.”²⁷¹ By 1951, however, Pius XII legitimized family limitation not just economic

²⁶⁹ Charles W. Carey, Jr, “Pincus, Gregory Goodwin,” *American National Biography Online* Feb 2000. 12 April 2011.

²⁷⁰ quoted in Carl Reiterman, “Birth Control and Catholics,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1965): 225.

²⁷¹ Tobin, *The American Religious Debate* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2001), 65.

reasons, but also for social, medical, and even “eugenical” ones. Thus, the Vatican finally ruled that family limitation could play an important role in the alleviation of poverty and the pursuit of social justice. Economic, social, and medical concerns were deemed as licit reasons for using the rhythm method. However, perhaps the pope’s blatant embrace of “eugenical” concerns as an acceptable justification for contraception is even more surprising and ground-breaking, since rhythm method advocates never explicitly said that they advocated for eugenics. The pope’s comments further legitimized the conclusion that the Catholic Church was not opposed to eugenics, as long as the procedures pursued were in line with Catholic teaching. As Margaret Sanger mused, “We [birth control advocates and the Catholic clergy] are coming down now not to a question of principle, but a question of methods.”²⁷²

Other historians have already argued that the Church bent to popular pressure on the issue of birth control through the adoption of the rhythm method. Through my research, however, I have found that the clergymen deeply invested in social justice contributed to this compromise in profound and lasting ways. When birth control advocates first argued that contraception could alleviate poverty, these priests were bound by their Church doctrine to oppose contraception, regardless of its socioeconomic merits. They harnessed Catholic social justice arguments to provide clear, if sometimes idealistic, alternatives. These priests concentrated on the way a living wage and other social safety nets would assist struggling couples, while still allowing them to enjoy a rich family life. However, once a morally licit form of contraception became available, these same priests recognized that the rhythm method could immediately alleviate the most pressing problems created by industrial poverty and the Depression. They propelled the American Church towards approval of the rhythm method, even without the Vatican’s endorsement. These men issued approbations and recommendations, endorsed the writings of

²⁷² Margaret Sanger, *Autobiography* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 412.

lay Catholics who educated the public on the socioeconomic merits of the method, and dispersed material among their own parishioners. Although these priests ultimately found themselves alienated for their endorsements, the pope's declaration in 1951 demonstrates that their socioeconomic arguments for family limitation profoundly influenced the Vatican's decision to officially approve the rhythm method.

However, the pressures exerted by social justice concerns to accept a form of family limitation created pressing problems for the Catholic doctrine on birth control. After conceding that there were legitimate economic, social, and eugenic reasons for family limitation, what would the laity do when the rhythm method did not work? The Church could not backtrack on her acceptance of the rhythm method. Socially conscious priests had punctured permanent holes through their own social justice arguments against birth control once they discovered the rhythm method, and the Vatican had accepted their reasoning. Thus, the adaption of the rhythm method for socioeconomic reasons made it more difficult to explain the immorality of artificial contraception if the rhythm method proved to be unreliable. A article printed in *America* in 1933 reasonably feared "not that the Church itself will ever adopt [a] 'scientific' method [of artificial contraception], but that people will, after having found that in half the cases the new method is faulty."²⁷³

Back in 1934, the secular journalist, Guy Irving Burch, made an interesting comment on the Roman Catholic Church. "The Church of Rome may be slow to move," he wrote, "but it does move even as the earth moves around the sun--unnoticeably."²⁷⁴ This statement corroborates with historian John T. Noonan's assessment that the Catholic Church has changed,

²⁷³ W. Parsons, "Is This 'Catholic' Birth Control?" *America* 48 (Fall 1933): 497.

²⁷⁴ Guy Irving Burch, "Catholics on Birth Control," *The New Republic* (5 Sept 1934), 100.

gradually, in her approach to contraception.²⁷⁵ Although Noonan came to this conclusion by viewing the debate through a moral and theological lens, the same holds true when looking at the debate through the perspective of Catholic social justice. These socially conscious clergymen were instrumental in the small, but significant, changes the Catholic Church made in her perception of the intersections between family limitation and the alleviation of poverty.

²⁷⁵ John T. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1965), 6.

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