

The Linacre Quarterly

Volume 2 | Number 3

Article 3

June 1934

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Recommended Citation

Walsh, James J. (1934) "The Wisdom of the Church," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 2: No. 3, Article 3.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol2/iss3/3>

THE WISDOM OF THE CHURCH

By JAMES J. WALSH, M.D., Ph.D.

There is a great deal of unscientific talk about eugenics today, and about sterilization as a means to this end. Doctor Walsh shows in this illuminating article that the moral doctrine of the Church is the greatest force for human betterment in the world today.

THE greatest outstanding institution in the world at any time during the past nearly two thousand years has been the Catholic Church. The surprise is to find that it is just as outstanding today as it was nearly fifteen hundred years ago when it succeeded to the place in the world that had been held by the Roman Empire. The most interesting thing about the situation is that the Church has secured and maintained her prominence in the world not by complacent yielding to the opinions of mankind but often by opposition, leading men to what was best in them but through the thorny paths of self-denial and the narrow path, not the broad and easy way of self-indulgence.

Let me quote some examples that illustrate this. Over and over again in history there has been a definite tendency among ruling families and great houses of the nobility to intermarry so as to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of comparatively few. The Church has constantly taken a stand against close inter-marriage and has definitely forbidden marriage within certain degrees of kindred or has allowed it with dispensations only under such circumstances as brought home very emphatically to the contracting parties that while the Church like a good mother was yielding to their urgency under special circumstances her very definite opinion was that it would be better for them not to have asked to be an exception to the general rule with regard to marriages wherever there is rather close affinity.

Some thirty years ago Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, who had been the teacher of deaf mutes before his invention took him into other fields and who married one of his deaf mute pupils and continued to be very much interested in the subject of mutism, financed a special department of the census of 1910 for the purpose of collecting information with regard to the occurrence of defects in children who were the offspring of near relatives. It was found that such defects were nearly three times more common in cousin marriages than in others. I need scarcely say that the occurrence of blind or deaf children or even those who are noticeably defective in these senses, is the hardest kind of trial for parents. This has added very much to the trial there is in the world. All down the centuries the Church has been preserving men and women

from that most poignant of sufferings which comes as the result of realizing on the part of a parent that he or she is responsible for a serious defect in their children.

Wisdom of a very different sort was exhibited by the Church with regard to what is known as astrology. When men began to study the stars they very soon came to the thought that these heavenly bodies must have a good deal to do with influencing human conduct, shaping human destiny, and modifying man's relation to the universe around him. Physicians particularly took up this new science of the relationship of stars to men, for it was proclaimed a new science, and they applied it to medicine and it was not long before it came to be a medical rule that medicine of any kind should not be given nor venesection performed nor operations done without consulting the stars to see whether it was a favorable moment or not. The Church opposed this and therefore often seemed to be opposed to science.

The influence exerted by the Church for the eradication of dueling is a striking example of what may be accomplished by a firm stand maintained even when the world is utterly against that stand. A little more than a hundred years ago unless a man in public life would risk his life in a duel he was likely to be despised by his countrymen, almost sure to lose whatever political prestige or power he held, and refusal often meant, if he were a politician or a statesman, the end of his career. The duello as a means of settling disputes between men had been in existence for several hundred years. The Church had condemned it but men were willing to risk not only mortal but immortal life for a point of honor.

In spite of the social acceptance of the duel, which was quite as strong as the modern social acceptance of birth control, the Church's position strongly maintained finally brought about a change of sentiment and now only fools fight duels.

When I was a medical student, now nearly forty years ago, one of the very current topics of discussion in pastoral medicine, that is as to the morality of certain acts performed by physicians, concerned craniotomy. I think that that term is scarcely in use now but at that time there were many obstetricians who when they encountered what they thought to be insuperable obstacles in obstetrics or rather in labor felt that they were justified in crushing the head of the child and delivering it piecemeal. It was surprising how many men assumed that this could be done without involving any infraction of the moral law. Certainly it must have seemed a hideous murder of the defenseless infants. I suppose that the reason why it was thought of at all was that the old statistics of the pre-antiseptic days with their very high mortality were still deterring men from doing Cesarean section. The Church always took a stern stand with re-

gard to craniotomy and as a consequence for many years was said to be unprogressive and entirely too hard on mothers but of course the Church was right and craniotomy has gone out and pastoral medicine now concerns other subjects.

Some twenty years ago there was the development of a great deal of popular interest in what was called twilight sleep. A combination of drugs, the principal one of which was hyoscyamus, was administered to the mother in the course of labor, as the result of which she went into a sort of dream state during which she felt almost none of the birth pains. It was declared that at last the age-old curse, "In pain shall thou bring forth thy children," was loosed and that women need not suffer at all as they had suffered before. The subject was discussed in drawing rooms and at dinners and luncheons and women's clubs had physicians or those who had had some experience with this new method talk to them and it was surprising how much public interest there was in it. After a while as the result of experience it came to be realized that in cases where twilight sleep was induced to the greater comfort perhaps of the mother the death rate among the children was much higher than in cases where other agents were employed and where the mother could help the progress of the birth and where it was not too long delayed. Infants absorbed some of the drugs from the mother's blood and it was harder to get them to start breathing and many of them could not be made to breathe at all. With this announcement Catholic hospitals under the influence of Catholic teaching that the child must be given every opportunity for its life in spite of the cost to its mother refused to proceed with the new method of anesthesia for labor pains and it was not long before twilight sleep went out of vogue. The definite stand taken by the Church brought to public notice the dangers of the method and it was not long before it was eliminated.

From the very beginning of her history the Church has emphasized the right to life for every human being. When the Church came into existence there was a very sad state of mind with regard to the rights of children to life and above all with regard to the rights of the unborn child. Men of the old time believed that they had the right of life and death over their offspring and the result was the most serious abuses. One of the arguments urged in favor of birth control or birth prevention was that this practice would surely reduce the frequency of abortion. As a matter of fact it has not, but on the contrary the loosening up on moral principles from one aspect has carried people a step farther into the violation of still more important principles. This is what always happens when there is a relaxation of morality, it is always carried farther than

was originally intended. All over the world there is serious complaint of the number of abortions which cannot be called anything else but murders and not a few of them are the result of conceptions occurring in spite of efforts to prevent them which failed because there are no absolutely sure methods as yet known or likely to be found that will insure the success of efforts of this kind. The Church's effort to stop the beginnings is the only one that can prove really successful in eradicating these immoral tendencies.

Much is said of the benefit to be derived by children as the result of fewer children in the family, but as a matter of fact investigations rather carefully made with regard to the children of larger and smaller families show that where the surroundings are equal and the environment about the same the children of larger families are likely to be healthier than those of smaller families, and it has been pointed out that a great many of the geniuses of the world have been born after the fourth in the family and the custom of primogeniture, by which the first-born succeeds to the property and titles as is the custom in England, has given rise to a nobility which constantly degenerates unless under circumstances where the wives are chosen deliberately with the idea of lessening tendencies to degeneration that become marked among the nobility.

The Spartans endeavored to improve their people by the elimination of the unfit. The results of their efforts are very interesting because they serve to show how difficult it would be to pursue some of the eugenic methods that we hear so much about at the present time and that represent a very dubious solution for a very difficult problem in the improvement of the human race. The Spartans under the leadership of Solon, himself an Athenian, established the custom of having all children shortly after their birth tested in order to determine whether they were worth while keeping alive. If they did not pass the test the State put them to death. The result was that Sparta eliminated all the physical weaklings very successfully. They probably had the most physically perfect people that has ever been in existence. It is interesting, however, to realize that we have not a single intellectual development of any kind from the Spartans though at the same time the Athenians, without any such effort for the improvement of the race, gave us the magnificent literature and art of the fifth century before Christ which is perhaps the greatest in the world. No wonder the Church takes a firm stand with regard to eugenics in so far as there is to be elimination of the supposed unfit, because sometimes these prove to be the geniuses of the race.

As one of these movements gets out of the focus of popular attention another comes in. Just about the time that twilight sleep was

going into what President Cleveland called innocuous desuetude, birth control or rather birth prevention began to attract popular attention and after a while became a subject that was discussed in mixed groups in parlors or at dinner tables. A crusade was begun for the repeal of the laws suppressing public announcement with regard to it and for the free diffusion of information on the subject so that the poor might cease having children or at least more than one or two in the family and the world be less crowded lest we should be eaten out of house and home and our food supplies prove entirely inadequate. Propaganda for this purpose began to be organized and soon birth control was as much discussed as twilight sleep.

Meantime various movements against this birth control propaganda were organized among scientists and they have made it clear that it would surely be a very unfortunate event for our civilization if birth control or birth prevention continued to make itself felt as an ever increasing factor against civilization in our time. When the International Eugenics Congress held its meetings here in New York some five years ago at the American Institute of Natural History just around the corner from my home, I was present at a number of them and their conclusion at the end of the meeting was that the Malthusian proposition that man was outrunning his sustenance here on earth was entirely without foundation and that for hundreds of years yet nothing like that need be anticipated. Their conclusions have been amply confirmed by the world condition in recent years when farmers have had so much foodstuffs on their hands that the price they could secure for their products was not enough to pay them in any adequate way for their labor and expense in raising their crops. The question has been of reducing the acreage of corn, which is one of the great foodstuffs of the world, sharing with rice in Asia and wheat in Europe the privilege of being the staff of life. Scientists constantly look forward to being able to raise ever so much more than we are eating at the present time.

Instead of birth control, then, the Eugenics Congress insisted that what was needed was more and better children. In the discussions attention was called to the fact that life in the slums and on insufficient food, even though granaries were bursting with supplies and the farmers wanted to sell, had much more to do with the production of the undesirables in humanity than large families or the supposed exhaustion of mothers. Above all they emphasized that people of the better classes should have more children or the degeneration of the race and actual decrease in population was just ahead. It is easy to see now how well these scientists anticipated what has actually taken place. The proportion of old people in the world who have

to be supported has been constantly growing larger and the problem of old age pensions looms as a very important element in the unemployment situation and the question of the dole.

Curiously enough the very day on which Margaret Sanger's biography was reviewed on the front page of the book section of the Herald Tribune with a display portrait of the lady herself, the news from London was that the British Association for the Advancement of Science was convinced that birth control was tending already toward depopulation and that in most of the civilized countries of Europe and America the population is already stationary with a tendency toward decrease. After all in this country, in any town of the North and East that has not a large foreign-born population, the death rate is higher than the birth rate. As a Boston editor said, "When a descendant of the Mayflower moves out to Mt. Auburn (the fashionable cemetery) a descendant of the aliens moves into Commonwealth Avenue." Professor Carl Saunders of Liverpool University said that within the last sixty years the birth rate had declined so sharply in many countries that the population was not reproducing itself. This was true in Great Britain but the first steps in that direction have been taken in every country. Professor Saunders declared, "All races of European descent are treading the same path though at different intervals of distance." There is only one consolatory element in the discussions before the British Association for the Advancement of Science and that was the remark of Professor Haldane that the acquisition of wealth tended to sterilize either morally or physically the people acquiring it. I suppose there is no set of people in the population whom we can spare with less sense of loss than the very wealthy.

It seems to me, then, that we should appreciate the wisdom of the Church and feel that she is divinely guided. There are those who say that her legislation in this matter is likely to make many Catholics dissatisfied with the Church and some have not hesitated to say that it would represent a rather serious pitfall for the Church's influence, but in every one of the movements in which Church legislation has countered social usage and the opinion of the world, after a while people have come around to recognize that there was some power driving her that made her teaching not for the moment but for all time and after a while a change in view made itself felt.