

worldview

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LET US REASON TOGETHER

The question of birth control has long been a divisive issue for the Churches. In the past few weeks it has become a divisive force in our national life—one that may affect the future not only of individual politicians but of American foreign policy itself. Programs of foreign economic aid, for example, have never had an easy time in Congress, and it seems likely that their course in the present Congress will be further bedeviled by the controversy over population control.

But however unfortunate one may find these developments, they were probably inevitable. The present rate of growth in the world's population, which threatens far to outstrip the world's available food supply, must eventually have forced the debate over population control out of the academies onto the public stage. For the sake both of our domestic peace and our international obligations, however, we must now hope that the argument can proceed more rationally, and more charitably, than it has begun.

It is with this hope that *Worldview* publishes an extensive discussion of the "birth control controversy" in this issue. The magazine's purpose in sponsoring this discussion is not to seek some easy consensus (the contributors represent radically divergent points of view); it is rather to provide a forum for the stating of serious differences, because real argument can go forward only after these have been explored.

And that is the trouble with the controversy to date: both sides have conducted it with an apparent blindness to real, and basic, situations. There has been little attempt at reasoning together; we have seen, rather, a contest in hurling epithets. We have heard charges of "immorality" and counter-charges of "authoritarianism." One group has deplored the fomenting of "hysteria" over the "population explosion"; the other has denounced "callousness" toward the sufferings of the human race.

If the subject is to be rescued from irrelevancy, it seems desirable that some of the following situ-

ations be recalled, and assumed as a basis for dialogue.

Protestants might remind themselves that: (a) the Catholic position on artificial birth control was until recent decades the almost universally accepted position of the Christian Churches; (b) this position rests upon a coherent and rational theory of natural law, and in their recent statement the American bishops were affirming this position; (c) in their statement the bishops were further affirming the rights of American Catholics to act in the public order according to the dictates of their conscience and to reject as public policy that which they consider to be intrinsically immoral; (d) in this, the bishops were making no attempt to "impose" their views on anyone, but were, on the contrary, vindicating a basic principle of democratic procedure within a pluralist society: the principle of each group's right to speak publicly in the light of its own moral convictions.

But if Protestants are mindful of these things, Catholics should recall that: (a) modern non-Catholic religious thought has worked out a theology of family planning that rests upon its own best insights, and this theology must be debated, it cannot be merely denounced; (b) because of this development the Catholic position has become, in our times, a minority position and, in their public activity, it must be recognized by Catholics as such; (c) many non-Catholic Americans feel as strongly about the "immorality" of withholding birth control information from underdeveloped areas as Catholics feel about supplying it; (d) in this situation the Catholic position on artificial birth control *may* eventually become to the United States foreign aid program as the Christian Science position on surgery is to the United States health program.

These may be difficult points for either side to remember. But, if these and similar points are ignored, or merely denounced, no real discussion can take place.