

The Time Has Come: A Catholic Doctor's Proposals to End the Battle over Birth Control, by John Rock

In 1963, Roman Catholic fertility doctor John Rock published *The Time Has Come: A Catholic Doctor's Proposals to End the Battle over Birth Control*, a first-person treatise on the use of scientifically approved forms of birth control for Catholic couples. The first contraceptive pill, called Enovid, had been on the market since June 1960, and Rock was one of the leading researchers in its development. In *The Time Has Come*, Rock explicitly describes the arguments for and against the use of birth control from both a religious and a scientific perspective. With this work, he hoped to persuade the Roman Catholic Church that the use of a contraceptive pill was not contrary to Catholic natural law, which states that the primary function of marital sexual relations is to conceive a child. Rock lobbied for the acceptance and widespread use of contraceptive pills, which he considered to be of vital importance not only to women's reproductive health, but also to the struggle to control the world's burgeoning population.

The Time Has Come begins with Rock's explanation of what Catholic professor George H. L. Zeegers termed "the first problem in world history": the rapid doubling of the world's population. According to census data, the world population reached three billion people in 1959 and when Rock published his book it was (accurately) predicted that the population would double by century's end. Rock outlines how many scholars and political figures were deeply concerned about food shortages, unemployment, and poverty, which they believed would only worsen as the population increased. However, in the 1960s neither the US nor the United Nations would agree to aid developing nations—whose high birth rates contribute most significantly to the population crisis—in implementing any type of fertility control, even when representatives of those nations specifically requested it. Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower claimed that to fund birth control for other nations was to "interfere with internal affairs."

To this end, Rock attempted to deconstruct the various arguments for and against birth control from a theological standpoint, believing that in doing so he could find common ground on which it would become acceptable for all couples to use contraception to aid family planning. At the time the book was written, Jewish and Protestant leaders supported the use of birth control, while the Roman Catholic Church stood firmly against it. Contemporary Protestant statements declared that parents are ethically and morally responsible for the well-being of the children they have already given birth to, and that birth control was an approved way of controlling the number of children a couple had and how frequently they chose to conceive. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church asserted that conjugal relations are for the sole purpose of procreation, and that to frustrate a woman's ability to conceive was an offense to the law of God and therefore a grave sin.

Rock attempts to counter this stance by supporting the Protestant argument of responsible parenthood, citing several Roman Catholic theologians to corroborate this viewpoint. More than a century before *The Time Has Come* was published, the Catholic Church approved of a method of family planning, which is still in use today and is often called the rhythm method or natural family planning. Rock cites Pope Pius XII as supporting a couple's decision to control the size of their family—though the Church claimed that this was not to be confused with "birth control." Instead, a ruling by the Church in 1853 accepted "periodic continence," the practice of having intercourse only during what was then believed to be the infertile portion of the woman's menstrual cycle. Rock hoped that further research into fertility would improve the rhythm method and extend to couples an even more reliable form of fertility regulation. Rock also supports the argument that conjugal relations are important to the bonds between married couples, and that to deny sexual relations in

the interest of avoiding pregnancy would be harmful to marital relationships.

A large portion of *The Time Has Come* traces the public policy debate surrounding the use of birth control and physicians' ability to prescribe it to their patients. During the 1960s, more than one state banned the use of contraception, though these laws were often completely ineffectual as they did not prevent physicians from prescribing contraceptives to their patients, or offer any guidance as to how such a ban could be enforced. Rock explores Connecticut's contraception prohibition laws as a case study. In 1879, the current head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV), Anthony Comstock, and his followers legislated an obscenity statute, known as the Comstock Laws. These statutes made the distribution of information about contraception and abortion illegal. The use of contraception was banned as well. However, there was no companion law forbidding the sale of contraceptive devices, so in large part people continued to use contraception despite the laws against it. Rock explains that the situation continued largely unchanged until about the 1920s, when the reproductive rights movement began calling for the repeal of state statutes against contraceptive devices. Championed by Margaret Sanger among others, the movement sought the legalization of contraception. By the 1960s, most arguments given against the use of birth control centered on the idea that it was immoral and that the views of people who found it objectionable must be respected.

Rock also explains how he took part in several attempts to revoke the laws against contraception in his home state of Massachusetts. All failed. Many battles were fought between medical providers and hospital boards regarding physicians' ability to discuss birth control with their patients. Rock asserts that if public policy were ever to allow for a woman's right to use birth control, several important ground rules should be followed. His framework relies on a settlement in New York City that overturned laws banning physicians from prescribing contraceptive devices. He declares that first, family planning is a religious matter involving the consent of husbands and wives, in addition to being a medical issue involving the mother's health and the well-being of families. Second, the State has no right to legislate the religious perspectives related to birth control. Additionally, proper medical care requires provision for family planning, though no one should ever be compelled to use these services should he or she choose to reject them. And finally, all methods of fertility control should be made available, so that each patient can decide which form is right for her.

The Time Has Come explains Rock's belief that further research into fertility, the menstrual cycle, and conception would render the rhythm method more reliable and thus more useful to Catholic couples. To this end, Rock discusses his desire to see the US allocate more funds to investigate these subjects. More importantly, however, as one of the inventors of the contraceptive pill, Rock argues that the Roman Catholic Church should revise its stance on the use of contraception. In his book, Rock argues that since the pill functioned by suspending ovulation, it did not violate the Church's edict that no one be permitted to deliberately suppress reproductive function. He contends that the rhythm method actually suppresses reproductive function, since by avoiding insemination the ovum cannot be fertilized; by contrast, if ovulation is suspended there is no egg to be fertilized, and he reasons that the contraceptive pill fulfilled the edict better than the rhythm method does. Furthermore, in all the tests he performed to develop the pill, women who took it were often more fertile after the tests were complete. Rock felt it was important to point out that the pill actually improved a woman's chances of conceiving—especially women who were previously infertile. Thus the pill could actually be used to improve fertility, rather than always prevent it.

Rock concludes *The Time Has Come* with the strong call to end the battle over birth control. A number of changes came about after *The Time Has Come* was published, some that were in keeping with Rock's goals, and some that were disappointing. In 1965, the US Supreme Court reversed the Connecticut law banning birth control, stating that it violated a couple's privacy. Massachusetts legalized the sale of birth control to married couples in 1967, but continued to outlaw selling it to unmarried women. The latter was struck down by the US Supreme Court in 1972. In 1968 the Roman Catholic Church published the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*, which concluded that all methods of birth control except periodic continence were a violation of natural law, and therefore the Church prohibited them. Rock was deeply disappointed by this outcome, as were many other Catholics; a number of priests resigned after the decision was published.

Sources

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