11-29-1991

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Pope Criticizes Sex Education Manuals & Birth Control Programs

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General
Published: Friday, November 29, 1991

On Nov. 19 in Rome, Pope Paul John II denounced sex education manuals developed for distribution in Costa Rican public schools and certain "anti-natalist" campaigns. The Pope said the manuals failed to address "ethical and moral dimensions related to the problems of transmitting life," leading to "permissive attitudes" among young people. In statements to reporters in San Jose, Education Minister Marvin Herrera noted that the sex education guides had also been criticized by the Costa Rican Bishops Conference in March. He said distribution plans were scrapped pending further recommendations from the bishops. Herrera concurred that while the pamphlets contained ample information on human anatomy, they did not address moral issues of sexuality. Emilia Leon, Health Ministry public health director, said the ministry was attempting to reduce "reproductive risks," rather than birth control. The objective, she added, is to avoid teen pregnancy and health problems experienced by older women associated with multiple pregnancies. The minister said that while she understood the Catholic Church's position on morality, from a public health perspective use of birth control devices and prophylactics is necessary. President Rafael Angel Calderon said that the Pope had been misinformed. The sex education pamphlets in question were not developed for students, but rather for teachers. The materials, he added, will not be distributed until changes proposed by the Bishops Conference have been incorporated. Deputy Nury Vargas criticized the Vatican for "intervening in Costa Rican domestic affairs." She said, "Young people, and especially young women, must be educated about their bodies. Apparently no one has explained to the Pope that the second major cause of death among poor women is back alley abortions. He also appears unaware of the serious problem of teenage pregnancy." According to the Costa Rican Demographic Association, teenagers account for 17% of all pregnancies. The sex education materials were developed with the help of a US$1.5 million donation by the US Agency for International Development (AID) disbursed in 1988. Under the agreement with USAID, the government was committed to a five-year "reproductive health" program aimed at reducing the proportion of unwanted pregnancies from 42% to 25%, and the birth rate from 32 to 28 live births per 1,000 inhabitants/year. (Basic data from EFE, 11/19/91; Agence France-Presse, 11/21/91; ACAN-EFE, 11/20/91, 11/22/91)

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