

N4T

Santiago: The Cult of Virility in Latin America

By JAMES RESTON

SANTIAGO, Chile, April 8—A remarkable event is now taking place in Chile. The liberal *Presidente* of this Roman Catholic country, Eduardo Frei, who has plenty of political problems without adding the controversial question of birth control, is now receiving the delegates to the eighth World Conference of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. This could not have happened here a year or so ago and few Presidents in Latin America, even with the ambiguous support of Pope Paul, would dare open such a conference now.

Potential Disaster

But the family planners are here from all over the world, brought together, as Lord Caradon of Britain told them, "by a sense of danger, indeed by a sense of potential disaster on a scale never before imagined."

Latin America is the most dramatic symbol of this gloomy vision. It is in a race with the pace of history. It is making progress in the production of food and industrial and consumer goods but its production of people is outrunning everything else.

It has a higher birth rate than any other large area of the world, higher even than India's. It has a population of about 200 million now, which will be 300 million in the seventies. Larger than the United States or the Soviet Union now, the best estimates for the end

of the century put its population then at between 600- and 700 million.

Even the present population is beyond the control of the best government in this part of the world. Almost two-thirds of the people living below the Rio Grande today are existing on 1,200 calories a day, which is half of the adequate diet level. (The U.S. average is 3,100.)

The per capita income in Latin America is about \$250 a year. The illiteracy rate is 65 per cent and the people are choking the cities before they have conquered them. And forms of government affect all this very little. Dictators, military juntas, Social Democrats, liberals like Frei here in Chile—all have the same problem and all are running behind.

Chile has the most liberal birth control policy in Latin America. It permits the distribution of birth control information and contraceptive devices (though not the intrauterine coil). But poverty, religion, ignorance and fear still create an almost unmanageable problem.

The Abortion Business

It is illegal to have an abortion in Chile, but abortion is a flourishing business at \$20 an operation. And for every 250,000 live births a year in this country there are an estimated 150,000 abortions. Yet the annual population growth of 2.4 per cent is running well ahead of the 1.9 per cent growth of

food production, and the problem is much more serious in Brazil and the other tropical countries of Latin America.

One of the disturbing things at this conference is that, much as the delegates hope to see the Roman Catholic Church approve the use of chemical and mechanical birth control devices, few of them think that this would deal effectively with the problem. Even the abolition of the Latin-American siesta, which is apparently an agreeable and spectacularly productive rumble in these climes, would not bring the birth rate within manageable proportions.

Three popular notions or illusions seem to worry the delegates to this population conference. The first is that the right of parents to produce children is greater than the right of children to a decent life.

The second is that platoons of children are an economic boon in underdeveloped countries, and the third is the foolish and disastrous masculine idea that the adult male is a dud unless he produces as many children as Bobby Kennedy. Even the Pope, if he finally reconciles his doctrine on birth control with his doctrine of social justice, may not be able to deal with the stubborn vanity and stupidity of the ignorant male in Latin America.

The church is changing very slowly in Latin America, but the male animal in these regions is worse than the baboon and worships the cult of virility

long after he has forgotten the cult of Christianity.

Machismo, they call it down here, which is a word for sexual license not only within but outside the family. The Latin male is not satisfied with love, he must have life—one new life a year, if possible, in order to prove he is good for something.

"If we endeavor to deal with the great world problems of poverty, and hunger, and ignorance, and disease, and hatred, and fear, and violence too, without at the same time dealing with the problem of population we shall utterly fail," Lord Caradon told the delegates. But nobody suggested a remedy for *machismo*, which is even stronger in these parts than the teachings of the church.

Under Discussion

Nevertheless, at least the question is now being discussed openly in some parts of Latin America. The fabulous cities are talking about it in private, if not in public.

The editors are agonizing about it with one another, but not yet dealing with it in print. But as so many other things in Latin America, sex, as the fatalistic acceptance of poverty and privilege, is being questioned. President Frei here in Chile at least gave it a platform, and what is discussed here may very well prove to be more important than the political and economic discussions of the hemisphere Presidents at Punta del Este in the next few days.