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Catholics and eugenics: a little-known history

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NCR Today

This week on "Interfaith Voices," we are airing an interview that deals with a topic from Catholic life I had never heard of before: the Catholic struggle against the eugenics movement in the first half of the 20th century. It is a conversation with Sharon Leon, author of a new book, *An Image of God: The Catholic Struggle with Eugenics*.

This is a legacy of which Catholics should be proud.

The eugenics movement of the first half of the 20th century touted the idea that the human species could be improved if the "right" people reproduced and the "unfit" did not. ("Unfit" included: "feeble-minded," "imbeciles," diseased, those who were the wrong color or ethnic group.) It was an attempt at "selective breeding" to control heredity.

The worst of it was epitomized in forced sterilizations of women who were institutionalized in some way. Many state laws permitted that, and a landmark Supreme Court case, *Buck v. Bell* in 1927, ratified those laws. (For the record, *Buck v. Bell* has never been overturned).

Interestingly, much of the original movement was not aimed at African-Americans. According to Leon, the system of racial segregation in the U.S. was such that most eugenics advocates did not perceive a "threat." Rather, it was aimed largely at the immigrants from southern and eastern Europe who came to the U.S. in great numbers between about 1880 and 1924. These were largely Italians, Poles and Slavic peoples. And of course, most were Catholic. Interestingly, they were classified in those days as "races" rather than "ethnic groups."

In a certain sense, Catholic leaders were defending their own from southern and eastern Europe, but World War II gave their actions a broader meaning. When the Nazi atrocities against the Jews became

public, the importance of Catholic leadership against eugenics became clear. The "science" behind the movement had been undermined for years, so the eugenics movement went quiet -- at least the negative movement, which advocated forced sterilizations, etc.

According to Leon, the 1920s and 1930s were also a time when lay Catholics who opposed eugenics matured politically, learning to use secular arguments (in this case, the faulty science behind eugenics) in the public sphere.

The opposition to eugenics was indeed a proud moment in U.S. Catholic history. Here is the link to the interview.

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