

Catholic Adoptions in Ontario

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suitable Catholic home can be found? The Minister of Welfare in the Province of Alberta, where the problem is much greater, has proposed such action in his own province, and has suggested that the time limit be set at one year, which seems a reasonable length of time.

My interest in this whole matter is first to gain the right to the facilities offered by the Children's Aid Society for adoption without regard to my religion and second, by gaining that right, to provide an additional number of adoptive homes for some of the children who remain unadopted under the present system.

(3) Catholic Adoptions in Ontario

W. WARD MARKLE*

During the past few months, there have been frequent instances of speakers and writers giving utterance to the question of Catholic adoptions. Most of these reported speeches or articles gave the impression that Catholic babies are not being adopted; that there are insufficient Catholic couples applying for adoption and that these children, as a result, have been deprived of permanent homes. It is on this basis, that some of these people have suggested we engage in "inter-faith adoptions" or that religion should cease to be a factor. Extreme views have been actually expressed recommending that, —

- a) Religion be completely eliminated
- b) That the State or Province designate the religion of a child.

It is my considered opinion that most of these suggestions have been made by people, basing their opinion on rumor rather than fact and presumably ignorant of the whole process of adoption. In order to remedy a situation which, incidentally, does not exist, they recommend changes in the present adoption laws of Ontario.

Let us look at The Child Welfare Act, R.S.O., 1960, Chapter 53— which provides in Section 31, the following code:—

- (1) A child shall be deemed to have the same religious faith as his father unless it is shown that an agreement has been entered into in writing, signed by his parents, that he be brought up in the same religious faith as his mother.
- (2) An illegitimate child shall be deemed to have the religious faith of his mother.

Based on common law theory, these provisions of the Act provide a basis for determining the religion of children. To transfer the right of the father would be a violation of a basic concept of law; to abro-

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gate it to the State from the unmarried mother would be contrary to the principles of a voluntary act on her part.

Without pursuing the complexities of State designation of religion, how would this be done? Would a judge designate religion on the basis of population? Would he do so on the basis of adoption applications? Or what would be the framework of such legislation for his guidance?

I point out that under the existing Child Welfare Act, this legislation has developed a confidence in the function of Children's Aid Societies, particularly, in the services to the unmarried mother. In my opinion, the use of these services is unparalleled anywhere in the world. We have no black or gray market of babies in Ontario and one need but look at the actual figures of illegitimacy and the number of unmarried mothers served here in our Province, to arrive at the same conclusion.

While the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto cannot speak for all Children's Aid Societies, it wishes to state its position emphatically and clearly. In so doing, it points out that it is the largest Catholic agency in Ontario, if not in Canada. It is also the second largest Children's Aid Society in the Province, providing care for, by far, the largest number of Catholic children.

In order that everyone may be fully aware of the role of the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto, it may be well to clarify our services to unmarried mothers. I hasten to interject that of the 970 unmarried mothers that were given service by this Society in 1963, approximately 40% were from outside the Metropolitan area.

Because many people have an erroneous impression of this service, I again say that the unmarried mother comes to our Society for service as a purely voluntary act. If she states she is not a Catholic, she is immediately referred to the Toronto Children's Aid Society. If she states that she is of the Catholic religion, our workers are very clear in explaining the function of our Society; that we do not,—nor will we,—endeavour to influence her judgment in making a decision concerning her expected child; that our role is merely to help her resolve the conflict in which she finds herself.

Having provided services to 2,751 unmarried mothers in the years 1958 to 1962 inclusive, we know from experience that the first decision of any of them is not always the final one. Actually, in providing these services to unmarried mothers during that period, 1,716 of them have kept their own babies and 1,035 have entrusted their children to the care of our Society. It must be explicitly understood that these girls come to a Children's Aid Society, be they Protestant, Catholic or Jewish because they recognize the value of the service. In making a decision to give up their child for adoption, they are

assured by law, that their children are guaranteed a continuance of their religious heritage.

These babies, then, need a permanent home—which is achieved by the legal process of adoption. What, then, is the next step?

For the most part, we proceed to a court of law wherein a judge makes a final decision in granting permanent wardship. This Society, as a result, can subsequently effect placement in an adoption home. In some cases, because we sense the unmarried mother is not sure of her decision and, in recognition of this, we ask the judge of the court to grant temporary wardship. In a smaller percentage of cases, where the decision of the unmarried mother is obvious, we make such a placement by having her sign a consent to adoption. This, then, in effect, is the policy and procedure involved in our services to unmarried mothers.

Now we proceed to the second stage. For the healthy, normal baby, we have no lack of adoption homes. The placement of such babies is made as quickly as possible, thus assuring them of the love, security and happiness, so essentially needed in their development. What children, then, are not placed as quickly as they should be? For the Negro baby, for the baby of mixed racial origin, for the physically handicapped baby,—we have some—but certainly not enough adoption homes.

There is another group of children in the care of our Society—children who come into our care as the result of negligent parents and the majority of whom are at an older age. Oftentimes, and too frequently, because of family breakdown, they too become permanent wards of this Society. Many of these children of older ages have had too long an association with their own parents to be considered adoptable. They are not accepting of adoption and, in truth, are only desirous of returning to their own parents. In all of these cases, with rare exception, the religion has been well defined and is acceptable both to the children and to the Society.

Thus, we have two groups. In one—the Negro, mixed racial, physically or mentally handicapped and in group two—the child who comes into care at an older age, not accepting of adoption. It is well to point out that of the 55 Children's Aid Societies in Ontario, 3 serve Catholic clients only, 3 serve non-Catholic only, and 49 serve all denominations. We are sure that the two groups of children, as outlined above, pose a problem—common to all societies and not peculiar to ours alone.

It is interesting to note, in substantiation of the above statement, that at the request of this Society, the Department of Child Welfare did a thorough survey as of June 1962 and, at that time, according to the official statistical figure, there were 1,070 Catholic children available for adoption and 1,314 non-Catholic children available for adoption. When you further consider that these figures include all

wards, at least, legally adoptable up to the age of 16, and includes the two groups as aforementioned, it gives a much different picture to the impression generally created throughout the Province of Ontario. Since that time, as the result of the Catholic Women's League Adoption Programme, which is taking place in approximately 900 parishes throughout Ontario, this Society has received many inquiries from children's aid societies who have no Catholic children to place in their respective, approved adoption homes. There is every evidence to support a factual statement that most of our children's aid societies have approved Catholic adoption homes without having infants to place in them.

It may be well to also point out that this Society, as a matter of policy, does not place children in any institution,—except wherein the treatment facilities or programme is meeting the needs of the child. From our standpoint, the use of the so called "orphanage" has been eliminated.

As at the end of January 1964, our Society had 91 approved adoption homes and 93 more, awaiting approval, for the placement of children, particularly infants. Believing as we do, in the right of any child to have the advantage of the spiritual as well as the material environment, we, of course, will continue to place our children in good Catholic homes. It is obvious to us that the persons making statements concerning Catholic adoptions have either been misinformed or ignorant of the facts. We hope that this statement will clarify the situation.

If there is to be a conclusion to this article, it may well be in stating the figures, as pertaining to the Provincial Adoption Resource Exchange, which acts as a referral service for adoptable children from the 55 Children's Aid Societies in Ontario. In 1962, the percentage of Catholic children referred to this service was 63.3%. In 1963, the percentage had dropped to 40%, which was more than a complete reversal.

Subsequent reports from many societies indicate a noticeable increase in Catholic adoption applicants. Recognizing that the on-going programme of the Catholic Women's League is only in its infancy, there is every reason to believe that the demand for Catholic adoptable children will more than exceed the supply. If this assumption is correct, then it is only reasonable to further assume that the rapidly increasing Catholic population of Ontario will more than absorb any potential supply of children for adoption. I would, therefore, recommend to the other segments of the community that they take a good hard look at the rapidly increasing Catholic population and the trend to a shortage of Catholic babies for adoption. This, in no way, influences our opinion that all infants have the right to