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Margaret Sanger
9/21/57

Margaret Sanger, the leader of the birth control movement in America, talks to Wallace about why she became an advocate for birth control, over-population, the Catholic Church, and morality.

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Transcript

THE MIKE WALLACE INTERVIEW

Guest: Margaret Sanger

9/21/57

WALLACE: Good evening, what you're about to witness is, an unrehearsed, uncensored interview on the issue of Birth Control. It will be a free discussion of an adult topic, a topic that we feel merits public examination. My name is Mike Wallace, the cigarette is Philip Morris.

(MUSIC)

ANNOUNCER: New Philip Morris, probably the best natural smoke you ever tasted, presents...(MUSIC)

ANNOUNCER: The Mike Wallace Interview.

WALLACE: Tonight, we go after the story of the woman who violated convention and bucked powerful opposition to lead the Birth Control Movement in America. You see her behind me, she is Mrs. Margaret Sanger, who was thrown into jail eight different times for her efforts. If you're curious to know why Mrs. Sanger has devoted her life to the Birth Control Movement, if you'd like to hear her answer to the charge that Birth Control is a sin, and if you want to get her views on politics, divorce and God, we'll go after those stories in just a moment.

WALLACE: My guest's opinions are not necessarily mine, the station's or my sponsor's Philip Morris Incorporated, but whether you agree or disagree, we feel that none should deny the right of these views to be broadcast. One might say that the basis of this program is fact and fiction. And using that yardstick I'd like to apply it to something I usually talk about at this time and that is this: Philip Morris Cigarettes.

WALLACE: Here's why I smoke 'em and enjoy them. Fact One:-- Today's Philip Morris is no ordinary blend, it's a special blend, of domestic and imported tobaccos. Opinion? My taste may be different from yours, but on this I think we can agree. This cigarette tastes natural; I think you'll like it. Fact Two:-- Today's Philip Morris is made of mild, lighter leaf tobaccos. Opinion. To me that accounts for the

genuine mildness I get in every puff--it's what I call a man's kind of mildness, there's no filter, no foolin', no artificial mildness, because you see there's nothing between you and the tobacco itself. And fact three is, of course, this box. Philip Morris was the first non-filtered cigarette to come in a crush-proofed box. Opinion? A cigarette that keeps better, smokes better, so get with Philip Morris yourself and check these facts, when you do, I think you'll find it's probably the best natural smoke you ever tasted. And now to our story.

WALLACE: When Mrs. Margaret Sanger opened the first Birth Control Clinic in the United States, back in 1916, birth control, was a dirty word. The police threw her into jail as they were to do seven more times during her crusade. A crusade that still faces the reasoning, but unalterable opposition of the Roman Catholic Church. That crusade kept Mrs. Sanger away from her children for long periods. It helped to break up her first marriage, and she suffered constant harrowing social abuse.

WALLACE: Mrs. Sanger, in view of all of that, let me ask you this first of all. Why did you do it? I realize that you had an intellectual conviction that birth control was a boon to mankind, but I'm sure that others have had that conviction too, and so what I would like to know is this: What events --what emotions in your life, made Margaret Sanger a crusader for birth control?

SANGER: Well, Mr. Wallace, it's hard to say that any one thing has made one do this or that. I think that from the very beginning -- I came from a large family, my mother died young, eleven children, that made an impression on me as a child. I was a trained nurse, went among the people.

SANGER: I saw, women, who asked to have some means whereby they wouldn't have to have another pregnancy too early, after the last child, the last abortion, which many of them had. So there are numerous things that are, one after the other, that really made you feel that you had to do something.

WALLACE: There are some other possible reasons that suggest themselves on reading your biography by Lawrence Lader. Your mother, as you say, died prematurely after bearing eleven children. She was born a Catholic, was she not?

SANGER: She was born a Catholic, yes. In Ireland.

WALLACE: And your, your father was sort of a -- village atheist, who clashed with church authorities and because of his atheism his earnings dwindled under community pressure --you and your brothers and sisters were known as quote children of the devil, end quote. Could it be then, that in part at least you were driven emotionally toward the birth control movement because of antagonism toward the church, because that was a way to fight the church.

SANGER: No I don't think I had anything of the kind in mind-- I was -- I was what I would call a born humanitarian. I don't like to see people suffer, I don't like to see cruelty even to this day, and in nursing you see a great deal of cruelty and unnecessary suffering. At that time, there was no opposition as far as the church was concerned, any church. It was mainly the law, the Federal Law and State Laws, that one had to--to think of. The church was not in my mind at all.

WALLACE: Well in going after your motive then, and I will press you just a little bit more about that and then get to the specifics of this evening, but in your motive, in the movement, is it possible that the movement itself -- the feeling of wanting to do anything that you felt was important, that perhaps that moved you a good deal.

WALLACE: Because, the fact remains that you led a movement against overwhelming pressures that stem back to centuries and in doing so according to your autobiography, you even left your first husband, and you wrote this to a friend, Mrs. Sanger. You said, "where is the man to give me what the movement gives, in joy and interest and freedom." Now, what was this joy, this freedom, that you craved?

SANGER: Well, I don't remember that letter -- (LAUGHS) -- how it was written, but I think it was not question of a -- a marriage at all, there's a certain satisfaction in a --doing something that is going to alleviate the sufferings of women, in particular, and I was quite a feminist, at the time.

WALLACE: hm -- hm -- obviously..

SANGER: ...and a -- yes -- and a -- I naturally didn't want to see women take all the suffering of child-bearing and of pregnancies. So it was a pleasure in a sense to think that you were striking at an archaic law, which it was..

SANGER: ...it was put on the statute books by Anthony Comstock some years ago, and no one had stood up against it and no one had--had tried to change the laws, and at that time not even a doctor had a right to use the United States Mail in common carriers for books, for learning, for anything that he had to do with this question. It was considered obscene. The whole question was considered obscene.

WALLACE: Mrs. Sanger, you have helped to spread the Birth Control Movement, not only here in the United States, but in Europe, and the Orient as well. Why? Why is Birth Control of such vital importance internationally? Is it just to save women's suffering is that the only reason in your mind?

SANGER: Well, not entirely, the population question is a great concern today and the rate at which the birth - births come in to the we're saving them now - at one time the children died...they didn't have the food. Today our population all over the world is getting certainly better consideration and better conditions than they had at the time when I was there. I went to every country because I was invited and a--I didn't spread--go into the country myself--I was invited to go to Japan and to speak there, have eight lectures on the question of Birth Control and Peace.

WALLACE: Well, do you believe that Birth Control is essential if we want to keep millions of people across the world from starving is that your thesis?

SANGER: Say it again.

WALLACE: Do you feel that Birth Control is essential to keep millions of people across the world from starving?

SANGER: Well, I think that Birth Control--if you keep the population more or less static until you pick up your resources, certainly you'll--keep--prevent their starving.

WALLACE: Well, what's more important -- Birth Control or picking up the resources?

SANGER: Well, picking up the resources there's just a limit to that too. There's just so much -- take Japan -- and she cannot feed they've had the best experts come there when MacArthur was there and the best experts would say that they have twenty million more people than they can feed; she's got to be fed outside in some -- in some way. She's got to have that kind of help if she's going to keep from fighting.

WALLACE: But certainly around the world there is potential agricultural land that is not being properly used now. Just this past year on May 21st the New York Times summarized an important study of the world's food resources, made by Professor James Barner of the California Institute of Technology. Professor Barner says that the world is not using one billion acres of potential agricultural land and he adds that if this land were used, and present agricultural land were improved, the entire world could be fed adequately even if the population increased by one third in the next fifty years.

SANGER: Oh, Mr. Wallace, you hear so many fantastic things what can happen, what may happen -- ah -- this and that --I've heard it for the last thirty years, at any rate, of what could be done but it's never done, and the thing is what is it now -- what have we got today...A very distinguished woman spoke to me about Arizona and she said I wish you wouldn't talk about population --she said all the population in the United States could be put in one state and I said what state -- she said Arizona.

SANGER: I said did you ever hear of caliche--she didn't know if I was talking about a delicatessen or what. I said well, caliche is harder than any rock, and it's usually about three inches below the ground, where-- it looks beautiful it looks as if you could have food, it looks as if you could have corn or wheat or cotton--but as a matter of fact you have to dynamite caliche out of the ground again in order to have a little shrub have a little grass or a few flowers so many problems that-- when it comes to that. And the demographers, I never heard of any one that would agree with that. That we could have another in the world. Another, another third.

WALLACE: You say that originally the opposition was in all law and you had to fight against that. Today your opposition stems mainly from where, from what source?

SANGER: Well, I think that the opposition is mainly from the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church.

WALLACE: Of the church

SANGER: The hierarchy...

WALLACE: Of the hierarchy of the church. You feel that the parishioners themselves, the lay--people of the church are not against it.

SANGER: They come to all of our clinics just the same as the non-Catholics do. Exactly the same.

WALLACE: Well let's look at the official Catholic position...opposition to Birth-Control. I read now from a church publication called "The Question Box" in forbidding Birth Control it says the following: It says the immediate purpose and primary end of marriage is the begetting of children, when the marital relation is so used as to render the fulfillment of its purposes impossible--that is by Birth Control--it is used unethically and unnaturally. Now what's wrong with that position?

SANGER: Well, it's very wrong, it's not normal it's -- it has the wrong attitude towards marriage, toward love, toward the relationships between men and women.

WALLACE: Well the natural law they say is that first of all the primary function of sex in marriage is to beget children. Do you disagree with that?

SANGER: I disagree with that a hundred percent.

WALLACE: Your feeling is what then?

SANGER: My feeling is that love and attraction between men and women, in many cases the very finest relationship has nothing to do with bearing a child. It's secondary. Many, many times and we know that --you see your birth rates and you can talk to people who have very happy marriages and they're not having babies every year. Yes, I think that's a celibate attitude...

WALLACE: Surely, a celibate attitude but you agree that Catholicism according to the tenets of Catholicism they rule that birth control violates not only the church's position --it isn't the church's position but they say it violates a natural law as I have just explained, therefore birth control is a sin no matter who practices it. Now the violation of the natural law--you certainly can take no issue with the natural law as the hierarchy of the Catholic Church regards it...

SANGER: Oh, I certainly do take issue with it and I think it's untrue and I think it's unnatural.

WALLACE: Well let me ask you

SANGER: ... It's an unnatural attitude to take --how do they know? I mean, after all, they're celibates. They don't know love, they don't know marriage, they know nothing about bringing up children nor any of the marriage problems of life, and yet they speak to people as if they were God.

WALLACE: Let me let me ask you this question. Suppose a healthy, well-to-do couple decide for some reason never to have children, use birth control all their lives. Would you say that your methods are being misused, Mrs. Sanger?

SANGER: Not if they were intelligent people and they had some reason for thinking of children as a responsibility, or they -- some disease that they might have, that they wouldn't like to pass on to a child and I think it would be a very unselfish attitude for them to take if there is a disease.

WALLACE: No, I say a healthy, well-to-do couple. A couple that just doesn't want children and for that reason they use birth control all the way. Do you think that is a misuse of your methods?

SANGER: I don't think it's a misuse. I think if they're intelligent adults that they must know what they want, they must manage their lives themselves and certainly there's nothing birth control--than there is in other things that you might deny yourself.

WALLACE: I asked you your motives a little while ago, at the beginning of the program--your motives in working for birth control as hard as you have for as many years as you have. You reject the principle Catholic argument against birth control as being totally invalid. Well what do you think is the reason, the motive of the Church in forbidding birth control?

SANGER: You'd have to ask a Catholic that, I couldn't say what their motive is.

WALLACE: Well ah -- you couldn't say officially what their motive is but you certainly must have an opinion about it, Mrs. Sanger.

SANGER: Well, I don't have much to do with the--with the hierarchy and I know that the people that come to our organization and want to have the same methods, or whatever it is that one can have, to prevent a pregnancy that those women say to us--I, we ask their religion very often and they say, "I am a Catholic, I was raised in the Catholic Church, on this my Church is wrong, on this, this is the the one thing, I will never be anything else but my Church is wrong on this one thing" and that is said over and over and over again. So what the motive is...

WALLACE: But you won't hazard a guess.

SANGER; I don't care to, thank you.

WALLACE: May I ask you why? Now I know that in private and...in--actually in public discussions, I think, prior to this time--you have been willing to state your understanding of what the motives of the Church are and now you would you would rather remain silent. May I ask you why?

SANGER: Well, simply because I don't think that a -- that the Church has changed in its attitude, some of the hierarchy have changed their attitude. You can't say the same thing that you might have said a year ago or two years ago as to your belief, as to your opinions. I'm not going to --

WALLACE: Have you heard it said, that the reason that the Church is against birth control is because they want more Catholics?

SANGER: I've read it.

WALLACE: Do you believe it?

SANGER: Well, if you read their papers, where they point out Boston, that that's what had happened in Boston in Massachusetts. They had simply out-bred the Protestants and they're -- they -- in Boston in Massachusetts they have control. I read that in their own papers

WALLACE: I see...of course the Church's answer--the Church's answer, and I read now from a pamphlet published by the Redemptionist Fathers in Missouri, says as follows: It says "that point of view about wanting more Catholics is nonsense. Quote, "The Catholic Church does not command Catholic husbands and wives to have even one child. The Church considers it more than normally meritorious for them to have no children if they mutually and perpetually give up the use of the marriage right for the Love of God."

SANGER: Alright, I have no quote what they do, so they...I think that the question in my mind is that they may do and order their own people to do as they wish but I object to their having the same rules for people who are not of the same religion.

WALLACE: Well, they believe, you see, that it was a natural law, not a Catholic Law, but a "natural law," and therefore a sin not just for Catholics, but a sin for all peoples...and I think that there are other religious groups, the very very Orthodox Jews, feel the same way about birth control. Let's look at another argument against Birth Control, Mrs. Sanger, published in Red Book Magazine, in March of 1956. It says "Birth Control is a devastating social force, which tends to weaken the moral fibre of the community. Immunity from parenthood encourages promiscuity, particularly when unmarried persons can so easily avail themselves of the devices." Do you doubt that?

SANGER: I doubt it.

WALLACE: You do...

SANGER: Certainly.

WALLACE: Then let me read from a news story in the Philadelphia Daily News on June 10th, 1942. The story quotes you as urging the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps to give its members quote preventive measures against pregnancy end quote and you add,quote abortion and illegitimacy are bound to result if the Government doesn't recognize human nature. End quote. In other words you were not advocating Christian morality, but rather ways for single women to avoid bearing illegitimate children.

SANGER: Where was it taken from.

WALLACE: Philadelphia Daily News -- June 10, 1942 direct quote from Margaret Sanger.

SANGER: I doubt it. I don't believe I ever made such a remark.

WALLACE: Well, in the same vein in your autobiography --which you cannot disavow-- you wrote the following about Sexologist Havelock Ellis. You said "he's been able to clarify the question of sex and free it from the smudginess connected with it from the beginning of Christianity". Now why --what do you mean by the smudginess connected with sex and why do you blame it on Christianity?

SANGER: Well, there's many reasons of course -- if we had more records of it to go on with Christianity and I think I was speaking of Havelock Ellis as having clarified the question of homosexuals...making the thing a --not exactly a perverted thing, but a thing that a person is born with different kinds of eyes, different kinds of structures and so forth...that he didn't make all homosexuals perverts--and I thought he helped clarify that to the medical profession and to the scientists of the world as perhaps one of the first ones to do that. That was one of things that I meant in that.

WALLACE: Mrs. Sanger do you disagree that Catholics or do you feel that Catholics should not have a right to have a say when the city administration contemplates spending their tax dollars on birth control or the dissemination of birth control information? Something that Catholics believe is sinful.

SANGER: That they have a right to say --

WALLACE: Do you feel that they don't have a right to have a say when a city administration contemplates spending their dollars -- tax dollars on birth control? For instance here in New York Catholics comprise about 45% of our population -- they're the largest single group. Well, don't you think that they should have the democratic right to lobby against having their money spent their tax money spent on something that they consider evil?

SANGER: I suppose they have a right. And they certainly do it -- but so have the others and yet they're only 45% of the population -- and that is not the majority.

WALLACE: But they have a right to get up and...

SANGER: Certainly. I'd have no objection to their having a say about it--but I think we should have the same right. I say "we", I mean non-Catholics .

WALLACE: Well, of course this is a little bit of variance of something you have told our reporter earlier this week, you said earlier this week --"it's not only wrong it should be made illegal for any religious group to prohibit dissemination of birth control -- even among its own members". In other words you would like to see the government legislate religious beliefs in a certain sense.

SANGER: Honestly, -- where are these strange things coming from -- that I said them (LAUGHS)..I should like to know when.

WALLACE: Well, now you know that my reporter spent a good deal of time with you. He's a very accurate young man...

SANGER: Yes..

WALLACE: And this is a this is a specific quote.

SANGER: Well, I don't think I put it quite that way.

WALLACE: What are your religious beliefs, Mrs. Sanger? Do you believe in God in the sense of a Divine Being -- who rewards or punishes people after death?

SANGER: Well, I have a different attitude about--the divine--I feel that we have divinity within us, and the more we express the good part of our lives, the more the divine within us expresses itself.I suppose I would call myself an Episcopalian by religion and there's a--many other, if you travel around the world you get quite a bit of the feeling of all--all religions--have so much alike in the divine part of our own being. And I suppose you just couldn't just put that into a book or you couldn't put it to a

phrase or a sentence.

WALLACE: Do you believe in sin -- When I say believe I don't mean believe in committing sin do you believe there is such a thing as a sin?

SANGER: I think the greatest sin in the world is bringing children into the world--that have disease from their parents, that have no chance in the world to be a human being practically. Delinquents, prisoners, all sorts of things just marked when they're born. That to me is the greatest sin -- that people can -- can commit..

WALLACE: But sin in the ordinary sense that we regard it -- do you believe or do you not believe.

SANGER: What-what would they be?

WALLACE: Do you believe infidelity is a sin?

SANGER: Well, I'm not going to specify what I think is a sin. I stated what I think is the worst sin.

WALLACE: Yes, but then you asked me to say what--and I said what and ah--you refuse to answer me?

SANGER: I don't know about infidelity, that has many personalities to it--and what a person's own belief is--you can't, I couldn't generalize on any of those things as being sins.

WALLACE: Murder is a sin...

SANGER: Well, I naturally think murder, whether it's a sin or not, is a terrible act.

WALLACE: In just a moment Mrs. Sanger I'd like to ask you about another social problem here in the United States -- Divorce. Nearly four hundred thousand couples get divorced in this country each year. And I'd like to get your views on the cause and possible prevention of this problem. We'll get Mrs. Sanger's answer to that question in just sixty seconds.

(COMMERCIAL)

WALLACE: Get with Philip Morris in regular pack or crush proof box, probably the best natural smoke you ever tasted.

WALLACE: Now then Mrs. Sanger there are nearly four hundred thousand divorces or annulments in America each year --What -- and this is hard to do in the short time, of course, that we have -- what do you recommend to cut down the divorce rate?

SANGER: Well, as a great many of our clinics are including, in the work that they do in birth control clinics, having marriage counseling. So when the woman or the man come and complain that their marriage is on the skids--we invite them to come and have special talks with some of our psychiatrists or others who are making a study of that all over the country. Where we have about five hundred clinics -- they almost all include marriage counseling and marriage erection.

WALLACE: May I ask you this, could it be that women in the United States have become too independent --that they followed the lead of women like Margaret Sanger by neglecting family life for a career? Let me quote from your biography describing your second marriage to Noah Slee. Quote, "In New York Mrs. Sanger maintained every clause of their compact of independence. They had separate apartments --they telephoned each other for dinner or theatre engagements or passed notes back and forth". Would you call this a sound formula for marriage Mrs. Sanger?

SANGER: For different people, yes...it certainly was for me, and for my husband. We had a very happy marriage...he had different friends than I had and--I don't believe in forcing, after all we were two adults, forcing your friends on another person when they have an entirely different outlook--it worked out very well.

WALLACE: I know that it did. You have two sons -- One final question. You have two sons... How many children have they?

SANGER: Would you like to see them?

WALLACE: I would indeed.

SANGER: (LAUGHS).

WALLACE: How many children, that's six in this family.

SANGER: Five boys and a girl in that family.

WALLACE: And in the other family?

SANGER: Two girls.

WALLACE: Two girls. Mrs. Sanger I thank you so much for taking time out in coming and talking to us here this evening.

SANGER: And, Mr. Wallace, I've never smoked, but I'm going to begin and take up smoking and use Philip Morris as my... as the cigarette for me to take.

WALLACE: Well I thank you very much Mrs. Sanger. In the eyes of some Margaret Sanger has been a heroine, in the eyes of others she's been a destructive force. The purpose of this interview has been not of course to try to resolve this issue but to open it to a little sensible discussion. This was done with a feeling that all of us, regardless of our beliefs, can do nothing but profit from a free exchange of ideas. I'll bring you a run-down on next week's interview in just sixty seconds or so.

WALLACE: These few seconds at the end of the interview are among the most enjoyable of the week for me. For much as I enjoy smoking during the interview with Mrs. Sanger, I believe I enjoy this cigarette most right now...of course Philip Morris is easy to enjoy and the taste is natural -- there's mildness here too. Today's Philip Morris has what I call a man's kind of mildness-- there's no filter no fooling no artificial mildness, because there is nothing between you and the tobacco itself. Which is why I say get with Philip Morris, probably the best natural smoke you ever tasted.

WALLACE: Next week, by popular demand, we're going after more of the opinions, gripes, and philosophy of Frank Lloyd Wright. The revolutionary architect who attacked what he called the "mobocracy," on this program three weeks ago. This time we'll find out, among other things, why Mr. Wright says that he has a great affection for the people of the Soviet Union, and we'll get his views at the age of 88 on Death and Immortality. That's next Saturday night 'till then for Philip Morris, Mike Wallace -- goodnight.

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