Shameful history of Vermont eugenics

By Carrie Handy,

Most Vermonters are stunned and ashamed when they learn that, fewer than 80 years ago, our Legislature passed a law enabling the sterilization of Vermonters who had been determined to be “undesirables,” people from targeted groups that included Abenakis and French-Canadian immigrants.

The 1931 sterilization law was designed to reduce the number of people seen as placing demands on public services and to purify what then-University of Vermont zoology professor Henry Perkins, a national leader in the eugenics movement, called “the fine old stock of original settlers in Vermont.” Perkins spearheaded the research project that supported the sterilization legislation. Historical records reveal Perkins’ prejudice toward a number of groups, including French-Canadian immigrants, who were almost exclusively Roman Catholic, and his belief that their presence in Vermont was contributing to what was known as the “rural degeneracy problem.”

Vermont became the 27th state to pass a sterilization law, shrouded in rhetoric about improving the lives of the poor, but revealing an agenda of ethnic discrimination that is impossible to deny, and authorizing the sterilization of an untold number of people identified by the Vermont Eugenics Survey as “defective.” To date, five states have issued official apologies.

Interestingly, a chief player in the national eugenics movement at that time was Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger, whose advocacy for birth-control access was underscored by her belief that use of birth control should be required of women deemed “unfit,” who “recklessly perpetuated their damaged genetic stock by irresponsibly breeding more children in an already overpopulated world.” Both the sterilization and the birth-control movements share common origins and were advanced by individuals with similar beliefs regarding the need to limit or eliminate births among certain populations. Notably, the organization Sanger founded is now the largest provider of abortions in this country.

Representative Anne Donahue of Northfield has proposed a resolution apologizing for this dark chapter in Vermont’s history, a laudable effort one hopes will easily pass with unanimous support. Joint House Resolution 32 resolves to express regret for the sterilization of targeted Vermonters, noting that false science and “misguided social judgment” led to forced sterilization of many poor Vermonters and, in particular, those of French-Canadian and Abenaki ancestry.

It is interesting to contrast the shock that comes with acknowledgment of this immoral attack on some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged Vermonters of the Depression era with the widespread acceptance found today for a different kind of eugenics: the systematic aborting of children identified as having “genetic anomalies” or other defects considered undesirable or with a difficult prognosis. For example, current statistics
indicate that up to 91 percent of babies diagnosed in utero with Down syndrome are aborted. This practice is encouraged by many doctors, who often recommend abortion as a “choice” when a baby receives a difficult prenatal diagnosis.

At the other end of life, there is a growing movement to enable physicians to assist people to commit suicide when they face serious illness, using words like “choice” and “dignity” to suggest an option which in reality reduces choice and removes dignity. Physician-assisted suicide is yet another slippery slope moving from “choice to die” to “duty to die,” and enabling the elimination of people who have been deemed dispensable in our society.

“First They Came,” a popular poem about the inactivity of German intellectuals following the Nazi rise to power and the purging of their chosen targets, expresses a sentiment we should all carefully examine in the context of our current culture’s apparent growing acceptance of the notion that some people’s lives are less worthy of protection than others. It says:

THEY CAME FIRST for the Communists,  
and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist.  

THEN THEY CAME for the Jews,  
and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew.  

THEN THEY CAME for the trade unionists,  
and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist.  

THEN THEY CAME for the Catholics,  
and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant.  

THEN THEY CAME for me  
and by that time no one was left to speak up. 3

If any one person is vulnerable because of age, illness, genetic anomaly, or simply by virtue of being unwanted, as is the case with the vast majority of the million babies aborted annually in this country, then we are all vulnerable. Will future generations look back on this age and cry foul, as we are now decrying the Vermont sterilization movement of the 20th century? If we do not speak up for the unborn and the terminally ill now, who will speak for us, or our children, when the time comes?

As Catholics, we end our annual Lenten journey with a greater appreciation of Confession: acknowledging our sins, promising not to repeat them, and declaring that we will avoid the near occasions of sin in the future. May the graces of this Easter season help our lawmakers find the value of asking for forgiveness.
1 Nancy L Gallagher, Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State, 1999 p. 95

2 Angela Frank, Margaret Sanger’s Eugenic Legacy; p. 240

3 Martin Niemöller, First They Came, 1946