



Catholic Teaching on Population Issues

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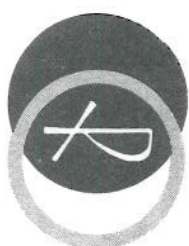
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I. WORLD POPULATION TRENDS AND PROSPECTS

Concern about population trends and policies is a prominent concern of the international community. The primary forum for consideration of these issues is the United Nations. Two U.N. agencies focus on population: 1) *The U.N. Population Division*, which conducts research and sponsors studies on international demographic issues and assists nations in carrying out censuses and local research and 2) *the United Nations Fund for Population Activities* which collects and dispenses funds to individual nations for family planning programs and research. The United Nations sponsored international conferences on population in 1974 and 1984 that drew international attention to what is often called "the population problem."

Prior to the 1974 U.N. World Population Conference in Bucharest, world population growth was often described in crisis terminology and usually accompanied by apocalyptic predictions about world food supplies, diminishing natural resources, and negative effects on social and economic development.

Expected to Stabilize

Books about the dire consequences of unchecked, rapid population growth commonly referred to it as the "population explosion." Yet, demographers always urged caution in regard to population projections, noting that it was almost impossible to predict the outcome of trends beyond one or two decades at most. By 1984 it was generally recognized that fertility patterns in the developed nations had begun to decline by the early 1960's, and the continued decline brings the new problems of a predominantly aging population, inadequate labor force, and difficulties arising from international migration.

In 1974 world population numbered 4 billion people. In mid 1987 the figure was 5 billion. This figure is expected to grow by almost 1 billion every 10 years until 2025 when it will reach 8.6 billion. It is expected to stabilize at about 10.2 billion in 2095.

To understand the implications of these figures one must understand that the pace of the actual increase in people will begin to slow considerably after 2010, because the rate of the world's population growth has already been in decline. The rate of growth was at a peak of 2.04 percent in 1965-70, declining to 1.67 percent in 1980-85 and expected to fall below 1 percent by the year 2000, continuing the downward trend until the end of the 21st Century.

The major factors affecting world population are fertility, mortality and migration. Thus, by way of summary, we can draw the following profile of the world's population:

1. Since 1970, the rate of world population growth has been declining, though the pattern varies from region to region.

2. The major cause of the decline of population growth has been the decline in birth rates. Rates in the developed nations have fallen most sharply, with the majority of the nations of North, South, and Western Europe, and North America presently below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman of childbearing age. (For example, in 1985 the total fertility rate in Western Europe was 1.6, in Southern and Northern Europe 1.9 and 1.8 respectively, for North America 1.8, and for the USSR, 2.3). Rates in the developing nations have also begun to decline. Decline has been rapid in North Africa, Latin America and most of Asia, while rates of fertility are high in sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia. China has a 1985-1990 rate of 2.1.
3. Mortality rates are also decreasing. Mortality is best measured in terms of life expectancy. Life expectancy at birth in 1985-1990 was projected to be 61.1 years for the world, 74.0 for developed nations, and 59.0 for the developing nations. Since 1970-75 this reflects an increase of 4.5 years for the world, 2.7 for developed nations, and 5.0 for developing nations. Among the latter, infant mortality is highest in Africa (101 infants deaths per 1000 live births) and lowest in Latin America (56 per 1000 live births). In all cases there has been a notable decline since 1975.

Aging of Population

4. The changes in births and deaths affect the population structure of countries. In the developing nations there are higher proportions of children and youth. In 1985 the median age of the world population (i.e., the age at which a population is divided into two equal parts, half older, half younger) was 23.5 years. It was 32.5 years in the developed nations and 21 years in the developing nations. In 1985 there were 570 million children under 5 years of age in the world, 85 percent in the developing nations. At the other end of the life span, in 1985 8.8 percent of the world's population were persons 60 years or older. The percentage was 15.8 in the developed nations and 6.6 in the developing nations. Note however that the elderly population has been growing much faster, and the aging of the population is an increasingly important concern in all regions and nations, but most pressing in the developed nations.
5. While the actual numbers of international migrants are not generally large, the impact of migration is significant. In countries which have promoted permanent resettlement (Argentina, Australia, Canada, Israel, and the United States) and those of Western Europe that have imported laborers, the numbers are higher. Other nations had significant numbers due to temporary labor needs, dislocation due to war or partition, and/or permissive immigration policies. In many cases international migration is a consequence of a country's need for younger and sometimes unskilled workers and the corresponding need of people to find employment in another country. This pattern is also evident in regard to internal migration, where increasing numbers of young people are relocating from agricultural areas to major cities.

Although rates of population have declined, not all population problems have been solved. Indeed, the problems go far beyond the statistical reports and projections. The rates of growth and decline must be analyzed in reference to other variables—food, employment, housing, health care, education, natural resources and environment, and the world economic outlook. These factors have a more direct bearing on people's lives—and lifestyles—and sharpen the moral and ethical sensitivity regarding human dignity, social justice, and the common good. Thus, while the decline in population growth has defused the population bomb, the development process has not moved forward at an equal pace in all parts of the world, and great global inequities still exist. This further emphasizes the need for population policies that are based on religious and human values and are informed by moral and ethical principles.

II.

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH ON POPULATION

In the context of the gloom-doom forecasts of the 1960's and 70's, it was often argued that all measures to limit population growth should be taken, including some that were implicitly coercive. Developing nations recognized the threat of coercion at both the 1974 and 1984 World Population Conferences and included specific safeguards in the World Plan of Action.

Furthermore, the Catholic Church was seen as a major causal agent of world population growth because of its moral teaching opposing artificial contraception, sterilization, and abortion.

At the very same time the Catholic Church was developing a moral-ethical position on population policy. Note that population control and birth control are not the same thing. Population control is what governments and international agencies do, while birth control is what couples do. In any case, while the roots of the Church's position on population policy can be found in its social teaching of the past 100 years, Paul VI and John Paul II have refined and specifically applied the Church's teaching on social justice and responsible parenthood to contemporary population issues. We find this development in Conciliar and Synodal documents, in Papal Addresses and in the interventions of delegations of the Holy See to international meetings on population and socioeconomic concerns.

Adopted and Encouraged

At the outset, it is important to realize that the Church has not rejected all government efforts in establishing population policies but has urged that such efforts be carried out in a positive way supportive of human dignity. In recent years, debates about population policy have been taking place in the United Nations, in governmental assemblies throughout the world, and in the communications media. For practical purposes, two different approaches have emerged: (1) the developmentalist ap-

proach, which emphasizes the need for socioeconomic development which eventually results in decreased birth rates, and (2) the "family-planning-first" approach, which calls for determined efforts to decrease birth rates as a pre-condition for assistance from developed nations or international agencies.

The Holy See, from the outset, adopted and encouraged the developmentalist approach which can be summarized by the following points:

1. Population policy should be part of a larger commitment to a program of social justice that enables all persons to live a fully human life, one endowed with freedom and dignity.
2. Granted that rapid population growth may at times impede the development process, governments have rights and duties, within the limits of their own competence, to try to ameliorate the population problem. This includes providing information concerning the impact of population growth and also in terms of legislation and programs that will help families.
3. Decisions regarding the size of the family and the frequency of births should be made by the parents, without pressure from the government. Such decisions are premised on a correctly formed conscience that respects the Church's authentic interpretation of the divine law in regard to family planning methods. Couples should take into account their responsibilities to God, themselves, the children they already have, and the community or society to which they belong.

4. The family is the basic social unit. It should be protected from pressures that prevent it from pursuing its legitimate goals, especially in terms of family size and the frequency of births, and should be given assistance by society in regard to education, stable social conditions, and the welfare of its members.
5. In many countries there is a need to adopt new economic systems, new methods of farming, and new forms of social and political organization. Some antiquated customs, even those related to the family (e.g., inheritance of land, dowry systems), should be changed or abandoned if they impede the development process or conflict with human dignity and human rights.

The Church's teaching regarding the moral unacceptability of contraception, abortion, and sterilization has developed further and was asserted clearly and in detail in the Address of John Paul II to Rafael Salas of the United Nations Fund for Population Activity, and the Intervention of Bishop Jan Schoote, Head of the Holy See's Delegation to the 1984 International Conference on Population in Mexico City.

In addition to the above, those documents emphasized the following points:

1. The dignity of the human person and his or her God-given rights;
2. The importance of the family as the fundamental unit in society and the responsibility of governments and international organizations to assist families, particularly by providing accurate demographic information and avoiding any type of coercion regarding contraception, sterilization, and abortion;

3. The value of the child as a person and the unique rights of parents to nurture and educate their children;
4. The roles and responsibilities of women, and the need to safeguard mothers from being pressured to work outside the home;
5. The need to provide support and assistance for the aging;
6. The need to find new mechanisms for socioeconomic development that respect the religious, cultural, and social dimensions of the human person and not just material progress in society;
7. The value and reliability of natural family planning methods to enable couples to make responsible decisions regarding parenthood;
8. The positive duty of governments to create proper conditions for families to live a decent life and for couples to have a relatively large family if they so choose;
9. The rights of families as well as individuals to be respected in legislation and social policies regarding migration;
10. Expansion of the efforts of governments and international organizations to reduce morbidity and mortality, and to insure greater access to health maintenance and primary health care.

III.

WORLD POPULATION:

FUTURE TRENDS, CHALLENGES

As indicated above, most population specialists project a continued decline in world population growth rates into the next century, resulting in a stabilized population (birth=deaths). This will mean a world population of about 10.2 billion people around 2095. In light of this factual data, what might we expect in the future in regard to population trends and some related issues?

1. Population and Development.

Worldwide population is declining due to decreases in fertility rates. Most industrialized countries presently have fertility rates below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, and a few are already experiencing fewer births than deaths—that is, an actual decrease in population. In most cases the low birthrates have not yet adversely affected productivity because of the high use of technology and a work force heavily composed of new immigrants or guest workers. Negative reaction to foreign workers is already creating new problems in some countries. At the same time the native population is aging.

The uncertainties and fragility of the international financial situation as well

as the debts of many Third World countries threaten the stability of industrialized economies as well as those of developing nations. This has been further aggravated by the events in Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, fertility rates are also declining in the developing countries, but the impact is slower and less apparent. In some developing countries, birth rates remain high and are often characterized as an obstacle to development. It is commonly admitted that population growth of and by itself does not cause poverty or the failure of the development process, but it may aggravate other problems such as poor planning, scarcity or misallocation of resources, or poor management.

In some countries, an unstable political situation, drought or other natural disasters or internal migration problems also negatively affect development. Most recently, the spread of AIDS, especially in Africa, has been a factor. At the 1984 World Population Conference there was general agreement that while population policies may be an important aspect of development policies, they are never substitutes for more systematic international efforts to meet the development needs of developing nations. High priority was given to international cooperation in meeting the goals of the International Development Strategy for the Third U.N. Development Decade.

Nonetheless, many of the international finance agencies (World Bank, International Monetary Fund) and some of the most affluent developed countries continue to insist on fertility decline as a first step or dominant aspect of a development policy. This mindset is promoted by groups such as The Pathfinder Fund, the Draper Fund, and the International Planned Parenthood Federation and it continues to influence discussions of development and the world economic situation.

2. Population and Poverty

It is often claimed that population growth impedes economic growth and therefore induces poverty. In practical terms this is translated to mean that larger families place undue burdens on economic resources and generate social obligations (health care, education, housing) that in turn create poverty.

From a careful reading of the data on population and development it becomes clear that economic and development studies fail to demonstrate that population growth creates a situation of poverty. As P.T. Bauer, an economist who specializes in development issues argues, "*rapid population growth has not been an obstacle to sustained economic advance in the Third World or the West.*"

Ben Wattenberg claims that population growth can be economically beneficial because it stimulates commerce, productivity, product development, and research. It creates a public fund through taxation that helps pay for services to people.

These economists and demographers, and others as well, recognize that there are often other complicating factors such as inequality, discrimination, lack of planning and political leadership, absence of resources or capital that, in a

rapidly growing population, forestall or frustrate development. But growth cannot be singled out as the only or certain cause of underdevelopment.

This is true in regard to family size. In most countries fertility has already dropped to between 1.8 and 3.5 children. In high fertility countries family size is generally around 4 children. In agricultural societies larger family size contributes to family productivity.

A younger society has more incentives to move forward in terms of development, and it provides a broader base from which government can draw to support programs for the elderly and disadvantaged. In any case, there is no conclusive data to prove that large families are inevitably poor families. The Western and developed nations presently have extremely low birth rates and they still have poor people.

There is a growing recognition that affluent societies with low birthrates are experiencing a new type of poverty. That is, the lack of people who will carry on the values and traditions of the culture, who will assure and continue productivity and economic progress, and ultimately create the income that can be redistributed to care for the needs of those who are unable to care for themselves.

3. Population, Resources, and the Environment.

Prior to the 1974 Population Conference at Bucharest, there were dire predictions that population growth would ultimately lead to the exhaustion of the earth's resources, notably minerals, fuels, and especially food. Since that time, more careful analysis of natural resources shows that the supply is not being exhausted, though consumption patterns, especially in industrialized and materially affluent countries are often wasteful. A number of scholars, especially Julian Simon, have critically analyzed the projected scarcities and shown that in many cases there are sufficient resources, and in other cases new synthetic materials are already substituting for formerly used materials. The same is true of energy resources.

Advocates of population control claim that an expansion of family planning programs in the Third World is necessary to avert a world hunger crisis. However, recent U.N. studies show that world food production has continued to increase since the mid-1970's, even in the developing countries, surpassing growth in population.

Roger Revelle, a noted demographer, has estimated that world agricultural resources are capable of supporting a population of 40 billion people. This could be achieved with an expanded use of the world's land for agriculture and improvement of agricultural yields, both of which are possible.

In effect, those most knowledgeable about global food problems believe the world is well stocked with food supplies and capable of feeding many more people than presently exist. Temporary setbacks from drought, ineffective distribution mechanisms, regional conflicts such as the Persian Gulf War, and other natural disasters may create problems in some parts of the world, but these can be overcome. In any case, mass starvation is not a prospect.

Population growth is also cited as a cause of environmental problems. Donald Mann, President of Negative Population Growth claims that our only solution to environmental problems is an actual reduction of present world population from 5 billion to 2 billion.

In fact, much of the global pollution results from the indiscriminate use of fuels, technologies, and chemicals, especially in the developed nations. Their use could be better controlled or restrained and some things might be prohibited.

But a more simplistic approach is to blame the major problems—global warming, acid rain, and depletion of the ozone layer—simply on population growth. The 1984 Population Conference called for a transition to new technologies that would maintain the integrity of the environment, and it called on governments to establish appropriate policy measures. Nonetheless, continued efforts to use environmental problems as a reason for population control may be expected.

4. Population and Sexual Permissiveness.

The 1974 Population Conference called for assuring "all individuals and couples" access to family planning information and methods. This constituted a break with former U.N. policy that spoke of family planning only in terms of married couples. The 1984 Population Conference maintained the new language, and it was clear from the debates in both conferences that family planning availability was to be promoted for unmarried persons as well as for married couples. Most recently this has been applied to teenagers to combat the problems of teenage pregnancy.

In all cases this takes sexual activity out of the context of marriage, ignoring the fact that sexual intimacy is a prerogative and responsibility inherently connected with marriage and family life. This emphasis on the so-called right of the individual was one of the most compelling factors preventing the Holy See from joining the consensus at both conferences. Accordingly, we must recognize that efforts to promote family planning are often premised on and supportive of attitudes of sexual permissiveness. This same thinking is now being applied to preventing the spread of AIDS.

5. Population, Family Planning Programs, and Abortion.

Strategies to deal with population growth focus on widespread availability of contraception and sterilization, often without safeguards for the freedom of the couple. This is most evident in China and India where coercion is the keystone of family planning programs. But there is the added problem that international family planning agencies and some developed nations tend to have a double standard in regard to the Third World.

Methods of birth control that are dangerous or unproven are promoted in and exported to the Third World. Witness the recent debate in France regarding RU 486, an abortion pill that has been described as necessary to

combat population growth. The same was true of Depo-Provera, a drug not approved for use in the United States but promoted for use in the Third World.

The most recent addition is Norplant, a contraceptive agent implanted under a woman's arm. Much of the clinical testing of new contraceptives by international agencies takes place in Third World countries because there are fewer safeguards.

The 1984 Population Conference adopted a resolution proposed by the Holy See urging governments "to take appropriate steps to help women avoid abortion, which in no case should be promoted as a method of family planning..."

This resolution reflected the existing policies of most countries, but was strenuously objected to by China and a few other countries. It was supported by many Third World countries and by many Western nations as well. After considerable discussion, the resolution was adopted by the majority of nations.

In the future we can expect new initiatives from advocates of international population control seeking to reestablish abortion as a necessary component of a broad based family planning program.

CONCLUSION

In the preparatory sessions for the 1984 International Conference on Population and in the debates of the conference, there was continued recognition of the ethical implications of population policies, the need to consider religious convictions and principles and also the need to protect the rights of couples to plan family size and the spacing of births.

Nonetheless, there remains a strong ideology of population based on materialist values that attempts to influence policy initiatives in individual nations and in the international forum. It is an ideology that is prejudicial and discriminatory toward countries that have what are considered high fertility rates. It is an ideology that stands ready to accept and justify strategies that are religiously or culturally offensive, that are at times dangerous to women's health, and violative of basic human rights.

Some proposals involve elements of pressure or coercion by conditioning socioeconomic assistance on a demonstrated decline in fertility or, at the personal level, by placing pressures on couples that prevent them from having more than one or two children. The demand for population control is often based on economic priorities, as evidenced by the strong rhetoric of the World Bank.

The population control mindset creates and supports the contraceptive mentality and supports the emphasis on discovering and massively distributing efficient and effective methods of contraception. The continued and pervasive insistence on population control as a primary factor in solving socioeconomic problems has prompted a reaction from the Church in many

developing countries. That reaction was clearly expressed at the 1980 World Synod on the Family. In their closing Message to Christian Families the Bishops stated:

Often certain governments and some international organizations do violence to families...Families are compelled—and this we oppose vehemently—to use such immoral means for the solution of social, economic, and demographic problems as contraception or, even worse, sterilization, abortion, and euthanasia. The Synod therefore urges a charter of family rights to safeguard these rights everywhere.

In comments addressed to Bishops at the conclusion of *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI noted that the Church's mission implies concerted pastoral action in all fields of human activity—economic, social, and cultural—to render living together in society more fraternal and peaceful in faithfulness to God's design for the world. This concerted pastoral action can benefit from a correct understanding and use of demographic information.

At the same time, priests can bring to discussions of population affairs an emphasis on the Church's social teaching which is founded on respect for the dignity and rights of the human person and the common good. The development and advancement of a moral perspective regarding population issues is an important aspect of the Church's mission.

Most Reverend James T. McHugh, S.T.D.
May 15, 1991

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Vatican II*

Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, (Apostolicum actuositatem). (See Ch. III, "The Various Fields of the Apostolate", #11.)

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, (Lumen gentium). (See Ch. II, "The People of God", #11; Ch. IV, "The Laity", #35; Ch. V, "The Call to Holiness", #41.)

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, (Gaudium et spes); cf., #50, 87, & 76.)

Paul VI**

Address to United Nations General Assembly, October 4, 1965.

On the Development of Peoples (Populorum progressio) 1967.

On the Regulation of Birth (Humanae vitae) 1968.

John Paul II
General Audiences of September 10, 17, 24, October 1, 8, 15, 22, 1980. *L'Osservatore Romano*, Vatican City.

Apostolic Exhortation on the Christian Family, (Familiaris consortio). Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference (USCC), Office of Publishing Services, 1981.

Address to Dr. Rafael M. Salas, Secretary General of the 1984 International Conference on Population and Executive Director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities — Vatican City. Washington, D.C.: Committee for Pro-Life Activities, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), 1984.

Address to Two International Congresses on Marriage, the Family, and Fertility — Vatican City. Washington, D.C.: Committee for Pro-Life Activities, NCCB, 1984.

Weekly Audience Talks on Humanae vitae, (Reflections on Humanae vitae: Conjugal Morality and Spirituality). Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1984.

Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, (Christifideles laici). Washington, D.C.: USCC, Office of Publishing Services, 1988.

Holy See
"Address of Archbishop Jan Schotte, Chairman of Vatican Delegation to the United Nations Population Conference, Mexico City, 1984." *Origins*. 14 (1984): 205ff.

Charter of the Rights of the Family, Washington, D.C.: Committee for Pro-Life Activities, NCCB, 1983.

* For the Documents of Vatican II see Flannery, Austin. Ed. *Vatican Council II*, Northport, N.Y.: Costello Pub. Co., 1981.

** Most Papal statements can be obtained through the USCC, Office of Publishing Services or the Daughters of St. Paul.