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Volume IV, Number 3

Fall 1980

\$5.00 a copy

Population Policy: The Moral Dimension

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POPULATION GROWTH is a complex and multifaceted issue. An integral approach to population questions requires a consideration of the factors influencing the growth or decrease in population (births, deaths, migration), the age structure and distribution of the population, and the allocation of resources necessary to meet the needs of the population.

For roughly the past quarter-century, concern about world population growth has been articulated in crisis terminology, often leading to apocalyptic predictions. 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 statistical analyses, noting that it was almost impossible to predict trends beyond one or two decades at most. Now it is generally recognized that fertility patterns in the developed nations began to decline in the late 1950s, and the continual decline poses the new problems of a predominantly aging population, insufficient labor force, and international migration. In 1974 the U.N. World Population Conference at Bucharest urged the adoption of population policies that would further decrease population growth, while in 1979 the U.N. Population Commission discussed reports indicating that the world is now experiencing a new demographic situation in which—

1. there are approximately one billion persons in the industrialized nations of the world, which have experienced a continual decline in fertility over the past twenty years;
2. there are approximately one billion persons in China, which has achieved some stability in its demographic situation;

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↳ Executive
Director

↳ Secretariat for
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3. there are approximately one billion persons in developing nations where fertility has begun to decline in recent years;
4. there are approximately 1.4 billion persons in developing nations where fertility has not yet begun to decline.

Although rates of population growth 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, it has not removed the need for population policies that are based on religious and human values and informed by moral and ethical principles.

Until the modern era, the birth rate fairly well reflected the choices—and capabilities—of married couples. These choices and the means of pursuing them were generally considered to be private and personal, that is, beyond the limits of government intrusion. But in recent years considerable attention has been given to the finite character of the world and its natural resources, to the increased damage to the natural environment caused by consumption patterns, and to the new perception of the status of woman and her right to equal opportunity. The result has been a strong and highly visible campaign for zero population growth, coupled with demands that the government take a more direct role in lowering the fertility rates. Such government activity implies some degree of coercion and a corresponding threat to human freedom. It also raises the issue of its ethical propriety.

The Magisterium on Population Policy

The development of Catholic teaching in regard to population policy is very much a modern phenomenon, expressed in the writings of Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council. Concern about the government's role in regard to population appeared in Pius XI's *Casti Connubii*, Pius XII's address to the Italian Association of Large Families, and John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra*, but in these documents the concern was more an admonition or caution to governments to avoid forcing individuals to use methods of birth control prohibited by the Church.

In attempting to outline a more contemporary Catholic position on population policy, this paper will review the writings of Pope Paul VI and pertinent documents of the Holy See during his pontificate, as well as the pertinent sections of *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 87).

Before we proceed to the review and analysis it is important to emphasize

that the magisterium has not rejected 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 approach, which emphasized the need for socioeconomic development that would inevitably result in decreased birth rates, and (2) the "family-planning-first" approach, which called for determined efforts to decrease birth rates as a pre-condition to aid from developed nations or international agencies. The Holy See, from the outset, adopted and encouraged the developmentalist approach.

On October 4, 1965, Pope Paul VI addressed the United Nations General Assembly in New York. In his address, a review and encouragement of U.N. efforts to maintain peace and foster the development of peoples, Pope Paul referred to the population question. Asserting that "human life is sacred," he invoked the "banquet-of-life" metaphor and urged the U.N. to search out ways of providing sufficient food for the entire human family, explicitly rejecting the family-planning-first approach: "Your task is so to act that there will be enough bread at the table of mankind and not to support an artificial birth control that would be irrational, with the aim of reducing the number of those sharing in the banquet of life."

The pertinent sections of *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 87) and *Populorum Progressio* (nos. 36 and 37) are quite similar, and since these are the pivotal texts they can be considered together. Both documents take the developmentalist rather than the family-planning-first approach and assert the following basic principles:

1. Granted that rapid population growth may impede the development process, governments have rights and duties, within the limits of their own competence, to try to ameliorate the population problem. These are described in terms of providing information concerning the impact of population growth and also in terms of legislation and programs that will help families.
2. 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 the means used. Couples should take into account their responsibilities to God, themselves, the children they already have, and the community or society to which they belong. *Populorum Progressio* was the more explicit in spelling out these criteria of responsible parenthood.

3. 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 should be given assistance by society in regard to education, stable social conditions, and the welfare of its members.
4. In many countries there is a need to adopt new methods of farming and new forms of social 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.

Populorum Progressio is somewhat more explicit than *Gaudium et Spes* about changing social conditions, and it adds the plea that people be informed of scientific advances in methods of family planning that are medically safe and morally acceptable—a reference to natural family planning.

These two texts are foundational, although other statements of Pope Paul or the offices of the Holy See are more detailed and specific.

Humanae Vitae used almost the same language as *Populorum Progressio* regarding the role of the rightly formed conscience (no. 10). The encyclical then reaffirmed the Church's traditional prohibition of contraception, sterilization, or abortion as means of family planning (nos. 10-14).

Humanae Vitae also urged public authorities to protect the family unit from legally authorized immoral practices in regard to demographic problems, and to choose instead to heighten efforts to bring about a just and equitable socioeconomic order that supports the family and assists couples in observing the moral law (no. 23).

In his address to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (1970) and in *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), Pope Paul again noted that governments should avoid forcing birth control on couples to decrease population rates, and should foster development and socioeconomic programs that support the family unit. He made references to *Mater et Magistra* and *Populorum Progressio*.

The U.N. Population Year—1974, and the World Population Conference at Bucharest, provided an occasion for a series of statements by the Holy See. Late in 1973 the Vatican Secretariat of State circulated a confidential document to the episcopal conferences, prepared by the Committee for the Family, to provide information and direction in regard to the planned U.N. activities. The document, which subsequently became public, asked episcopal conferences to cooperate with the Holy See in preparing for Population Year and to inform their people. It pinpointed specific responsibilities of episcopal conferences: (1) to analyze closely and pass judgment on the moral aspects of initiatives of government agencies and private organizations; (2) to study the positions that the government will take on the proposed agenda and, where possible, make some recommendations to the government; and (3) to try to insure that representatives of episcopal conferences

and Catholic organizations, as well as theologians and scholars, present clearly and forthrightly the teaching of the Church as contained in *Gaudium et Spes*, *Populorum Progressio*, and *Humanae Vitae*. The document drew attention to the danger that Population Year might become the platform for those within the Church who rejected the magisterial teaching to propound their own views and represent them as a "quasi-official position."

The document then summarized the points contained in the Church's teaching:

The fundamental values which moral teaching must now underline particularly are, among others, the meaning of procreation, the responsibility of those who exercise it, respect for life and its transmission, the nature of the marriage act which must remain open to the transmission of life, the right to life, the rights of the family as the fundamental cell of society, the quality of life, the nature and the just demands of the national and international common good.

The document also stressed a positive effort to motivate people to show respect for human life, the human person, and the family. Moreover, the document noted that "Population Year could be the right time for intensifying our concern and our efforts in the service of life and for creating a climate of social justice and social institutions favorable to life." It saw two extreme attitudes that warranted correction: (1) the assumption that population growth must be slowed in any way possible because "we should not allow people to be born if their life may be completely frustrated," and (2) the tendency to deny or ignore the existence of any population problems at all. The former tendency ignores solutions in accord with human dignity, and the latter position ignores the Church's teaching on responsible parenthood.

The document listed certain points that should be included in a population policy: (1) definite support for the dignity and stability of the institution of the family; (2) safeguarding the rights of family members by the avoidance of policies favoring contraception, sterilization, abortion, and lack of respect for the dignity of any party; (3) concentrated efforts to achieve social justice; (4) considering population policy as only one aspect of a sound development policy; and (5) efforts to develop positive attitudes toward sexuality, including information on natural family planning methods.

This document of the Committee for the Family was quite comprehensive and detailed and, in its delineation of the responsibilities of episcopal conferences, perhaps more specific than any other document from the Holy See.

On March 28, 1974, Pope Paul VI met with Rafael Salas and Antonio Carillo-Flores, U.N. officials responsible for the World Population Year and conferences. The Holy Father again emphasized that the activities of World Population Year could be beneficial if they stressed social justice instead of radical measures to decrease population growth. He urged a holistic ap-

proach in which all factors received proper attention: "the demands of social justice as well as respect for the divine laws governing life, the dignity of the person as well as the freedom of peoples, the primary role of the family as well as the responsibility proper to married couples."

Turning to population policy, Pope Paul listed the following criteria:

1. Any population policy must be at the service of the human person . . . removing everything that is opposed to life itself or that harms men's full and responsible personality.
2. Any population policy must guarantee the dignity and stability of the institution of the family by ensuring that the family is provided with the means enabling it to play its true role.
3. A population policy must be part of a larger commitment to a program of social justice that enables all to live a fully human life, one endowed with freedom and dignity.

In June 1978, Paul VI met with Henry Labouisse, executive director of UNICEF, and John Grun, director of the U.N. International Year of the Child. In the course of his remarks applauding many of the UNICEF programs in behalf of children, Pope Paul expressed the Holy See's dissociation from "projects that may directly or indirectly favor contraception, abortion, or other practices that do not respect the supreme value of life." He also cautioned against U.N. support of programs whose purpose is "to make children less welcome or even to prevent them from being born into society." Initial proposals for the International Year of the Child (IYC) had met mixed reactions at the United Nations, and the Vatican *Observer* had expressed some reservations. One of the earliest promoters of the IYC was a Catholic organization, the International Catholic Child Bureau. A number of population-control groups also promoted the IYC, which gave cause to the Vatican's concern. Because of this background and Pope Paul's overall commitment to the U.N. and its efforts, this meeting provided an occasion for him to express encouragement for UNICEF and IYC, while also cautioning against efforts to turn IYC into a platform for population control.

On two occasions celebrating the fifteenth year of his pontificate in June 1978, Paul VI referred to the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

In his address to the College of Cardinals on June 23, 1978, he noted that the issuance of *Humanae Vitae* had caused him anguish but that the passage of time had confirmed the necessity and importance of its teaching. He also said that he counted on the cardinals and all the bishops to further the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*.

Less than one week later, on June 29, at a special anniversary mass on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the Holy Father reviewed what he considered the most important endeavors and teachings of his pontificate. In greater detail, he described *Humanae Vitae* as a specific part of his overall commit-

ment "to defend life in all the forms in which it can be threatened, disturbed, or even suppressed," in fulfillment of Vatican II's mandate to safeguard human life (see *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 27 and 51). He noted that his program of respect for life included emphasis on socioeconomic development, especially for the Third World, as expressed in *Populorum Progressio*. It also included defense of life from its very beginning, and Pope Paul quoted the *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 51) condemnation of abortion. He then called attention to *Humanae Vitae*, in which he sought to protect marriage and the family from civil legislation that threatens the marriage bond or the inviolability of human life in the mother's womb. He observed that these concerns had been repeated in "statements contained in our ordinary magisterium and in particular acts of the competent congregation." He also noted his solicitude for young people, who suffer most from the disruption of family life. In this address, Pope Paul made three points that have far-reaching implications.

1. He once again stressed that nations, in trying to meet population problems, should give priority to programs of socioeconomic development rather than to contraception and abortion.
2. He emphasized that the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* expresses the Church's teaching on responsible parenthood and that it had proceeded from his desire to protect marriage, the family, and the unborn child from dangerous social and political efforts.
3. He reaffirmed his commitment to the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, pointed to its special relevance in the face of continuing attacks on the family and the child, and emphasized that the same teaching had been continually repeated in the exercise of his ordinary teaching responsibility.

This last-cited statement provides a good summary of Pope Paul's teaching efforts, which were consistent with *Gaudium et Spes*. Worthy of emphasis is the fact that he saw the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* on responsible parenthood, and specifically on the prohibition of contraception, sterilization, and abortion, as integral with *Populorum Progressio* and *Gaudium et Spes* on the role of government in dealing with population problems.

At variance with Pope Paul's teaching is the position taken by some Catholic theologians and scholars who maintain that the Church should separate the teaching of *Populorum Progressio* and *Gaudium et Spes* on population from the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* on responsible parenthood, by maintaining a "discreet silence" on the moral prohibition of contraception (HV, 11). They argue that the teaching on contraception is unique to Roman Catholics and that even within the Catholic Church it is highly disputed and not universally held by all bishops, theologians, and the faithful. ✓

A survey of theological writing indicates that many theologians and other

scholars openly propound a sexual morality based on dissent from the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*.

Some Catholic scholars also advance the opinion that the Church, in encouraging nations to formulate population policies, should remain silent on contraception, because it is not necessary for civil law to prohibit every morally unacceptable action. However, the present discussion in regard to population policies is not directed to whether the Church should insist that the state prohibit contraception, but rather to whether the Church might argue that population policies should avoid promoting birth control as a primary strategy. The laws now in effect in most nations authorize or empower the state—

1. to provide information about population goals, desired family size (as proposed by social planners, economists, and so on), methods of birth control and their medical acceptability;
2. to engage in research on population questions and birth-control methods;
3. to provide the actual birth-control methods to those voluntarily requesting them;
4. at times, to coerce certain classes of individuals (i.e., the retarded, welfare recipients, carriers or victims of genetic disease) to use specific means of birth control;
5. to influence or pressure foreign nations to meet certain population goals in terms of their growth rates;
6. to use public funds for all of the above.

Although not all these purposes are objectionable, many are, because based on unacceptable philosophic premises. Moreover, there is a measure of subtle coercion involved as the government expands its population policy.

The further question, Should the Church assert publicly the Catholic position that contraception is immoral or maintain discreet silence? merits further consideration. First, the traditional teaching is based on the natural law, which applies to everyone, not only to Catholics. Moreover, for the Church to remain silent may imply an abandonment of a magisterial position. But more important, if pluralism requires silence on moral teachings not universally accepted, does that not, to some degree at least, limit the scope of religious freedom? Some note the controversy and continual disagreement within the Church on *Humanae Vitae*. But is not continual silence a failure of teaching responsibility on the part of the Church, that is, a failure to publicly proclaim moral teachings consistent with the teaching of Christ and the Catholic tradition? The teaching, whether or not it has been infallibly defined, certainly seems to have an unchangeable quality that the Church should proclaim precisely in order to bring about a better understanding of the reasons for the teaching, the positive aspects of the teaching about

marital intimacy and mutual love, and the need for relying on God and his grace rather than having an overbearing concern about material things.

Thus, the Church, instead of maintaining silence, should articulate its teaching on responsible parenthood, that is, the number and spacing of births, criteria for such decisions by married couples, and its opposition to sterilization and abortion as government policies.

In summary, the activity of the Church has the following purposes:

1. To safeguard the personal or human rights of individuals in regard to procreation
2. To safeguard the family unit from government interference and pressure
3. To avoid even subtle coercion resulting from government policies that canonize or favor the small family
4. To respect the consciences of those who do not wish to pay for family-planning services via taxes
5. To maintain a climate in which the Church can continue to teach her natural-law ethic free of abuse or mockery by society or any other groups (i.e., policy-makers, intellectuals, and so on)
6. To involve government in research and development in natural family planning methods
7. To prevent government policy from becoming the platform for specific ideologies (i.e., sexual liberation or reproductive freedom as understood at present to include homosexuality, adultery, and so on)
8. To insure that when the government provides family planning it is as a health service, not a welfare program, and that it is available only within a larger context of prenatal and perinatal health care for mother and child
9. To encourage research in reproductive biology and allied sciences that will improve reliability of natural family planning

Conclusions

☞ In light of the policy statements of the Holy See and the review of writings in the field of population ethics, any attempts to establish a population policy that is based on human dignity and is responsive to human needs should include the following goals:

1. A population policy should put primary emphasis on social and economic justice, international development, and increased efforts by the developed nations to assist the developing nations.
2. A population policy should sustain adequate population growth and distribution to enable a nation to pursue its development policies. In some cases, it is desirable and morally acceptable for a nation to moderate its population growth to keep pace with its development strategies, food and economic resources, and socioeconomic policies.

3. A population policy should be part of a larger policy of social development. It should look to the development of sufficient resources to service the existing population and its projected increase. Each step the government takes in urging people to meet demographic goals should be paralleled by efforts to improve social conditions and extend a full range of social opportunities—jobs, housing, health care, education—to all citizens.
4. A population policy must support the family unit, enabling the family to pursue its own goals while fulfilling responsibilities to the overall society.
5. A population policy should preserve adequate freedom for the individual couple to bear and support the number of children they desire. It is the positive duty of government to help bring about conditions that will relieve pressures on couples to limit family size.
6. When a population policy involves education and assistance in family planning, it should include only those means of family planning that are in accord with the moral law and the dignity of the human person. Sterilization should be excluded as a means of family planning. Acceptance of family-planning assistance should be voluntary, with legal prohibition of coercion, particularly for the poor, who are often considered the target of family-planning programs.
7. Protection of the right to life at all stages, especially in regard to the unborn and the aging, must be included in all population policy. Euthanasia and abortion should be prohibited as means of population control.
8. Research into all phases of the family life cycle and the effects of social trends on the family should be part of a population policy. There should also be funding for demographic research and for the scientific work that will lead to the further development of safe and morally acceptable methods of family planning.
9. A population policy should provide a full range of prenatal, maternal-health and pediatric services, and nutritional care.
10. In order to benefit families, a population policy may also include ancillary services such as education in human sexuality and in marriage and family living, and pre-marriage and marriage counseling.

APPENDIX

Papal Statements, Conciliar Documents, and Other Statements of the Holy See

Pius XI. *Casti Connubii*, 31 December 1930.

Pius XII. Allocation to the Italian Association of Large Families, 20 January 1958.

John XXIII. *Mater et Magistra*, 15 May 1961. In Gremillion, J., *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*. New York: Orbis Books, 1976.

Paul VI. Address to the U.N. General Assembly, 4 October 1965. In Gremillion.

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- _____ . *Populorum Progressio*, 26 March 1967. In Gremillion.
- _____ . *Humanae Vitae*, 25 July 1968. In Gremillion.
- _____ . Address to U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, 16 November 1970.
- _____ . *Octogesima Adveniens*, 14 May 1971. In Gremillion.
- _____ . Message to Rafael Salas and Antonio Carillo-Flores, 28 March 1974. In *Origins*, vol. 3, 1974.
- _____ . Address to Sacred College of Cardinals, 23 June 1978. In *Origins*, 6 July 1978.
- _____ . Message to Henry Labouisse and John Grun, 28 June 1978. In *Origins*, 20 July 1978.
- _____ . Homily on Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, 29 June 1978. In *Origins*, 20 July 1978.
- Second Vatican Council. *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965.
- Vatican Secretariat of State. Note on Population Year. In *Origins*, 7 February 1974.
- Bishop Edouard Gagnon. Address of the Chairman of the Holy See's Delegation to U.N. World Population Conference, Bucharest, Rumania, August 19-30, 1974. In *Origins*, August 1974.