

THE CHURCH AND THE POPULATION YEAR: NOTES ON A STRATEGY

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THE FORMULATION of population policy, whether on the national or international level, is a complex task involving several institutions. The Church is one of the societal institutions whose religious beliefs, moral evaluations, and empirical actions can influence population policy at both the national and international levels. Consequently, it is important to reflect upon the way in which the Church thinks about its influence and its mode of exercising influence in the population debate. This article seeks to reflect upon these questions from a "strategic perspective," i.e., in light of its past history in the problem and its present resources it asks how the Church might cut into the population-policy debate. From this strategic perspective the article seeks to elaborate three distinct ways to understand the potential of the Church in the population debate. Two considerations are substantive, relating to what the Church might say in the population discussion to its own people and to other relevant institutions. The concluding section is more structural than substantive: it seeks to assess the potential the Church has to use the substantive message it formulates for the Population Year.

DEFINING THE ISSUES

The population issue confronts us with a new urgency this year. The United Nations Population Year is part of the reason for the urgency as the UN seeks to influence the attitudes of individuals, the actions of governments, and the agenda of voluntary organizations. However, the new sense of seriousness about the population question cannot be wholly attributed to the UN year; the "population lobby" has been in existence for many years seeking to fulfil the goals now pursued by the United Nations.

The dimension which provides the edge to the population question this year is the explicit linkage between the issues of population, resource allocation, and environment. Of course, those who have been concerned with population have been raising these issues for some time. However, there is presently a keener receptivity to the message, as we find in the energy crisis a prismatic experience of the politics of scarcity. The new element in the population question is not so much new facts but a new perception, shared now by large numbers of people. The perception is the awareness of what it means to live in a limited universe. This perception,

with the range of political, moral, and economic questions it raises, sets the context in which the issues of population growth and population policy are judged.¹

The issues involved in the politics of scarcity are usually set forth in general terms as patterns of population growth and patterns of consumption.² How people and governments relate these two categories, and how they rank their relative importance, can be as significant as what they finally decide to do about either of them. The same perception of limitation can lead to very different conclusions, depending on how the factors of the problem of people and resources are related and how broadly the problem is conceived.

The nature of the population-consumption problem is that it is at once a global or systemic issue which may also be analyzed as a series of distinct and different problems for various parts of the globe. Where one stands in the globe has much to do with how one interprets the nature of the population problem. Recognition of these two aspects of the problem, its systemic relevance and its regional differentiation, is a starting point for considering a strategy of Church action during the Population Year.

The assumption being made in this section of the article is that the first audience to whom the Church speaks is its own people. The strategic question is what it ought to say to its own constituency. The response offered here is that the first function the Church can fulfil is to aid its own constituency and other interested parties to understand the elements of the problem and how they ought to be related to each other. If those elements have differing value for different places in the international system, then the Church must assess where it stands in the system before it speaks to the question. This is especially true for the Church in the United States. The potential impact of the United States on any systemic plan for population policy and the existing impact we have on the consumption question presents a very serious pedagogical question to the American Church. What is the shape of that question and how should the Church respond to it?

It is generally agreed that, given the nature of the population-consumption problem, no unilateral approach, stressing only one side of the problem, will be effective.³ The Church in the United States should

¹ An example of the kind of reflection stimulated by perceptions of a limited universe is the recent *Daedalus* issue "The No Growth Society," 102 (Fall 1973).

² See the contribution by Peter Henriot in this issue, "Global Population in Perspective: Implications for U.S. Policy Response."

³ The same point is made from different perspectives by J. Holdren, "Population and the American Predicament: The Case against Complacency," *Daedalus* 102 (Fall 1973) 31-44; *Population Memoranda I, II, III*, The Center of Concern, Washington, D.C.; R. Revelle, cited in A. Dyck, "Procreative Rights and Population Policy," *Hasting Center Studies* 1, no. 1 (1973) 80-81.

not run away from the population issue; it should use the Statement on Population approved at the November 1973 meeting of the National Conference of Bishops as a platform from which to move into the population debate. However, establishing priorities in approaching an issue is the essence of policy planning. In the United States, while both aspects are important, the consumption question is the one we can directly control, but it is an issue we as a nation are not anxious to confront.

The proposal argued here is that, in light of her past teaching and in view of present needs in the United States, the Church should highlight the consumption question, its nature, its urgency, and the U.S. relationship to it. To repeat, the design of this strategy is not to let the Church avoid the issue of population limitation; the content of the Church's message should not be that adequate measures taken regarding consumption will solve the question of population. They will not. Rather, the strategy is designed to allow the Church to highlight an element which has had high priority in Catholic teaching and low visibility among the Catholic constituency: the distribution of wealth and resources in the international system. The consumption question is a major aspect of this problem. Statistics about U.S. population trends indicate that the message about family limitation is being heard. There is no comparable evidence that changes in patterns of consumption have taken place. Presumably, it will continue to be easier to speak to Americans about contraception than about "contraconsumption."

But the moment may be at hand to attempt to surface in serious fashion the question of America's consumptive habits. The catalyst for such a discussion is at hand: the energy crisis. The energy crisis has accomplished what Church teaching from *Mater et magistra* through *Justice in the World* could not achieve: it has made the ordinary American aware of the percentage of the world's usable resources and wealth which flow into this country. The awareness is purely factual; by itself it has no moral content. The factual perception, however, is the necessary first step for raising other questions. In a sense, President Nixon has opened the road for further discussion by proposing Project Independence. Basically, the policy begins with the recognition that the United States, constituting about 6 percent of the world's population, presently consumes about 30 percent of its energy. The objective of Project Independence, presumably, is to allow us to continue this rate of consumption. The only policy question which has been raised is how we can do this.

In the face of this policy proposal, the Church in the United States possesses a body of papal teaching on international morality which runs directly counter to the premises and objectives of Project Independence.

The whole theme of papal teaching on the modern international system is that of interdependence, the necessity for people and nations to have a basic perception of the globe as a potential community, not simply a competing crowd. At the point where the premises of independence and interdependence clash stands an agenda of complex questions of political economy, strategic balance, and international order. One of these questions is the consumption habits of all the industrialized developed nations.

The Church could use the prevailing consciousness about energy questions to raise questions which go far beyond the issues of oil and energy. These questions are issues intrinsically related to the concerns of the Population Year. If the Church raises them competently, forcefully, and intelligibly, they could serve to expand the parameters of the public debate in this country about what is an adequate population policy, nationally and internationally. Too often the population debate seems to imply the question, can the world afford the reproductive habits of Asians and Latin Americans? This is not irrelevant, but an equally relevant question is whether the world can afford the consumption habits of Americans. Presumably, an adequate population policy will deal with both questions. The point being made here is that the second question will not automatically be raised or argued in the United States unless some group or institution is committed to articulating its implications over a long period of time. The Church could take such a task as its primary contribution to the Population Year debate; it could work through its institutions and constituency and with other groups to get equal time for consumption issues. In doing this, the Church would raise issues which many inside and outside its constituency would rather not examine. If it is to do this credibly, it will have to face an issue it is suspect of not wanting to examine: the contraception question.

DETERMINING A PUBLIC POLICY

It is essential that a strategy for the Church in the Population Year address explicitly again the relationship of Catholic teaching and governmental policy on population. The concept of the Population Year has as its central, though not its exclusive, focus the question of governmental planning and policy; no strategy of action can avoid this issue. Moreover, the need to be explicit about Church teaching and public policy is, in fact, an opportunity to state our position in a way which can be strategically helpful for the Church and substantially beneficial for the public debate on population policy.

The elements of population policy which are of primary concern to Catholic teaching are the questions of the *means* of population control

and the interpretation of human *rights* in population policy. The proposition being argued in this article is that there is a need and a possibility to move Catholic thinking ahead on both of these issues in determining public policy for the Church during the Population Year. Specifically, we should recognize that the Catholic position on permissible means of population control can be recast without detriment to existing teaching, and that the Catholic policy position should be recast to give primacy to the question of human rights rather than to the question of technical means of population limitation. How can these two moves be made and why should they be made? They can be made by explicating some dimensions of Pope Paul's statement on population policy in *Populorum progressio* in the light of traditional Catholic social ethics. They should be made because by reshaping Catholic policy in this way we can make the Church a more active participant in the population-policy debate, and we can specify some moral issues in that debate of concern to the wider human community.

The statement of Paul VI which is our starting point occurs in his discussion of population and governmental policy in *Populorum progressio*. After acknowledging the existence of the problem of population growth and resource allocation, the Pope wrote: "It is certain that public authorities can intervene, within the limit of their competence, by favoring the availability of appropriate information and by adopting suitable measures, provided that these be in conformity with the moral law and that they respect the rightful freedom of married couples."⁴ This statement constituted an advance beyond previous papal positions in its explicit affirmation of the existence of an objective problem of population growth and in its general legitimation of governmental intervention in the area of population questions. What the statement did not do was to clarify the meaning of suitable measures of population control nor did it offer a response in principle of how to adjudicate the relationship of personal and familial rights with the responsibilities of public authorities.

Since he made this statement, Pope Paul has also authored *Humanae vitae*, which dealt at great length with the question of suitable means of family planning for Catholics. The question which arises on the level of public policy for the Church is whether the response to the means question in *Humanae vitae*, which prohibits any contraceptive technique save for rhythm, must be or should be taken as a specification of the general statement on means found in *Populorum progressio*. Should this be the public-policy position of the Church? Or should the policy position in 1974 be simply a reiteration of the paragraph from *Populorum*

⁴Paul VI, *Populorum progressio*, no. 37 (New York: Paulist, 1967).

progressio, continuing to cast the issue of means in those unspecified terms?

Both of these approaches would be an inadequate policy response for the Church to make in the Population Year. To use *Humanae vitae* as the basis of our public-policy posture is to ignore the difference between teaching personal morality and teaching about public policy. To repeat *Populorum progressio* without further reflection leaves the Catholic policy position too general and ill defined. We need to be more specific, but we should specify our stance on the level of social policy, not personal morality. Moreover, neither of the above-mentioned responses is required by previous Catholic teaching. We have the possibility of moving beyond the choice of using *Humanae vitae* as our public policy or of simply repeating *Populorum progressio*. The way to move is through the means question to the rights question.

In discussing the question of suitable means of population control, the strategy of the Church should be to base its position on number 37 of *Populorum progressio*, but to elaborate this statement of principle in light of the traditional distinction in Catholic social ethics between public and private morality. Every action of the person, whether internal or external, private or public, personal or social, is bound by the moral law. However, not every command or prohibition of the moral law can or should be translated directly into civil law or into the realm of public policy. While consistently affirming its right and obligation to teach on all dimensions of the moral order, the Church has not felt obliged to see the entire corpus of Catholic teaching incorporated in the civil law or public policy of a society. In situations of moral and religious pluralism (the factual global situation today), where highly controverted issues of morality are at stake, the determination of whether to seek to bring all dimensions of public law or policy into accord with Catholic teaching depends upon a series of *moral judgments* about the nature of the issue involved, the intelligibility of Catholic teaching to others, the authority employed in the teaching, and a series of *prudential calculations* about the consequences for the Church and society of seeking to make the teaching the norm for societal action.

In the formulation of a public policy for the Population Year, the Church could use this traditional line of reasoning to clarify its public stance on the means question. There are grounds in both the area of moral analysis and the calculation of political consequences to argue that, except for the means of abortion and sterilization, the Church should not oppose nor seek to prohibit public authorities from designing and implementing policies which employ a range of contraceptive techniques. In other words, save for the issues of abortion and sterilization, the

strategy of the Church would be to regard contraceptive practice as an issue of private morality which the Church continues to teach for its members, but not an issue of public morality on which it seeks to affect public policy.

Justification for this position can be garnered morally from the style of recent Church teaching on contraception. While continuing to affirm a natural-law argument against contraception, the arguments of *Gaudium et spes* (no. 51) and *Humanae vitae* (nos. 4, 11, 12) rely heavily upon the Church's right to interpret the natural law. While this point is not new, the emphasis accorded the authoritative character of the teaching in discerning the content of natural law renders it less useful for those in society who do not accept the teaching authority of the Church. If acceptance of Church teaching authority is so intrinsically linked to understanding of the rationale of the Church's position against contraception, there is moral reason not to seek to bind an entire society with the position. An empirical assessment of the possibility of establishing even minimal societal consensus on a prohibition of contraception policy reinforces this normative judgment.

The logic of this position, while not ignoring the highly debated character of contraception within the Church, is not based upon the status of *Humanae vitae* among Catholics. Theoretically, one could hold literally to the position espoused in the Encyclical for Catholics and still argue that we ought not to make that position the basis of our public policy during the Population Year. The public position on contraceptive policies could be a posture of a discreet silence. We could withdraw public opposition from contraceptive policies, leaving to the decisions of public authorities within specified limits the formulation and implementation of means questions.

The logic of the position being argued here involves a low profile for the Church on the means question in population policy. It does not involve a low profile on the substantive morality of population policies espoused by public authorities. The argument is to shift the emphasis of the moral case, not to eschew it. A low profile on means of contraceptive technique is only one dimension of policy. It should be correlated with another position: a strict, explicit, unyielding opposition to any attempt to employ abortion as a means of population control. These two elements, explicit condemnation of abortion combined with an implicit but clear neutrality about other forms of contraception in public programs, provide the parameters of a "means policy" for the Church.

The objection often raised against such a proposal is that by decreasing our opposition to contraception, we weaken our position on abortion. This is not convincing; in fact, the contrary argument can be made.

There is real value for the Church, strategically and substantively, in taking advantage of the Population Year to distinguish the issues of abortion and contraception in the mind of Catholics and in the public mind. The need to distinguish the issues can be seen in responding to two positions which fail to differentiate them. The first is the argument sometimes used by Catholics: it asserts an intrinsic link between contraception and abortion and a process of inevitable deterioration from use of one to the other. The second, the mirror image of the first, is the argument employed by some proponents of population control who wish to use abortion as a safeguard or support in cases of contraceptive failure. This position also asserts that the distinction between contraception and abortion is a distinction without a difference. Passage from one means of population control to another is not regarded as either morally or politically significant. Against both of these arguments the Church should clarify the intrinsic moral difference between abortion and contraception and the distinctively different standing they have in terms of public morality.

The difference in the moral order is the qualitative distinction between how we decide morally whether we should begin a new life and how we decide morally about our responsibility toward developing life. The implications for public morality arise from recognition of the different nature of the two decisions. The abortion decision constitutes a prismatic case for the social morality of a society. What is involved is the right to life of a weak and vulnerable needy neighbor. As Prof. Ralph B. Potter has poignantly observed, the fetus symbolizes the human situation of each person: we are all in varying degrees dependent upon each other, and the quality of life we share is related to the respect we have for that dependence.⁵ When abortion decisions are viewed as issues of private morality, i.e., decisions in which there is no public interest at stake, the protection of human rights in society is substantially threatened. It is easy to recognize the rights of the strong; only a morally sensitive society recognizes and supports the rights of the weak.

In drawing the distinction between abortion and other forms of contraception on the grounds of public morality, the Church strengthens the case it is presently trying to make in society on abortion and it highlights a factor which has been systematically overlooked in our cultural shift on abortion. To specify the abortion decision as a case of public morality is to assert that because the rights of the fetus are involved, the society has an interest in how the decision is made; failure to protect the rights of anyone has implications for everyone. We ignore

⁵ R. Potter, "The Abortion Debate," in D. Cutler, ed., *Updating Life and Death* (Boston: Beacon, 1969) pp. 85-134.

the abuse of the rights of others at the peril of someday having our own rights ignored.

Opposition to abortion in any form, but especially abortion as a public policy, on the grounds of public morality, is the strongest argument the Church can make to the charge that it seeks to impose its morality on others. If it can be shown that the public interest is involved because issues on rights are at stake, then the case against abortion as an isolated act or as a public policy is not a "sectarian" position. Moreover, in casting the abortion argument in this form—the rights of the fetus as a public issue—the Church specifies a significant moral factor which is not being weighed in the arguments about public policy.

This discussion of the abortion issue has served to move us from the means issue to the rights issue. The stance the Church takes against abortion as a means of population policy should be only one part of a broader position which casts the moral argument about population in terms of a human-rights genre of argument. To base our moral critique of population policy on a means argument is defective on two counts: substantively, it looks at only one relatively minor dimension of population policy; strategically, it tends to isolate us, leaving us without allies on an issue where Catholics alone cannot carry the case, nationally or internationally.

Conversely, to base our critique of population policy in terms of a human-rights argument allows us to take a systemic view of population policy, i.e., analyze the principles which guide the direction and implementation of policy, and offers us an opportunity to join forces with others who also have raised questions about the morality of population policy here and abroad. Our evaluation of population policy should not be only in terms of a critique, but where we have to make a critique it should be carried out under the rubric of human rights.

The purpose of a human-rights evaluation of population policy would be to guarantee that any measures adopted serve not only the common interests of the larger society but also respect the personal rights of individuals who make up the society. The essence of the population problem is the need to balance the aggregate interests of society in maintaining a proper balance of resources and people with the personal rights of the individual to marry and to determine family size.

The style of systemic moral thinking which seeks to accord proper weight to the "common good" while recognizing that the "common good is chiefly guaranteed when personal rights and duties are maintained" (*Pacem in terris*, no. 60) is part of the Catholic social tradition as best expressed in modern papal teaching. To move from a means argument to a rights argument on population policy is to remain very much in a

Catholic style and structure of moral reasoning. It is to move, however, from a particularistic to a universalist mode of argumentation.

Prof. Arthur Dyck, in his discussion of the nature of the right to have children, describes it as a "fundamental right" which an ideal observer would recognize as being universally valid, "belonging to every human being *qua* human being."⁶ A human-rights style of argument places the Church in the service of all individuals and thereby elicits the co-operation of others similarly concerned about such fundamental rights. The shape of the argument defending such fundamental rights against unjust intrusion by a public authority would follow the lines of Pope John's discussion in *Pacem in terris* of the relationship between individuals and public authorities in a state. The specifics of such an argument cannot be easily summarized, but among the benefits of adopting such a style of moral reasoning are the following: (1) we broaden the scope and basis of our moral reasoning on the population issue, speaking in defense of each person against unjustified restriction of a basic right; (2) in this process we strengthen the defense of the Catholic conscience in the face of policies it might find particularly offensive, e.g., sterilization; (3) we avoid the charge of a "sectarian" stance by arguing in categories and for principles which stand apart from any single faith perspective.

The need for such a human-rights posture on population policy is evident both on the national and on the international levels of the debate. The pressure of the population problem tends to emphasize the need to stress systemic over personal values.⁷ The first to be affected by such thinking are often those in society without power to protect their rights. In evaluating the impact of incentives and compulsion as instruments of policy planning, Dyck finds that "Compulsion, like incentives, discriminates against the poor. Restricting the very poor to two or three children would render their lives much less hopeful and much more precarious. In less developed countries such restrictions for the poor mean economic losses in the form of reductions both in labor and in security for their old age."⁸

The theme of this quotation indicates the final utility of a human-rights approach to population policy for the Church. Current research on population policy has given us a better appreciation of the complex relationship between development and population.⁹ The necessary role of

⁶Dyck, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁷For a discussion of some of the ethical issues involved in the mix of systemic and personal aspects of public morality, see M. Longwood, "The Common Good: An Ethical Framework for Evaluating Environmental Issues," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 34 (1973) 468-80.

⁸Dyck, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

⁹See, e.g., W. Rich, *Population Explosion: The Role of Development*, Overseas Development Council, Communique no. 16; see also *Population Memoranda* of the Center of Concern.

development policies for any successful population policy is now more widely appreciated. The Church has sought through her recent teaching to articulate a theory of the rights involved in the development process. She now needs to complement this theory of rights with a theory of rights for population policy, one which takes the problem seriously, legitimates and encourages public action, but also correlates this with personal and familial freedom.

POLICY, PEDAGOGY, AND PASTORAL CARE

Thus far we have discussed possible substantive positions which the Church might assume in the Population Year. A complementary strategic consideration is to assess the potential of the Church to reach audiences with a message about the Population Year. Her potential influence is linked in part with the channels she has at her disposal to transmit information, evaluation, and opinion. Three structural characteristics of the Church, nationally and internationally, are pertinent to this assessment of her potential: her educational ministry, her transnational presence, and her pastoral access to people.

The significance of the Church's educational system, understood both as schools and as religious education, becomes evident as the multidimensional character of the population question becomes clearer in the public mind. Factors influencing peoples' ideas on fertility include notions of sexuality, sexual identity, family, the role of women in society, and the age best suited for marriage. The formative ideas people receive about these concepts and the links that are drawn from these personal issues to the larger social questions concerning demographic and socioeconomic factors can make a substantial long-range impact on the fertility patterns in society. What is taught in Catholic schools must obviously be determined by our own values and beliefs on these questions. But there are creative possibilities for influence through the Catholic school system, because we can deal there with basic themes which affect fertility and we are forming the most important decision-makers about fertility patterns: the individual couple who will enter marriage.

On a very different level of the population question the Church has another form of presence. Political scientists refer to the Church as a transnational actor, i.e., an institution which cuts across sovereign states and which exercises a systemic or global influence. There are only a handful of institutions in the world which possess this kind of presence; it carries with it a unique potential for action. The Church is simultaneously a transnational or universal institution and also a national body, since it takes shape within each state. The dimensions of the population policy are global in scope, but the decisions about policy are made by

sovereign states. The Church possesses the potential to influence the global shape of the problem and also the specific decisions of national actors. Few other institutions have the opportunity to function at these two levels.

Finally, few other institutions possess the access to peoples' lives, consciences, feelings, and beliefs the way the Church does in its daily pastoral work. One of the difficulties of setting population policy is that we are dealing with a macro-level of reality, but the decisions affecting reality are made at the micro-level of personal choice about family size. It is difficult to translate the macro-dimensions of the question into the personal perceptions of individuals. The Church is involved in the macro-questions through her social and moral teaching. But it is also involved in the micro-level of peoples' lives through its pastoral care. If the Church can correlate its action on these two levels, it can exercise a singularly valuable influence on a question with immense personal and policy implications.