

NOTE

POPULATION CONTROL AND THE CATHOLIC CONSCIENCE: RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MAGISTERIUM

It looks as if within a decade or two family planning and population control will be commonplace of world society. It does not seem beyond human ingenuity to bring under control the present rapid increase of the human population in Third World countries. It is a sound enough theory to ascribe what is happening in these countries to a cultural lag, that is, to the discrepancy between rapid technological advance and slower attitudinal change. Modern technology, in reducing the death rate in Third World countries, had eliminated the traditional brake on rapid population growth, but the instinctive desire for a large family that down the ages has been the answer to a high death rate has not yet changed. In the West a more gradual drop in the death rate over several generations, coupled with colonial expansion and migration, ensured a less dramatic increase in population. In the Third World control of mortality came suddenly and there were no countries to colonize or migrate to.

LACK OF SYSTEMATIC OPPOSITION

The alarm has been sounded and practically everywhere there is concern about family planning and population control, and if the present signs are any indication, the concern will grow and implementation will become more and more effective. *A striking phenomenon is the absence of systematic opposition.* About the only organized opposition in the world is that of the Catholic Church, and Catholic opposition is not to the principle of family planning and population control,¹ but to most of the methods. All the other major cultural influences easily accept modern methods of contraception and most of them seem to have no qualms about abortion: liberal humanism obviously, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Marxism. So, the overwhelming majority of mankind in North America, Western Europe, Russia, North Africa, China, Japan, and the rest of Asia can be counted upon to go along in time with whatever methods seem necessary and feasible for effective family planning and population control.

The chief obstacle to the implementation of these policies is shortage of means and lack of sophistication in developing countries, but about policies and programs themselves there is no problem. Among the

¹ Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 50; *Populorum progressio*, no. 37; "Declaration of Asian Seminar on Population," *Month* 234, no. 1275 (Second New Series 6, no. 11; Nov. 1973) 392.

developing countries of North Africa and Asia acceptance of government policies or programs by 1970 was widespread. They had been adopted in Ceylon, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Morocco, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Arab Republic, and South Korea.²

This would seem to indicate that in these vast areas of the world there is no organized cultural or religious opposition to family planning and population control. Fagley's comment on the reaction of non-Christian religions is relevant:

Despite the pro-fertility factors embedded in the *mores* of these cultures, the major non-Christian religions have proved surprisingly flexible in modifying or sublimating some of the doctrinal obstacles to small family patterns. For population policy in such cultures, what Christian churches say or do about population problems or family planning no longer has the fateful significance of fifteen years ago. Church pronouncements and action can help or hurt the Christian minorities and the people their medical facilities serve. But the national programmes and international assistance will undoubtedly develop in any case.³

In sub-Saharan Africa the picture is somewhat different. The population issue is not yet a vital one. People in most African countries are not yet conscious of pressure on space or resources. The population is largely rural and the traditional antidote against a high death rate coupled with a strong cultural bias in favor of fertility is still operational. However, there are signs that once African governments begin to realize that rapid population growth is an obstacle to development, they will not hesitate to encourage family and population policies. This has already happened in Kenya, Ghana, and the White-dominated Republic of South Africa and Rhodesia, though, in these last two countries, not without some adverse Black reaction that sees in fertility its most powerful weapon against the oppressor. In most other African countries that were once under British rule, family-planning activities in the private sector are fairly widespread.

There remains Latin America, where Catholic influence and cultural lag combine to slow down the ready acceptance of family and population policies. On the other hand, there is hardly a Latin American country that has not an active private association promoting contraceptive

² Cf. B. Berelson, "The Present State of Family Planning Program," in F. S. Singer, *Is There an Optimum Level of Population?* (New York, 1971) p. 339.

³ Cf. R. M. Fagley, "Population-Parenthood Issues," *Month* 234, no. 1275 (Second New Series 6, no. 11; Nov. 1973) 387-91.

advice, and in many cases with the support of the government.⁴ Mexico is moving rapidly towards an all-out government program, and other countries are not likely to hesitate about tackling the cultural lag once they realize that uncontrolled population growth is a major obstacle to development.⁵

The conclusion to be drawn from this brief survey is that for the vast majority of mankind cultural and religious attitudes offer no positive resistance to whatever technological methods are thought necessary to implement a population policy. Negative resistance comes mainly from the cultural lag, and the immediate problem for the population planners is how to overcome the cultural lag without the industrial modernization largely responsible for solving the problem in the West. As Watts puts it:

In a nutshell, the dilemma facing the world is to control population growth in an age of declining mortality by means of manipulating the concept of ideal family size which couples in a particular society or stratum of a society share. It is not persuading people to plan their families, but rather persuading them to want less children and then plan accordingly. I am pessimistic about the extent to which this is possible without the foundation of modernising influences such as occurred in the West. I would not go so far as to say that we must tread exactly the same path of social change as in the West, but I think unless we can devise new means of altering people's attitudes towards children and family size, rather than merely altering their attitudes towards planning their families, we will make insignificant progress in the under-developed world. I think that with modernisation change will come in any case but, by itself, it will not come fast enough. The essence of our problem is how can we speed up the decline of fertility, which from the experience of the West seems likely to come with modernisation and development—how can we speed it up in advance of modernisation and development? I do not know the answer. I have no neat formula to offer.⁶

Perhaps in the end the only formula will be a crash program of modernization of the Third World demanding of the developed world sacrifices equal to those only made in wartime. This is probably wishful thinking, but if the panic about the population spreads, such wishful thinking may become practical politics.

⁴ Cf. R. D. Garcia, "Latin America," in *Family Planning and Population Programs* (Proceedings of the International Conference on Family Planning Programs, Geneva, August 1965; Chicago, 1966) p. 250.

⁵ Cf. Enrique Brito Velázquez, "Central American Problems," and Pedro Calderan Beltrão, "Latin American Complexities," *Month* 234, no. 1275 (Second New Series 6, no. 11; Nov. 1973) 372-76, 377-80.

⁶ Cf. H. L. Watts, "Population Control," Unpublished paper delivered to University of Natal Winter School on "Environmental Responsibility," Durban, South Africa, 1973.

THE CATHOLIC POSITION

Whether it does or not, the future facing the great majority of mankind looks like involving legalized and organized contraception and medically induced abortion on a scale vast enough to constitute common everyday practice. Only one body of any significance in the world appears to hold official views critical of these methods—the Catholic Church. What is this going to mean for us?

In the first place, the Catholic Church cannot afford not to be vitally and vigorously concerned about the world population problem. It is obviously not merely a population problem; it is a problem related to social justice between nations, economic sharing on a global scale, and development. It is the twentieth-century world-wide version of the capital-labor issue of the nineteenth century. The Catholic Church came so late to realize the implications of that issue that she has had very little say in its development and its consequences, and for that reason very little say in vast areas of modern life. She dare not stay on the sidelines of the population issue. An issue of this magnitude could very well affect the life of every married couple and of most national communities and governments. It will be a dominant political, economic, social, and domestic issue bearing down on human life from all sides and demanding that any organization claiming to offer a spiritual vision become deeply involved in it and make a significant contribution to the promotion of the human values at stake. The Church has learned from bitter experience that “thou shalt not” is not a significant contribution to the solution of a social problem. An organization claiming to offer moral guidance must justify its claims by the relevance of its views and the constructive and effective character of its influence.

Consequently, the problem of human population with all its associated issues—inequality of distribution of the world’s goods, obstacles to growth in developing countries, insensitivity of opulent societies—must be an area of major concern for the Church. This is already accepted in principle. *Mater et magistra*, *Pacem in terris*, *Gaudium et spes*, *Populorum progressio* have all emphasized the role that the Catholic community must play in helping to solve global social problems. The population problem has not yet received from the Church the attention it merits, and for obvious reasons: the uncertainties surrounding it and the particular problems it raises in the sphere of Catholic family morality. But the nettle has to be grasped sooner or later, and 1974, the year of the United Nations Conference, is a good year to do it.

Grasping the nettle means far more than setting out principles and laying down directives. Experience should have convinced us by now that

ideas take a painfully long time to soak through a society, to become values for that society. We are learning that the rate of evolution from idea to value is directly dependent on the quality of the communication. Unfortunately, communication has not been the strong point of the Catholic magisterium. We are very good at saying what should be done, but not very helpful in indicating how it should be done.

This was the weakness of the social teaching of the Church. The papacy took the lead in proclaiming its principles to the world in a series of great encyclicals, but because of the inadequacies of the time achieved little by way of effective communication. Forty and fifty years after *Rerum novarum* Catholic social teaching was still a sideline in most seminaries. The Roman Congregation of Studies responsible for programs of priestly studies had not realized that if *Rerum novarum* was to create a Catholic social conscience, it could only do so through the education of future priests. Again, decades after Cardijn had formulated his revolutionary ideas about the education of youth in the faith, there were few formal programs in seminaries to ensure that future priests would be trained in his methods. No one is to blame for this. It was just that past influences had left us with the conviction that if an idea was launched into space, it would make its own way: bishops and priests and religious and lay teachers would absorb it avidly and apply it vigorously. Of course, the majority did not. They did not know what to do. They were victims of the practical truth that only the exceptional few are able to do what they are not trained to do, especially when the situation in which they are supposed to operate is a huge, stubborn, and complicated social problem in which the great majority of individuals feel utterly powerless.

This is precisely the situation we are likely to be faced with in the next few years in regard to the population issue. Practically every country in the world will have a state-supported system of family planning, and most of these will probably have the dimension of population planning as well. The common currency of these systems, as far as we can foresee, will be practices in conflict with Catholic morality: contraception and abortion. They will be commonplaces of human society all over the world, part of the cultural climate of the age. People not accepting them will be mere curiosities, strange survivors of another age. Ninety percent of the world's population will be unable to understand the religious and ethical scruples of the dissident ten percent; and of the ten percent itself, what proportion will stand firm by its nonconformist principles, which it will be accepting, if it does accept them, largely on the authority of its religious leaders? This is going to be a colossal problem for the majority of Catholics, clerical and lay. In an age when the argument from

authority carries scarcely any weight whatsoever, they are going to be expected to hold out against universal human convictions about the moral acceptability of contraceptive procedures and legalized abortion and against the almost irresistible pressure of universal practice.

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MAGISTERIUM

How will the Catholic magisterium deal with this situation? Will it merely say that, while it realizes that societies, governments, and families have a problem, the Catholic Church cannot approve of the illicit methods employed and that God's law and the law of nature demand abstention from these methods?

Is it just for the magisterium merely to say that and to wash its hands of all the rest? The rest includes the millions of poor women, of working women, whose only escape from the intolerable burden of an unwanted pregnancy is an easily obtainable abortion. It includes the millions of couples the world over whose only hope of avoiding pregnancies which in the circumstances they will feel in conscience bound to avoid, lies in the use of contraceptives available everywhere, publicized, advertised, and practically imposed by social and political pressure. It includes the ministers of state, members of parliament, and civil servants who somehow have got to make a family-planning and population program work, or let the society for which they are responsible totter and stumble into chaos. It includes hundreds and thousands of key figures in the politics and economics of prosperous countries who have to be persuaded of their responsibility for the Third World and of their obligation to see that there should be much more sharing, on the basis that the Christian concept of community applies as much to nations as to individuals.

The responsibility of a teacher of morals goes far beyond the bare enunciation of duties. It implies concern about the situation in which those duties have got to be fulfilled; for it is unrealistic, and it may even be unjust, to lay down the law to people when their circumstances make it morally impossible for them to observe that law. I think of the condition of family life among the Bantu people of South Africa. Bantu society has been so disrupted by white exploitation, urbanization, and migrant labor that it is almost a mockery to speak of the responsibilities of Christian marriage and family life. In vast areas of this society sixty percent of the children are illegitimate. In these circumstances, has the Church the right to proclaim its teachings on marriage or to uphold its canonical discipline if at the same time it is not moving heaven and earth to have the whole social situation changed? By insisting that moral standards must be preached in impossible situations, the Church leadership could be guilty of a double injustice: an injustice to the poor

people who are supposed to live up to these impossible standards and an injustice to the pastoral clergy who are supposed to preach what they know very few of their hearers can practice. The relevance of these remarks to the population issue is all too obvious. The magisterium of the Church could be guilty of a grave injustice if it allows a situation to develop in which the vast majority of the faithful live under such enormous social pressures in the matter of family planning and population control that only the heroic will be able to cope with them.

While the responsibility for preparing for this situation is shared by the whole Church, it falls particularly heavily on the episcopate with Peter at the head. It is the duty of the magisterium to see that the Church is geared for the coming crisis. This means assessing as clearly as possible the situation in which the faithful will be called upon to observe Catholic standards of family morality, and in this assessment we must not be afraid of the information and forecasts of sociologists, economists, and demographers. This assessment should help to indicate what line the Church should take in regard to papal and episcopal directives, preparation of the pastoral clergy for its guiding role, and preparation of the people for the tensions they will have to endure.

Will the emerging picture be one of a Church girding itself for a long and exhausting siege, an embattled Church calling on all its resources to help priests and people fight off the contagion of an all-pervading atmosphere of contraception and abortion? It could be. But what a pity, just when we are trying to shake off the siege mentality of recent centuries, to have to fall back behind new ramparts! All things considered, it looks extremely doubtful that the Church will be prepared to accept such a situation again. We have had enough of it. We know we were not sent into the world to erect fortifications against the world but to pervade and influence the world.

So we have to face the prospect that, in a world in which there is a moral consensus on the need to limit population growth, to undertake programs of family planning and population control, the Church must be able to put before mankind her own realistic methods of achieving these aims, demonstrating that they are able to serve the human community and promote human values better than the accepted methods. This is an extremely tall order and will demand an enormous effort of the Church, an effort that can be deployed only if the Holy Father himself takes the lead in mobilizing the available forces: the social scientists, the theologians, the educators, and the communicators. It is a question of assembling a vast amount of information, drawing practical conclusions, and formulating a pastoral plan involving a far-reaching training program for those who have to implement it. To repeat again a basic

contention: we can no longer afford merely to enunciate principles, we have to create the means of translating them into social values.

This will take much more effort and organization than is normally put into an episcopal synod. In scope and thoroughness it will have to match the efforts the United Nations organization expends on the population problem. It will have to be a courageous decision on the part of the Holy Father, for what might emerge from such an effort could be shattering for some traditional Catholic attitudes.

It could be the first great soul-searching experience of the Church in which her traditional moral system concerned mainly with absolute and unchangeable principles is brought face to face with scientifically assembled facts of a human situation in which these principles have to be lived, the first great confrontation between the "essential" of the traditional Catholic mentality and the "existential" of the modern approach.

As I have said, it will take courage on the part of the Holy Father to mobilize such an effort; for no matter how eternal our principles of morality may be, our attitude to them will not come through such a confrontation unaltered. The facts when honestly faced have a way of influencing theory. The effort to shape up a Catholic population policy could be a big step forward in the elaboration of the kind of Catholic moral theology needed in our complex and pluralistic world.

It could be that one of the first casualties in this elaboration would be the traditional Catholic concept of the absolute moral value and its counterpart, the intrinsically evil. We have managed in recent centuries to maintain our precarious balance on these two poles of Catholic ethical teaching by a number of subtle solutions to special problems involving self-defense, mental reservation, surgical operations, organ transplants, taking in extreme need what belongs to another, ectopic fetuses, and the rest of the twilight zone covered by the principle of double effect. Today our moral theologians accept much more easily that there can be conflicts of moral values, leaving a justifiable choice to the person in the middle—though the moral system of the Church in its general operation has not yet absorbed this relatively new outlook. It is relatively new to us because to get to it we have had to hack through the theological constructs of the past, but to mankind at large it must be as old as the first stirrings of the moral sense. It is the assumption largely responsible for the relative ease with which Protestant Christians and most other religious groups in the world adapt their ethical teaching to new situations thrown up by the social evolution of mankind. It is ironical, in a way, that Catholic teaching has been able to cope quite easily with conflicts of values involving human life outside the womb, as in the

matters of self-defense and just warfare, but has made exceptionally heavy weather of conflicts of values involving human life within the womb.

POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS

Freed of the absolutist mentality—though, of course, claiming no emancipation from authentic moral values—the Catholic system should be able to cope with the problems raised by the need for population control. We might very well take two opposite courses in regard to the two characteristic forms of fertility control.

We could possibly come to terms with forms of contraception not involving abortion. In actual fact, this seems to have happened already for the majority of Catholics in developed countries and the practice looks like spreading progressively to Catholics in developing countries as contraceptive procedures become available. But in regard to anything smacking of abortion, it is not easy to see that we could ever depart from our insistence on the value of human life. Here our main concern would be to develop such a convincing case against abortion that we could win the world to our way of thinking. But to achieve this, we would have to work very hard indeed, and we would have to win credence for our position by demonstrating in a very practical way our appreciation of the population problem and our ability to offer a substantial contribution to the promotion of the human values involved that have importance for the people of our age.

Among these values must figure high on the list, if not at its very summit, the need for international sharing in a Christian spirit; for it does seem that the solution of the population problem is going to depend in a very large measure on improving the economic lot of the teeming human masses of the Third World. The wealthy nations are not likely to be successful in preaching population control if they do not practice economic sharing on a much larger scale. Into the achieving of this goal the Church can and must throw the whole weight of her spiritual and moral influence. Sharing on an international scale comes as a late entry into the field of our moral concern, but obviously it must occupy more and more of our attention. The very essence of the Christian ethic in regard to material goods is that men are the stewards of them and those who enjoy an abundance have a heavy responsibility in regard to those who do not. This applies to communities as well as persons, to nations as well as individuals. This, then, is an area to which the Church must devote a great deal of attention—and, of course, not merely theological attention but above all pastoral and educational attention. Theologies are easy enough to elaborate. Communication of their message is the real

problem, and this must be understood more and more clearly and fully from the highest level of the magisterium down to the humblest manifestation of pastoral concern. The major problem is not thinking but imparting and living what is thought. In *Populorum progressio* we have all we want by way of principles clearly formulated by Pope Paul VI. Now we need the drive to communicate and apply.

International sharing is not, of course, a direct contribution to solving the population problem. It works indirectly, by spreading conditions of prosperity in which, as has been the universal experience so far, people desire smaller families. How they achieve the limitation will remain a Catholic dichotomy until one of two solutions is achieved: either the problem is tackled head on in a thoroughgoing consultation of the type envisaged here, or the magisterium gradually opts out of the unequal struggle and allows the permissive view to take over. There can be hardly any doubt that this is happening. To keep the Catholic conscience bound to the official view on birth control would, in the circumstances of today, require superhuman insistence on the part of the magisterium. This insistence is not manifest. Rather there is a tendency to avoid the topic or to treat it with tolerance and benign interpretation. So by default a major change is occurring in the moral teaching of the Church—which hardly enhances the image of the magisterium.

The challenge of population control calls for a braver approach, an approach that must make the best use of what our various experts have to offer, an integrated approach to a problem that affects human life in all its dimensions. An abstract formula is not an answer. We must know as precisely as possible the situation that constitutes the problem, the values that are at stake, what we have to offer in preserving and promoting these values, and how we are going to offer our contribution to the world. If the magisterium does not see to it that this total ecclesial effort is mobilized and deployed, it will not have the right to teach; for, invoking our old ally, natural law, no authority has the right to command the impossible, and it will be impossible for pastors and people to cope with the population issue without very full and effective leadership from the magisterium. We must avoid at all costs incurring the reproach of Jesus: "You load on men burdens that are unendurable, burdens that you yourselves do not move a finger to lift" (Lk 11:46).

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