

Ministry in Service to Life and Family

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Introduction

Within a very short time of beginning ministry in Hong Kong I began to work with the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council in its Natural Family Planning centers. My experience in helping couples to plan their families in a healthy, responsible manner naturally led to a growing interest in the Pro-life movement.



The Birthright Society was established in 1973 by Bishop Hsu to provide practical alternatives for women facing the abortion decision after abortion became legal in Hong Kong. It had been established for a year or two when I began to serve in various ways.

When further changes to abortion legislation were being proposed in the early 1980's a group of concerned people formed the Action Group on Abortion Bill which grew into the Pro-life Action Association, Ltd. Over the years this group has tried to serve the community by increasing awareness of medical, legal, social and ethical implications of abortion legislation. Early on we decided to broaden our interest to include all issues impinging on respect for human life. We submitted an opinion paper to the Basic Law Drafting Committee on the "Rights and Duties of Hong Kong Residents in Relation to the Child and Its Family". Other efforts included a pamphlet informing medical staff of their right to opt out of procedures which were against their conscience and a position paper on the right to life of the newborn handicapped child. Our more recent efforts have been to present position papers to the Government's Committee on Scientifically Assisted Human Reproduction. Many media representatives contact us for comments on current issues.

Governments and Family Rights: Conflict of Interest?

Most nations and societies recognize the family as the primary and vital cell of society requiring both respect and protection. For a definition of the family I could not do better than quote the words of His Eminence Alfonso Cardinal Lopez Trujillo "The objective [so that the International Year of the Family may bear lasting fruit] in the face of society and the world should insist on reaffirming, in a clear and strong way, the validity of the natural concept of the family as a stable union of heart and life of man and woman, open to welcoming life and committed to the mission of education and the promotion of the life of society."

Life: the Basic Right

Of all the rights an individual in society can lay claim to, the most basic is the right to life. Life is a gift, it is good, it is beautiful, and this beauty cannot be fully perceived or fairly judged by another. There are many examples of severely handicapped individuals who show true appreciation of this gift whereas many healthy, wealthy and talented persons are miserable and bored. When the right to life is denied, it is futile to discuss either rights or responsibilities.

It is in the interest of governments to support and strengthen family life since the family is the first and most important educator of children, its future citizens, in the values which provide for a stable society.

The proper rearing of children is a long and complex process which naturally demands a strong, stable social unit to provide the necessary milieu for growth and development of the human personality. It is the common aspiration of all families that their children be able to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity. It is likewise in the interest of governments and society to facilitate this process. While history has provided us with many examples where families and/or societies have not achieved or even sought to promote these ideals, the resultant human misery, loss of human

potential and chaotic conditions only reinforce their importance.

The concept of "the right to life" implies an understanding of a complex set of attitudes toward human beings. These attitudes include respect for the dignity of each individual and a sensitivity to the many ways in which this dignity is threatened. It seems that some philosophies prevalent today do not distinguish the fundamental difference between human beings and animals. There is a great gap between the great apes and human beings, which is demonstrated by human ability to reflect on one's behavior and experience. This reflection leads to the development of codes of conduct which are recognized as good both for the individual and for society.

For some reason the prevailing secular attitude towards human sexual behavior appears to be that it is uncontrollable, instinctual behavior similar to what we see among animals. My own experience with helping couples to be aware of the naturally occurring periods of fertility and infertility indicates that it is in the respectful use of intercourse in marriage that the couple grows in love and human dignity over the years. Mutual respect insures that both the unitive and procreative aspects of intercourse are balanced. Where this daily example of loving respect is present in the family the children benefit greatly; their own dignity is recognized and enhanced as well.

Population and Fertility Control

For thirty to forty years we have been warned about the world wide "population explosion". Methods of population control have been institutionalized in nations and international bodies. Nations have used varying degrees of incentives and disincentives to persuade families to limit the number of their children.

An unrelenting search for the perfect method of controlling fertility has been the goal of nations and scientists. We know clearly the criteria for the ideal method. It should be reliable and safe with no serious side effects. It should be inexpensive and readily reversible. It should be easy to learn to use and should not require extensive medical services either in its provision or as a back up service. Ideally clients should become autonomous within a reasonable period of time. Further criteria that may be more difficult to obtain would limit need for client

participation or persistent motivation. In the first set we described the present day model of natural family planning [NFP]; the further requirement of motivation and daily participative activity is the source of the strongest criticism of NFP. All artificial contraceptive methods such as barrier methods, the pill, intrauterine devices, injections or slow release hormone methods, and sterilization fall short of meeting one or the other of these criteria.

Parallel with the development of increasingly reliable contraceptive methods was the understanding of the physical signs of fertile and infertile periods combined with effective teaching methods. When all that was available was the diaphragm and contraceptive jelly, natural family planners had the Ogino-Knauss method of calendar calculations to determine fertile periods. The efficacy of both methods was about equal. Now, persons who speak of NFP as being synonymous with the rhythm method or "Vatican roulette" are merely displaying their ignorance of modern developments.

The factors which militate against the ability of clients to use successfully NFP seem to be more related to the level of communication in marriage, the pressures of urban society and the attitude that every human problem should have a magic pill to provide the quick fix. It is commonly assumed that NFP requires regular cycles and a high level of literacy. However studies of effectiveness have shown that the groups with the highest success rate come from couples in less developed nations where their poverty probably enhances motivation.

After the development of extremely effective artificial contraceptives there followed a strong push to legalize abortion in most nations. This has resulted in a marked decrease in the number of births. Although most governments and international bodies deny that abortion has a role in family planning, it is in truth the back up to failure of the other methods.

A recent World Development Report cited in the *Hong Kong Sunday Standard* [August 14, 1994] listed fifty nations, their ranking according to size of families and the change which had occurred in their ranking between 1970 and 1992. Forty of the fifty were now below the replacement figure of 2.2 children per family. These countries represented both developed and undeveloped nations with the majority coming from Europe and North America. Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Singapore and

China were all well below replacement levels. Of these five Asian nations most people are aware that Singapore and China achieved this through the use of various kinds of disincentives. Of these five most people are also aware that Singapore in recent years has tried to reverse the trend by using incentives to larger families, especially among its better educated class.

How did Hong Kong achieve its 58% reduction in fertility without government intervention? Practical matters of crowded housing and costly education seem to prevail. Many present day parents came from big families and were determined not to have large families themselves. The most worrisome attitude that can creep in under the cover of population control is that children can be considered expensive, unnecessary appendages to married life. Once the anti-child mentality is established it is not easily counterbalanced.

It seems that the one or the two child family has become the norm in Hong Kong. It takes some very special skills in parenting to help the only child to grow up to be a person who willingly shares material goods and interactions with others. Some parents feel that all this social development will be provided in the interactions in nursery, kindergarten and school, but experience shows that socialization of children is better acquired in the closer relationship of family. Many two child families consist of a son and a daughter. One mother reflected as her children grew older that she regretted stopping at two because she felt that each was lonesome and desirous of sharing with a sibling of their own gender. Although they had cousins and school-mates this need was not met.

China's Draconian Solution

China has decided that it needs a drastic reduction in its population and therefore requires that the Han Chinese family should have only one child. If all the long and short term effects of such policies could be reduced to a single area, there might be some rationale for the drastic measures which they have implemented. Given the strong cultural value of the need to have a son to continue the family line, a whole host of present and future problems accompany the one child policy. In many provinces of China there is already a serious imbalance of the

male/female sex ratio and this imbalance can be expected to worsen in the future. If infanticide and abandonment of female babies is resorted to now, where will brides be found for the coming generation of men? Fines are unequally levied especially in the rural areas where a family may have managed to hide a second birth. Fines, especially those unequally applied, bring with them the possibility of corruption. Education will be denied to the child who is born without permission. Fines and denial of education will plunge the rural areas into deepening poverty. Women are being kidnapped and sold as wives to those in the cities who cannot find a wife. The methods of exerting social pressure on families through the work place and /or the neighborhood to adhere to the one child norm distort normal social relationships. Is the good to be obtained from the reduction of population going to leave a lasting legacy on the whole development of society? Can the government continue to govern in the face of the efforts to avoid compliance that will certainly spring up? Is there no possible method which could retain the shreds of human dignity while providing for development which tends to result in fewer births? Is the education process too slow to achieve the desired goal? Will the price now being paid in human suffering ultimately prove to be too great for the nation and its government to bear?

Human Dignity in Marriage

How should husbands and wives ideally come to a decision about having children, when and how many children they want, can care for and subsequently have? I believe that these are vital matters that should be discussed during preparation for marriage. I believe that good remote preparation for marriage for each woman is a thorough understanding of her menstrual cycle and the signs expressed by bodily changes during the fertile and infertile times in the cycle. I believe that this knowledge needs to be understood by the future husband, not only because of the implications of fertility but also for understanding better the variations in his wife's emotions and moods. The information basic to NFP has benefits far beyond its application to healthy control of fertility. The greatest long term benefit to successful couples is the enhancement of their relationships in all areas of their life together. In particular the position of

women in society is enhanced by the respect shown her within the family.

Human dignity demands that husband and wife together decide on the number of children they wish to have. Some may decide that they do not wish to become parents. If they make this decision when they are young they may desire to reverse it when they become older. Fertility diminishes with time, many couples who find that time has run out for them suffer greatly when they grasp at every method available to remedy infertility. Some couples may find to their great sorrow that some illness had rendered them infertile before marriage. Those who work with infertile couples are aware of how much human suffering is exacerbated by misplaced blame on who is responsible for the inability to have the desired child.

I would hope that more wide spread awareness of and respect for the awesome power of fertility would leave couples open to changing their mind in favor of another child after one or two if they feel that they can lovingly care for that child. I would also hope that families would lay aside the gender bias in favor of boys and give up the attempts to influence the gender of their child. Nature seems to know how to balance the sex ratio without help from technology.

At the beginning of marriage many may think that their first child has absorbed all their capabilities at parenting but later find that their family circle is enhanced with the arrival of the second or even third child. The essential element is that the couple should decide without outside coercion the number of children they can responsibly care for, while the decision process needs to be tempered with generosity and love.

Role of Church and Government

There will be those who are quick to point out the many examples of irresponsible parents. This is where social bodies such as the Church and governments have a positive role to play. Support for the family by education in positive values is an unending process and requires much creativity in the present social climate where instant gratification is promoted in so many ways.

The development of artificial contraception and the "sexual revolution" arose together but have failed to deliver the happi-

ness they promised. The pleasures of sexual intercourse have always been a powerful lure leading to extra-marital affairs and exploitative situations such as prostitution. However we always recognized that sexual activity carried with it the responsibility of a possible new life and that promiscuity carried with it the danger of sexually transmitted diseases. Somehow we even recognized that it could lead to the death of that new life if abortion became a solution to the ensuing social problems. Once contraception separated the possibility of conception from sexual intercourse, the forces of death have increased, not lessened their hold.

Young people today should not be blamed if their perception of sexual activity brings with it visions of death, disease and destruction. Yet most of the sex education they are being offered assumes that they will become sexually active and provides them with the counsel of despair to practice "safer sex". It does not dare to tell them that the safest choice is to choose a lifetime partner who also is and will be faithful. Fortunately church groups are beginning to have the courage to promote chastity.

Violence is more and more associated with young people, especially those who are sexually active or drug abusers. Teenagers carry guns to school in the inner cities of the United States, shoot each other over a famous brand coat, expect sexual favors if money has been spent during the date. Adults have certainly failed to provide them with the living example of the life-giving, loving aspects of normal, healthy, self-giving married life.

Conclusion

This paper began with a question, "Governments and family rights: is there a conflict of interests?" The answer to that has to come at the end of a deep search into what values governments believe will be in the best long term interests of its people, providing for their progress in spiritual as well as material matters and providing the basis of a stable society. I believe that an honest search will lead to the conclusion that there is no conflict of interest.
