

Documentation

Family Planning: The Popes Speak

Editor's Note: The following quotations from recent Popes on Family Planning are extracted from Chapter 1 of *Ethical and Pastoral Dimensions of Population Trends*, a document prepared by the Pontifical Council of the Family to provide guidelines for pastoral action to Bishops' Conferences around the world and to inform them of present global demographic realities. The document was prepared in view of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, September 5-14, 1994.

Papal Teachings

The Church has always considered that the systematic control of births, using directly or indirectly coercive means to limit population size, does not contribute to authentic human development. Moreover, anticipating certain contemporary criticisms of population control theories and practices, the Popes have regarded what is sometimes called the "population crisis" only with great prudence. However, it should be noted that the Supreme Pontiffs have closely followed the different population trends, paying the same attention to the population growth observed in some countries as to the declining population observed in other places. At the same time they have vigorously striven to promote justice, peace, and development. By attaching the problems of poverty and hunger at their source, they wished to help resolve these problems. This papal teaching is set out in different documents.

From John XXIII to Paul VI

Mater et Magistra

In his Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magistra*, Pope John XXIII referred in 1961 to the problem of food and demographic trends. He stated: "But whatever be the situation, we clearly affirm that these problems should be posed and resolved in such a way that

people do not have recourse to methods and means contrary to human dignity, which are proposed by those persons who think of persons and their life solely in material terms."

Gaudium et Spes

Referring to population trends in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council affirm: "International cooperation is vitally necessary in the case of those peoples who are faced with the special problems arising out of rapid increases in population. There is a pressing need to harness the full and eager cooperation of all, particularly of the richer countries, in order to explore how the human necessities of food and suitable education can be furnished and shared with the entire human community."

Address to the United Nations

In his historic address to the United Nations General Assembly in 1965, Pope Paul VI said: "You proclaim here the fundamental rights and duties of man, his dignity, freedom--and above all his religious freedom. We feel that you thus interpret the highest sphere of human wisdom and, we might add, its sacred character. For you deal here above all with human life and the life of man is sacred; no one can dare offend it. Respect for life, even with regard to the great problem of birth, must find here in your assembly its highest affirmation and its most reasoned defence. You must strive to multiply bread so that it suffices for the tables of mankind, and not rather favour an artificial control of birth, which would be irrational, in order to diminish the number of guests at the banquet of life."

Populorum Progressio

In 1967, in his Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI again wrote about demographic realities: "Finally, it is for parents to take a thorough look at the matter and decide upon the number of their children. This is an obligation they take upon themselves, before their children already born, and before the community to which they belong--following the dictates of their own consciences informed by God's law authentically interpreted, and bolstered by their trust in Him."

Humanae Vitae

In his Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968), Pope Paul VI confirmed these teachings. He explained "responsible parenthood." In relation to the biological processes, responsible parenthood means knowledge and respect of their functions: human intellect discovers in the power of giving life biological laws which are part of the human person....

Responsible parenthood also and above all implies a more profound relationship to the objective moral order established by God, of which a right conscience is the faithful interpreter. The responsible exercise of parenthood implies, therefore, that husband and wife recognize fully their own duties towards God, towards themselves, towards the family, and towards society, in a correct hierarchy of values.

In *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI called attention to the fact that public authorities might be tempted to impose artificial methods of birth control. For this reason he appealed to these authorities: "To rulers, who are those principally responsible for the common good, and who can do so much to safeguard moral values. We say: Do not allow the morality of your peoples to be degraded; do not permit that by legal means practices contrary to the natural and divine law be introduced into the fundamental cell, the family. Quite other is the way in which public authorities can and must contribute to the solution of the demographic problem: namely, the way of a provident policy for the family, of a wise education of peoples in respect of the moral law and the liberty of citizens."

Familiaris Consortio

In 1982, in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Family *Familiaris Consortio* Pope John Paul II analyzed the birth of a secularist anti-life mentality; "One thinks, for example of a certain panic deriving from the studies of ecologists and futurologists on population growth, which sometimes exaggerates the danger of demographic increase to the quality of life. But the Church firmly believes that human life, even if weak and suffering, is always a splendid gift of God's goodness. Against the pessimism and selfishness which cast a shadow over the world, the Church stands for life... Thus the Church condemns as a grave offense against human dignity and justice all those activities of governments or other public authorities which attempt to limit in

any way the freedom of couples in deciding about children. Consequently any violence applied by such authorities in favour of contraception or, still worse, of sterilization and procured abortion, must be altogether condemned and forcefully rejected."

Mexico City

The Pope again spoke on this theme in 1984, in an address to the Secretary of the World Population Conference held in Mexico City. "The very notion of 'responsible parenthood' and family planning has been violated by the distribution of contraceptives to adolescents. Moreover, from contraceptive programmes a transition has in fact often been made to the practice of sterilization and abortion, financed by governments and international organizations."

Sollicitudo Rei Socialis

In his Encyclical Letter of 1987, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Pope John Paul II wrote: "One cannot deny the existence, especially in the southern hemisphere, of a demographic problem which creates difficulties for development. One must immediately add that in the northern hemisphere the nature of this problem is reversed; here the cause for concern is the drop in the birth rate, with repercussions on the aging of the population, unable even to renew itself biologically. Just as it is incorrect to say that such difficulties stem solely from demographic growth, neither is it proved that all demographic growth is incompatible with orderly development. On the other hand it is very alarming to see governments in many countries launching systematic campaigns against birth, contrary not only to the cultural and religious identity of the countries themselves, but also contrary to true development. It often happens that these campaigns are the result of pressure coming from abroad, and, in some cases, they are made a condition for the granting of financial and economic aid and assistance. In any event, there is an absolute lack of respect for the freedom of choice of the parties involved, men and women are often subjected to intolerable pressures, including economic ones, in order to force them to submit to this new form of oppression. It is the poorest populations which suffer such mistreatment, and this sometimes leads to a tendency towards a form of racism, or the promotion of equally racist

forms of eugenics. This fact too, which deserves the most forceful condemnation, is a sign of an erroneous and perverse idea of true human development."

Centesimus Annus

In his Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* marking the centenary of *Rerum Novarum* in 1991, Pope John Paul II wrote on population: "Human ingenuity seems to be more directed towards limiting, suppressing or destroying the sources of life--including recourse to abortion, which unfortunately is so widespread in the world--than towards defending and opening up the possibilities of life."

Address to Pontifical Academy of Sciences

The address of the Holy Father, John Paul II, on November 22, 1991, should not be forgotten. It was delivered at an audience granted to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. The Academy had just spent a week studying the relationship between "resources and population."

"The urgency of the situation must not lead into error in proposing ways of intervening. To apply methods which are not in accord with the true nature of man actually ends up by causing tragic harm. For this reason the Church, as an 'expert on humanity' (cf. Paul VI) upholds the principle of responsible parenthood and considers it her chief duty to draw urgent attention to the morality of the methods employed. These must always respect the person and the person's inalienable rights."

