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The Population Explosion – Myth or Reality?

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A native of Liverpool, England, Father McCormack was graduated from Durham University and served for almost 10 years as a missionary in West Cameroon, West Africa. In the past 15 years, he has specialized in population and development problems of developing countries and has given special attention to international social justice. The author of numerous books, he has served as a delegate to the United Nations Population Commission since 1965.

“Certainly the World, as it appears to our eyes, becomes more and more refined and progresses from day to day. Now all lands are accessible, all are explored, all are open to traffic and the most important evidence that the population is so great is that we are now a burden on the World, there are barely enough of the essentials for us, our needs have become acute and there is a cry of complaint on the lips of all men, for nature can no longer sustain us.”

These words might have been written by a modern scientist concerned about the race between population and resources. Actually, they were written by an early Latin Christian writer, Tertullian. His conviction that “all lands are explored” makes us smile. The world has survived to see a population twenty times the size that it was over 1750 years ago when Tertullian wrote.

But once again similar cries, with far more justice, are being raised. Can we brush them aside, the way Tertullian’s could have been brushed aside by anyone with greater knowledge than his? Will we muddle through our present crisis as Tertullian’s world did? Is it just a question of crying “Wolf, wolf!” once more when there is really no cause for alarm or when undreamed of developments of knowledge and even the use of present expertise for a more equitable exploitation and distribution of the bounty of God in the world, will dispel our present fears? To answer these questions should be comparatively easy. To point to the immense differences between the problems of the 3rd Century and the 20th would not be difficult. But the controversy about what is called the “Population Explosion” of our age is hard to conduct on a purely rational or objective level. Often enough, more heat than light is generated by discussions of it.

In spite of this we must come face to face with the problem of rapid population increase if we are to maintain an honest and scientific attitude to the welfare of mankind. There is no doubt that one of the most urgent problems facing the world in the last quarter of the 20th Century is the extremely rapid increase in the growth of world population.

It is only in the past 15 years that there has been a real awareness of the problem and it is less than ten years since the countries of the world, in the General Assembly of the United Nations, really began to come to grips with it. Even now there is reluctance in some circles to accept the facts and the consequences for individual countries and regions — and for mankind itself — which flow from them.

Attitudes from the past still linger and are difficult to change. The ideal of a large family has seemed to be so essential a part of the culture for many countries and has been so strongly reinforced by world religions that it is extremely difficult for many people to face the fact that for the foreseeable future, smaller families will have to be considered the general norm.

Population statistics are not part of a “numbers game”; they are about people and space and the resources they need. The population problem itself would not exist if the earth were a hundred times the size it is and had virtually unlimited, easily available resources. But it is not. Hence the problem. The problem must be situated in a human context: it concerns human beings. It must also be situated in the framework of the integral and authentic development of all people on earth.

The quest for social justice, for example, and the war on world poverty, should receive new impetus from consideration of population problems. But it would be dangerous to think that nothing can be done about population programs before social justice is achieved.

The Catholic Church, and especially lay organizations, must face up to the fact that the world is confronted with a serious and urgent situation. The solution of the population problem is fundamental to any consideration of man's future on earth and the quality of life of hundreds of millions of human beings at present on earth and of the millions to come.

Importance of the Facts

If we are concerned, then our first obligation is to study the *facts* carefully, without prejudice, without bias, as objectively as we can. As Rosalind Murray said in *The Good Pagan's Failure*, “If we are seeking the truth, how shall we find it by falsifying the problem we have to face?”

The first question to ask is: “Is there a ‘population explosion’?” The only way to find this out is from the *facts*. It is only after this has been done that we can take a value-oriented approach and suggest

courses of action in keeping with our Christian principles and our concern for individual human beings.

In Tertullian's day, the population of the world was about 200 million. It took the human race from the beginning of time until nearly 1500 years after he wrote to reach the first 500 million people (in roughly 1600 A.D.). It took only 230 years to add the next half billion (in population terminology, 1 billion = 1000 million.)

By the beginning of the 20th Century, the number of people on earth was over 1½ thousand million. In the 50 years between 1900 and 1950 another billion was added; and by 1961, the population had risen to 3 billion. In 1976 the four billion mark was reached. By 1987, there will be five billion. By the end of the century, there will be at the very least six billion, if the population regulation programs are extremely successful.

The most important root cause of the population explosion can be described as follows. During the past 150 years the achievements of science so ambivalent in other fields have, in medicine and hygiene, put weapons into the hands of man to defeat many ancient diseases and prevent epidemics which formerly acted as a considerable check on population growth. This has led to a lengthening of the life span of men and women with the added consequence that their reproductive lives are also extended. Therefore we are in an unprecedented era of human history where death control (at least control of premature death) is being achieved.

Since population growth is the difference between the birth rate (i.e., the number of children actually born) and the death rate — and includes migration which is not an important factor, except in some special cases — it is easily seen that with the death rate so considerably lowered, population growth rates of the order of 2.5%, 3% and 3.5% are inevitable, given high birth rates. Such rates mean a doubling of population in 27, 23 and 20 years respectively.

This process began in the developed countries in the last century but they soon managed to bring down their growth rates to manageable proportions and their highest growth rates, e.g., 1.5%, were much lower than those in the developing countries today.

The developed countries have reduced their rate population considerably in this century. England had a rate of population increase of 1.5% a hundred years ago. It is now 0.5%. If its rate of growth had remained at 1.5% its population would now be 180 million; actually it is nearer 60 million.

The United States of America, during the years 1800 to 1950, increased its population ten-fold, partly by natural growth, partly by immigration. Today, its rate of increase is less than 1% and there is a strong campaign for zero population growth.

Other developed countries of Europe have experienced important declines in population increase and have problems of declining popula-

tions. The birth rate has fallen below replacement level in Denmark, Finland, Holland, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the Federal Republic of Germany.

Population of the Developing Countries

The position in the developing countries at present is far different. There, high birth rates, with lowered death rates, have caused rates of increase varying from 1.5% to 3.5%. It is important to notice this difference as it shows there is not a homogeneous global population problem and that attempts at solution must be different.

Although high rates of growth are common to developing countries, there are such vast differences in demographic patterns that it is not possible to talk about the Third World so far as population is concerned. The problem must be studied continent by continent, region by region, country by country, even district by district.

Asia has a population of 2,287 million; by the end of this century it might well have more people than there are at present in the whole world. Africa and Latin America, with 413 million and 326 million respectively, have not such vast numbers, but both will double their populations by the end of the century.

Asia has the biggest problem. Asia which as a whole has 2,287 million people with a population rate of increase of 2.0%, might seem to be less subject to population increase, but in reality it is the region where the most considerable expansion of population is taking place. It is worth splitting up into regions to exclude Japan and mainland China and some smaller areas.

Japan is the only developed large country in the huge area stretching from Burma to Japan. The other countries (with the exceptions of the special cases of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore), though they may resent the term, are economically developing countries, with per capita incomes ranging from £40 per annum in Burma and Indonesia, \$260 per annum in Malaysia and \$360 per annum in Mongolia.

China's growth rate of 1.8% must be regarded as an educated guess until the result of the next census; the last census was 20 years ago.

These are the *facts* of population growth. To be meaningful they must be related to the economic, social and environmental realities in the world in which we live at this point of time.

As I have already indicated, these formidable figures which indicate that the population of the world is vast and has increased tremendously in the past 150 years, would not matter so much if the space and resources were much greater. Statistics by themselves are not important; it is the relationship between the number of people on earth and, especially in certain regions of it, and the fulfilling of human needs for food, for health, for education, for housing, for employment and so on. These needs are not being met adequately in

large areas of the world. The rapid increase in population is making it more difficult to satisfy those basic needs. In other words, the population explosion is taking place in the developing countries, and they are least able to cope with it.

Ordinary common sense would surely lead to the realization that needed development, even social justice itself, especially in the developing countries is hindered by the population situation.

The question whether the world can feed its peoples and any foreseeable increase in them cannot be answered on an abstract level by working out how much habitable, cultivatable land there is (including land which could be brought into production), dividing this by the number of people on earth, then taking into account how much land is needed for a person to satisfy food needs and triumphantly showing, as Colin Clark does, that the world could feed 47 billion while at present the population of the world is only 4 billion. Therefore, there is no problem or not one that could not easily be overcome given the commitment and good will of the nations of the world. Unfortunately, we do not have one world, we do not have a reservoir of land from which countries can lay claim to satisfy their needs. These reserves of land are often placed far from areas of greatest need and greatest population increase.

Also the time element is important. Every year, 30 million tons of grain *extra* are needed *just* to feed the increase in population and this figure will keep on rising so that if the higher population projection for the year 2000 is reached, i.e., 7 billion people, 111 million tons of extra grain will be needed. However, if the lowest projection is realised, i.e., 6 billion by means of very successful population regulatory measures, there would be a modest surplus of 9 million tons.

Feeding Problems are Complicated

The problem of feeding the world's peoples and the prospects of doing so are far more complicated; they require detailed calculations and depend on many intangibles impossible adequately to foresee. The above is simply an illustration of this complexity. But it does indicate that fewer people to feed would ease the situation and that no matter how we do and should value human life, we cannot go on increasing our numbers irresponsibly and indefinitely.

That is why the labels "populationist" and "anti-populationist" will one day lose all meaning. In a finite world eventually there will come limits to growth that even the most populationist will be unable to ignore. In a finite world high birth rates and low death rates are just not a possible combination.

The unprecedented increase of this century, especially the latter half of it, affects not only the food supply. In fact it has far more serious effects on employment, housing and the whole development

process. Concentrating on the food/population relationship tends to obscure this.

The crowded cities of the world, especially the developing world, give the clearest evidence of the problems created by rapid population growth.

At the beginning of the century, the earth was a rural planet, in the sense that 80% of its inhabitants lived in the countryside and only one in five people in towns. In the developing world, the proportion of population in rural areas was far greater.

By the end of the century, the earth will be predominantly an urban planet. Over 50% of the world's inhabitants will be in towns and cities by the year 2000 and probably as many as six out of ten people in the developing world. The reason for this increase within the developing world is due to the natural increase of 3.5% or 4% or over in the poorer parts of cities (which means a doubling of the population in less than 20 or 25 years) and also to immigration from the countryside, due also to the pressure of population in many cases as well as to other causes.

A few figures will give an illustration of the magnitude of the problem:

CITIES	POPULATION IN MILLIONS		
	1950	1975	2000 (Estimated)
Mexico City	2.9	10.9	31.5
Sao Paulo	2.5	9.9	26.0
Lagos	0.3	2.4	9.4
Manila	1.5	4.4	12.8
Djarkarta	1.6	5.6	17.8
Shanghai	5.8	11.5	22.1
London	10.2	10.7	12.7

Whatever may be the theories about the value or otherwise of population growth, whatever may be the reluctance to face it for whatever reason, the very least that can be said is that population increase is a crucial factor in making the problems of cities and of the developing countries as a whole much more difficult to manage. Anyone can see that to feed, house, educate, employ, give medical care to, for example, 2.9 million in Mexico City 1950 is easier than to do the same for 31.5 million in the year 2000 or even for 10.9 million in 1975.

It seems clear that if we look at the facts and at the urgency of the population increase problem we will be forced to the conclusion that a slowing up of the rate of population growth would be in the best interests of the human race and would give a better opportunity to improve the quality of human life. Some would even go further and would foresee disaster if such efforts to restrict population growth are not undertaken.

It is not possible, in my opinion, to answer the case for population regulation by abstract arguments nor by a pseudo providentialism, i.e., that God will provide no matter what we may do.

There was theory prominent at the U.N. Bucharest World Population Conference 1974 which was given a good deal of uncritical credence and which has passed into the conventional wisdom on the subject. It was expressed in various ways but the main theme of it could be summarized as follows: Just as the population rates of increase began to fall in the developed countries and continued to fall in the developing countries when development and a certain measure of social justice was achieved, so the same process will take place in the developing countries. Therefore, there is no need to have special population programs. Population increase, which admittedly in some countries is high — too high — will come down of its own accord when people are not so poor, when development has raised them from their miserable conditions and when fairer distribution of available wealth has been secured.

Types of Opposition

To oppose the developmentalist position, however, is not the same as opposing development and moral justice. One must distinguish. There is a grave need for an attack on world poverty, a sustained campaign against social injustice, unconscious or deliberate, an ending of the glaring inequalities in the world which Pope Paul has indignantly called an insult flung in the face of God and man, the creation of a world in which everyone can say "Give us this day our daily bread" and know his prayer will be answered.

Development, full human development of the poorest, must be one of the very first priorities for the human race and for the international community. A fair share of the world's goods, an equitable division of world trade, a monetary system which does not perpetuate huge disparities in standards of living, a new world economic order which does not divide mankind into people who have riches undreamed of before in the history of the world and people who live in poverty undreamed of by the affluent — these are the targets that the human race must set itself if it is to remain truly human. No concern with even the most acute population problem must obscure this.

Nonetheless, one must not promote all this by downgrading population programs or proposing theories that do not hold water. There are several fatal flaws in the developmentalist theory¹ and the theory could do great harm if it were acted upon and population programs delayed until poverty is eliminated, and social justice arrives because excessive population increase is one of the factors hindering the achievement of these goals. Two well-known population experts, Freedman and Berelson, have commented on this:

General development ("Take care of the people and population will take care of itself") or specific thresholds like woman's status or popular education or income redistribution are being strongly advanced at present, in the post-Bucharest spirit. There can be little doubt that such fundamental changes would affect fertility downward, but they too take time and effort, not to mention far larger funds; and they are, after all, the ends for which fertility control is a means, not the other way around.²

Perhaps the best summing up is to say that where family planning measures are seriously implemented and population or personal pressures are strong, significant contributions are made by such programs even when general improvement of living standards has not taken place. But, of course, even greater success would be achieved if social progress goes hand in hand with population education, and population programs can never be a substitute, but should be complementary to general development programs.

Also, population growth can and does go down in the absence of any program. The melancholy figures, running into millions, of abortions often enough performed in primitive conditions via crude methods which put the mother's health in jeopardy, are proof of this, and provide a further incentive for family planning programs. As a member of the English International Justice and Peace Commission said: "It is a scandal that the most common form of birth control in Catholic countries is abortion," a reference especially to Latin America.

In considering the population problem, there has been a tendency in the Church to state the problem of rapid population growth and then warn against "immoral methods" which may be used to counter this increase, without any real positive attempt to suggest how one of the gravest problems facing mankind should be coped with. To play down or try to ignore such an issue, crucial to the present welfare of hundreds and millions of people, and putting into jeopardy generations to come, surely raises other ethical and religious issues than the morality of methods of limiting the number in the family. Mr. R. Salas, the executive director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, expressed this thought in a speech to a Catholic audience:

Finally a most important consideration which I think subsumes the rest. The question of poverty in the world and its eradication, the allied questions of development and population are in the end questions of morality. We should not become so closely involved in consideration of the morality of specific means of family planning that we lose sight of the wider issue, which is no less than the physical, mental and moral well-being of two-thirds of mankind. As I have already said, World Population Year is concerned with the totality of the relationship between population and development. It is a concern which I feel that all Catholics can share.³

The criticism I have made of some Church circles does not, of course, apply to those organizations in developed and developing

countries, such as the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council (CMAC) in England, the CANA movement in Malta, and especially the Human Life Foundation in the U.S.A., which have devoted their efforts, within the teaching of the *magisterium*, but with true pastoral understanding and concern, to help Catholics with regard to personal problems in planning their families and even with regard to participation in the population programs of their countries.

REFERENCES

1. See my article, "Population and Development" in *The International Development Review*, No. 3, 1975.
 2. Freedman and Berelson, "The Record of Family Planning Programmes," *Population Council*. New York, January, 1976, p. 37.
 3. Statement at the Centre of Concern Seminar. New York, November, 1973.
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