

REFLECTIONS ON THE DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTION AND ON PASTORAL GUIDANCE

■ BERNARDO COLOMBO

On the July 1989 issue of *Science* was Carl Djerassi, a chemist at Stanford who liked to qualify himself as the mother of the pill – since G.G. Pincus was usually named the father of the pill – who, in Mexico City in 1951, had accomplished the first synthesis of an oral contraceptive, while he was associate-director of Syntex, a firm comprising research and business. In his article he outlines new approaches to birth control. These include a male pill, a once-a-month menses inducer and an antifertility vaccine, and an antiviral compound that associates birth control with the fight against the AIDS epidemics, and the measuring of certain biochemical changes which, if done accurately and simply, could reduce the fertile period in a cycle by more than 50% and thus significantly improve the poor image of natural family planning.

The Study Week on Resources and Population, held at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, examined, by means of factual information and in-depth evaluations, both present situations and plausible developments, stressing current and future problems. The picture that emerged was a complex one. One fundamental aspect that was amply documented is that of the profound imbalances, from many points of view, among countries and among population categories. Resolving them will require an enormous effort at various levels, and this was also stressed in certain essential passages in the address of Holy Father John Paul II to the conference participants.

A careful examination of the topics presented and discussed at that meeting may serve to underline further elements of basic importance for the proper formulation of pastoral guidelines.

Above and beyond even the present severe difficulties, and those of the immediate foreseeable future, as well as the errors made in both creating and dealing with these difficulties, the reality of the situation which now confronts the whole of humanity requires careful reflection. Such reflection had already been initiated in Point 6 of the Papal address. This reality is one that must be measured against a norm that is perpetually valid, since it derives from natural law. To be precise, our present state of knowledge informs us that mankind in the future must limit itself on *average* to a little more than two children per couple. This is the inevitable consequence of the power that man has acquired over sickness and death, and which he will presumably further extend. Fol-

lowing another course would, within a few centuries, produce intolerable results bordering on the absurd. It is a matter of fate already foretold, if we exclude enormous catastrophes or drastic inversions of trends. Nuclear risks have been cited, as has the ozone hole; AIDS is spreading, with as yet poorly defined demographic consequences. However, regulating one's own actions on the basis of expecting unforeseeable and disastrous events to happen, does not seem to be a wise course to follow.

In substance, man is, unfortunately, *obliged to relinquish a large part of his procreative capacity*. One can of course comment that in numerous economically developed countries there are less than two children per couple. But it is one thing for behaviour to result from a choice – however mistaken it may be – and it is another to have such behaviour imposed by necessity.

The consequence and problems which derive from such a situation are of various types: there will be a general aging of the population; there will be many small families with all the attending psychological, educational and emotional implications, and also problems of inter-generational relationships; it will be necessary to find acceptable means of reconciling a couple's free and responsible choices with collective needs, and so on.

In the world today there is a considerable limiting of the number of births, though not everywhere, nor in equal measure, and not with identical means in the various countries and social classes. On the whole, one may say that at present only about one half of humanity's reproductive potential is fully utilized. Recent variations in individual choices regarding marital customs do not appear to have any appreciable influence on this figure. The causative factors which are by far the more relevant are: the limiting of conception and the limiting of birth.

With regard to induced abortion, figures in the area of tens of millions per year are being put forward, but it is difficult to check the reliability of such estimates.

The most recent calculations published by the United Nations indicate that circa 450 million married couples of reproductive age made use of family planning methods in 1987. Of these, 7.2% were said to be using their knowledge of the non-fertile periods of the female cycle. These figures and percentages are to be approached with great caution, as there are – for various reasons – significant margins of uncertainty, especially where so-called traditional methods are concerned, including what is known as the 'rhythm' method. On the other hand, now, after a period of five years, this figure will certainly have risen, especially – it would seem – with regard to female sterilization. In this context, a recent estimate speaks of 43 million additional cases in the five years following 1984.

The costs involved in limiting births by these means have also been calculated: in the developing countries alone the figure is put at more than 5 billion dollars a year. Of this, three-quarters is said to come from local governments, 10% from users themselves, and some 15% from the so-called *donor agencies*: the United Nations Population Fund, the United States Agency for International Development, the International Planned Parenthood Federation, and a variety of international, governmental and private institutions. It should be kept in mind that the actual impact of the 'external' interventions is far greater than that implied by those figures. Indeed, these interventions strongly contribute to creating a cultural climate, and to steering the actions of local governments. The unscrupulousness, the amorality, the malice, the vested interests inherent in many initiatives are absolutely disgraceful. A strong condemnation of them would lose its force, however, if it were to call into question, or to minimise the seriousness of the demographic problems – a seriousness which, as already stated, was made very clear at the Study Week on Resources and Population.

Conversely, such denunciations would have more force if they were accompanied by firm support for the diffusion of natural fertility regulation methods. This is what *Humanae Vitae* has urged within Christian married couples (n. 25), to be promoted by doctors and members of the nursing profession (n. 27), in its recommendations to the clergy (n. 29), in its invitation to the Bishops (n. 30), in its encouragements to men of science. Similar expressions occur in *Gaudium et Spes* (n. 52) to recall the need for everyone to promote the good of marriage and the family. It is also implicitly referred to by the Holy Father John Paul II in his discourse addressed to the participants in the Study Week on Resources and Population (n. 6), recalling that the Church invites humanity to program its future, motivated not only by material concerns, but also and especially by respect for the order which God has infused into creation.

To try to ensure that one will not have children by applying knowledge of the infertile periods (*Humanae Vitae*, n. 16) is a very demanding responsibility, from several points of view.

First of all, concerning what has already been said, the 'circumstances' which were spoken of in *Gaudium et Spes* (n. 51) and the 'serious motives' mentioned in *Humanae Vitae* (n. 15) and previously specified by Pius XII in his Allocution to Obstetricians on October 29, 1951, may no longer be viewed as simply occasional and isolated events, but must be considered as a *human condition which is habitual and widespread*.

Further, these methods – in contrast to others, and more so than any other – cannot be reduced to purely individual initiatives, in no case what-

soever. Then too, it is clear how substantially different this way is from many others followed for similar ends. To voluntarily undergo sterilisation for anti-conceptual reasons certainly requires in the highest degree both a decision and a taking on of responsibility, once and for all. Conversely, the use of natural methods for regulating conception requires giving long-lasting, constant and continuous attention to responsible choices.

Further, these methods – in contrast to others, and more so than any other – cannot be reduced to purely individual initiatives, in no case whatsoever. They demand, and are capable of increasing, a complete, affectionate harmony of the spouses in their attitudes and their behaviour with regard to procreation. The married partners are continually being called upon to seek the proper balance between potential collaboration with that act of God's love which is Creation, and simple union in chaste intimacy with acts which, performed in a mode that is truly human, promote the mutual giving of which they are the symbol, enrich the spouses reciprocally in joyous gratitude (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 49), constitute a support for mutual fidelity, and also contribute to the well-being of the children (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 50 and n. 51; *Humanae Vitae*, n. 3 and n. 16).

The pursuit of such a balance is enhanced by a sure knowledge of the fertile phases of the female cycle, capable of responsible guiding behaviour in serene awareness of the potential consequences of one's own acts: knowledge which nowadays encounters considerable obstacles in the ordinary manifestations of biological variability, with negative effects on conditions of fertility regulation.

In the Holy Father's discourse (n. 5) it is stressed that humanity must confront the new circumstances by making use of all its intellectual and spiritual energies, recovering a sense of the moral significance of *setting limits* for oneself, learning to develop responsibility toward all forms of life. Here, the contribution which the Church can make is of fundamental importance. Concerning the natural methods for regulating conception, the Church says that 'For if with the aid of reason and of free will they are to control their natural drives, there can be no doubt at all of the need for self-denial. Only then will the expression of love, essential to married life, conform to right order. This is especially clear in the practice of periodic continence' (*Humanae Vitae*, n. 21), while also reminding us that 'God comes to their help with the grace by which the goodwill of men is sustained and strengthened' (*Humanae Vitae*, n. 20). This necessary self-discipline is of course not to be limited only to the sector in question, but must be encompassed in an integrated education covering the entire gamut of human activities. A coherent witness of this kind within the Catholic world could

also be of assistance in solving the enormous problems of peoples whose cultures are foreign to the idea of limiting the number of children and who are more likely to suffer from the 'new conditions': a large part of the Islamic world, for example, or sub-Saharan Africa, even India. For this actually to take place, it is of course necessary that the example be clearly visible and that the aid given be significant.

In this respect, one might make a few succinct observations. Mention has been made of the expenses involved in limiting births in developing countries. As a conjecture – supported by indicative evidence – it may be posited that the amount of funds, of whatever origin, earmarked for the diffusion of natural methods, is not much more than 1%. Additional estimates have also been made as to the future interventions considered to be necessary to keep pace with the medium variant projections of demographic development in the immediate future made by the United Nations; however, it is impossible to say how much the world in general, and the Catholic world in particular, is prepared to do in the future to promote natural methods in these countries, for there are no known programs of action, apart from very restricted initiatives.

There are enormous needs of all kinds in numerous countries, and Church institutions which are in the front line for giving aid must set priorities, given the limited resources which are available. Hunger, disease, tremendous poverty, all cry out for immediate attention. Facing these problems, Church bodies stand side by side with many other national, international, public and private institutions that are moving in the same direction. However, aid which is intelligent and respectful of the natural regulation of procreation by working in a way which so closely associates the rational creature with his or her Creator because it respects the order established by God (*Humanae Vitae*, n. 16) – such aid may be viewed as a proprium of the Church, which must give to it adequate space not only in moral teaching but in concrete action.

Certainly, every form of 'aid' which comes from outside runs the risk of being interpreted as a kind of masked imposition of others' interests. It is a risk run by every method which is introduced in this field, but it should be kept in mind that it is minimal where natural methods are concerned. What surely produces more negative consequences is the lack of coordination among such initiatives. In fact, at times, organizations which adhere to different 'schools' seem almost to be in competition with one another, and this severely damages their public image.

In practice, not only in economically developing countries but almost everywhere, instruction in and diffusion of the natural approaches to reg-

ulating conception are left to the voluntary sector. This has a few positive aspects: confidence that the advice given is good, and the generosity of working together for a common ideal. However, there are also a few serious negative sides: lack of permanent structures, precarious measures, too little professionalism. Very unpleasant situations arise when voluntary personnel feel themselves to be forgotten, victims of neglect on the part of Church authorities. On the other hand, the inefficiency of the voluntary services may produce loss of confidence and resignation on the part of those who are responsible for family pastoral work.

As the 50th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* draws near, one would hope that the brief considerations put forward here will spur the Church to a renewed commitment of its enormous energies to furthering the spread of natural conception-regulating practices, as well to review the means which it employs for this purpose. In this regard, one might recall the ‘pressing invitation’ addressed in *Humanae Vitae* to all Bishops that they, together with the cooperation of priests and laity, should work ‘with all zeal and without delay to safeguarding the holiness of marriage, in order to guide married life to its full human and Christian perfection’ (n. 30). ‘Consider this mission’, the encyclical says, ‘as one of your most urgent responsibilities at the present time. As you well know, it calls for concerted pastoral action in every field of human diligence, economic, cultural and social’ (*ibid.*).

The strenuous and multiple efforts of the Catholic Church to meet the needs of suffering humanity are well known. But, whereas it is clear to all how much there can be done for the lepers, to take an example, or for educational opportunities in Catholic schools, there seems to be lacking an equally clear awareness of the millions and millions of persons who need to be wisely counselled, assisted and followed-up – including in situations where clinical opinions are required – regarding the everyday, fundamental life choices. It is not a question here of promoting chastity as part of a lifestyle of austerity – which, as has already been stated, is a basic option, and to which the Church can bring its immense spiritual riches. Here it is a matter of technical aspects, and these can be briefly outlined.

First of all, it should be resolved to make a far greater effort than is now the case in the field of research. There is still much to be desired, today, as to the applicability, the acceptability and the reliability – together with the simplicity of use – of natural ways of regulating conception. They must be considerably improved if this way is to be made available far beyond present limits, and if it is to be generally viewed as a valid alternative to other methods now being used which do not respect the dignity of human acts. Such research requires appreciably greater funding than the extremely small amount which a

few persons manage to obtain at present from public authorities that display little interest. This funding should preferably not be tied to the private sector which aims only at profits.

Further, it is indispensable that there be widely diffused services which provide information, counselling and assistance, rooted in professionally competent, stable structures, which operate in mutual collaboration, and which are staffed with qualified personnel. Coordination of this type can also be useful for setting up a system to record and document results, which would in turn make possible and facilitate critical evaluation of the work accomplished, thereby improving efficiency and efficacy.

In addition, one might consider promoting the establishment of one or more centres of excellence in every country. They would provide scientific support, contribute to a rational planning of activities, and could function as reference points for the professional training of workers at various levels. Such centres could also accomplish fruitful work in international solidarity.

These are merely sample proposals, to be considered along with others which might be put forward. What is needed in any event is that such things be done in a spirit of open, intelligent and active concord.

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