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The Catholic Hierarchy and the Population Problem

VITALIANO R. GOROSPE, S.J.

It is heartening to know that both the government and the Church have already taken the initiative toward finding a solution to the population problem. They are currently collaborating in a Commission on Population in order to study and formulate demographic policy and action. Recently the Catholic Hierarchy issued a statement on the problem meant to present the Philippine Church's official position as a basis of dialogue.¹ Let me give a short summary of the more important issues in the statement, and then comment on them.

The Bishops' statement affirms that although socio-economic development is an important and necessary material value, it is subordinate to the basic human values of the Filipino family. The problem of population control cannot be properly understood except within the context of national development. The Bishops admit the need to integrate economic and social development with population control. They distinguish between macro and micro measures of fertility control and point out that government policy has hitherto been toward positive development measures rather than negative population checks. The Bishops recommend some macro-measures which the government is competent to undertake, e.g., raising the minimum legal age for marriage; integrating sex education; establishing an old-age pension system in order to minimize dependence on children; expanding recreational facilities; and controlling internal migration.

The Bishops view the problem of fertility control as primarily one concerning the individual couples who have the basic right to determine the size of their family. They consequently assign a subsidiary role to the government in this regard. Micro-measures of fertility control are best left to private humanitarian and religious agencies. The Bishops strongly emphasize that it would be a mistake for the government to undertake actively and rely principally on the promotion of family planning services. They argue this point by questioning the effectiveness of family planning programs since these cannot significantly arrest population growth without including abortion or masked

¹ Statement of the Catholic Hierarchy of the Philippines on the Population Issue as summarized in *The Manila Times* (July 10, 1969).

infanticide. According to the Bishops' statement, the most effective means of fertility control is a program of education towards responsible parenthood enhanced by the cultivation of the proper moral climate. Furthermore, the Bishops caution, demographic policy should neither be determined by nor rely on foreign financial aid; it should depend on funds generated in the public sector through the elimination of government graft and corruption, as well as made available through the curtailment of conspicuous spending on the part of the rich. Nor should a policy of population control be determined by the mass media; rather it should grow out of the common consensus and decision of the Filipino people as a whole, relying, of course, on the knowledge of experts. The proper value-orientation demanded by this national problem is discipline of the human spirit of which our nation's leaders should set the example. The Bishops conclude with a reminder that the present situation calls for sobriety and optimism; not a simplistic, short-cut solution but one which in the long run is more responsible and lasting.

The statement of the Catholic Hierarchy is significant because it is the first public recognition by the Philippine Church that rapid population growth constitutes a national problem and demands national effort. The Church has become aware that this problem and the answer it demands may no longer be ignored and postponed. Up to the present the general climate of opinion in the Philippines has been one of apathy and the general attitude has been "wait and see" as if the population problem would take care of itself in the end. The Bishops' statement shows a changed attitude and this is a most welcome beginning, a step in the right direction.

However, with due respect to the teaching authority of the Catholic Hierarchy and inasmuch as the Bishops themselves encourage dialogue on the population issue, a few critical remarks for further reflection and discussion seem to be in order. As an initial and general expression of the Philippine Church's stand on the population issue, the Bishops' statement will more or less find general acceptance. But as a practical and realistic attempt to grapple with the problem, it leaves much to be desired. The statement is inadequate not because of what it says but more significantly because of what it fails to say which needs to be said. Toward solving the problem that faces the nation, what is needed from the Church is a statement of practical principles of action. The Bishops' statement is so general and cautious that it provides little practical guidance.

A public statement of position and petition composed by the Divine Word Junior Clergy Conference and addressed to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines is worth quoting in full:

The problem of increasing population in the Philippines must be faced. Since our bishops have taken a definite stand in support of *Humanae Vitae*, it is only just that they also take definite steps to make it possible for our people to follow the encyclical, for example by providing a sufficient number of family clinics and by insisting that in government supported family clinics the Church-approved methods should also be taught.

The Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country and consequently we would expect our bishops to provide a representative, not a mere observer, on the government population commission.

Further, we condemn as immoral the imposition of means of population control that violate the conscience of our people, as a prerequisite for foreign aid.²

It must be recalled that the Bishops' statement strongly opposed foreign aid as a source of revenue for financing measures of population control in order to safeguard the conscience of our people. It, however, does not suggest in any way any form of a Church supported family planning information and action program on a national scale. There are about eight rhythm clinics maintained under Church auspices but they are not widely known. They reach only an insignificant number of the national population. People cannot take the Bishops' statement seriously unless they see that the Church has committed its personnel and resources to make it possible for individual couples to limit family size and at the same time remain loyal to the Christian ideal. If the Bishops want a large majority of the rural people to be faithful to the teaching in *Humanae Vitae* and to their own pastoral letter, then they must implement as soon as possible a massive program of instruction and motivation on the rhythm method and on responsible parenthood.

The Bishops' statement strongly emphasizes the basic *right* of individual parents to determine the number of their children. In view of the present critical situation one would expect the Catholic Church and other Churches to teach with much stronger emphasis the *duty* of Filipino couples to limit the size of their families. Is there not a moral obligation in social justice demanded by the common good for individual parents to practice family planning as an exercise of responsible parenthood? Until now the Philippine Catholic Hierarchy has emphatically taught the negative prohibition of artificial contraception and has paid little attention to the more positive aspects of responsible parenthood. Much more should be made of the teaching of *Populo-*

² *Philippine Priests' Forum*, 1 (June 1969), p. 37.

rum Progressio (37) on the *duty* of parents in deciding the number of their children, to take seriously into account "their responsibilities toward God, themselves, the children they have already brought into the world and the community to which they belong". If the cultural attitude of having many children among the larger segment of the national population remains unchallenged by the Catholic Church, how can any significant improvement in the reduction of the birth rate be effected in the foreseeable future? Should not the Catholic Church in its educational program of responsible parenthood place the burden of its teaching authority on the necessity and advantages of family planning and take the initiative in establishing family clinics in strategic areas on both the diocesan and parish levels?

The Bishops' statement is a wise and forceful reminder that there is a moral limit to government intervention in the matter of fertility control. The Bishops clearly state that it is a mistake for the government to undertake actively and rely principally on the promotion of family planning services. As it stands one can hardly take issue with this carefully worded statement. However, its stricture on the government's role in the control of the rapid population growth implies an attitude of caution which in effect will most likely act as a brake on any strong effort on the part of the government to face realistically the present population crisis. In the past the government has been quite reluctant to oppose the Catholic Hierarchy publicly and so government efforts in family planning have been limited to "underground" services in the city of Manila. This shows that the influence of the Church's attitude on the government's demographic policy in the near future cannot be underestimated. The morally relevant question at issue is: in view of the present national situation, does not the common good and social justice demand that the government take a more active role in formulating and implementing a responsible demographic policy? Does not the government not only have the right but the *duty* to undertake actively, though not solely and principally, an educational program that will teach citizens both the the necessity and advantages of family planning? It would seem that unless the Catholic Church by its attitude and teaching leads the way, the government effort in this direction will not be forthcoming.

Once it is granted that the government has the right and the duty to undertake an educational program of family planning services, the question of methods of birth control and the question of individual conscience remain. Since the Philippines is predominantly Catholic, Church-approved methods of birth regulation should also be taught in government run family clinics. But in order that the individual's conscience may be fully respected, as many methods of birth control as possible should be explained to individuals seeking advice. This policy would give the individual the opportunity of making a real

choice based on a mature and well-informed conscience. In order to protect the common good and in particular the public health, government family clinics should also explain the possible medical effects of the pill and the probable abortifacient effect of the intra-uterine device (IUD). Without much Church approval, it is most unlikely that the government will undertake a program of family planning services which offers the opportunity of making a real choice among various methods of birth control.

To recapitulate, the Catholic Hierarchy of the Philippines have supported the teaching in *Humanae Vitae* against artificial contraception and have appealed to the Filipino faithful to accept it "with filial love and to follow it faithfully and loyally" (Pastoral Letter of October 12, 1968, I). One would expect then that in the latest Bishops' statement definite practical steps would be taken to make it possible for individual Filipino couples to follow the Pope's teaching and at the same time to limit the size of their families in view of the present population crisis. The actual Philippine situation would seem to indicate that the Church's teaching should primarily and strongly emphasize the *duty* of individual parents to limit the number of their children for the sake of the common good. So long as the Church's attitude does not emphasize this a substantial majority of the total population will not be educated towards responsible parenthood. The poor, uneducated, rural people need family planning most of all; for them primarily the Church should initiate a program of instruction and motivation on family planning. So long as the Philippine Church's attitude stresses the negative prohibition of artificial contraception, she will have less and less influence on the more mature, better educated, and conscience-directed Catholic couples who already exercise responsible parenthood and need family planning least of all. A paternalistic attitude of the Church is no longer appropriate for the more mature and conscientious Catholic. As some Catholic Bishops in the Philippines remain remote from the real problems of the people, so shall the Church in the long run be unable to rely on its own members for compliance to her teaching. Finally, the role of the government in the solution of the overpopulation problem will to a large extent depend on the attitude of the Catholic Hierarchy. Unless the Church recognizes the *duty* of the government to undertake a program of family planning services for the common good, the government in a predominantly Catholic country like the Philippines will hesitate to move as it should. It would seem then that the government and the people look up to the Catholic Hierarchy as the spokesman for the Church to lead the way.