

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Philippine Church and Government on Population: Ethical and Theological Aspects

Vitaliano R. Gorospe, S.J.

Philippine Studies vol. 36, no. 2 (1988) 233–240

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Philippine Church and Government on Population

VITALIANO R. GOROSPE, S.J.

The separation of Church and State (1986 Constitution, Article II, Section 6) does not mean that there should not be harmony and co-operation on a national issue like population which involves not only civic but also ethical and religious aspects. There are two significant changes in the 1986 Philippine Constitution which show complete agreement between the Church and the Aquino government. The pro-life provision in Article II, Section 12 protects "the life of the mother and the life of the unborn from conception." This strong and clear antiabortion stand of the new Constitution makes it unique in the world. The pro-family provision in Article XV, Section 3 defends "the right of spouses to found a family in accordance with their religious convictions and the demands of responsible parenthood." What is noteworthy is the deletion of the pro-population control mandate in the 1973 Constitution, Article XV, Section 10: "It shall be the responsibility of the State to achieve and maintain population levels most conducive to the national welfare." The vote of twenty-four against four of the Constitutional Commission in favor of the deletion of the population control provision shows a radical departure from the population policy and program of the previous regime. The Constitutional protection of the life of the unborn from conception, the right of parents to determine family size, the correct understanding of "responsible parenthood" were some of the valuable insights and values contributed by the Pro-Life movement to the new Constitution.

This article addresses itself to the ethical and theological aspects of the population issue under the new dispensation as seen in the present position of the Church vis-a-vis the Aquino government. In order to

understand better why the government shifted radically from population control towards social reform and family welfare, we shall consider: first, the Church's position or that of the Catholic Bishops; secondly, the two positions in the government, namely, that of the Minister of Social Services and the Director of the National Economic Authority; and, thirdly, controversial issues on family planning.

THE CHURCH: THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE OF THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippine population control policy officially began with Executive Orders 171 (1969) and 233 (1970) and with the help of the Population Commission prospered under the Marcos regime. The present position of the Catholic Bishops can be gathered from a Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) statement of the Episcopal Commission of Family Life (ECFL) whose contents are also found in an open letter to President Aquino and in the keynote address to the 2nd National Pro Life Conference by Bishop Jesus Y. Varela, Chairman of ECFL. The official stand of the ECFL opposes the inclusion of population control in the new Constitution. The practical policy of the CBCP is not to be involved in any way with the population control program of the government, nor to enter into any form of association that lends a semblance of tacit approval of the program. The Catholic Bishops' justification for their stand and policy is the injustice underlying the previous government's population control policies. To show that the Philippine population control policy was unjust, the following reasons were stated: The policy (1) wastes huge funds without alleviating poverty; (2) is based on the false assumption that population pressure hinders economic growth; (3) supports a worldwide drive towards zero population growth in the face of global fertility decline; (4) is dictated by the World Bank and other foreign funding agencies; (5) imposes fertility targets which violate freedom of choice and of conscience of spouses and government workers; (6) develops an escalating pattern of contraception, then sterilization and finally abortion; (7) targets for indoctrination not only the married but also the unmarried, even adolescents; (8) is deceptive because the true cause of poverty is not population growth but unjust international economic structures of dependence and exploitation. For the Catholic

Bishops the real issue is not methods of birth regulation nor responsible parenthood but the question of whether the State should be allowed to establish a macro drive towards manipulating population growth?

In 8 December 1974 the Catholic hierarchy in "The Population Problem and Family Life," considered the Philippine population problem not only a problem of *numbers* but a problem of *justice* (unequal distribution of wealth; greed and selfishness) and the *care of peoples*. Against the manipulative coerciveness of the government birth control program, the Church emphasized the defense of freedom, the protection of human rights and values, the need of social justice and education towards internal sexual discipline and responsible parenthood. Having experienced the injustice and abuses of the Philippine population control policy, the CBCP withdrew its membership from the Population Commission.

Bishop Varela's open letter, besides pointing out that ₱1.5 billion was spent on population programs imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, added that "the creation of new life involves religious and spiritual values which public authorities should not interfere with" and "it is vitally linked to bodily integrity which is inherent in dignity and self-determination." The open letter asks President Aquino to stress family welfare and social development rather than population control.

The Philippine population control program under the Marcos regime was found to be *authoritarian* (no popular consultation, no participation of the people or accountability to the people), *colonialist* (one uniform foreign plan for all developing countries), *manipulative* (material incentives and social sanctions for family planning), *unethical* (unsupervised oral contraceptives and sterilization), and *depersonalizing* (violates freedom of couples and conscience of government workers).

THE ETHICS OF PHILIPPINE POPULATION CONTROL

Today under the Aquino government, the heart of the controversy is a draft Executive Order submitted to the President by the CBCP aiming at "reorienting government population policies and reversing the aims and functions of population and family planning agencies"

(*The Manila Chronicle's FOCUS*, 8 March 1987). The controversy is between, on the one side, the Filipino Pro-Life Movement whose antiabortion and anti-artificial-birth-control stand is reflected by the CBCP and Minister Mita Pardo de Tavera of the Ministry of Social Services and, on the other side, the objections of Minister Solita Collas-Munsod of the Economic Development Authority and possibly Minister Alfredo Bengson of the Ministry of Health, both of whom would defend freedom to choose any safe and effective method of birth control which implies the State's responsibility to provide adequate information and make available all methods of family planning consonant with the moral and religious convictions of the people.

What is the ethics of Philippine population control? Who should decide—the State, the Church, or the Filipino family? All three have their own responsibilities and own roles to play. Let us focus on the official teaching of the Church with regard to population. If the State's concern is population growth for the sake of the common good, in general the Church's main emphasis is freedom, human rights and social justice. In particular, in the "Church's Concern with Population Problems," Pope Paul VI stresses that the true solution to these problems must take into account "the demands of social justice as well as respect for the divine laws governing life, the dignity of the human person as well as the freedom of peoples, the primary role of the family as well the responsibility proper to married couples." The Second Vatican Council, besides reaffirming freedom of conscience and freedom of religion ("Declaration on Religious Freedom," nos. 2 & 3), stressed not only the primary right of parents to determine the number of children but also responsible parenthood or their social responsibility towards society.

From the teaching of the Church, is it ethical for the State to make it a policy to curb the growth rate of our people? On 7 June 1984 Pope John Paul II said to the late Rafael M. Salas, Secretary General of the 1984 International Conference on Population and former Executive Director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA):

The Church recognizes the role of governments and of the international community to study and to face with responsibility the population problem in the context of and with a view to the common good of individual nations

and of all humanity (*Populorum Progressio*, 37). But demographic policies must not consider people merely as numbers, or only in economic terms, or with any kind of prejudice. They must respect and promote the dignity and the fundamental rights of the human person and of the family.

Both sides of the controversy will interpret Church teaching as favorable to their side. Those who favor natural family planning against artificial contraception and sterilization will claim that the Philippine population policy does not respect the dignity of the human person and the rights of the family. Those who favor the "cafeteria" approach to family planning will claim that for the government to limit the methods of birth regulation to natural family planning alone does not respect human freedom of choice.

THE GOVERNMENT: MSSD, NEDA, MH

On 21 November 1986 the keynote address of the Acting Chairman of the Population Commission, Minister Mita Pardo de Tavera of the MSSD, to a Manila Hotel symposium of the Family Planning Organization of the Philippines put the Philippine population control policy and program in very serious trouble. Minister Pardo de Tavera was for completely overhauling the fifteen-year-old (1965-85) Philippine population program which cost ₱1.5 billion as contrary to the "basic beliefs and ideals of a large segment of Filipino society." More comprehensive than the CBCP statement, the MSSD Minister gave nine reasons why the population program failed. She stressed that "the culprit of mass poverty" was not overpopulation but "inequitable economic structures." Population growth can be slowed down by "economic development and social justice through increased urbanization and industrialization." Therefore the most effective solution to the population problem is economic development and social justice. The dismal failure of the Philippine population control policy was the main reason why the 1973 Constitutional provision on the State's responsibility to adopt population policies for the national welfare was deleted from the 1986 Constitution. In answer to the question: How can the Philippine population program contribute to the national goal of safeguarding and improving the quality of life? Minister Pardo de Tavera made three recommendations as follows: (1) the strengthening and care of Filipino family life in safeguarding the cultural value of

the family in accordance with the Constitution; (2) the collation and monitoring of population statistics and analysis of population and related factors vis-a-vis socioeconomic conditions and services such as nutrition, health, education, housing, etc.; (3) the initiation and monitoring of government efforts towards social justice. Reiterating the Catholic Bishops on the population problem the Minister pointed out that the population problem is "a problem of existing unjust structures and not that of non-existent numbers and unborn children." In conclusion the Minister emphasized a "*welfare* Commission" and "a population *welfare* program which places quality of life over and above the number of people (*Italics mine*).

On the other side, in a letter (13 January 1987) addressed to Malacañang, Solita Munsod, NEDA Director and Economic Planning Minister, raised very strong objections against the draft Executive Order entitled "Reorienting Government Population Policies and Revising the Aims and Functions of Population and Family Planning Agencies." Minister Munsod could not endorse the draft Executive Order for many serious reasons. The strongest objection was that "it is erroneous to put the blame on the population program for the failure to alleviate mass poverty and improve the quality of life of the poor." To claim that there is no absolute correlation between mass poverty and overpopulation is to ignore the common sense view that the "more people having to divide among themselves the available resources or economic pie," the less there is for the majority poor. Furthermore, the existing population programs do not violate the natural right of life of the unborn. If the key value is responsible parenthood (the meaning here is narrowly limited to birth control), then the population control program makes available the knowledge, means and opportunity to practise responsible parenthood. It is also fallacious to believe that marital infidelity, prostitution, and the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases are due to the availability of contraceptives. Finally, the proposed withdrawal of assistance to nongovernmental organizations is inconsistent with the government policy of enhancing private sector participation.

CONTROVERSIAL FAMILY PLANNING
ISSUES

Dr. Mercedes Concepcion, the country's leading demographer and former Dean of the U.P. Population Institute, despite the disappointing performance of the government's population control program due to a variety of factors, still believes in the pressing need for national family planning. The government must still balance population growth and economic development. In an underdeveloped country like the Philippines, population is a key factor affecting economic progress. Right now the Philippine population control program is in a state of suspension although the Population Commission (PopCom) has been allowed its 1987 budget. Since Minister Mita Pardo de Tavera is acting Chairman of the Population Commission it is understandable that she would like to shift that budget from population control to social services. Should the PopCom be under the Ministry of Social Services, or the National Economic Development Authority, or the Ministry of Health? Minister Alfredo Bengson of the Ministry of Health is in favor of the "cafeteria" approach to family planning for the sake of freedom of choice and conscience.

Dr. Concepcion at a workshop on Population, Resources, Environment and the Philippine Future (PREPF) and on the basis of a U.P. Population Institute study of seven of the twelve Philippine regions said that were the country to achieve the goal of reducing fertility to replacement levels (two children per couple), voluntary measures may not be sufficient. Without advocating radical coercive measures herself, she mentioned compulsory contraception, legalized divorce and abortion as possibilities. According to Dr. Concepcion, for the Philippines to pass from a "later transitional period" of population growth to a "modern" population profile (two children per woman), the government must implement its long term plan on health, nutrition, population, and regional development. But "what is needed now is a realistic setting of growth rate targets, region by region, over a fairly short period—probably about a decade," Dr. Concepcion said. That the CBCP, Minister Pardo de Tavera and MSSD and the Pro-Life Movement would not want to spend all that money and effort in the direction of Dr. Concepcion's projected plan, is not too far from the truth. In Dr. Concepcion's view, with or without a government

population control program, national family planning will continue and the private nongovernmental sector may have to take the lead. One such nongovernmental organization is the Family Planning Organization of the Philippines of which Atty. Ramon A. Tagle, Jr. is a Catholic advocate of both natural and artificial family planning.

THE CHURCH AND FAMILY PLANNING

In a paper on the concept of family planning, its objectives and controversial issues, Atty. Tagle takes a historical perspective in order to show that artificial contraception is conformed to Catholic teaching and practice. On the one hand, the method of historical and evolutionary consciousness is one moral and theological justification for artificial birth control. On the other hand, classical and static consciousness is the traditional support for the official teaching of the Catholic Church in *Humanae Vitae* (1968) which absolutely bans any form of artificial contraception. Today, after eighteen years of moral controversy, the 1968 birth control encyclical turned out to be prophetic in the sense that natural family planning proved to be the safest, most human and Christian method of birth regulation.

In order to lend Catholic support to artificial birth control, Atty. Tagle gives a sociological, philosophical, and theological perspective of family planning. He shows that dissent from the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* by Catholic hierarchies throughout the world, by contemporary theologians, by the majority of experts on the Papal Birth Control Commission is theologically valid and pastorally applicable in practice. He quotes the Indonesian Catholic Bishops to justify a couple's practice of artificial contraception because after study and counsel they sincerely and honestly cannot agree with the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. There is no need to revisit the impasse of the artificial birth control moral controversy, no need to review the major moral positions and their arguments. Today what is needed in the Philippine context is the ongoing moral and religious education of Filipino couples so that they can form a mature Christian conscience and appreciate better the pro-life, pro-family, pro-love and pro-justice attitudes and values behind the Church's wisdom and prophetic endorsement of natural family planning.