

World Population:

A Response to the 2009 London Newman Lecture

In choosing Chris Bain, Director of CAFOD, to give the 2009 London Newman Lecture, an edited version of which appeared in your May 2009 edition, you have given us as good a review of the Catholic approach to globalisation and poverty as you could get.

Mr Bain opens up with a description of the two attitudes to globalisation: one group believing that it will abolish poverty, the other believing that it has increased poverty and widened the gap between rich and poor.

Why do opinions differ so fundamentally? The answer is simple. The first group looks at regions of the world where effective family planning is used by most couples, where populations have stabilised, and where prosperity has developed faster than at any time in human history. The second group looks at regions where family planning is available to few, where populations rocket upwards, and extreme poverty continues.

Because there is a taboo, or semi-taboo, or consensus that prevents population increase being considered as a cause of poverty, another cause has to be found and many alight upon the prevailing economic system. If we can leave aside the taboo, it can be said that no economic system can prevent extreme poverty developing in a country where the population is doubling repeatedly. (1)

There are signs that the taboo is breaking down.(2) Indeed, in his speech, Mr Bain includes population growth amongst the reasons why the Millennium Development Goals are unlikely to achieve their 2015 targets for education, health and environmental sustainability, and he notes, “the world population has doubled since the inauguration of President Kennedy.” This is a rare acknowledgement from an aid agency and it is a consolation to me that it comes from CAFOD.

The regions of the world noted by Mr Bain as prospering under globalisation are ‘the Western world, and increasingly in parts of Asia and Latin America.’

In the Western world, family planning is available to almost all, and, excluding immigration, populations are stable, or stabilising. In Europe (excluding Russia) the population was 485 million in 1960 and 586 million in 2005. In Eastern Asia populations are also stabilising, with contraceptive use by couples at over 80%, so that the 2005 population is only twice that of 1960. And, belatedly, in parts of Latin America, populations are slowly stabilising with contraceptive use by couples at over 70%, and populations increasing only 2.5 times in the 45 years.(3) In many countries in these regions globalisation has been stunningly successful.

On the other hand, almost all the distressed countries and regions that Mr Bain mentions have increased their populations more than three times in the forty-five years 1960-2005. This includes Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Sudan, DR Congo, sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, the Philippines and Honduras. And one (Uganda) has increased its population more than four times.(4) Contraceptive use by couples varies between under 10% in Ethiopia and Sudan, and just over 60% in Honduras.

In the 1950’s and 1960’s, “everyone” knew that repeated doubling of populations would cause poverty. Aid agencies such as Oxfam, Christian Aid, and War on Want produced magazines or adverts supporting family planning. (I still have them.) Pope Paul VI made statements about it (5), Catholics wrote about it (6) and so did many others.(7)

And then, from the 1970’s, the taboo – enforced mainly by the ideology known as ‘political correctness’ – stopped all serious discussion of the demographic explosion, and the effort to provide the poor in developing countries with effective family planning faded. No one campaigned for it. It brought no kudos or votes and, I suspect, aid agencies came to believe it would reduce their income. So, in many developing countries, population control is being left to those age-old methods, disease, famine, and war. It is a great tragedy.

Mr Bain quotes *Populorum Progressio* at the end of his speech. In this encyclical Pope Paul also notes the difficulties caused by the accelerated rate of population growth and he taught that “public authorities can intervene in this matter” and that “They can instruct citizens on this subject and adopt appropriate measures”.(8) In some parts of the world the Church is virtually the public authority. I do hope that CAFOD will take up the task of instructing us on this subject and also that they will adopt appropriate measures in the numerous medical centres they support in the developing world.

Dr. Gerald Danaher

Notes

1 Population doubling in Africa and the Middle East to Pakistan, the only large region of the world where – in most countries – family planning is not easily available: 300 million in 1950, 600 million in 1976, 1,200 million in 2002, 2,400 million in 2050. And onwards from there. The United Nations latest (2008) low, medium, and high estimates for the 2050 population are 2413 million, 2760 million, and 3132 million respectively. (The more exact figure for 1950 is 308 million)

2 Population control and family planning are rising up the development agenda after decades in which they were taboo. Bronwen Maddox, Chief Foreign Commentator, The Times, January 27, 2009

3 Internet: UN World Contraceptive Use 2005

4 Internet: World Population Prospects. The 2008 Revision. United Nations Population Division

5 (a) "Population problems are of extreme importance...they have a vital bearing on world peace". Mgr Giovanni Battista Montini (the future Pope Paul VI) writing to the Twenty-sixth Italian Catholic Social Week in 1953. (The Encyclical That Never Was p244. Sheed&Ward)

(b) "A problem which everyone talks about, is that of birth control, as it is called, namely, of population increase on the one hand and family morality on the other. It is an extremely grave problem."

Pope Paul VI 23 June 1964 (Report in The Times 24 June 1964)

(c) See Populorum Progressio below.

6 (a) "Korea's rapid population growth (three per cent per year) will have all but cancelled out its economic advance", (even if General Park's Five Year Plan were to succeed) The Starved and the Silent by Fr Aloysius Schwartz 1966 p110. Fr Schwartz was a Maryknoll missionary in South Korea. He describes the horrendous slums there where "on the rubbish dumps women and children with blackened and scared hands scraped in the refuse for morsels of food." Happily, the South Koreans, by using family planning and the world economic system, prospered, and they do not have such slums any more.

(b) There is one major cause of poverty and lack of development which until recently has not been given its full importance. Even now, in some Catholic and Marxist circles, the subject is deliberately avoided or treated superficially with ideological bias rather than attention to the facts. I refer to the population explosion...Fr Edmund Flood OSB Ealing Abbey Pamphlet 1969 "World Poverty – the Future." For a fuller excerpt from this pamphlet see 'A Benedictine Assessment' at gerrydanaher.com

7 (a) "Quite as important as the Four Freedoms... is a Fifth Freedom – from excessive numbers of children. Far more than much of the world realizes, even the partial achievement of the first four is dependent upon this last." Road to Survival by William Vogt 1948 (The Four Freedoms were freedom of speech and worship, freedom from want and fear. These freedoms are absent in many of the countries making up the region referred to in note (1) above)

(b) This "action helps to promote war and render poverty inevitable."

The reaction of 2600 US scientists to the 1968 confirmation of the ban on artificial contraception by Pope Paul VI (The Encyclical That Never Was p244. Sheed&Ward)

8 Populorum Progressio Paragraph 37 "There is no denying that the accelerated rate of population growth brings many added difficulties to the problems of development where the size of the population grows more rapidly than the quantity of available resources to such a degree that things seem to have reached an impasse. In such circumstances people are inclined to apply drastic remedies to reduce the birth rate. There is no doubt public authorities can intervene in this matter, within the bounds of their competence. They can instruct citizens on this subject and adopt appropriate measures, so long as these are in conformity with the dictates of the moral law and the rightful freedom of married couples is preserved completely intact. When the inalienable right of marriage and of procreation is taken away, so is human dignity. 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."