

POPULATION DECISIONS: THE COUPLE OR THE STATE (THE ETHICAL VIEWPOINT)

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Perhaps some of you are saying to yourselves, "Now we shall hear the conservative position on the matter." Allow me to disappoint you. The ethical considerations that will be proposed here derive not so much from a desire to be *cautious* as from a desire to be *integral* in our approach to population decisions.

Let us begin with an analogy. Suppose we were dealing with the question of human development or human happiness, if you will. There are various models of happiness, either theoretical or practical, explicit or implicit, that have arisen in the course of human history. One model which has probably influenced us much more than we realize is the so-called success ethic or achievement ethic. It is a model which has usually flourished in technologically developed societies. The success ethic is characterized by an emphasis on efficiency, material rewards, escalating consumption of products and a bright — perhaps too bright — confidence in man's capacity for unlimited progress. Our own inclinations, the mass media and the persuasive example of technological rewards (for "nothing succeeds like success") have all contributed to our acceptance, in varying degrees, of the achievement ethic. In many ways, the Philippine strategy (or strategies) for development is based on this model. What are we to say about this point? I, for one, would say that the technological model is fundamentally human and Christian, but that our acceptance of it must be an intelligently critical acceptance. Rather than argue this abstractly, let me cite examples from actual lived experience.

You might have read the news report several years back about the Wall Street banker, Jesse Livermore, who was making profits of four thousand dollars or more each week. Mr. Liver-

more was for many of his colleagues the glorious example of success. He had everything he wanted according to the norms of the achievement ethic. One morning, however, the janitor who came in to clean the office was terrified to see Mr. Livermore stretched out on the carpeted floor, a pool of blood around his head and a revolver near his right hand. The suicide note read: "I am a failure." Let me add another example, if you would pardon this reference to a personal experience. In a certain country in Europe which has a highly developed social welfare system, there are many homes for the aged. Upon reaching a certain age it is well-nigh mandatory for the old folks to leave their children and take up residence in these institutions. I saw with my own eyes what I can only call a morbid last supper, a last family meal before sending grandfather and grandmother away to a home for the aged. Children and grandchildren were gathered there and the old folks, understandably, could not keep back their tears as they ate. The meal over, a taxi was called. The old folks reluctantly got into the cab, a waving of goodbyes, and then off to the home for the aged. They would be lacking no material comforts there, incidentally; they would have everything — color TV, good meals, a comfortable room — everything except human affection.

Such phenomena should, I believe, make us wary of accepting the success ethic uncritically. It would seem that efficiency, consumer-satisfaction, technological progress — valid as they may be to a certain extent — are by themselves inadequate as a goal for human development. They are only partial values and must be seen for what they are: parts of a more integral model of human development. In other words,

mere *abundance* does not satisfy the heart of man; he searches also — and perhaps, much more — for *meaning*. If our model of human development is less than integral, we will find our achievements turning against ourselves.

Now to the question of population control and how one may approach it in an integral manner. First of all, a brief attempt toward a realistic appraisal of the problem of human numbers. What happened at the United Nations Population Conference last August would make a good starting-point. I recall reading a report on the proceedings at Bucharest written, evidently, by a journalist with a sense of humor. It went something like this: "From Bucharest, good news and bad news to the world. The good news: there is no population problem. The bad news: we don't know how to solve it." In other words, there seem to have been two divergent readings of the population issue at the U.N. conference. Drawn simplistically, the two different lines of thinking appeared to be, first position: population growth is the biggest and most important problem of national or international survival and development — and the most effective solution is population control; second position: population growth is by no means the most important problem — the biggest problem is inequitable distribution of goods and resources plus wasteful consumption (the solution is a just sharing of such goods and resources).

What lessons can one draw from Bucharest? I suppose these would be some of them: first, the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle — population growth is a serious problem but it is not "the problem of problems;" second, one should not be tyrannised by scary apocalyptic readings of demographic data; third, population control by itself is ineffective — it must be understood and applied within the larger context of a serious socio-economic program toward redistribution of income, goods and resources. We have, therefore, arrived at the trite conclusion (though it doesn't seem to be that way, judging from the heated arguments that flare up over the matter) that a high rate of population growth is one of the significant components of the problem of world poverty,

and that population control must be instituted. Who makes the decisions? That is our topic for this evening.

How many children, then, should a couple have? If one may be allowed to stress the obvious, we are all agreed I am sure, that deciding on the number of children is qualitatively different from, say, deciding on how many shirts, how many pairs of shoes or how many cars one should have. This difference cannot be proven by the empirical method, yet it is the intuitive minimum required for further meaningful discussion. Perhaps one can also assume that in the absence of a problematic rate of population growth the state should not get involved in the decision-making process regarding the number of children in a family. It is, therefore, due to the danger posed against national and international survival that the state comes into the picture. Survival is a rather fundamental value; it is the condition for the enjoyment of other values. However, it is not the highest value. There are other human values more important than survival itself, for example, integrity, conscience, love. To survive through the violation of other basic values could be the surest way toward meaninglessness. Mankind could well ask: "What did we survive for?"

This is analogous to the preservation of individual life to the exclusion of other personal values. It could be the ticket to despair. The man who has saved himself could well ask: "What do I exist for?"

It is, therefore, imperative in this matter of population control that those who make the decisions be guided by an *integral* vision. No single value may be pursued in oblivion of other human values. There must be an intelligent and honest balancing of values in the context of a scale or hierarchy of such values. What then are the values to be considered in making population decisions? I would see them as the following: survival, human dignity and freedom, justice.¹ And how are they to be evaluated and balanced?

It has been a long-standing conviction and practice of the international community to give human dignity and freedom top priority among these values. This was explicitly recognized by

the United Nations International Conference on Human Rights held in Teheran in May 1968: "Couples have a basic human right to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and a right to adequate education and information in this respect." For its part, the Catholic church affirmed the same priority in its Vatican II document on *The Church in the Modern World*: "Parents should regard as their proper mission the task of transmitting human life and educating those to whom it has been transmitted. . . They will thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which may be foreseen. For this accounting they will reckon with both the material and the spiritual conditions of the times as well as of their state in life. Finally, they will consult the interests of the family group, of civil society and of the Church itself. The parents themselves should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God."

If human dignity and freedom have been given the highest ranking, that does not mean they are the only values to be considered. Notice that the Teheran statement speaks about deciding "freely and *responsibly* (italics ours) on the number and spacing of their children." The Vatican II document, on the other hand, speaks of consulting the interests of civil society. In other words, a serious concern for the survival of the human community must guide the pursuit of dignity and freedom. There should be a balancing of values. This, I believe, is what the World Council of Churches at its meeting in Sofia in September 1971 wanted to express: "It has been a cardinal assumption that any list of human rights should include the right of parents to decide on how many children they might have. But this right should not be exercised apart from the right of children to physical, social, and psychological health, to an environment which gives scope to the fulfillment of their human potentialities." An integral approach truly sensitive to the need for a balancing of values according to their relative importance in the eyes of the human moral community — this is what the population decision-maker should have.

Now, things would be much easier if the different values involved in population planning could simply be weighed and ranked in orderly sequence. But such is not the case. Life is full of tensions and there is often a conflict of values. Sometimes one value cannot be achieved without diminishing another. This may be seen in the case of incentives to family planning. Given a problematic rate of population growth, a shortage of food and resources and the need for economic development how far can the state encourage or coerce parents to limit the number of their children? How can the different values relevant to population control be properly balanced? This leads us to indicate some ethical guidelines (necessarily general in nature) in the making of population decisions.²

1) In accordance with the primacy given to human dignity and freedom, the state has an obligation to do everything within its power to protect, enhance and implement freedom of choice in family planning. This means that voluntary family-planning programs are to be preferred and tried before other types of program.

2) If it can be clearly shown (and here the state has the burden of proof) that voluntary methods have been adequately and fairly tried, and have nonetheless failed and continue to fail, then programs that go beyond family planning may be introduced. In the Philippine context it is highly doubtful that voluntary programs have been given a fair and adequate trial; they have not been promoted in a sufficiently thorough and systematic way.

3) Insofar as it is necessary to introduce incentive schemes, those which are least coercive are to be preferred. For instance, "positive" incentives are less objectionable than "negative" ones. In theory, positive incentives (like rewards or prizes for acceptors) are non-coercive, in the sense that people are not forced to take advantage of them. In practice, however, they appeal largely to the poor who are in need of money or goods — and if the need is desperate true freedom does not exist. For example, to offer a poor couple a sack of rice (esp. at the height of the rice crisis) on condition that they become acceptors is, to put it mildly, not con-

ductive to freedom of choice. Negative incentives are more coercive since they impose a penalty for what is considered excess procreation. There is a problem of justice involved here. Very often it is the families who need social and welfare benefits most who get penalized for having the *n*th child. These could also be injustice perpetrated against the very children who are born, in that they are deprived of state benefits through no fault of their own. In the Philippines there are two negative incentives instituted by law: tax exemption is limited to the fourth existing child and maternity leave with pay is granted only up to and including the fourth child.

4) Finally, as a general rule, the more coercive the proposed plan, the more serious, urgent and necessary should be the reasons to justify it. These reasons should be genuinely demonstrable before the human moral community.

Population decisions: the couple or the state? In the past few minutes we have tried to indicate the essential issues involved in this delicate problem. Basic human values are at stake and, therefore, we cannot afford to make population decisions irresponsibly. To be responsible signifies an integral approach to the problem. One-sided, partial approaches could lead to sad consequences. It is to be hoped that efficiency of the program be not taken as the principal norm for population decisions in this country.

With enough efficiency we might, of course, assure survival. But if results are achieved at the expense of human dignity, freedom or justice we might find the inevitable question coming back at us: What did we survive for? Ladies and gentlemen, I believe it would be better to ask this question early rather than late.

Notes

At the time he read this paper Antonio Lambino, S.J. was with the Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University.

1. See Callahan (1971).
2. These guidelines are based on those suggested by Callahan (1971, 1973).

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