

large numbers of lay people seeking holiness entered television in order to speak the truth in love, television might well be transformed.

But I hear constantly from my ethics students that love, honesty, and the communion of persons are nice abstract ideals, but in the "real" world we have to "be practical." We have to earn a living, after all. These are our children, a whole generation now, born since Vatican II. They have been raised in Catholic families and instructed in Catholic institutions. But they have not really been catechized or spiritually formed or theologically educated by the Church. They are quite cynical about the reality of human love. Their cynicism is not bitter or angry. In fact, it seems hardly conscious. They simply assume that human relationships are manipulative and dishonest. And with that cynicism, they easily dismiss their need for divine life as gained through the sacramental life of the Church. It seems less important than their need for money and the things money can buy.

And yet, it is love, and love alone, that can make the next thousand years a millennium of the laity. A truly stunning instance of such love was in the national news recently. Duane and Janet Willis instantly

lost six of their nine children when their van struck some debris on the freeway and the gas tank exploded. In their first meeting with the media, Mr. Willis told of their belief that their children are in a better place and, "we will see them again." They were only stewards of the children, who all along belonged to God, and are with Him now. But he also spoke of how each child lent to them was a precious gift, and how each day with them was precious. "We didn't have nine children by accident," he (a Baptist) explained. Mrs. Willis home-schools their children, while her husband teaches handicapped children in an elementary school. She is 47 years old. Her youngest was six weeks old at death, another 3 and another 7.

Who is to say that this couple are not chosen ones, saints of the type our Holy Father speaks of? Perhaps they are suffering a vicarious purification whose contagion will be the salvation of many. They represent openness to new life at its best — years of honesty between husband and wife — and a family bonded by the Super-Glue of self-giving love, love grounded in a solid belief in the reality of love and in the God Who is Love. They exemplify one of many necessary steps toward a millennium of the laity. ■

ON POVERTY & POLLUTION

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THE PROBLEM IS NOT TOO MANY PEOPLE

In most circles it is an article of unquestionable faith that the world has a population problem. This can mean either that there are now too many people in the world, or that if population growth is not halted now, there soon will be too many people. And there are organizations corresponding to

both these viewpoints: Negative Population Growth, which believes there are too many people now, and Zero Population Growth, which simply wants to limit future growth. It is generally assumed by all right-thinking people that many or most of the ills of the world are due to "the population problem." But there is reason to question this widespread assumption. Let me begin by looking at some examples of this conventional attitude.

Take, for example, an article in the *Washington Post* of October 9, 1994, entitled "Syria's Economy Starting to Slow." The writer has good things to say

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about the people of Syria. Quoting an unnamed diplomat, he writes: "The people are bright, they work very hard, and they're basically technically competent." Now, it would seem to me that a country could never go wrong in having a few more such bright, hardworking people. But not to the *Washington Post's* reporter. For in the preceding paragraph, he wrote: "Syria still suffers from a bloated and inefficient public sector, widespread corruption and, *most ominously*, rapid population growth, which threatens to overtake economic growth within a few years" (emphasis mine). Without necessarily agreeing that economic growth after the pattern of modern thinking is an unambiguous good, I nevertheless find this hard to understand. Would not one think that more bright and hardworking people would make for more economic growth? It is true that there will be a lag between the time the bright and hardworking people are born and the time they can begin to contribute to the gross domestic product, but in the meantime, they will *consume* a good many products and require the services of physicians, teachers, and others, whose work also contributes to economic growth. So in this way they will help the GDP to rise ever higher, even while at their mother's breasts.

Another example of this pervasive thinking, or rather nonthinking, about population is the following. In a special survey of Islamic countries in *The Economist* (Aug. 8, 1994), the writer states, "In Libya, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi is lucky to have a country with few people and plenty of oil...." Now it is true that if you have few people, you will have more money from the sale of a given amount of oil to give to or spend on each person. But the notion that fewer people is necessarily better for economic growth is simply wrong and is based on neither facts nor logic. Let us examine a particular case.

In 1993 the population per square mile of Haiti was 600. In Barbados, another Caribbean island nation, it was 1,538. This is what a 1985 book, *Underdevelopment Is a State of Mind*, has to say about Barbados and Haiti:

Haiti and Barbados have several things in common. Both are island nations; they share essentially the same climate. Both have depended principally on one crop for extended periods, and have only moderate natural re-

source endowments. The large majority of their people have ancestral roots in West Africa. Both countries experienced long periods of enslavement of blacks. Both are today extremely densely populated.

There the similarities end. Haiti is one of the world's poorest countries, suffers from low levels of literacy, faces serious health problems.... Barbados is among the most affluent of the middle-income countries; its achievements in education and health rank it with the developed countries....

Remember that Barbados is well over twice as densely populated as Haiti. The literacy rate in Haiti is 53 percent, in Barbados 99 percent. In Haiti life expectancy at birth is 53 years for men and 55 for women; in Barbados it is 70 for men and 76 for women. I could continue quoting statistics, but the point is clear. It is not the number of people, at least not by itself, that contributes to poverty or to the many other problems a nation can have.

Behind the population scare is a failure to recognize some obvious truths. Each human being born into the world is two things, a consumer and a producer. And, barring our early years, most of us seem able to produce more than we can consume. Obviously farmers do so, and so can nearly anyone else. A builder, even working by himself, could make a house for his family in probably less than a year, and have years left over to make houses for others. So what does this mean? Simply that God seems to have made it possible for the human race both to sustain itself and keep itself occupied at the same time.

Roughly speaking, man's productive effort should more than match man's needs. And in fact, it seems that the "more than match" is a perennial problem in the form of unemployment, for there we have — or supposedly have — unneeded labor capacity. The unemployed do not (for the most part) starve or go naked in the streets. Therefore the productive efforts of other people must be feeding and clothing and sheltering them, so that it would seem their own efforts are unnecessary. Now my immediate reason for mentioning this is to point out that if we are primarily concerned with economic growth, then all men are both their own market (for they are consumers) and the productive agents that will supply that market. The more people, the more economic

growth, unless things such as monopoly control over the economy or unwise kinds of government intervention hinder things. But in itself, more people could not possibly jeopardize continued economic growth, for people's needs and wants are the very thing that fuels such continued growth.

I will add, by way of parenthesis, that the obvious way of dealing with excess labor capacity, with the oversupply of goods and services that a full-employment economy would generate, is to cut back on hours of work. If every adult head of family working 40 hours a week produces more than we ourselves can use and more than the poor need, then let us cut back to 30 hours and see if we still have enough. If a man — or a whole society — can do well enough on 30 hours of work, why work 40? We could more usefully spend our time with our families and with God.

At present there are not too many people in the world, but is it ever possible for there to be too many people, especially too many people living after the manner of modern industrialized man?

In regard to the first part of this question, it is very unlikely that at any time there will be too many people, absolutely speaking, in the world. If every square foot were filled by a human being, or anything remotely approaching that, then indeed there would be a population problem, but we are not likely ever to reach that point, or anything remotely near it. It is true that the recent reductions in population growth rates, in Europe and the U.S., for example, have been accomplished mainly by means that offend morality — contraception and abortion — but these means are unfortunately likely to continue. And were the entire world ever converted to the Faith, and abortion and contraception as a result rarely resorted to (for sin will still remain), this would not mean that births would necessarily become too numerous, for such a Catholic world would be able to reduce births, if necessary, through moral means — i.e., Natural Family Planning — and would presumably have the will to do so. But to the second part of this question, whether there could be too many people living after the manner of modern industrialized man, I think the answer is more complicated. What is necessary for a good life is much less than is necessary for a typical modern life. This is true both in terms of resources used, including electricity, and in terms of actual square feet of land used. Think of how much land is taken up by modern superhighways, parking lots, and

other things that are used for the automobile. And think of how much automobile traffic and pollution are generated because most of us live far from our jobs and because small and local shops are typically centralized into giant stores and malls. But here, as we will see, more people does not imply more and worse polluters.

Let us look at a few measures of consumption as compared with population density. And since this is consumption after the modern industrial manner, it usually entails pollution in the manufacture of the consumable good. Electricity, for example, an obvious factor in almost all production, often requires burning oil or coal. In the U.S. the 1993 population density was 73 people per square mile, a relatively low figure (the reason the U.S. can seem overpopulated is because so many of us are crammed into metropolitan areas; our problem is not national population density, but population distribution). Taking only western European nations whose living standards are at least equal to those here, we find the following number of people per square mile for 1993: France, 273; Italy, 511; United Kingdom, 621; Switzerland, 455. Yet energy consumption per capita (in kilowatts) was (1990) for the U.S., 10,321; France, 3,870; Italy, 3,856; United Kingdom, 5,049; Switzerland, 3,912. Also in 1990, the U.S. had 1.7 persons per passenger

From 1963 to 1989, there was an 18% increase in the number of calories available per person per day throughout the world, according to a recent United Nations report, "The State of Food and Agriculture".... In 1961-1963, 74% of the world's population lived in countries with less than 2,000 calories per person per day available. In 1987-1989 only 12% of the world's population had that little. While the world's population has grown about 1.6% annually since World War II, the food supply has increased about 2.5% annually, resulting in a net gain of 40% in food production per person.

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car in the country. France had 2.4; Italy, 2.1; Switzerland, 2.2. (I do not know the figure for Great Britain.) Obviously I am not arguing that the greater population density of these European states *caused* their citizens individually to consume less energy and have fewer cars — simply that more people per square mile clearly need not cause more environmentally destructive behavior by each person. A world full of Amish farmers would use far fewer resources than most of us do at present, so it is obvious that the planet could safely contain many more Amish farmers than modern industrialized men.

Most of us want a world in which forests, meadows, and clean rivers and beaches exist. But a small population can produce as much pollution as a large one when, as with us Americans, we consume well over twice the amount of energy per capita as do the French. So it seems to me very suspicious that North American and European population planners are targeting the *people* of the Third World when their own people contribute much more to environmental destruction. It is the technology, moreover, originally invented and often manufactured in Europe and North America that is exported to Latin America, Africa, or Asia that makes possible much of the ecological destruction taking place there. The energy consumption per capita in Syria (1990) was only 1,084 kilowatts; in Algeria, 990; in Brazil, 765; in the Philippines, 301; in Zaire, 66. The people of those nations have more to fear from the environmental destruction caused by our luxury-living populace than we do from them.

Pollution is a danger to human civilization. But the above figures indicate that it is not the sheer number of people that produces the pollution problem, but rather how those people live, for if Americans lived as Frenchmen do, we could have twice the number of people and consume less total electricity than at present. It would seem, then, that the best measure of the likelihood of human environ-

mental destruction is not the number of people but how people consume and pollute. Twenty-three percent of France is meadows and pastures, and 27 percent is forests and woodlands. If a country can have almost four times the number of people per square mile as the U.S. does, yet have 50 percent of its land in woods and meadows, I fail to see any *population* problem. No doubt there is pollution in France, but the great variations in energy use and other measures of consumption among even the Western nations show how much could be done to reduce pollution even without dismantling our consumerist society. And if we were actually to become serious about seeing how much we could do without, we would amaze ourselves with how little damaging impact mankind could make on the natural environment of our planet.

I know of no better way to close than by quoting the words of the present Vicar of Christ. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) John Paul II made reference to the fact that “the direct or indirect result of industrialization is, ever more frequently, the pollution of the environment...” (no. 34). And in *Centesimus Annus* (1991), he linked the problem of the environment to “the problem of consumerism” (no. 37). The world does not, and probably cannot, suffer from a *population* problem. It does suffer from a problem of how we live. As *Centesimus Annus* further points out, “At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day” (*ibid.*). This error is directly condemned by our Lord: “a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Lk. 12:15). This error is man’s overweening desire to remake everything after his own will. This error originated largely in the modern West. It is here and by us that the earth is threatened, and if we are honest about our own way of life we will discern that all the talk by the nations of the West about the world’s population problem is simply a way of preventing a hard look at the evils of how we ourselves live. But governments of Western nations would rather kill Third World babies with abortion or maim Third World mothers with chemical contraceptives than inconvenience ourselves even a little bit.

For Christians in the West the choice is stark: Will we serve God or continue in our faithful service of Mammon? We cannot do both. ■

NEXT ISSUE

The next issue of the NOR is, as usual, dated July-August. It often appears in subscribers’ mailboxes in the month of August. We resume our normal monthly schedule with the September issue.