

## **Declaration on the Decrease of Fertility in the World**

**27 Febbraio 1998**

*February 27, 1998*The truth about current demographic trends cannot be denied any longer. It is increasingly evident and ever more widely acknowledged that the world is engaged in a marked demographic decline, which started around the year 1968. In 51 countries, fertility is already below replacement level. The number of deaths per year is even higher than the number of births in 15 of these countries. It is urgent to increase the general knowledge of these trends. A true solidarity must be forged without delay, boldly facing the future and mindful of the Declaration of Human Rights whose 50th anniversary is commemorated this year.

### **1. BEING ATTENTIVE TO DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS**

Following the mandate which it has received, the Pontifical Council for the Family closely follows the demographic trends of the different countries in the world.[1] For this reason, the Council has already convened various meetings of world-renowned experts. This has permitted a closer look at the circumstances proper to specific continents. In that way, trends in the Americas were the object of a congress in Mexico City[2] (21-23 April 1993). Trends in Asia and Oceania were studied at a conference in Taipei[3] (18-20 September 1995). The variety of demographic trends in the different countries of Europe were examined in Rome[4] (17-19 October 1996). At the present, the Pontifical Council for the Family is preparing a meeting which will be devoted to the demographic situation in African countries.

Meanwhile, the Pontifical Council for the Family follows with attention and interest the studies of research centres on demographic matters. Among these institutions is the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. This body convened a meeting of 14 world-renowned experts in Toronto, Canada, 4-6 November 1997, in order to study the actual worldwide decline in fertility and its foreseeable consequences for various nations in the immediate future. These experts could only confirm what all demographic data has already indicated for many years, namely, that the decrease in fertility which, for some 20 years, has affected most of the industrially developed countries--Northern and Western Europe, Canada, the United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand--is extending to an ever greater number of developing countries, in Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Caribbean. One expert, commenting on the continuity of this decline since 1975 in countries which already had a low fertility rate, remarked: "Once the fertility transition begins, further declines follow invariably".[5]

### **2. A COMMON VOCABULARY: WIDESPREAD, SIMPLISTIC, AND ERRONEOUS**

For too long, most of the discussions about population have developed a certain universal and erroneous popular vocabulary, according to which the world is viewed as a prisoner of an "exponential", even "galloping" demographic growth, which is causing a "demographic explosion"--the so-called "demographic time bomb". The Pontifical Council for the Family, which has demonstrated in one of its publications[6] that this "popular vocabulary" really lacks all foundation, is pleased to note that, even in some agencies of the UN, the truth regarding the demographic situation has begun to be recognized. Indeed, for 30 years, the conferences sponsored by this organization have provoked and nurtured unfounded fears about demography, especially in the southern countries. On this alarmist basis, different agencies of the UN have invested and continue to invest huge financial resources in order to compel many countries to institute Malthusian policies. It has been proven that these programs, always imported from abroad, usually involve coercive measures of fertility control. In the same way, international aid for development is regularly granted on the condition of establishing programs of population control which include forced sterilizations, or sterilizations performed without proper

informed consent. Local governments are also adopting such Malthusian policies, and non-governmental organizations--of which the most important is the well-known International Planned Parenthood Federation--are actively fostering these policies.

In the poor countries, the first victims of these programs are the innocent and helpless populations. They are systematically deceived and driven to consent to their mutilation under the false argument that it is, for them, a necessary antecedent to development.

### **3. DEMOGRAPHIC DECREASE AND THE AGEING OF POPULATIONS**

These disastrous policies stand in total contradiction to the actual demographic trends, as they are revealed in statistics and the analysis of available data. For 30 years, the rate of growth of the world's population has continued to decline at a regular and significant rate. At this point, following an impressive drop in their fertility, 51 countries in the world (out of 185) are no longer able to replace their population. To be precise, these 51 countries represent 44 percent of the population of the world. In other words, the total fertility rate (TFR) in these countries, that is to say, the number of children born of each woman, is lower than 2.1. This is the minimum level of fertility needed for the replacement of the population in a country which has optimum public health conditions.

This situation is found to be the same on almost every continent. There is below-replacement-level fertility in America (the United States, Canada, Cuba, and most of the Caribbean islands), in Asia (Georgia, Thailand, China, Japan and South Korea), in Oceania (Australia) and in almost all the forty countries of Europe. On this continent, the effect of aging on population leads to depopulation, with the number of deaths surpassing the number of births. This negative balance is occurring in 13 countries already, including Estonia, Latvia, Germany, Belarus, Bulgaria, Hungary, Russia, Spain and Italy. Beyond the question of ageing, the most problematic question is that of demographic decline, with all the adverse consequences that such a decline can bring about. In the near future, the number of countries whose fertility rate is below replacement level will multiply. In the same way, the number of countries whose mortality rate is higher than its birth rate will increase.

Such realities, which have been familiar to demographers for a long time, still seem hidden from the media, public opinion and those responsible for public policy decisions. They are passed over in silence at the international conferences, as was evident, for example, during the Cairo Conference in 1994, and during the Beijing Conference in 1995.

### **4. COMPLEX CAUSES**

The causes of this unprecedented situation are certainly complex.[7] J-Cl. Chesnais, of the Institut National d'Études Démographiques (Paris), has analyzed them in detail for the above-mentioned meeting of demographic experts. Some of the causes are easily spotted. The marriage rate, in an environment which is unfavorable to matrimony, has significantly dropped, and thus fewer people are marrying. The mean age at which women first give birth has sharply increased, and continues to do so. Labour Codes do not facilitate the desire of women to integrate harmoniously their family life and professional activity. The lack of true family policies in these countries which, nevertheless, are directly affected by the demographic decrease, explains why families cannot actually have the number of children which they would like to have: it is estimated that the difference between the number of children that European women desire and the number they really have is around 0.6 child/woman.[8] J-Cl. Chesnais concludes his report about the causes of the fertility decrease by introducing a new element in demography, which has been rather neglected by demographers: the ratio between pessimism and hope experienced by populations. According to this author, a return to a higher fertility rate in those countries whose fertility is declining at the present can be expected only if there is a change in the "mood" in these countries, a shift from present pessimism to a state of mind which could be compared to that of the "baby-boom" era, during the era of post-World War II reconstruction.[9]

Apart from these causes based on living conditions and on sociocultural changes in industrially developed countries, other factors directly link demographic decrease to the human will, and therefore to human responsibility. These are the methods and policies of voluntary limitation of births. The spread of chemical contraception techniques and often the legalization of abortion have been established, while, at the same time, policies in favour of welcoming new lives have been weakened. In recent years, mass sterilization, already mentioned, has been added to these causes. One can recall the massive, scandalous campaigns of male and female sterilization in India in 1954 and 1976, leading to the overthrow of Mrs. Gandhi's government.[10] In Brazil and in Mexico, 40 percent of the women using a fertility-control method are sterilized.

At the present moment, the media is reporting the sterilization campaign carried out last year in Peru by the services of the Public Health Department. This has provoked a worldwide reaction of indignation.[11] Public health-care employees[12] put "pressure" on women who were mostly illiterate and not informed about the real purpose of their "operation".[13] These procedures also resulted in a number of deaths. The Catholic Bishops of the region have demanded an explanation.[14] They have been joined by a large group of congressmen who have asked that the Peruvian Congress investigate these sterilizations (which number more than 100,000) in order to determine the medical and ethical conditions under which they were performed. These congressmen seek to reveal the full truth regarding violations of human rights carried out during this governmental campaign.[15]

## **5. TOWARD SEVERE IMBALANCES**

From these causes, which we have briefly noted, disturbing consequences result. The youth ratio in these populations decreases markedly. Consequently, we see a reversal of the age pyramid. A small population of young adults must then secure the production of the country and support the large population of older, less active people who have a greater need of health care and medical services. Within the active population, some deep imbalances are occurring between the young and the somewhat older people, as the latter try to protect their jobs while younger generations find a reduced job market.

Nor should one forget the effect of an aging population on education. In order to provide for the economic burden of the elderly, there is a great temptation to cut down on the money allocated for the training of new generations. This weakening of the educational system brings in turn a considerable risk: that of losing what might be called the communal memory. The transmission of cultural, scientific, technical, artistic, moral and religious common goods becomes thereby endangered. It also needs to be pointed out that, contrary to what is often asserted, unemployment itself is aggravated by the demographic decline.

The experts also foresee some other aspects of the current trend: the increase in the mean age of the population may markedly affect its psychological profile: "moroseness", the lack of intellectual, economic, scientific and social dynamism and reduced creativity--which seem already at work in some "aged" countries--would merely express the structure of the demographic pyramid of these countries. Meanwhile, the ratio of the elderly who hold positions of responsibility in society increases. Under these conditions, in order to secure the healthy functioning of various social insurance programs (pensions, life insurance, health insurance, welfare system) the temptation becomes great to resort to euthanasia. It is well-known that euthanasia is already performed in various European countries. Among the most obvious effects of demographic decline, we have to mention the violent imbalances, already foreseeable, between countries whose demographic age compositions are widely different. If, for example, we compare the age pyramid in countries such as France, Spain and Italy, on the one hand, with countries like Algeria, Morocco and Turkey on the other, we are impressed by the fact that they are precisely the reverse of one another. We can imagine the problems produced by such a contrast. Some of the difficulties that rich countries find today in effectively limiting clandestine immigration from poorer countries may be only the precursor of the problems which lie ahead.

It is urgent that public opinion and those responsible for public policy be informed of these trends. It is no less urgent to reject the fallacious data, ideological sophisms and even fabricated statistics that are invoked in presentations on these themes. In the field of demography, as in other fields of knowledge, the truth cannot be concealed forever. One cannot but rejoice to see that this truth is becoming more and more evident, as the Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs did not hesitate to call for this meeting of experts on the theme of "below-replacement fertility". There is no reason not to reject the inaccuracies and lies which have been too often exploited in order to "justify" programs and policies totally incompatible with the respect due to fundamental human rights.

## **6. CELEBRATING MAN AND HIS RIGHTS**

In this regard, the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a reminder to the world. To celebrate these rights is to celebrate man. This moment provides a unique opportunity for the human community to strengthen the respect due to the essential values to which it has subscribed, and on which it has committed itself to build its future. These values must be safeguarded from all compromise on the part of States, international organizations, private groups or individuals. These rights are identified as follows: the right to life, the right to physical and psychological integrity, and the equal dignity of all human beings (cf. article 1).

The year 1998 offers to all people and nations the occasion to assert again with enthusiasm their unreserved approval of the letter and spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Here, great vigilance is needed. Faithfulness to the Declaration implies the exclusion of all efforts which seek, under the guide of so-called "new rights", to include abortion (cf. article 3), to leave physical integrity unprotected (ibid.), or to undermine the heterosexual, monogamous family (cf. article 16). Some are currently striving for these harmful goals, seeking to deprive some human beings of their fundamental rights, and to impose upon the weakest new forms of oppression (cf. articles 4 and 5). The lies which undergird these efforts inevitably lead to violence and barbarity and introduce the "culture of death".[16]

As Pope John Paul II has declared: "Human rights transcend every constitutional order". These rights are inherent in each man. They do not result from a consensus which is open to negotiation depending on the forces or self-interests that may be present. The very existence of these rights, recognized and solemnly declared in 1948, does not depend on the relative quality of the formulations which exist in constitutions and laws (cf. article 2.2). Every constitution, every law, which would attempt to limit the possession of these declared rights, or to modify their meaning, should be immediately denounced as discriminatory and, as suggested by the Preamble of the Declaration, as suspect of totalitarian ferments. It is on this common reference to values, defended at the price of so many tears, that the fabric of the nations can be restored, and that a city of the world, open to the "culture of life" can be built. This ambitious project is not out of reach, but the solidarity between peoples, which is both its nourishment and its fruit, supposes, as a preliminary condition, that the solidarity between generations be affirmed. As a consequence, the Pontifical Council for the Family invites all people of goodwill, and especially Christian associations, to do their part in making the truth regarding current demographic trends widely known. It invites them to condemn with courage the Malthusian programs which remain totally unjustified and completely in violation of human rights.

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1. Cf. Pontifical Council for the Family, *Ethical and Pastoral Dimensions of Population Trends*, Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, ISBN 88-209-1990-7.

2. *Cuestiones Demográficas en América Latina en perspectiva del año internacional de la familia 1994*, Mexico, April 1993, Ediciones PROVIVE, ISBN 980-6256-04-2.

3. *International Conference on Demography and the Family in Asia and Oceania*, Taipei, Taiwan, 18-20 September 1995, The Franciscan Gabriel Printing Co. Ltd., December 1996, ISBN 957-98831-1-4.

4. *Familia et Vita*, Anno II, n. 1, 1997, pp. 3-137.
5. Aminur Khan, *Fertility Trends among Low Fertility Countries*, Expert Group Meeting on Below-Replacement Fertility, Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat, UN/POP/BRF/BP/1997/1, p. 11.
6. Cf. note 1.
7. J.-Cl. Chesnais, *Determinants of Below-Replacement Fertility*, Expert group meeting on Below-Replacement Fertility, Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat, New York, 4-6 November 1997 UN/POP/BRF/BP/1997/2, pp. 3-17.
8. J.-Cl. Chesnais, *Determinants of Below-Replacement Fertility*, p. 12.
9. "The second half of this century experienced the decline of puritanism and the victory of materialism (hedonism, cult of consumption, American way of life). The coming century could stress the limits of this model.... The trivial interpretation of the baby-boom as a response to economic growth does not hold: the real crucial change was the change in the state of mind, from mourning to hope. How is it possible to imagine such an inversion of the historical trend without a big shock?". J.-Cl. Chesnais, *Determinants of Below-Replacement Fertility*, pp. 13-14.
10. The consent of women to surgical sterilization in conditions devoid of hygiene was obtained in exchange for a gift of food. The number of such "voluntary" sterilizations declined sharply in the year following the fall of Mrs. Gandhi's government. J.H. Leavesley, *Update on Sterilization*, Family Planning Information Service, vol. 1, n. 5, 1980.
11. As pointed out by the French newspaper *Le Monde*, the accusations in that country against the population policy were not new, but, "since they had come until now from the Catholic Church, public opinion was hardly concerned, attributing them to the Church's traditional opposition to contraception. Today, however, it is from the third national congress of rural and indigenous women that protests are coming, and they are reiterated by the farmers' union, popular women's organizations, feminists and opposition members of Congress". N. Bonnet, "La campagne de stérilisation au Pérou provoque de nombreuses critiques. L'existence de pressions exercées sur les femmes a été dénoncée par un journal et plusieurs organisations et reconnue par le vice-ministre de la santé", *Le Monde*, Friday, 2 January 1998, p. 3.
12. As the American expert Richard Clinton said: "Dispensaries have monthly quotas to respect". This explains why, near the end of each month, the employees of the Public Health Department, for fear of losing their jobs, were so eager to "encourage" Quechua women to go "to the dispensary" for "the vaccination for their baby and for a small, painless and free operation for themselves". N. Bonnet, *La campagne de stérilisation*....
13. The newspaper *El Comercio*, in order to clarify the debate, has carried out a large inquiry on these sterilizations in the poorest parts of the country, and has brought back testimonies which confirm that, in exchange for food and care for their younger children, some women have submitted to tubal ligation. The newspaper explains that the State takes charge of the surgery but refuses to accept responsibility for complications or deaths when the operation turns out badly. N. Bonnet, *La campagne de stérilisation au Pérou*....
14. Joaquin Diez Esteban, "La campaña de control de la natalidad se cobra cinco víctimas", *Palabra*, 1 February 1998, p. 22.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Pope John Paul II, *Encyclical Centesimus Annus*, 1991, n. 39.