

Life Insight

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Statement for Respect Life Sunday October 3, 2004

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On Respect Life Sunday, the Catholic bishops of the United States again invited Americans to begin reflection in a special way on the sacredness of human life. As part of that reflection, each of us would do well to examine how faithful we are – as individuals, communities and as a culture – in carrying out our duty to reverence life and oppose the many threats to human life and dignity.

The theme for this year's program is *every human being is made in God's image*. This truth touches the core of what it means to be human.

When God created the first human beings, he created them "in relation to one another" because a human being "is not an isolated individual but a person – an essentially relational being" (*Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, International Theological Commission, September 2004, no. 10).

The human person's relationship to God is the inherent and universal basis of human dignity and inalienable human rights.

As human beings, we have been given the orientation toward and the freedom to pursue solidarity and communion with others. Love, as Pope John Paul II has written, is the only appropriate response to another human being, while self-centeredness causes us to use others as if they were merely a means to our ends or obstacles blocking our path to happiness.

Only through the redemptive act of Christ and the constant outpouring of grace from the Holy Spirit upon all men and women of good will, are human beings able to be "conformed to the image of Christ, the perfect image of the Father" (no. 25). By always seeking the good of others in the context of all our human relationships, we become more fully human. Each time we act for the good of another, we are transformed, little by little, into the image of Christ.

Sadly, one need only look at headlines of recent weeks to see how far we are falling short of respecting the image of God in every person. For example:

- Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese, driven from their villages in a genocidal purge, risk starvation in refugee camps near Darfur.
- Hundreds of Russian schoolchildren and parents were gunned down by terrorists, and suicide bombings have occurred almost daily in the Middle East.
- In the Netherlands, a major hospital is allowing doctors to euthanize children under 12 if they have an incurable illness or face what the doctors adjudge intolerable suffering. Belgium which, like Oregon, legalized doctor-assisted suicide for terminally-ill patients only, nevertheless permitted the illegal killing of a patient with multiple sclerosis who was not dying. Now Belgium contemplates legalizing pediatric euthanasia, as is widely practiced on disabled newborns in the Netherlands.
- Despite warnings from demographers that falling fertility rates worldwide are creating a dangerous demographic imbalance, the United Nations Population Fund strongly reaffirmed its agenda of worldwide legal abortion and contraception, and China continues policies of coercive abortion and sterilization to meet its population targets.
- Partial-birth abortion continues, as courts block state and federal efforts to ban the procedure, despite overwhelming public support for such a ban.
- Embryonic stem cell research which entails killing live human embryos in order to harvest their stem cells is being conducted, and proponents are lobbying hard for increased taxpayer funding for such research. Yet stem cells from umbilical cord blood and adult tissues, organs, and even fat, are already treating and curing human beings.
- The cloning of humans is being vigorously pursued in South Korea, China, Massachusetts and elsewhere.
- Over 4,000 children die from abortion each day in the United States and an estimated 46 million die annually worldwide. ...

Reasons for hope

Despite this bleak summary, signs of hope abound.

A significant majority of Americans would greatly restrict abortion to the statistically-infrequent cases of life-endangerment and rape, if not ban it outright. Most oppose doctor-assisted suicide and euthanasia. In overwhelming numbers Americans oppose human cloning and the creation and destruction of human embryos in research, in favor of research using stem cells from adults, cord blood and other licit sources.

In ever greater numbers young people are embracing their faith with a zeal and devotion that augurs well for the future of Christianity. Every year, more young people embrace God's design for human sexuality, choosing to be chaste and encouraging others to abstain from sexual activity until marriage. The number of abortions among the young continues to decline, and opinion polls show that young people are more "conservative" on issues of morality than their parents' generation. And they are enthusiastic and active in their desire to promote a more just society where the human rights of all, including the unborn, are respected.

If there is to be, as Our Holy Father has predicted, a new springtime for Christianity in this millennium (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, no. 18), it will come about because young people understand what it means to be truly human – creatures made in the image of God, to love and be loved by God and one another. And it will come about if each of us takes seriously our responsibility to contribute to building a culture of life in which the dignity and life of every human being is respected.

We can begin with self-giving love in our families, in our places of work or study, and in our communities.

Prayer is foundational to our effort to build a culture of life, both to ensure that what we undertake conforms to God's will and to beg that he will crown our efforts to defend life with success.

For those able to contribute time or treasure to programs that care for women in crisis pregnancy, for those suffering after abortion, and for the frail elderly and others at the margins of society, what you do for them, you do for Our Lord.

We have the right and obligation to see that our government respects the human rights of all, especially the most vulnerable. Through direct contact with our elected representatives and by voting, we can cooperate in defending life to the fullest extent possible under our system of government, or we can acquiesce in officially-sanctioned evil.

The Catholic bishops of the United States remind us: *Catholics need to act in support of these principles and policies [concerning the sanctity and dignity of human life] in public life. It is the particular vocation of the laity to transform the world. We have to encourage this vocation and do more to bring all believers to this mission. As bishops, we do not endorse or oppose candidates. Rather we seek to form the consciences of*

our people so that they can examine the positions of candidates and make choices based on Catholic moral and social teaching. (Catholics in Political Life)

Through the annual Respect Life program, as well as other endeavors, we recommit ourselves to defending human life by every legal means, and we pray fervently that our efforts may in our lifetime usher in "a civilization of love and life" (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 100) to the glory of God in whose image we are created.



Where Have All the Children Gone?

Last month the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) hosted the "Countdown 2015 Global Roundtable" in London. Its goal was to assess progress in curbing world population growth through universal access to "reproductive health care" since the 1994 U.N. Conference on Population and Development in Cairo.

Although the Cairo Conference explicitly rejected abortion as a "method of family planning," groups like IPPF and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have never retreated from their aggressive advocacy of a universal "right" to abortion on demand. And the Conference's final "Programme of Action" was bad enough: promoting universal access to artificial birth control, and condoning what has been interpreted as a "right" to sexual activity for children aged 10 and above. By 2005, wealthy countries were supposed to pony up \$6.2 billion annually to achieve these and other Conference goals. They are only halfway toward that goal.

According to some published reports, the London meeting turned into a major gripefest about current U.S. Administration policies: 1) against worldwide abortion on demand; 2) favoring abstinence before, and monogamy in, marriage over condom use to combat AIDS; and 3) refusal to fund UNFPA as long as the organization continues to support China's coercive population program.

Tim Wirth, who led the U.S. delegation in Cairo that pushed without let-up to expand abortion "rights" and now heads the pro-abortion U.N. Foundation, complained that "the current administration has placed ideology above evidence and bias above science" (editorial "Cairo countdown/Hoping for health by 2015," [Minneapolis] *Star Tribune*, 9/27/04).

If any side has been blinded by ideological bias, it is surely the folks at Countdown 2015. It's not a secret that fertility rates worldwide have plummeted in the past 30 years. The U.N. Population Division, numerous respected demographers, economists and social scientists have described this phenomenon in official publications, books, scholarly articles, and the popular press. Today the only sources which still warn of an impending

population explosion are outdated American textbooks and diatribes from population control extremists and abortion ideologues.

Consider the demographic *evidence*:

- Global fertility rates are 50% lower than in 1972 – 2.9 children per woman, down from 6 children per woman. They continue to fall at an increasing pace. For population to remain stable, the fertility rate must be 2.1 in nations with relatively low infant mortality and proportionately higher than 2.1 where greater numbers of children die in childhood from communicable diseases or malnutrition.

- Philip Longman, author of the new book *The Empty Cradle*, writes in *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2004): “All told, some 59 countries, comprising roughly 44 percent of the world’s total population, are currently not producing enough children to avoid population decline, and the phenomenon continues to spread. By 2045, according to the latest UN projections, the world’s fertility rate as a whole will have fallen below replacement levels.”

- In *Fewer: How the New Demography of Depopulation Will Shape Our Future*, sociologist Ben Wattenberg states: “Never in the last 650 years, since the time of the Black Plague, have birth and fertility rates fallen so far, so fast, so low, for so long, in so many places” (quoted in M. Meyer, “Birth Dearth,” *Newsweek International* on-line, available at <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6040427/site/newsweek>).

- The average fertility rate in Western Europe is a dismal 1.4 children per woman, ranging from 1.8 in Ireland and France to 1.2 in Italy and Spain. Meyer (above) describes what a 1.4 fertility rate means for Germany: “Germany could shed nearly a fifth of its 82.5 million people over the next 40 years – roughly the equivalent of all of east Germany, a loss of population not seen in Europe since the Thirty Years’ War” which ended in 1748. Western Europe is losing approximately 750,000 people a year.

- Economist Robert Wright of Stirling University (Scotland) warns of a “demographic time bomb” because of “a precipitous fall in the fertility rate” in Scotland, now below 1.5 children per woman. The current population of over 5 million is expected to decrease by more than 20% by 2041. A recent survey showed that over 40% of highly-educated Scotswomen aged 45-49 were childless (“The demographic dilemma: where are all the babies,” *The Herald* (U.K.), Sept. 21, 2004, available at www.theherald.co.uk/business/24363.shtml).

- President Vladimir Putin calls Russia’s population loss of 750,000 people a year a “national crisis.” The yearly loss could increase to 3 million or more by 2050. And it is estimated that “Bulgaria will shrink by 38 percent, Romania by 27 percent, Estonia by 25 percent” (Meyer, above).

- Japan’s fertility rate of 1.3 children per woman will soon put the population into absolute decline. According to U.N. estimates, over the next four decades, Japan will lose a quarter of its 127 million people.

- China’s fertility rate has dropped from 5.8 children per woman to 1.3 (Chinese census data). “By 2019 or soon after, China’s population will peak at 1.5 billion, then enter a steep decline. By mid-century, China could well lose 20 to 30 percent of its population every generation” (Meyer, above).

- Despite government incentives to produce more children, the industrialized nations of Asia such as South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are now at sub-replacement fertility levels.

- In Canada’s Institute for Research and Public Policy’s *Policy Options* magazine (Aug. 2004), the Canadian government is urged to “import” more young people to counter declining fertility rates (reported by Steven W. Mosher in Population Research Institute’s “Weekly Briefing,” Aug. 23, 2004).

- “Mexican fertility rates have dropped so dramatically, the country is now aging five times faster than is the United States. It took 50 years for the American median age to rise just five years, from 30 to 35. By contrast, between 2000 and 2050, Mexico’s median age, according to UN projections, will increase by 20 years, leaving half the population over 42” (Philip Longman, “The Global Baby Bust,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004).

- Uruguay, Brazil, Cuba and many Caribbean nations are also experiencing sharp declines in birth and fertility rates (Meyer).

- The U.S. fertility rate dropped to a low of 1.7 children per woman in 1975, but rose to 1.99 where it currently is, largely as a result of the slightly higher birthrates among Latino immigrants. However, the population in the U.S. 65 years and older is expected to double by 2035.

Why are birthrates plummeting?

To start with, 46 million abortions occur annually, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute (http://www.agi-usa.org/pubs/fb_0599.html). More or less “effective” artificial contraception and widespread sterilization have greatly reduced birthrates, especially in those developing countries where coercion is used to reach population targets. UN data report that 62% of women of reproductive age who are married or “in union” are using some form of artificial birth control (Meyer).

But economic and “lifestyle” factors also can affect a family’s decision to have fewer children, for example:

- 1) migration of families from farming areas – where children’s labor benefits the family – to urban centers where there’s no immediate economic incentive for having children

- 2) women's access to paying jobs in urban areas, and the reality that many have to work to help support the family
- 3) the continually rising cost of raising children: over \$200,000 to age 18, excluding college, according to the Department of Agriculture
- 4) high taxation reducing the family's disposable income (R. de Marcellus, "Falling Fertility: The World at the Tipping Point," *Population Research Institute Review*, Sept.-Oct. 2003)
- 5) young people spending more years in higher education to meet the demands of a more highly skilled workforce, which delays the average age of marriage and increases their education debt (de Marcellus)
- 6) the later average age of marriage, resulting in lower fertility among women and a shortened period of child-bearing in marriage (de Marcellus)
- 7) divorce
- 8) sexually-transmitted diseases which can impair fertility are at epidemic levels due to multiple partners
- 9) materialism and consumerism, fueled by advertising and television
- 10) radical feminist ideology that measures women's worth solely by the acquisition of money and power, and denigrates their contributions to family life.

Conclusion

As demographers examine declining birthrates worldwide, economists are beginning to raise the alarm about what this portends for the future economic health of nations when there will be far fewer workers contributing to the programs which support a growing population of the elderly.

Obviously, the benefits of raising children transcend economics. Children are a source of joy, love, and hope. They transform and sanctify their parents. Our society and our world need to recover an appreciation for the gift of children whose presence is needed now more than ever.

Looking at hundreds of photos taken during a friend's six-month stay in Denmark, I was struck by the absence of children in the parks and streets. "Where have all the children gone?" I asked. Whole schools and villages in Japan, northern Italy, eastern Europe are bereft of children. No giggles, no pranks, no sense of wonder at the natural world. May the Good Lord and good sense spare us such a fate!

2004-2005 Respect Life Program Materials

If you've not yet ordered this year's Respect Life Program packet, we invite you to do so while our limited supplies last.

This year's theme – *Made in His Image* – is wonderfully illustrated by designer Lisa Toscani. See <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/rlp0405.htm>.

The Respect Life flyer takes a fresh look at what it means to be made in God's image and examines the implications of this mystery for three groups of people: families, medical personnel, and public officeholders and those who elect them.

The articles cover advances in fetal surgery, human dignity of those in a persistent "vegetative" state, risks in reproductive technologies, God's view of human sexuality, youth suicidal behavior, and how to more effectively convey the pro-life message. To order, call toll-free: 866/ 582-0943.

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