



The Holy See

LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

TO THE SECRETARY GENERAL

OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT* To Mrs Nafis Sadik

Secretary General of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development

*and Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund*¹. I greet you, Madam Secretary General, at a time when you are closely involved in preparing the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, to be held in Cairo in September. Your visit provides an occasion for me to share with you some thoughts on a topic which, we all agree, is of vital importance for the *well-being and progress of the human family*. The theme of the Cairo Conference takes on a heightened significance in the light of the fact that the gap between the rich and the poor of the world continues to widen, a situation which poses an ever increasing threat to the peace for which mankind longs. The global population situation is very complex; there are variations not simply from continent to continent but even from one region to another. United Nations studies tell us that a rapid decrease in the global rate of population growth is expected to begin during the 1990s and carry on into the new century. At the same time, growth rates remain high in some of the least developed nations of the world, while population growth has declined appreciably in the industrialized developed nations.² The Holy See has carefully followed these matters, with a special concern to make accurate and objective assessments of population issues and to urge global solidarity in regard to development strategies, especially as they affect the developing nations of the world. In this we have derived benefit from participation in the meetings of the United Nations Population Commission and from the studies of the United Nations Population Division. The Holy See has also participated in all the regional preparatory meetings of the Cairo Conference, gaining a better understanding of regional differences and contributing to the discussion on each occasion. In accordance with its specific competence and mission, the Holy See is concerned that proper attention should be given to *the ethical principles* determining actions taken in response to the demographic, sociological and public policy analyses of the data on population trends. Therefore, the Holy See seeks to focus attention on certain *basic truths*: that each and every person - regardless of age, sex, religion or national background - has a dignity and worth that is unconditional and inalienable; that human life itself from conception to natural death is sacred; that human rights are innate and transcend any constitutional order; and that the fundamental unity of the human race demands that everyone be committed to building a community which is free from injustice and which strives to promote and protect the common good. These truths about the human person are the measure of any response to the findings which emerge from the consideration of demographic data. It is in the light of authentic human values - recognized by peoples of diverse cultures, religious and national backgrounds across the globe - that all policy choices must be evaluated. No goal or policy will bring positive results for people if it does not respect the unique dignity and objective needs of those same people.³ There is widespread agreement that a population policy is only one part of

an overall development strategy. Accordingly, it is important that any discussion of population policies should keep in mind the actual and projected development of nations and regions. At the same time, it is impossible to leave out of account the very nature of what is meant by the term "development". All development worthy of the name must be integral, that is, it must be directed to the true good of every person and of the whole person. True development cannot consist in the simple accumulation of wealth and in the greater availability of goods and services, but must be pursued with due consideration for the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of the human being. Development programmes must be built on justice and equality, enabling people to live in dignity, harmony and peace. They must respect the cultural heritage of peoples and nations, and those social qualities and virtues that reflect the God-given dignity of each and every person and the divine plan which calls all persons to unity. Importantly, men and women must be active agents of their own development, for to treat them as mere objects in some scheme or plan would be to stifle that capacity for freedom and responsibility which is fundamental to the good of the human person.⁴ Development has been and remains the proper context for the international community's consideration of population issues. Within such discussions there naturally arise questions relating to the transmission and nurturing of human life. But to formulate population issues in terms of individual "sexual and reproductive rights", or even in terms of "women's rights", is to change the focus which should be the proper concern of governments and international agencies. I say this without in any way wishing to reduce the importance of securing justice and equity for women. Moreover, questions involving the transmission of life and its subsequent nurturing cannot be adequately dealt with except in relation to *the good of the family*: that communion of persons established by the marriage of husband and wife, which is - as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* affirms - "the natural and fundamental group unit of society" (art. 16.3). The family is an institution founded upon the very nature of the human person, and it is the proper setting for the conception, birth and upbringing of children. At this moment in history, when so many powerful forces are arrayed against the family, it is more important than ever that the Conference on Population and Development should respond to the challenge implicit in the United Nations' designation of 1994 as the "International Year of the Family" by doing everything within its power to ensure that the family receives from "society and the State" that protection to which the same *Universal Declaration* says it is "entitled" (ibid.). Anything less would be a betrayal of the noblest ideals of the United Nations.⁵ Today, the duty to safeguard the family demands that particular attention be given to securing for husband and wife the liberty to decide responsibly, free from all social or legal coercion, the number of children they will have and the spacing of their births. It should not be the intent of governments or other agencies to decide for couples but, rather, to create the social conditions which will enable them to make appropriate decisions in the light of their responsibilities to God, to themselves, to the society of which they are a part, and to the objective moral order. What the Church calls "*responsible parenthood*" is not a question of unlimited procreation or lack of awareness of what is involved in rearing children, but rather the empowerment of couples to use their inviolable liberty wisely and responsibly, taking into account social and demographic realities as well as their own situation and legitimate desires, in the light of objective moral criteria. All propaganda and misinformation directed at persuading couples that they must limit their family to one or two children should be steadfastly avoided, and couples that generously choose to have large families are to be supported. In defence of the human person, the Church stands opposed to the imposition of limits on family size, and to the promotion of methods of limiting births which separate the unitive and procreative dimensions of marital intercourse, which are contrary to the moral law inscribed on the human heart, or which constitute an assault on the sacredness of life. Thus, sterilization, which is more and more promoted as a method of family planning, because of its finality and its potential for the violation of human rights, especially of women, is clearly unacceptable; it poses a most grave threat to human dignity and liberty when promoted as part of a population policy. Abortion, which destroys existing human life, is a heinous evil, and it is never an acceptable method of family

planning, as was recognized by consensus at the Mexico City United Nations International Conference on Population (1984).⁶ To summarize, I wish to emphasize once again what I have written in the Encyclical *Centesimus annus*: "It is necessary to go back to seeing the family as the sanctuary of life. The family is indeed sacred: it is the place in which life - the gift of God - can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth. In the face of the so-called culture of death, the family is the heart of the culture of life. Human ingenuity seems to be directed more towards limiting, suppressing or destroying the sources of life - including recourse to abortion, which unfortunately is so widespread in the world - than towards defending and opening up the possibility of life" (n. 39).⁷ As well as reaffirming the fundamental role of the family in society, I wish to draw special attention to *the status of children and women*, who all too often find themselves the most vulnerable members of our communities. Children must not be treated as a burden or inconvenience, but should be cherished as bearers of hope and signs of promise for the future. The care which is essential for their growth and nurture comes primarily from their parents, but society must help by sustaining the family in its needs and in its efforts to maintain the caring environment in which children can develop. Society ought to promote "social policies which have the family as their principal object, policies which assist the family by providing adequate resources and efficient means of support, both for bringing up children and for looking after the elderly, so as to avoid distancing the latter from the family unit and in order to strengthen relations between generations" (*Centesimus annus*, n. 49). A society cannot say that it is treating children justly or protecting their interests if its laws do not safeguard their rights and respect the responsibility of parents for their well-being.⁸ It is a sad reflection on the human condition that still today, at the end of the twentieth century, it is necessary to affirm that *every woman* is equal in dignity to man, and a full member of the human family, within which she has a distinctive place and vocation that is complementary to but in no way less valuable than man's. In much of the world, much still has to be done to meet the educational and health needs of girls and young women so that they may achieve their full potential in society. In the family which a woman establishes with her husband she enjoys the unique role and privilege of motherhood. In a special way it belongs to her to nurture the new life of the child from the moment of conception. The mother in particular enwraps the newborn child in love and security, and creates the environment for its growth and development. Society should not allow woman's maternal role to be demeaned, or count it as of little value in comparison with other possibilities. Greater consideration should be given to *the social role of mothers*, and support should be given to programmes which aim at decreasing maternal mortality, providing prenatal and perinatal care, meeting the nutritional needs of pregnant women and nursing mothers, and helping mothers themselves to provide preventive health care for their infants. In this regard attention should be given to the positive benefits of breast-feeding for nourishment and disease prevention in infants, as well as for maternal bonding and birth-spacing.⁹ The study of population and development inevitably poses the question of *the environmental implications of population growth*. *The ecological issue too is fundamentally a moral one*. While population growth is often blamed for environmental problems, we know that the matter is more complex. Patterns of consumption and waste, especially in developed nations, depletion of natural resources, the absence of restrictions or safeguards in some industrial or production processes, all endanger the natural environment. The Cairo Conference will also want to give due attention to morbidity and mortality, and to the need to eliminate life-threatening diseases of every sort. While advances have been made that have resulted in an increased life span, policies must also provide for the elderly and for the contribution that they make to society in their retirement years. Society should develop policies to meet their needs for social security, health care and active participation in the life of their community. Migration is likewise a major concern in examining demographic data, and the international community needs to ensure that the rights of migrants are recognized and protected. In this regard I draw special attention to the situation of migrant families. The State's task is to ensure that immigrant families do

not lack what it ordinarily guarantees its own citizens, as well as to protect them from any attempt at marginalization, intolerance or racism, and to promote an attitude of convinced and active solidarity in their regard (cf. *Message for World Migration Day*, 1993- 94, n. 1).¹⁰ As the preparations for the *Cairo Conference* proceed, I wish to assure you, Madam Secretary General, that the Holy See is fully aware of the complexity of the issues involved. This very complexity requires that we carefully weigh the consequences for the present and future generations of the strategies and recommendations to be proposed. In this context, the draft final document of the Cairo Conference, which is already being circulated, is a cause of grave concern to me. Many of the principles which I have just mentioned find no place in its pages, or are totally marginalized. Indeed, certain basic ethical principles are contradicted by its proposals. Political or ideological considerations cannot be, by themselves, the basis on which essential decisions for the future of our society are founded. What is at stake here is the very future of humanity. *Fundamental questions* like the transmission of life, the family, and the material and moral development of society, *need very serious consideration*. For example, the international consensus of the 1984 Mexico City International Conference on Population that "in no case should abortion be promoted as a method of family planning" is completely ignored in the draft document. Indeed, there is a tendency to promote an internationally recognized right to access to abortion on demand, without any restriction, *with no regard to the rights of the unborn*, in a manner which goes beyond what even now is unfortunately accepted by the laws of some nations. The vision of sexuality which inspires the document is individualistic. Marriage is ignored, as if it were something of the past. An institution as natural, universal and fundamental as the family cannot be manipulated without causing serious damage to the fabric and stability of society. The seriousness of the challenges that Governments and, above all, parents must face in the education of the younger generation means that we cannot abdicate our responsibility of leading young people to a deeper understanding of their own dignity and potentiality as persons. What future do we propose to adolescents if we leave them, in their immaturity, to follow their instincts without taking into consideration the interpersonal and moral implications of their sexual behaviour? Do we not have an obligation to open their eyes to the damage and suffering to which morally irresponsible sexual behaviour can lead them? Is it not our task to challenge them with a demanding ethic which fully respects their dignity and which leads them to that self-control which is needed in order to face the many demands of life? I am sure, Madam Secretary General, that, in the remaining period of preparation for the Cairo Conference, you and your collaborators, as well as the nations which will take part in the Conference itself, will devote adequate attention to these deeper questions. None of the issues to be discussed is simply an economic or demographic concern, but, at root, each is a matter of profound moral significance, with far-reaching implications. Accordingly, the Holy See's contribution will consist in providing an ethical perspective on the issues to be considered, always with the conviction that mankind's efforts to respect and conform to God's providential plan is the only way to succeed in building a world of genuine equality, unity and peace. May almighty God enlighten all those taking part in the Conference. *From the Vatican, 18 March 1994.* **IOANNES PAULUS PP.**

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*AAS 87 (1995) p. 190-196. *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. XVII, 1 p. 747-755. *L'Osservatore Romano* 19.3.1994 p.7. *L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English* n.12 pp. 1, 2. *Serving the Human Family*, p. 191-197.

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