

*In Western Christian culture today fertility
is seen as a curse
because it invades the selfishness of man*

Catholics and the Flight from Fertility

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The controversy between Fr. Charles Curran and the Vatican congregation headed by Cardinal Ratzinger over matters of sexual ethics has focused attention on the official and reiterated Catholic condemnation of contraception and innately contraceptive acts, such as homosexual acts. However, the narrow focus of the current controversy on Curran's (and, it must be admitted, the American Catholic laity's) approval of contraceptive acts misses the real source of the sickness in Catholic life in the West. Catholic populations are not even reproducing themselves in countries of traditional European culture. If this refusal of fertility were accomplished by natural family planning rather than by abortion and contraception, would the end result be any better? The refusal to bear children is not a trivial matter; it is a result (except in rare cases) of a hard-heartedness and selfishness that are the essence of man's alienation from God, or to put it in plainer language, damnation.

The work of Allan Carlson has made us familiar with the statistics concerning the population decline of the West. At the turn of the century, the traditionally Christian countries of the West accounted for 30% of the population of the world; they now make up 15%; by 2025, they will be 9%. The basic trend is clear in all the countries of European Christian civilization, whether they are capitalist or Communist, Catholic or Protestant. Catholic countries and groups have shared in this dramatic decline of fertility. If one had only the statistics on the birth rate to go by, one would assume that these countries have been wracked by famine, plague, and poverty. However, the opposite is the case. The Catholic populations of the West are among the most prosperous groups of Catholics in the whole history of Christianity, but they have an extremely low birthrate, and it is doubtful that they are even reproducing themselves. Although it is difficult to determine who should be called Catholic, and therefore it is impossible to develop precise statistics, nevertheless it is clear that the number of children in the average Church-going Catholic family has declined dramatically in the past twenty years. This has occurred even as these Catholics have finally made it in America, and achieved the highest incomes of any group of Catholics in American history, and among the highest incomes of any group in the world.

Be fruitful and multiply

Catholics in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe have escaped the economy of subsistence farming that is the common lot of humanity, and have also largely escaped the drudgery of the industrial revolution. They have achieved a prosperity that is the envy of the

whole world. Yet they have few children. Why? More to the point, how can they so restrict their fertility and still consider themselves in any way as obedient to the will of God? The first command of God to man is "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28). While the religion of the Old Testament is not a fertility religion as that phrase is commonly understood, clearly the writers of the Old Testament saw man's fertility as an image of the divine creativeness. That man is made in the image of God means many things, but the first and most obvious meaning in Genesis is that man's resemblance to God consists in man's differentiation into male and female ("in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" Gen. 1:27), and mankind's consequent sexual fertility and ability to reflect the divine fruitfulness. The promise of God to Abraham is that from this man, sterile from old age, God will miraculously raise up "a great nation" (Gen. 12:2), as numerous as "the dust of the earth" (Gen 13:16), as numberless as "the stars" (Gen 15:5). A major portion of the Old Testament recounts the miraculous fertility of the seed of Abraham, which God preserved and multiplied through all the disasters of history. Sterility to the Jews was a curse; fertility a blessing, indeed, the fundamental blessing of the Old Testament, for in it God demonstrates his power against the devouring forces of death, and man participates in the creative, self-giving love of God.

This attitude to fertility continued in the Judaism into which Jesus was born. Elizabeth is saddened by her barrenness, and rejoices when the Lord demonstrates his creative power by making her and Zechariah, like Abraham and Sarah, fruitful in their old age. God does an even greater work than this: he makes virginity itself fruitful. The Spirit which moved over the face of the waters in the beginning to give them life and fruitfulness now does something even greater in Mary. She is not only made fruitful in her virginity; the child she conceives is the Son of God in the fullest sense. Creation, by the power of God, is made so fruitful that it gives birth to God himself. The promise of fertility to Adam and to Abraham has been fulfilled in a way far surpassing, infinitely surpassing, the greatness of the original promises.

Virginity is fruitful

Jesus both is born of human fertility, taking flesh from Mary, and transcends the fertility and mode of generation handed down from Adam. His own fruitfulness is spiritual. He is virginal, yet his offspring, the members of the Christian people, far outnumber the children of Abraham. Indeed, we may hope for, and must pray for, a universal fruitfulness, that all men may be saved. The virginal Church is the fruitful Church. The virginal Mary is the mother of all the redeemed. St. Paul, who wished that all might be like him in the matter of marriage, was the most fruitful of the apostles in his missionary work. Throughout the history of the Church the great movements of conversion and renewal, from the desert fathers to Opus Dei, have been initiated by virgins and celibates.

But the primeval blessing to Adam has not been revoked, and will not cease to the end of the world and the inauguration of the age in which there shall be no more "marrying and giving in marriage." Until that time, the married members of the Church continue to receive the blessing given to Adam, and the responsibilities that go with that blessing. Because the culture of the Church has been largely clerical and celibate, and because the laity generally realized that fertility was a blessing, there has been little need until this century to emphasize the goodness of the fertility of marriage. In pre-modern Europe the laity instinctively knew, and in areas such as

Africa, recently converted from a natural religion that recognized the sacredness of fertility, the laity still know that children are a blessing, the greatest blessing apart from our redemption in Christ.

But in modern European culture, and in the countries around the world that have been influenced by it, fertility is seen as curse, because it invades the selfishness of man, and obliges him to share his time and goods with others. The propaganda of Zero Population Growth finds a ready audience in fallen, selfish man, who is always seeking an excuse not to give of himself, to care only for the self, to remain locked within the self. If children were seen as a blessing, not a curse, contraception would be seen as desirable in only rare circumstances, instead of being almost universally approved and practiced.

The decline of Catholics of European descent in the United States has been offset by Mexican (and therefore Indian) migration. Very shortly the Church in the United States will become mostly Native American because of the failure of European Catholics to reproduce themselves or win converts. While the imperfect evangelization of Hispanics is often discussed, they are probably no more imperfectly evangelized than European Catholics, in view of the latter group's profoundly unchristian attitude to children. However, the faith of the Hispanics may not be firmly formed enough to withstand the anti-child attitudes of the predominant culture in America, and like the once fertile French Canadians, the Hispanics may become even more sterile than secularized Protestants.

In Europe the situation is worse. The native Christian birth rate is lower than in the United States, and there is no reservoir of pre-modern Catholics nearby. Europe has therefore had a substantial immigration from Islamic countries. Islam is reviving, and shows a militant hostility to Christianity. Catholics in Western Europe may find themselves in the same position as that of Catholics in Lebanon, and for the same reason. The equilibrium of the Lebanese state was destroyed because Lebanese Catholics, influenced by France and the West, had a low birth rate and the Moslems had a high one. Beirut was called the Paris of the Middle East; Paris may become the Beirut of Europe.



Fertility is a curse

The view that fertility is a curse also underlies the increasing acceptance of activities and ways of life that a generation ago were regarded as perversions. Freud defined sexual perversion as intercourse that could not result in conception. But if conception is something to be avoided, sterile sexual activity can be seen as acceptable. The amazingly swift acceptance of homosexuality among Catholics, especially among moral theologians such as Curran in the United States, is a result of a reversal of the normal human attitude to fertility.

Such a profound distortion in the attitude to natural fertility also affects Catholics' attitude to supernatural fertility. In the New Testament, consecrated virginity and celibacy are seen as the conditions for fruitfulness more profound and more extensive than that of natural fertility. Priests are rightly called "father" because of their share in this fruitfulness. But as a respect for natural fertility has declined, so has the understanding of spiritual fruitfulness. Catholics do not seek converts, and many clerics seem to regard celibacy a sterile exercise in self-denial. If sexual activity is seen as normally sterile, then virginity and celibacy cannot be experienced in the Church as a transcending of a natural good for an even higher and more extensive supernatural good: spiritual fruitfulness.

Even if the clergy remain celibate, it is often for the wrong reasons. There is clearly a push on in the United States to ordain homosexuals to the priesthood, with the understanding that they will be celibate. Such a situation would be very damaging to the morale of celibate heterosexuals, who may find themselves in sexually-charged situations when they were expecting normal human friendships. Even if a homosexual remains chaste, his celibacy in the clerical state is a misleading and distorted sign. A normal heterosexual male in choosing celibacy for the sake of the kingdom sets apart and consecrates his natural fertility to God so that God can achieve an even greater spiritual fruitfulness through him. The homosexual, however, even if he remains chaste in the celibate life of the priesthood or religious state, is setting apart and consecrating to God a damaged, innately sterile sexuality. Even if he is sincere in his chastity, nonetheless his life is not the true sign of the nature of the kingdom that the celibate heterosexual's is. If the Levitical priesthood demanded perfection of its members (Lev 21:18-21) because only the best was to be set apart for the service of the Lord, much more so should integrity be a characteristic of those set apart for the ministry of the worship of "the sanctuary ... set up not by man but by the Lord" (Heb. 8:10).

Since the corruption of the attitude of European and Western Catholics toward fertility has gone so far, to the point where even their moral theologians reject the Biblical teachings on the subject as obsolete and outmoded, their situation may not be salvageable. It is hard to see what might help the West regain the sense of fertility as a blessing. Even theologically conservative evangelical Protestants have accepted the view of children of the secular West. Only a few fringe groups such as the Amish, and the heterodox offspring of Christianity such as Mormonism and the historic heresy of Islam still accept the Biblical view of fertility as a blessing.

Perhaps the Catholic Churches of Europe and the West are doomed to follow the ancient churches of North Africa and Asia Minor into oblivion. African Catholics, still untouched by Western attitudes, regard fertility as a blessing. As a result, the Church is increasing rapidly both because of large families and conversions. Seminaries are full and religious life flourishes, even in countries that are still mastering self-government. Perhaps Providence is laying the foundations of a new Christian civilization in Africa, as Providence once converted the barbarian tribes of Europe. These historic Christian peoples that arose after the fall of the Roman Empire and spread throughout the globe may be reaching the end of their history. In rejecting children they have rejected their own future. For Christian peoples to meet their end in such a way must delight the ancient enemy of the human race. "Mankind's warfare against death," as the Greek Fathers liked to characterize sexual intercourse, will have surrendered to the enemy.

If there is any hope for the dying civilization of Christian Europe, it must come primarily from the witness of the laity. Only if Catholics demonstrate by their family life that they regard children as a great blessing is there any possibility of change for the Churches of the West. If Catholics restrict their families to guarantee an enjoyment of middle class luxuries or to follow anti-Christian theories which see human life as parasitic and destructive of the environment, they may choose natural or unnatural means, but the end result is the same: a rejection of fertility, children, and the future.

If Catholic families rejoice in their children, their witness may speak to the dying semi-Christian societies around them in a way that celibacy cannot. In a Catholic family that accepts the gifts of both nature and grace, the mysteries of generation and regeneration, of Adam and Christ, of the life of this world and the life of the world to come, are united and harmonized. The beauty of self-giving love, which gave itself in creation and on the cross, can shine through such families, and touch the hearts of a world, including many fellow Christians, sickened by a selfishness of which men are no longer even aware. Such families can serve as occasions of grace to those open to repentance; and as occasions of judgment to those who at the sight of the works of grace harden their hearts still further, hating the sight of a fertile love which condemns by its very existence their own refusal to give.

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