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Family Planning and the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines: Cohesion and Conflict

Religious institutions play a significant role in the context of culture as they affect social and political organizations, as well as individual behavior. Particularly, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is an extremely powerful body, both domestically and internationally. With regard to family planning, the RCC has been an effective player in debates, providing the determinant voice in policy, and thus affecting the lives and the well being of millions. "Among the many institutions that seek to influence population policies, the RCC is arguably the most controversial and least understood." Through its efforts to halt condom distribution, AIDS education programs or eliminate specific reference to family planning methods in UN documents, the RCC merits scrutiny.

Views of the Roman Catholic Church on Population

Historically, the RCC has held a number of varying views on population, undermined by different beliefs. In the Church's early history, Saint Thomas Aquinas believed that it was not possible for a country to allow unlimited growth as he approved of laws limiting population size. Conversely, years later, the 1930's proposal on marriage, *Casti Connubii*, pronounced to couples that they "have a duty to raise up members of God's household that the worshipers of God and Our Savior may daily increase." Kissling notes that this pronatalistic stance has continued into the 1990's as evidenced when Pope John Paul encouraged Brazilian couples to have more children to help solve the shortage of priests in the world. In the Philippines, Bishops in the Catholic Church deny supporting married couples to have large families, "but basically they argue the more children the better. In practice they can't even agree that (family planning) would be good for the country to reduce its population growth." In sum, the RCC's position on population has an inconsistent history.

Early on, sexual intercourse was viewed as a distraction from spiritual life and was only tolerated within marital unions for those couples who desired to procreate. No tolerance was given to couples who sought intercourse for pleasure. In the 1800's, the discussion continued as to whether or not it was possible for a couple to ever have sex without committing a sin. During this time, experiencing sexual pleasure, even sex directed towards procreation, was deemed sinful. As a continual target, women were viewed as the source of sexual pleasure and, ultimately, sin. Specifically, women were "defective and misbegotten, subordinate in the very nature of things, physically defective" and useful for only means of procreation. It has only been in the 1930's that the RCC acknowledged that sex has a purpose beyond procreation by enhancing the marital relationship.

As couples sexual motives have been questioned, the RCC has made significant gains to deface the significance of artificial means of contraception. At the center of this debate, the RCC views artificial means of contraception as unnatural and immoral, disrupting God's plan for the planet. Launching smear campaigns, the RCC describes their opposition as "anti-child, anti-family, anti-life, and pro-abortion" and accuses artificial contraceptive supporters as "promoting a culture of death." Most notably, the RCC's anti-contraceptive propaganda highlight the side effects of artificial means, yet fail to compare how these are "infinitesimal compared with the risks of pregnancy." Additionally, with efforts to describe modern methods as abortifacients, with the connotation that they cause a fertile embryo to abort, the RCC has used scare tactics to dissuade its members from taking steps to control their fertility. Yet "despite the evidence that the most widely available contraceptives are not abortifacients, debate over this issue obscures a far more central issue - the right of each woman to plan her family size and the interval between births." As a result, the RCC's resistance against artificial family planning methods opposes the success that a program may have to provide all available methods to families.

Over the years, Church opposition to contraceptives has solidified yet the RCC, to a certain degree, acknowledges the problems associated with a rapid population growth. The Vatican, in response, declared that the Church "does not propose procreation at any cost" yet has, at the same time, resisted remedies that "are contrary to the objective moral order", namely artificial contraception and abortion. In response, the rhythm method of family planning was approved in 1951 by the RCC for only "serious motives", including "medical, eugenic, economic and social reasons." Similarly, couples were told they could even use rhythm throughout their married lives, through not habitually or for less than "grave reasons." In addition to natural family planning, abstinence is also recommended for couples who wish to limit births and comply with the RCC's guiding principles on regulating births. The Pope states: If, then, there are serious motives deriving from the physical or psychological condition of the husband or wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that it is then permissible to take into account the natural rhythms immanent in the generative functions and to make use of marriage during infertile times only, and in this way to regulate births without offending the moral principles. Hence, natural family planning, combined with complete abstinence in fertile periods, is preached as the only morally acceptable ways of practicing responsible parenthood.

In the Encyclical Letter of His Holiness, *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI stresses that the marital relationship is the one institution where decisions about responsible parenthood are to be made. By definition, responsible parenthood is based on conjugal love, in which "children are the most precious gift of marriage and contribute immensely to the good of the parents themselves." For that reason, "responsible parenthood is exercised either by the thoughtfully made and generous decision to raise a large family, or by the decision, made for grave motives and with respect for the moral law, to avoid a new birth for the time being, or even an indeterminate period." In the eyes of the RCC, the need for responsible parenthood should be a standard for Catholic families, yet what this standard hopes to achieve is not yet fully understood.

In several public statements, the Pope has sympathetically demonstrated concern for population issues and has recommend to clergy to "preach more vigorously the duty of couples not to bring into the world more children than they, or the society, at a particular moment in history, can support. The guiding principles of the RCC, although not stated specifically, allow for the support for large families and the couples' interpretation if they wish to limit or space births. In taking a general stance on recommending how many children a Catholic family should have, the Church believes the decision on the number of children lies solely with the parents. The RCC further believes that pressure to limit or increase the number of children must be the couples' own decision. Pressure from others, specifically government officials and international donors, on acceptable family size is believe to be outright coercion since "authorities are greatly tempted to counter this danger with radical measures." Therefore, couples are "to make their decision responsibly, that is, with a sense of their responsibility to each other, to their children already born, to their children still to be born, to society and to God."

In contrast to the RCC's indeterminate stance on limiting and spacing, the Church stands violently firm against "unlawful means of birth regulation", namely abortion. The RCC abhors abortion and their opposition to this procedure stems from religious doctrine that considers the fetus to be a person from the moment of conception. On the move to create abortion illegal in all countries, the RCC contends that this position is not particular to Catholics, but a moral insight that should form the basis of ethical policy for all religious groups. Ironically, many Catholic religious leaders question this view. Debate has focused as to exactly when a fetus becomes a person, and leaders are not in agreement as to when this occurs along the momentum of pregnancy. In the United States, the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights formed as a united front to challenge leaders to support the personal decision to have an abortion. Specifically, Catholics for Free Choice declared that, "we affirm the religious liberty of Catholic women and men and those of other religions to make decisions regarding their won fertility free from Church or governmental intervention in accordance with their own individual conscience." Such free choice in decision-making is a direct threat to the RCC's counteracting abortion. In retaliation, the RCC utilizes its powerful position to prevent access, information and services to women considering an abortion.

Do Catholics benefit from the RCC's teaching on fertility regulation? In the lay community, strong supporters of natural family planning and abstinence may uphold the RCC's principles, but for many Catholics, this is not the case. Survey results demonstrate that Catholics accepted artificial means of birth control about as well as adherents of other religious groups, even in countries where access to birth control may be less than ideal. Seeking services, contraceptors use family planning methods that are off course for the RCC.

Despite the fact that overpopulation has had a negative effect on improvements on standards of living in developing countries, many researchers believe that the Vatican has manipulated the political process in the United States and internationally. Specifically, the RCC "obstruct(s) reproductive rights by suppressing contraceptive technology and substantive public dialogue. Through its political actions, the RCC has effectively denied access to family planning to hundreds

of millions in the developed and developing world. In general terms, the RCC ignores the struggles of the impoverished in developing countries and complaints from married Catholics. As a result, it is believed that "the policies of the Roman Catholic Church cause the most suffering where people are the poorest."

Experiences in the Philippines

Particularly within developing countries, the RCC has been cited as ignoring the struggles of the impoverished and lower class. Like many other Catholic countries, in the Philippines, the RCC is very active in the population policy debate. Admst the 7,100 plus islands comprising the archipelago, a sizable majority, 84%, of all Filipinos are Roman Catholic. As the only Christian Southeast Asian country, the Philippines has one of the regions highest rates of population growth. In 1992, the population in the Philippines stood at 66 million and is expected to reach 75 million by 2000, a tenfold growth from the beginning of the century. If this rate continues, by the year 2100, there will be three quarters of a billion Filipinos, a rate expected to exceed the population destinies of India, Sri Lanka and West Germany. In response, the RCC in the Philippines has taken a range of responses to population issues, from active involvement to overt aggression against the nation's population board.

In the mid-1950's, researchers in the Philippines believed that the country, then under 20 million, could easily support a population of 2.5 times its size. During this time, country leaders, in agreement with Church officials, saw no need for population control since overpopulation did not exist in the Philippines. Yet later that same decade, Jesuit demographers recognized that although the Philippines may not have an immediate population problem, the rate of growth was such that severe problems would arise in the near future.

Ten years later, the problem of overpopulation came into focus and political and church leaders began to challenge their previous conception of the problem. Reacting, in 1969 former President Marcos institutionalized a national family planning program by creating a Population Commission (POPCOM) to study the issue and advise on a national policy. The focus of the commission was to decelerate the nations high fertility rates, yet consensus on how this was to be accomplished was considered problematic and, at best, unclear. What was reported about the new government plan was that the official family planning program emphasized reduction of population growth and established a quota system and incentives for the number of new acceptors. "Women, as a result, became victims (of a program that was to assist them)" and "efforts were criticized for treating women as program targets and not as individuals capable of making choices." Family planning users complained of having IUD's inserted without prior knowledge and inadequate information and follow-up on oral contraceptive use. Among other problems, the use of quotas and incentives were to be one of the programs first misgivings that would be used against the program in later years.

Calling for international assistance, Marcos solicited the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to assist his government in initiating population control measures. In its decades of support, USAID "has been critical in obtaining family planning program action in the

Philippines" and has provided the major portion of financial support for family planning programs in the country. Yet for USAID to conduct its work in its earliest years, the mission was required to mask some of its family planning assistance through larger programs on maternal and child health. This would be a second concession of the family planning program's commencement.

Church support was viewed as favorable at the start of the program and the RCC in the Philippines began to seriously react to the country's population growth rate. By identifying population growth as a crisis and calling on the Church in Manila to take action, Frank Lynch, a Jesuit priest, called on other priests to take responsibility to further discuss population concerns with the body of the Church. Specifically, he wrote that: It is my hope, shared (I dare say) by the majority of well-educated Catholics in the Philippines that the Church may soon speak more directly to their members, telling them in clear and certain terms...that the folk or folk-Catholic belief that one should place no control on family size or child spacing is opposed to the Church's official position on the responsibility parents have toward children.... Catholic bishops and priests...have to speak openly and often against the false morality of those who extol large families and abandonment to Divine Providence as a prima facie evidence of supreme virtue. As a result, the RCC and the government began to take steps together to address the issue of population growth in the Philippines.

At the time Lynch delivered his message, other Catholic sociologists brought an increased awareness of population problems. RCC officials started to become involved in the government birth control plan, making no objections and even sat on the POPCOM board. When POPCOM was first established, the RCC insisted that the rhythm be included in the methods offered, but did not insist on the exclusion of other forms of contraception. "Rather than either acceptance or condemnation of contraception, there was a tacit agreement by the Catholic hierarchy not to raise the issue." Such joint forces sustained for many years, but would later have a bitter parting.

As the 1980's approached, POPCOM began to lose support and was repeatedly challenged by researchers who felt that an increase in population was needed for economic development. Withdrawing from POPCOM, the RCC began to challenge the government program with the sense that "it is not the number of people but the unequal distribution of income which causes poverty." Skeptics of the RCC agree that, "the big debate in the Philippines regarding population and development, however, is not over the redistribution of resources, but about the morality of managing population growth through the use of artificial means of contraception." Further harming the potential growth of a strong population control policy at that time, the RCC began to publicly damage the advances previously made in support of a government family planning program.

The government began to be attacked for having a population control orientation and, likewise, services suffered in their efforts to provide family planning assistance in the hopes of reducing the rapid population rate. In response to POPCOM's weakened efforts, Catholic bishops declared the government program unjust because it: (First) wastes huge funds without alleviating poverty;

(second) is based on the false assumption that population hinders economic growth; (third) supports the world-wide drive toward zero population growth in the face of global fertility decline; (fourth) is dictated by the World Bank and other foreign funding agencies; (fifth) imposed fertility targets which violate freedom of choice and of conscience of spouses and government workers; (sixth) develops an escalating pattern of contraception, then sterilization and then abortion; (seventh) targets for indoctrination not only the married but also the unmarried and even the adolescents; (eighth) is deceptive because the true cause of poverty is not population growth but unjust international economic structures of dependence and exploitation. Such language set government and church leaders on opposite ends of the spectrum and divided program supporters.

Since this time, the RCC has withdrawn its membership from POPCOM and tried to eliminate the government population program all together. Consequently, this would be one of many defeats the family planning program would suffered in the Philippines. Rebuking government policies on family planning, the RCC hierarchy in the Philippines, together with some lay organizations "by their political influence (blocked) the implementation of an effective government-sponsored family planning program" during this time. For almost twenty years following, church and state division fueled. Reconciliations would not be attempted until a new president entered office in February 1986.

Rising from the country's largest national rally to oust corrupt President Marcos, Cory Aquino rose to power by the true vote of the people. Aquino's support for a population control program was bent on favoring Church doctrination, since it was the Church who helped her rise to power. As a result, the government program took more of a pronatalist stance, as per the wishes and full participation of the RCC. Even more, the family planning program would be encompassed within broad objectives that covered child welfare concerns, further diluting the population control emphasis of the program.

By Aquino's request, in 1990, church and state differences were explored in a fashioned dialogue with leaders from both sides. Discussions, described as "serious, substantive and amicable," produced an agreement wherein government program will not be undertaken to reduce-fertility or population growth." Instead, the program "recognizes that in a society made up of men and women of varying religious and moral beliefs, the government may tolerate methods which the Church finds objectionable as long as freedom of conscience is respected and abortion is avoided." Overall, five principles were drafted and settled upon. The program goals produced were: (Number one) to respect the freedom of conscience of individuals and particularly of married couples; (Number two) to limit itself to married couples of reproductive age who, of their own accord, based on their conscience, have decided to manage their fertility guided by their religious beliefs and morals; (Number three) to limit itself to couples who wish to space or limit births; (Number four to provide methods that) are limited to what is legally available in the Philippines; (Number five these) means allowed, which include natural family planning, IUDs, sterilization and oral contraceptive pills so long as they are not determined to be abortifacient.

Hardly was this an agreement by the RCC that they supported the use of contraceptive methods, but more a demand for government officials to seek the conscience of the individual, ahead of the goals of any birth regulation program. To ensure the program respected individual freedoms in choice of method use, both parties agreed to set up a monitoring system for annual dialogue for correcting problems and violations. What remained after this meeting was a delicate relationship based on mistrust and insecurity. Ambiguity on what role family planning would again stage was also noted.

In 1994, much of the amicable, uncertain relationship was again lost due to the interpretation of a significant world conference on reproductive rights. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo produced, for the first time, the concept of reproductive health and reproductive rights. The ICPD's definition of reproductive health implies that "people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how to do so."

The RCC in Manila responded to the Cairo documents by publically burning the conference proposals, citing them as "an agreement with the devil." While the influence of the RCC has been significant in attacking government policy, the Church has done little to influence the behavior of individual Catholics. An Ateneo de Manila University Public Opinion Survey found only 29% of Filipinos interviewed claimed to be aware of the position of the RCC on family planning. Of these, only half were able to state that position with some accuracy. Evidently, the RCC have been more effective in influencing government than its people. Research studies also found that attending church was associated with a higher rate of family planning use. In reality, "Catholics who attended mass regularly were more likely to practice birth control than those who were irregular in their religious conviction." This can be traced directly to the fact that fewer priests are serving the poor in rural areas and those able to attend mass regularly are largely higher educated, urban dwellers. Consequently, social position or class has more influence in determining family planning practice than religious attendance.

As the RCC aggressively discredited and tried to disprove the government program on population planning, former President Fidel Ramos has taken positive steps to address the issue. Until his office started, "presidential support (had) always been lacking for development programs" in the Philippines. More than any of his other predecessors, Ramos has pursued the issue of family planning by quintupling funding for program efforts to \$770,000 and increased the number of workers from 200 to more than 8,000. His goal for the nation's population is to slow the growth of the birth rate, now standing at 2.3%, to 2.0%. In approaching the issue, Field's Health Secretary, Juan Flavio, has made attempts to mend ties with the RCC to lessen the division between the two parties. Regarding the government's stance on contraceptives, Flavio notes that, "the point on which we disagree is on the promotion of artificial means of birth control. The Church wants natural methods. I teach both natural and artificial means - but not including abortion." Flavio sees that family planning plays a significant role in the health of women and their families, especially with the

increase in illegal abortions. Overall, Flavier and the government population program believe that the RCC and their program share similar beliefs regarding abortion and seeking the health of women, yet they do disagree on the use of artificial means of contraceptives.

Though many RCC leaders in the Philippines have been unable to defeat the population program, "they have called its justification into question and hampered its operations." Many leaders in the RCC would ideally like to see the complete withdrawal of government support for population matters. To facilitate this, the RCC continues to actively reject international family planning proposals aimed to reducing fertility. Recently, Cardinal Jamie Sin in Manila lambasted a new type of 'cultural dictatorship'. Sin charged the government with promoting "abortion, homosexuality, lesbianism, sexual perversion, condoms and artificial contraception." Through attacks, the RCC has completely separated itself from the policies of the government and its members.

In the future, the Philippine government and the RCC will likely continue to debate their focus on the nation's population growth. While this continues, population growth will increase and the health and well being of many women and families will be affected. Hunt believes that, "if the Philippine Government remains unable to mount an effective population control policy it will face increasingly serious and social and economic problems." In conclusion, the fate of the Philippine population remains in the hands of its leaders who will decide what measures are taken to ensure growth for the country as a whole.