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## The World Population Question: An Interview with William J. Gibbans, S.J.

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# The World Population Question . . . .

*Controversy over birth control and the population explosion, lately drawn into American politics, prompted your Editors to seek out clarifying expression of the Catholic viewpoint for any need our readers might have in discussing these topics.*

*A most timely symposium was published in the December 21, 1959 issue of United States News & World Report, entitled "The Birth-Control Issue — What Both Sides Say." We reprint the questions and answers asked of Reverend William J. Gibbons, S.J., a sociologist and economist who for years has specialized in population problems. He has contributed numerous articles and reports to Catholic and non-Catholic periodicals on population growth. He has taken part in many U. S. and international conferences dealing with problems of population and economic development. Father Gibbons now lectures in sociology at Fordham University in New York City.*

*The interview that follows was carried in the above magazine along with excerpts from the World Council of Churches report, "Responsible Parenthood and the Population Problem," and the statements of the National Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church and the Lambeth Conference of the Bishops of the Anglican Communion.*

At New York City

**Q. Father Gibbons, is the world facing a problem of overpopulation?**

**A.** Yes, though that word is easily misunderstood. The difficulty arising from present trends is very appreciable, not in terms of absolute overpopulation, but rather in terms of the rates of growth.

**Q. What's the difference?**

**A.** The difference is this: Absolute overpopulation would only be present where you would have no more living space or where you would not have adequate resources, despite any advance in technology. Such a situation is obviously quite a way off. Ac-

cording to estimates of good economists on the capacity of the world at a reasonable level of living, it's anywhere between 10 and 20, or even more, times the present population.

**Q. Is the actual problem the rate of growth?**

**A.** Yes. An excessive rate of growth prevents orderly economic and social development. It presents problems with capital formation, with the creation of job opportunities, with the provision of adequate housing and living space in cities and so on.

It also has very serious impacts on education in the provision of schools, teachers and facilities to educate people to live in the new

complex, technological civilization which is now spreading to the underdeveloped areas.

**Q. Are we in that phase now, do you think?**

**A.** I would say definitely we are, and particularly in the less-developed areas, more especially Asia, Africa and parts of Latin America — a situation where their growth rates are quite high and they do not often have the social and economic base with which to meet increasing pressures. The result is poverty, lack of educational opportunities, discontent and disorganization, and a good bit of concern about living standards and improving their way of life.

**Q. If population continues to grow at the present rate, what will happen to living standards in these areas?**

**A.** I believe that we can look forward to eventual decline in certain of the areas. It is desirable that something reasonable and morally acceptable is done to slow down rates of growth. This is in addition to — by no means a substitute for — intensive economic development. It seems clear that rates of 2½ to 3 per cent or more a year increase in population are excessive for a struggling economy to bear for long. Even dynamic economies require vast amounts of effort and money and personnel to keep expansion going at such a pace. Yet the underdeveloped areas often lack the literacy and technical skills that are the fundamental base of con-

tinuing progress, such as you find in Western Europe and North America. Moreover, in these latter areas, birth rates declined while living standards were improving, and even today remain low as compared with the poorer lands.

Some economists note that rates of economic expansion can be made to exceed population-growth rates, and point to particular examples. But I am not sure they always appreciate the long-term situation, should present trends on births and deaths continue indefinitely into the future.

**Q. Just how does the Catholic demographer—the student of populations—look at the population problem? Does he differ with those of other faiths?**

**A.** So far as the basic demographic and vital statistics and facts are concerned, I think there's no difference whatsoever. Any conscientious Catholic demographer wishes to know the facts, to interpret them adequately and to foresee, to the extent that this is possible, future trends.

With respect to his attitude toward what should be done about excessive fertility, he recognizes there usually is a difference. The Catholic demographer, however, is realistic enough to know that he has to take into account the conscientious convictions of other people, and he doesn't believe that we should impose virtue upon them, as conceived necessarily by himself. He does wish, however, to maintain human dignity, and I believe he shares this with any re-

sponsible demographer anywhere.

Over all, I believe both of them would be very loath to see extension of such practices as abortion or complete sterilization — particularly if there were any element of compulsion about it — around the world in underdeveloped areas.

**Q. What does the Catholic Church feel should be done about the excessive rate of growth in such areas?**

**A.** The Catholic Church, as such, has no doctrinal judgment on the economic-demographic implications of the growth rates in question. I would say definitely, however, that the Church from time immemorial has stood for responsibility in the use of all of God's creation. This includes obviously the material universe, the land, the forests, the mines, the other resources that we have at our disposal and were put there for man's use and enjoyment.

It also includes — and this is sometimes overlooked — very responsible use of the reproductive faculty. If man does not use sex responsibly in marriage and if he enters into marriage without due concern for the future, he is not acting in a rational manner.

**Q. Does that mean you favor "planned parenthood"?**

**A.** I think that most Catholics object to the term "planned parenthood" because it carries particular connotations of methods that various groups have advocated. I think the better term is

"responsible parenthood." I would start by saying it means that we will not rush into marriage prematurely and without insight and foresight as to the meaning of it all, that we will take into account the provision of economic support for children that may be born, that we will think about the overall welfare of these children and of society.

Within marriage itself, it's obvious also that God did not give man sex as a plaything, that it has a purpose and this is related to continuing the race. Man, therefore, must use this with a sense of responsibility so as not to harm himself, his family and the race. Otherwise, he's not being fully human.

**Q. How does that apply to people of other religions in underdeveloped areas?**

**A.** I think that the people in all the underdeveloped areas which are having these high rates of growth will have to acquire a greater sense of responsible parenthood. I also think that the very pressures that they experience and the aspirations for improved levels of living will lead them to arrive at reasonable human solutions according to their conscience.

Human beings are basically sound in their judgment and also are basically oriented toward the right thing, even if they don't always practice it. The law of nature, reflecting divine law, is written in their hearts, as St. Paul notes (Romans II:15). They should know right from wrong.

**Q. What method of regulating the number of offspring does the Church sanction?**

**A.** The Church's teaching on the matter of regulating number of offspring could be reduced to three heads.

The first is what we call delayed marriage, especially beyond the very productive years — in the late teens and early twenties.

The second is continence within marriage for a protracted period, which some people practice — in fact, even in non-Christian areas — in order to space children more effectively.

And the third is periodic continence or use of the sterile period during the woman's monthly cycle. Where there are legitimate reasons present, it is perfectly all right morally to use this latter method. Modern science has progressively made it more effective, and we can hope for further advances in the foreseeable future.

**Q. Are you referring to the so-called "rhythm" method?**

**A.** That is what I am referring to, and I think that adequate knowledge of the way in which it can be practiced should be possessed by people who are seeking responsibility in their use of marriage and their reproductive faculty. And I think this effort should be made, on the part of research scientists and medical people and others, to acquire better means of making this an effective method.

**Q. By accepting the "rhythm" method of regulating family size, has the Church to some extent**

**accepted the principle of birth control?**

**A.** This brings up the question of terminology. Unfortunately, in the Western world the words "birth control" have become associated in the minds of many people with particular methods usually referred to in Catholic circles as "artificial contraception." If we mean "birth control" in this sense, the Church has not come to terms with it, and cannot. If we mean "birth control" in the sense of responsible parenthood and the spacing of children when there are reasons for that, then the Church, I think, has always accepted this in principle and, in modern times, has also come to terms with it in practice.

**Q. Just what is the objection to "artificial birth control"?**

**A.** The Church's objection to artificial birth control is based on the fact that the sexual faculty of man is ordered to reproduction. This does not mean that conception and a pregnancy have to result from intercourse — in the aged or infertile it cannot. But it does mean that one may not place a positive block of any kind — mechanical, chemical or physical — that would make it impossible for nature to follow its course. The Church's objection to this is that the integrity of the individual sex act is thereby violated. Man has attempted to go contrary to the processes of nature — unlike periodic continence, in which man is following nature and is not introducing any block of his own to conception.

There's a further problem. The Church insists that the integrity of the individual's body must be preserved — not merely the institution of marriage. Hence, she disapproves of rendering oneself infertile to avoid conception.

Now, individuals can pursue what are called "secondary ends of marriage" — the fostering of love, the mutual assistance, the allaying of sexual desire. They fortunately can pursue these ends legitimately under periodic continence and still secure the spacing of children. The Church's position is not puritanical or rigorist. It's merely insisting that man use his body and perform the sex act in a way that nature intended.

**Q. Can this method of limiting the number of births be popularized sufficiently to meet the problem of overpopulation in undeveloped areas?**

**A.** I would answer that question in roundabout fashion. The successful practice of periodic continence requires considerable self-restraint and the exercise of the virtue of chastity. Therefore it can be recognized that many people will not be very successful in this particular method unless they are motivated by the principles that I've just outlined.

**Q. Can you get the people in overcrowded areas to follow these principles?**

**A.** I would say there are difficulties for the simple reason that they involve a good bit of technical knowledge, of adequate moti-

vation and of realization of the importance of responsible parenthood within the framework just outlined. Some of these people are illiterate, and difficulties have already been found in instructing such people adequately in the method of periodic continence.

However, I do think this is a further challenge to the medical profession and to research workers in this area to find simple tests for the fertile period which can be clearly identified even by illiterate people.

**Q. Is science learning any more about the "rhythm" method of regulating family size?**

**A.** I know research has been going on for some years. I've also followed the reports that have been made from such research. I'm not particularly happy as yet with the adequacies of the results.

Specifically, we still have controversy and misunderstanding — even within the medical profession — over the actual cycle, and the calendar method suffers therefrom.

Secondly, the tests that have been devised so far in order to indicate time of ovulation have not been sufficiently proven in certain respects, and many people, in any case, are still unaware of them and don't know how to use them.

**Q. If the "rhythm" method is the only method to be used, would it result in a smaller population in Western countries?**

**A.** Actually, in the more advanced areas of the world, the

concept of responsible parenthood has already slowed down the rates of population growth.

In a few European countries, average size of completed family is below the level required for replacement or renewal of population. In most of Europe, growth still goes on, and in some countries at a fairly significant rate. The United States and Canada, however, are growing at the rate of 1.7 per cent a year, which is comparable to rates in some underdeveloped countries.

In our country I don't think that there's any immediate prospect that the concept of responsible parenthood is going to result in a leveling off of population, and certainly not in any absolute decline in the foreseeable future. People still love children. As soon as the depression was over they started marrying early and we had a baby boom. The three-or-four-child family is pretty common in the United States, even among people who have no inhibitions about using artificial contraception.

**Q. Is it your theory that the "rhythm" method alone, if properly promoted, can solve the world's problem of threatened overpopulation?**

A. If people have adequate motivation, if they have adequate instruction and if they have the sufficiently developed virtue of conjugal chastity, they could resolve the problem of excess fertility by this means. I'm also realistic enough to understand that many people may lack one or

other of these qualities and therefore problems can and do arise.

**Q. Do you expect the growth of population to continue?**

A. I definitely expect that the growth of population will continue at a fairly high level, and more especially in the underdeveloped areas.

**Q. Looking ahead, how do you anticipate that the problem is going to work out?**

A. I would say, first of all, that the countries in question have to seek the best possible economic and social development as rapidly as possible and co-operate with more-developed nations and the United Nations in pursuing this objective.

I would say also that they themselves may reasonably look to programs of family education which will make their people aware of the problem. Many couples will need advice, within the moral limits of conscientious conviction.

**Q. Do you agree with estimates that by the year 2000 the world may have 6 billion people at the present rates of growth?**

A. I think it's quite reasonable. In fact, we may exceed 6 billion people if present trends continue, even with declining birth rates, because death rates are also going down with great rapidity. Unless there is some cataclysm, like war or massive famine or pestilence, the death rate will presumably continue fairly low for some years to come.

**Q. Do you think that a world population of 6 billion would be supportable?**

A. I think, objectively, it is quite supportable. The world has many land resources that are still unutilized and many resources of mines and forests.

Of course, it presents great problems, because of the time factor. It took us 120 years to add the second billion people in the world. We are now proceeding to double the 2.9 billion present population in a period of 40 to 45 years, and this requires the most intensive degree of research and development and economic expansion.

As to whether this can be accomplished readily in underdeveloped areas which are already low in their levels of living and production and consumption, I have grave doubts. Unless intensive efforts are made, there may very well be recurrence of famine, if not also of pestilence.

**Q. Then population is one of the major challenges of this age?**

A. I would say that human fertility is the major challenge. Population is a by-product. People in the aggregate present no problem in themselves, provided the growth and expansion are orderly and are not too rapid.

The real problem is the fact that human fertility is geared to rather primitive conditions, when the survival rate was twice as low and when a considerable number of children had to be born in order that the few would grow to

adult years and carry on the race and increase slowly in number.

**Q. Is it possible that the attitude of some Catholics in America toward family regulation is more rigid than the Church really requires?**

A. I believe it is, and I will be specific about that:

In 1951, the late Pius XII, on the occasion of the address to the midwives, and subsequently in his address to the Congress for the Family Front, made very definite statements concerning the problems of parenthood in our day and of child-bearing specifically — concerning the legitimacy of periodic continence, and indicating reasons whereby this is valid morally. He also expressed the hope at that time that science would be able to make this method more secure, and in this he was obviously referring to tests for ovulation. The same principle obviously applies to other morally acceptable methods of particularizing the female cycle.

**Q. Is the problem of poverty in the world related in any way to the level of population and the available resources?**

A. Poverty is not the unique result of either population size or rates of growth. The United States, during much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the consequence of immigration, grew at a rate of 3 to 3½ per cent a year and, meanwhile, expanded the economy and raised the levels of living.

Generally, Western Europe has continued to grow for some centuries — not as fast as the United States, but nevertheless fairly rapidly — and has also raised its levels of living. Modern technology and science make this possible.

The main problem in the underdeveloped areas is the rate of growth in connection with inadequate scientific and capital expansion, and also, perhaps, with inadequate motivation and initiative for economic and social growth.

**Q. Does this mean that we are going to have to support the underdeveloped nations for years to come?**

**A.** I would qualify that word "support." If it means we produce foodstuffs or manufactured goods or raw materials, and then merely distribute them, I think this might very well become increasingly difficult as our own needs increase and our own problems grow. If it means that we assist them to develop their own economies through technical and capital assistance, more trade opportunities and the like, then it is true we are going to have to exercise continuing leadership in helping these countries to raise their levels of production and consumption in the years ahead.

This poses, however, a psychological and political problem—the sensitivities of these people who obviously wish to be independent and self-directing — and also the problem of charges of the "new colonialism," or whatever you wish to call it, that can be leveled against the United States and

other countries of the Western world.

**Q. What do you think would be the results if we encouraged a country to carry out a large-scale campaign of birth control by artificial means?**

**A.** First, limiting the births will not necessarily even level off population, let alone reduce it. It will merely slow up the rates of increase.

Then, on the political level, the United States should not in any aggressive fashion be telling anyone what to do in their sovereign nation. It's up to the people themselves to work out programs in line with their own interests and their own conscientious convictions, and that is the first principle we should bear in mind.

Also, an attempt on the part of the United States or any group therein to impose particular methods against the conscientious convictions of people could be very demoralizing indeed, and might well result in worse social conditions than existed previously, even though the number of children born might be fewer.

**Q. What if a country undertakes such a program on its own?**

**A.** Well, we can take the situation in Japan. There are many Japanese who are anxious about the long-term psychological and health effects of the mass program initiated under the Eugenics Protection Law of 1948, and quite apart from the inherent objectionableness of induced abortion as such.

Their experience indicates that a certain number of unmarried people are resorting to abortions, and that this is demoralizing to youth and an invitation to premarital and extramarital affairs. The extent of this is a matter of

social research and has not adequately been determined.

This is a fact we must bear in mind: the side effects—social side effects—and also the medical side effects, even apart from the moral considerations.

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