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The Pope's Visit: Is Mass Immigration A Moral Imperative?

By David Simcox

Pope John Paul II's visit to the United States in October was a major offensive in the lobbying campaign for high immigration that the U.S. Catholic hierarchy has waged for decades. The U.S. Catholic bishops have stepped up their campaign since 1994 in the face of California voters' support for Proposition 187's curbs on illegal aliens as well as rising public and Congressional support for lower legal immigration.

Top Lobbyist from Rome

The pope's visit capped this campaign, coming during Congress's consideration of bills cutting legal immigration, combating illegal entry and abuse of political asylum, and barring immigrants from welfare. The House of Representatives' proposed reductions (HR 2202) of about 25 percent in legal immigration are modest at best, falling far short of the deep cuts needed to end immigration's accelerating effect on U.S. population growth. The cuts would roll back part of the 40 percent increase in legal immigration rushed through Congress in 1990 by a coalition of immigration advocates in which the American bishops played a central lobbying role. The current bills in both chambers would also provide new tools to stop the annual growth of more than 300,000 thousand in the number of illegal aliens living here.

John Paul II made the presumed moral obligation of Americans to accept more immigration a key theme of his homilies in New York, New Jersey and Baltimore, and in his meeting with President Clinton. He voiced the hope that "America would persevere in its own best traditions" as a "haven for generation after generation of new arrivals."

The pope is not a neophyte in using his visits here to step into the politics of immigration. In Texas in 1987 he publicly endorsed the "sanctuary movement." Sanctuary activists, many sponsored by churches, were then smuggling and harboring illegal aliens from conflict-torn Central American countries as a condemnation of allegedly unresponsive U.S. foreign policy and refugee law.

Immigration Not a Life Issue

In a more troubling turn for Catholics and for other Christians concerned about population growth, papal pronouncements here and in Rome, such as the Papal Letter on the "Gospel of Life" early in 1995,

increasingly imply a moral equivalence between immigration restrictions and practices of what the Pontiff calls the "Culture of Death:" abortion, contraception, capital punishment, euthanasia and assisted suicide.¹

Immigration has thus assumed a prominent place in the church's "consistent ethic of life." This ethic enjoins the Christian to stand in "solidarity with society's weakest members — the "elderly, the infirm, the unborn" — and now the immigrant. In this view, setting appropriate immigration levels becomes a critical ethical decision that cannot legitimately be based on the national interest, but on an overarching "common good" of all humanity.²

The U.S. hierarchy's creeping radicalization of church teaching on immigration blurs the distinction between the state's first obligation to the welfare of its own citizens and the obligations it may have to all humankind. Rejected is the primacy of the contractual obligations among members that has been at the heart of the democratic nation-state. National interest as a basis for immigration and population policies is deeply suspect in the hierarchy's view. In its place the church offers a high-minded but amorphous sentiment of a global "common good," but without a global social contract or a global entity to define or implement it.

Both Rome and the U.S. bishops have radicalized Catholic social teaching on immigration in other ways since the Vatican councils of the 1960s. The Church in the post-World War II era for the first time proclaimed a "right" of immigration. But it balanced that new-found right with acknowledgement of the right of governments to regulate immigration for the common good. Church pronouncements now affirm immigration as a virtually absolute right, while they have qualified the regulatory rights of states to the point where they are emptied of any legitimate scope of action. The rights of persons to emigrate and to immigrate are held up as a universal norm binding Catholics:

*Catholic citizens are required to work to see that as far as possible the laws of their countries adhere to this universal norm.*¹³

The hierarchy only muddles the debate and confuses the faithful by finding a moral mandate for mass immigration in highly selective and narrowly interpreted biblical verses. One result is the portrayal of

the ancient Israelites, because of their mandate of kindness to the stranger, as liberal cosmopolitans deserving our emulation.

But the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is far more ambivalent about strangers and aliens. Indeed, the theme of the Old Testament can be seen as a proto-nationalistic struggle of a people to capture and retain their own territorial space wherein they can assert the primacy of their most cherished collective values.

While at times viewed as a needy stranger, the biblical alien was often seen as a usurper or a threat to the community and its unique values. Jeremiah groans: "Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to aliens" (Lamentations: 5:2). Joel's (3:17) proclamation is unabashedly exclusionary: "...then shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall be no strangers pass through her any more." Borders were important to the ancient Israelites, as the logical dividing lines between radically different ways of life and worship: the Bible contains 129 references to borders and their location.

Overpopulation: Myth or Reality in Rome's World View?

Most disconcerting is the absence in current church positions of any concern with numbers or limits. If immigration itself is held to be a spiritually regenerating process, the inference from recent church statements is inescapable: just as there can never be too many people, there can never be too many immigrants. In Rome's and the bishops' prevailing cornucopian view, overpopulation is a non-issue. A 1994 report of scientists of the Papal Academy of Sciences warned that the birth rate "must not notably exceed two children per couple," concluding that birth control on a global scale was "absolutely necessary ... to prevent the emergence of insoluble problems." The Vatican strongly denied that the Academy's finding represented church teaching.⁴ Since then Cardinal Lopez Trujillo, Chair of the Papal Council on the Family, has dismissed overpopulation as a "myth."

But Pope Pius XII acknowledged in 1952 that "overpopulation" and scarcity of jobs were conditions in sending countries that justified emigration.⁵ (Pope John Paul II's 1995 *Gospel of Life* also accepted the existence of "overpopulation" in the developing world, only to rule out contraception and abortion as solutions). In the light of Pius XII's statements, the hierarchy's current reasoning is curious: overpopulation and scarcities of jobs exist and *emigration* is a legitimate way of relieving them; but limits on *immigration* are not morally legitimate actions of states to prevent overpopulation or job scarcities.

American Catholics and the Pope: Spiritual Assent, Practical Dissent

American of all faiths are right to be edified by the Pope's and the bishops' eloquent promotion of human rights. But such generalized exhortations on

immigration make a fragile basis for workable public policies in the temporal world. The otherworldly tone of papal teaching on immigration and population issues helps explain the increasing tendency of American Catholics to respect the Holy Father and the bishops as spiritual leaders while rejecting their specific guidance.

A TIME-CNN poll shortly before the pope's arrival showed that 83 percent of U.S. Catholics had a favorable opinion of John Paul II. But 69 percent of Catholics believed that abortion is not morally wrong in every case; and 93 percent felt that artificial birth was morally acceptable for Catholics.⁶

On immigration, 54 percent of Americans contacted in a recent New York Times-CBS News poll wanted immigration reduced. The results for the Catholic respondents were statistically undistinguishable from the country as a whole.⁷ Archbishop Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, the most outspoken Catholic hierarch on immigration, blamed strong Catholic support for Proposition 187 (49 percent of all California Catholics supported it and 59 percent of non-Hispanic Catholics) on the "low formational level" of many Catholics.

Mahony affirmed the church's intent to "re-evangelize" Catholics on such issues.⁸ But even "re-evangelization" is not likely to make the majority of Catholic voters accept Mahony's proposition that the nation's right to control its borders must take second place to the rights of immigrants to enter and remain.

Catholics in particular have reason for concern about the way the nation's other believers and secular Americans see the hierarchy's increasingly triumphalist statements on immigration. Declarations of Catholic leaders that immigration is the wave of the church's future and is a welcome source of growth and rejuvenation may sound to non-Catholic Americans like another demographic power play — especially to those leery of the church's existing power or suspicious of the depth of its commitment to separation of church and state.

An Ethic of Sustainability

The unconditional pro-natalist, immigration expansionist doctrines of the church hierarchy overlook other equally compelling moral and ethical issues of population and immigration and their consequences for the common good. The dignity of human life is ultimately related to its quantity. And the survival of human life is fatally tied to the viability of life's support systems.

The hierarchy's obsession with maximizing human life on earth today may well compromise the planet's ability to support human life in future centuries. A sustainable population now will help ensure the world's and America's ability to support human life indefinitely.

The United States has historically been generous in receiving immigrants. Rome ignores the record of the United States since its inception in opening itself to

millions. The pope's prescription would have the nation labor under that mandate forever, regardless of the profound demographic, economic and environmental transformations in our society.

America's bounty is not limitless. Contrary to the hierarchy's cornucopian view, the nation's ability to provide for its own needy is diminished by today's mass immigration. Remarkably, the U.S. bishops, even as they press for more immigration, have stepped up their campaign against the deteriorating real wages and conditions of American workers, the lack of low-income housing, and Congressional proposals to cut welfare benefits, as if high immigration were unrelated to those conditions.

To lump immigration in with searing life issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment, misrepresents them all and further polarizes debate. Declining to admit immigrants when clear national interests demand such limits is hardly a denial of life. The hierarchy's instinct is to see all immigrants as victims without options, ignoring the wide range of resources and alternatives they have and the diversity of their motives for seeking to come.

A theological question for the faithful in the current conditions of the United States is: who are the strangers that most enjoin our concern? Today's true "strangers" are our chronically deprived and disenfranchised fellow citizens, including those who decades of massive unselective immigration have helped concentrate in deprivation in our cities.

An environmentally sound and sustainable United States can make a far greater contribution to the quality and permanence of human life on earth than can a nation that is overcrowded, highly stratified, resource-depleted, and seriously polluting to both itself and the world. ■

[Editor's note: For a related article see "How Many Immigrants Does Vatican City Take? Actually None" by James Robb, THE SOCIAL CONTRACT, Vol. V, No. 4, p.280.]

NOTES

¹ Richard A. McCormick. "The Gospel of Life," *America*, April 29, 1995.

² U.S. Catholic Conference. *One Family Under God*, July 4, 1995.

³ Alfonso Figueroa Deck, S.J. "New Directions in the Catholic Understanding of Immigration Rights" in *Migration World*, VOL XXII, No.4.

⁴ Lindsey Grant. "The Cairo Conference: Feminists vs. the Pope." *The NPG Forum*. July 1994.

⁵ *New Catholic Encyclopedia — Volume IX*. "International Migration." New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967.

⁶ "Love the Messenger, Not His Message." *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, October 9-15, 1995.

⁷ *The New York Times*, October 4, 1995.

⁸ "An Interview with Cardinal Mahony." *America*, January 28, 1995.