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Vatican opposition to Cairo conference outdated stance



"Along with war and drought, the third horseman of the African apocalypse has been overpopulation. There are simply more people living on the land than the land can support."

— National Geographic News Service

Since the beginning of the United Nations, the Vatican has successfully thwarted U.N. efforts to address human population growth. This legacy of political intimidation has encouraged continued worldwide population growth and related human suffering.

Now, as world governments prepare for the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, the Vatican is again campaigning to undermine efforts to stabilize population.

During the past year, U.N. delegates have been working on a Program of Action — a 20-year plan to stabilize world population — to be finished and adopted at the meeting in Cairo. Vatican delegates have opposed the draft document, arguing either that population growth is not a problem or that allowing women and men to control their reproduction should not be part of the plan.

Dianne Sherman, editor of "The Zero Population Growth Reporter," summarized the Vatican's efforts to undermine the Cairo Conference.

In March, in a 12-page statement titled "Note on the Draft Final Document," the Vatican claimed the Cairo document's chapter on gender equality has an "overbearing emphasis on women" and that references to family planning for individuals — as opposed to couples — signals approval of a "sexually free" lifestyle. It also expresses opposition to the promotion of condom use, even to stem the spread of AIDS.

On March 18, Pope John Paul II met with Nafis Sadik, executive director of the U.N. Population Fund and secretary general for the Cairo conference. Delivering a scathing attack on the Cairo document, the pope told Sadik that contraception is immoral, that voluntary sterilization is "unacceptable" and that population policy should not be viewed in the context of improving women's health, education and status.

On April 6, at his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square, the pope said the conference lacked ethics and a coherent moral vision, promoted contraception and tolerated abortion. "It could easily become a year against the family if these projects are adopted at the Cairo conference," he said, referring to the U.N. designation of 1994 as the Year of the Family.

The draft Program of Action is indeed frank and to the point. It clearly advocates increasing the status and power of women as the best means of voluntary population stabilization. It includes programs for access to family planning, primary health care for women and infants and an emphasis on primary education for women. The document represents an ethical approach to population policy

that renounces coercion and centers on women's health and empowerment.

Some of the Vatican's allies in opposing the plan are Islamic countries that fear women will gain control of their economic and reproductive lives.

The past two U.N. conferences on population and development, in 1974

and 1984, have been subverted by the Vatican and its allies. In a time of increased starvation and overpopulation in several areas of the world, the Vatican's opposition to the Program of Action is inhumane and hopelessly nearsighted and doesn't accurately reflect the views of practicing Catholics.

"One of the bleakest facts of this century has been unchecked growth in world population, with its resulting strain on the planet's life-support systems and misery for countless millions of human beings," wrote Don Page, editor of *The Humanist*. "This represents an ethical failure of catastrophic proportions on the part of the people of the West who, while providing the medical and agricultural advances which make it feasible for all people to live longer, healthier lives, have at the same time allowed their governments to be manipulated by the Vatican and other religious interests to block effective dissemination of the knowledge and use of population-growth control measures."

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, in care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.