



FOOTNOTES

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 critical stage in the lobbying campaign for high immigration that the U.S. Catholic hierarchy has waged for three decades. The U.S. Catholic bishops have been on a special offensive since 1994 in the face of California voters' support for Proposition 187's curbs on illegal aliens and 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. 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 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 in the number of illegal aliens living here.

John Paul 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 conflicted Central American countries as a condemnation of allegedly unresponsive U.S. 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 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 members 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. 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."³

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."

Pope Pius XII acknowledged in 1952 that overpopulation and scarcity of jobs were conditions in sending countries that justified emigration.⁵ In that light, 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 a morally legitimate response of states to overpopulation or job scarcities.

American Catholics and the Pope: Spiritual Assent, Practical Dissent

Americans of all faiths are right to be edified by the Pope's and the bishop's 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 control 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 the proposition that the nation's right to control its borders must take second place to the rights of immigrants to enter and remain.

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 its support systems.

The hierarchy's obsession with maximizing human life on earth now may well negate 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. But its 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 spoken out strongly 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 so demand is hardly a denial of life. 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, resource-depleted, and seriously polluting to both itself and the world.

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

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

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