



DEMOGRAPHICS ARTICLE BY CARDINAL THOMAS J. WINNING ON DEMOGRAPHICS FOR THE SUNDAY HERALD

Perhaps it's the novelists and film-makers who are to blame. One could be forgiven, after reading the output of Lampedusa, Verga and Moravia and watching the cinematographic feasts of Coppola and Fellini for falling for the attractive but tragically false picture we all have of the stereotypical Italian family.

Behind the myth of the clan gathered noisily around the family table, of the black-swathed southern widow surrounded by doting grandchildren and the swarm of tanned youngsters kicking a ball in the piazza lies the sad reality of an institution in crisis.

In the main industrialised Italian cities today more than half of all families have no children. Of those who do, most have only one. Families with three or more youngsters constitute around one in 40 of the total.

The economic and social consequences of a population such as this which is not even reaching replacement levels has concentrated the minds of politicians and academics wonderfully in recent years, and ambitious schemes are now emerging to reverse the trend: employment, fiscal and educational changes are underway to halt the decline.

The issue is frequently revisited by politicians, journalists and documentary-makers. Demography, in short, is on the agenda.

Here in Britain we have heard a lot over the years about the problems of overpopulation in developing countries, but very little about the very real danger of underpopulation in the developed lands.

While we wallow in blissful ignorance, and admittedly, Britain's population implosion is less dramatic than that of Italy, mainland Europe makes provision. In France the state has recognised the problem by offering tax breaks to families with children.

In Norway the government has introduced generous grants to women who have children and choose to stay at home to care for their offspring up until school age.

I think it is important that in this country we realise that we are not immune from the dangers of falling birth rates. It doesn't take a genius to work out that too few tax payers and too many dependents on the social security system is nothing short of a recipe for disaster and social upheaval.

Just two weeks ago I was in Rome for the Jubilee of Families when the Pope spoke directly of this problem.

He said: 'Unfortunately in many regions, and paradoxically right in the more prosperous countries, bringing children into the world has become a decision taken with great hesitation, well beyond that prudence which is necessarily required for responsible procreation.

"It could be said that at times children are seen as more of a threat than a gift."

The child as a threat ... Isn't that the reality of life in Britain today?

I do not believe that young couples starting out in life deliberately exclude children in a plan of programmed selfishness. Rather I hear the cry all too often that "we can't afford to have children".

Such a fear on the part of parents needs to be addressed by society as a whole. For if the seedbed of future generations remains sterile then it is this generation which will suffer the consequences of a bankrupt old age.

Two weeks ago, before the families of the world, Pope John Paul didn't just raise the problem, he also proposed a solution: he said: "This trend can be reversed.. The situation of children is really a challenge for society as a whole, a challenge posed directly to families. Let us commit all our forces to defending the value of the family and respect for human life from the moment of conception.

"These are values which belong to the basic "grammar" of dialogue and human coexistence among peoples. I fervently hope that governments and national parliaments, international organizations and, in particular, the United Nations Organization will not lose sight of this truth."

No-one, least of all the Church is calling here for a "battle for births" in the style of those dictatorial regimes which saw national strength and security in huge families and vast numbers of young men available to act as cannon-fodder.

But perhaps there needs to be greater attention paid to favouring conditions which encourage people to have children. We need to find a way of allowing young couples to see children as a gift, not as a burden. I would like to see a new dialogue between politicians, academics, the Church and families to find the best way forward.

That means developing a whole new approach to the question of immigration for example. No longer can this be regarded by politicians or pressure groups as a threat or a problem. In fact it is increasingly being seen in mainland Europe as a necessity.

It would be sad if it took motives of economic self-preservation to cut out the cancer of xenophobia, alas still present in some sections of society, but that may well be the reality of the situation.

But immigration is not the whole answer. Indeed it would be extremely unjust for the developed world to act as a magnet for the best talent from the developing world, leaving the poorer countries denuded of their finest resource, namely their best-educated people. Instead we need to look at long-term measures which will make the birth of children an attractive option for parents.

That means changing a culture of death into a culture of life. It means developing a radically sane view of new life, not as something to be avoided like the plague through contraception, sterilisation and abortion, but as something to be treasured and valued.

To favour that change of mentality we need practical encouragement. That may mean new and imaginative consideration of the tax regime; a more family-friendly approach to child-care, perhaps with more generous allowances being offered to mothers who choose to stay at home and look after their pre-school children.

I feel we need, in the words of the Prime Minister on another occasion, to "think the unthinkable" on this issue. We need to open our minds to the very real threat of a declining population and be imaginative in our response.

The Church, for its part will seek to play a full and constructive role in the debate and will do all it can to put this vital issue onto the agenda.

Our aim is to broaden awareness of the problem. Now is the hour for consideration.

Procrastination is not an option. The demographic time-bomb continues to tick. It is in no-one's interest for it to explode in our face.