Environmentalism and Population Control: Distinguishing Pro-Life and Anti-Life Motives
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Environmentalists commonly offer three motives for why human populations need to be reduced or stabilized. One group maintains that human numbers threaten natural goods that should be preserved: biodiversity and ecosystems. A more extreme group maintains that we are taking up more than our fair share of the planet, eliminating species that have just as much right to be here. A third group advocates controlling human populations in order to prevent the environment from being degraded to the point that it harms people. I intend to examine in light of Catholic social teaching whether these proposed motives for controlling population are always anti-life.

Of late, it has become increasingly common for environmentalists to advocate population control. Many of them recommend contraception and abortion as means for doing so, means that are contrary to natural law and to Catholic Church teaching. In this paper, my focus will be on motives rather than means. I intend to examine in light of Catholic social teaching whether the environmentalists’ proposed goal of stabilizing or reducing population is always at odds with Church teaching regarding the human right to life. Catholics will be able to give better direction to decisions regarding population when they themselves recognize what constitute appropriate motives for stabilizing or reducing population. In addition, Catholics stand to gain credibility with many environmentalists when there is mutual recognition that they hold certain goals in common, and this credibility can serve as leverage for persuading the environmentalists in question to adopt moral means to the shared goals.

Environmentalists commonly offer three reasons for why human populations need to be reduced or prevented from increasing. A first group maintains that it is important to preserve biodiversity and ecosystems, as these are natural goods, and sees human numbers as sometimes threatening these goods. A second group espouses the same views, but in a more extreme manner; they maintain that we humans are taking up more than our fair share of the planet, eliminating species that have just as much right to be here as we do. A third group aims at controlling human populations insofar as doing so prevents the environment from being degraded to the
point that it harms people. (Individuals sometimes belong to more than one of these groups.) I am going to consider from the standpoint of the gospel of life these three groups’ motives for population control, starting with the humanitarian motive. I will then consider the motive of the more moderate group concerned with protecting the intrinsic goodness of nature, and lastly the motive of the more extreme group.

1. HUMAN POPULATION GROWTH NEEDS TO BE CHECKED BECAUSE EXCESS POPULATION RESULTS IN HARM TO OTHER PEOPLE

Some secular environmentalists do not have anti-human motives for advocating the reduction of human populations. Rather, their goal is to foster human life and health, even though some of the means they advocate, such as abortion, result in the exact opposite. These people rightly recognize that population in certain areas has grown to a point that the environment is impacted in a way that is detrimental to human life and health. While such areas may be fewer than some environmentalists would like us to believe, they are not non-existent as certain members of the pro-life community would have us believe. There are places, for example, where dwellers lack adequate water treatment facilities and end up defecating in, doing their washing in, and drawing their drinking water from the same source. To aim at having a large family in a situation where doing so not only makes it questionable whether one can keep one’s own children alive, but also intensifies environmental problems that harm others’ health and sometimes even causes their death is plainly contrary to the common good.

The Church has never taught that one should have as many children as one physically can have, but the parents’ decision (and indeed it is the parents, and not the state, who have the final say) must take into account the circumstances, including that of the common good of the society in which they live. In the words of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church:

In relation to physical, economic, psychological and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised both in the duly pondered and generous decision to have a large family, and in the decision, made for serious reasons and in respect of the moral law, to avoid for a time or even indeterminately a new birth.

The Church also teaches that the state has the right to enact legislation “to orient the demography of the population” with a view to “its citizens’ well-being,” so long as the rights of parents are respected and immoral means are not advocated or prescribed. Catholics, while rightly
denouncing illicit means of regulating population, should at the same time recognize that there are sometimes legitimate pro-life concerns underlying the position of certain of those environmentalists who advocate wrongful population control measures. Catholics should recognize their shared concern and try to tap into it, instead of writing these people off as having no concern for human life.

The situation cited above, of a couple being prudent in limiting their family size so as not to further tax an environment already so overtaxed that other humans are sick or dying as a result, pertains to developing nations. One might ask whether there are other circumstances, applicable to developed countries, in which couples should limit their family size in order to foster the health and well-being of others, including future generations. Can being pro-life in the developed world mean having smaller families? The idea at first sight certainly seems counterintuitive.

Once the alarmism concerning the “population bomb” (set off by Paul Ehrlich’s 1968 book bearing that title) became rampant, both Catholics and Protestants began having smaller families. Indeed it was not uncommon for Protestant couples to be counseled that responsible parenthood meant having two children, to stave off the dire situation where the earth would no longer be able to provide food for the human population, and the latter fear presumably was a reason why many Catholics as well had smaller families. The Green Revolution proved the prediction about the inability of agriculture to feed everyone to be wrong, and the dire prediction concerning the rate of population increase proved to be far from the mark.

Still, in principle, projected food shortages could be a reason to limit family size. In practice, such predictions depend on two hard-to-calculate variables, namely, the rate of increase of the population and the improvements in farm productivity. It seems doubtful that Green Revolution techniques can continue indefinitely to provide sufficient food for the currently increasing world population. For example, there are only so many ways to genetically modify a plant to get a higher yield (e.g., there are limits to modifying grains so that they have a shorter stem so as to keep the heads from flopping before harvest and so that the nutriments that would have gone to the stem are directed to forming grain). The large amounts of water that genetically modified (GM) crops require have resulted in land being lost to production due to salinization. The large amount of fertilizers, and often also pesticides, that GM crops require end up polluting water. The other factor to be taken into account is world population growth. Although many predict that this will level off in the future, such demographic predictions remain uncertain. Perhaps, then, there will
come a day when being pro-life in the sense of caring for starving people across the globe means having fewer children, and perhaps there will not.

One could mount an argument to limit family size directed specifically to couples in the developed world, based not primarily on potential food shortages, but rather on access to resources in general. People in the developed world use far more goods of the earth (metals, non-renewable forms of energy, etc.) per capita than people in the rest of the world, and thus it seems crucial that they should limit their family size. While this argument has some merit, it is not as strong as it might first seem. For one, parents could insure that their families take no more than their fair share of the world’s goods, not by having fewer children, but by teaching their children to live in a manner that is less wasteful and less materialistic. As Gerald Korson points out, big families lend themselves to environmentally friendly practices. The energy that lights and heats the home of a ten-person family is not significantly greater than that used in a one-person domicile, and so the per capita energy usage is less. Big families commonly buy things in bulk, shop at flea markets, hand down clothes and toys, and encourage non-wastefulness in general. They are also more likely to welcome an elderly relative into their home. In addition, although individuals in developed nations may use more goods than those in less developed nations, they are also by far the largest producers of technologies that enable us to better conserve our resources and protect ecosystems. One of the “extra” children in a large family may be just the individual who grows up to invent a more fuel-efficient engine or a better means of sewage treatment. Children in the least developed countries generally cannot afford the level of education requisite for such inventiveness, not to mention that the societies in which they live generally lack the capital for developing such technologies.

Still, while it is true that a member of a larger family on a number of counts may tax the environment less than a member of a small family, this is not true on every count—e.g., consumption of food (all things being equal) and production of sewage. Also, at a certain point the relatively higher environmental efficiency of a large family as to certain things is not going to compensate for the sheer number of individuals. The difference in numbers when it comes to environmental impact plainly increases as the children move off on their own (as each of them then is likely to own a computer, a television, etc.).

We have to realize, however, that non-renewable resources can only provide a decent standard of living for a fixed number of human individuals. Whether those individuals are born now or later causes no change in the total amount of non-renewable resources. It seems then what is impor-
tant is that each individual live in a manner that is fair with regard to other human individuals, and the timing of a person’s birth is irrelevant. One could argue, though, that keeping the population lower now will allow for renewable technologies to be developed that will reduce the demand for non-renewable resources, thus extending the number of years the earth can support the human population. Here, one can counter that more people means more ingenuity, and so such technologies will be invented all the sooner. One could then object that more people means more pollution. It is not clear, though, whether the failure of countries in the developed world to keep up with pollution is a matter of being unwilling to pay the costs of doing so or being unable to find the means to do so, or lacking the will to try.

The case then against couples in the developed world having large families based on the general grounds of environmental justice is not entirely compelling, although it does highlight the importance of reducing consumption and of encouraging the development of environmental technologies.

Of course, nowadays humanity’s carbon footprint is purported to cause radical changes in climate that impact especially on the least privileged members of the human family, and so some environmentalists tell us we should not have more than a couple of children to avoid harming others. The American bishops and Pope Benedict XVI share their views on the gravity of climate change and its consequences. The USCCB maintains:

> In facing climate change, what we already know requires a response; it cannot be easily dismissed. Significant levels of scientific consensus—even in a situation with less than full certainty, where the consequences of not acting are serious—justifies, indeed can obligate, our taking action intended to avert potential dangers.\(^{15}\)

The American bishops came out with an even more emphatic statement in light of a later Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report in 2007.\(^ {16}\)

Pope Benedict XVI has made numerous statements concerning climate change. For example, in 2007, Benedict said in a message to Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I:

> Preservation of the environment, promotion of sustainable development and particular attention to climate change are matters of grave concern for the entire human family. No nation or business sector can ignore the ethical implications present in all economic and social development. With increasing clarity
scientific research demonstrates that the impact of human actions in any one place or region can have worldwide effects. The consequences of disregard for the environment cannot be limited to an immediate area or populace because they always harm human coexistence, and thus betray human dignity and violate the rights of citizens who desire to live in a safe environment.  

More recently, in connection with the 2011 international climate conference at Durban, Pope Benedict expressed the hope that “all members of the international community might reach agreement on a responsible, credible response,” to the phenomenon of climate change, which he described as “complex” and “disturbing.”

Christian environmentalist Bill McKibben shares the view that addressing climate change is an urgent matter and reasons that the best way to do so is for people in developed countries to voluntarily limit their family to one child. He is not against large families in principle, but rather reasons that we are at a critical point for addressing climate change, and that reducing the population of the developed world is the most promising course of action, given that the inhabitants of developed nations are unlikely to make the necessary changes in their patterns of voracious consumption.

What is the situation with climate change? Are we reasonably sure that we are major causes in changing climate in a manner that does more harm than good to humanity? Although the USCCB affirms this, at the same time if one looks at their document, “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good,” one finds throughout qualifiers indicating that we are not really certain as to what, if anything needs to be done: “it could be quite serious,” “possible negative effects,” “interpretation of scientific data and conclusions in public discussions can be difficult and contentious matters,” “we may have the capacity to alter that creation significantly, and perhaps irrevocably.” One finds all these qualifiers indicating doubt in just the first seven pages of the bishops’ document. Such hesitancy is justified, given that there are quite a few scientists who contest that anthropogenic activity is a significant cause of climate change. “Climategate,” while hardly determining the truth or falsity concerning our role in climate change, certainly casts doubts upon the science typically called upon to support the view that we are having a significant negative impact on climate.

It does seem to be the case that if we really were quite sure that our activities are having a negative impact on the planet resulting in harm to others and especially to the poor, then the hierarchy should advocate that Catholics take this into consideration in planning family size. Again, even
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though human population seems likely to level out in the long term, if in the short term having large families is having a disastrous effect on the climate, that in turn will cause harm to other people, then there is a pro-life reason for limiting family size.

Now, one could counter that reduction of the population size would have a later negative impact on human lives insofar as this would diminish the financial base needed to fund the retirement of an increasingly gray population. One response to this objection is that there is already plain need for immediate reforms to insure that the elderly have an adequate standard of living when they retire from the workforce. Moreover, given current trends, it is reasonable to think that at some point world population growth will level off, and at some point it would have to level off out of necessity as resources are depleted. Thus, sooner or later the problem of not having more workers to fund Social Security (and other similar programs) will have to be dealt with.\(^\text{23}\)

Why then does neither the Pope nor the bishops recommend that every couple seriously consider limiting their family size in view of the common good of humanity? It is quite possible that they have not fully thought out this matter. Perhaps, however, they have, but then have decided that there is no strong reason to advise Catholics to limit family size, given that there are strong indications that world population is headed towards eventually leveling off. This does not address, however, McKibben’s argument, which again is that the time is now for us to act in order to mitigate the effects of climate change,\(^\text{24}\) especially on the poor, and that limiting family size is one of the most realistic ways of doing so.\(^\text{25}\)

Perhaps the reason why the hierarchy has not suggested that Catholics seriously consider limiting their carbon footprint by limiting their family size is that they realize that their teaching authority does not extend to science,\(^\text{26}\) and that whether climate change is driven by human activity in any important way is a scientific matter. Certainly, it pertains to the bishops’ role as shepherds to alert the faithful that we should endeavor to protect others and especially the poor in situations where well-established science indicates that harm to people is occurring or is likely to occur as a result of the way we are using the environment. But again, the faithful have the right to examine for themselves whether or not the science is sufficiently solid before adopting drastic measures, especially one so drastic as limiting family size.\(^\text{27}\)
2. HUMAN POPULATION GROWTH NEEDS TO BE CHECKED BECAUSE WE ARE DESTROYING THE INTEGRITY OF NATURE

The goal of preserving the integrity of ecosystems and biodiversity insofar as they are goods worthy of respect is not, as such, anti-human-life. It coincides with one of the goals of Catholic environmentalism. The *Cat-echism of the Catholic Church* affirms:

> Man’s dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute . . . it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation. Animals are God’s creatures. . . . By their mere existence they bless him and give him glory.

According to Catholic teaching, flourishing ecosystems and a multitude of species witness to the goodness of God. Thus, the loss of biodiversity due to, for example, needless destruction of rainforest, and the destruction of habitat caused by practices such as mountaintop mining prevent creation from witnessing to God’s glory. In the words of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:

> The diversity of life manifests God’s glory. Every creature shares a bit of the divine beauty. Because the divine goodness could not be represented by one creature alone, Aquinas tells us, God “produced many and diverse creatures, so that what was wanting to one in representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another . . . hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever” (*Summa Theologica*, Prima Pars, question 48, ad 1). The wonderful variety of the natural world is, therefore, part of the divine plan and, as such invites our respect. Accordingly, it is appropriate that we treat other creatures and the natural world not just as means to human fulfillment, but also as God’s creatures, possessing an independent value, worthy of our respect and care.

Now, all things being equal, the more people there are, the greater the pressure to engage in drastic practices, such as mountaintop mining, as well as in more benign practices that in some way destroy the environment, such as cutting down a forest to make room for housing or farming. What is one to do when sustaining human lives runs counter to the health of an ecosystem or entails the loss of biodiversity? The Catholic Church maintains that the value of the individual human life trumps any natural good. This comes out in the Vatican statement on water: “While never
overlooking the need to protect our eco-systems, it is the critical or basic needs of humanity that must be operative in an appropriate prioritization of water access."32 The same is affirmed by Pope Benedict XVI: “It should also be stressed that it is contrary to authentic development to view nature as something more important than the human person."33 The more moderate of the secular environmentalists who are concerned with protecting the integrity of nature share this view. For example, the World Wildlife Fund’s mission is “to conserve nature and reduce the most pressing threats to the diversity of life.”34 While the group advocates slowing human population growth as a means to doing so, it is also concerned with human well-being, especially the well-being of the poor:

[W]e also work with local communities in developing countries to improve livelihoods and health, and reduce population pressures on nature. We do this by reducing the adverse environmental impacts of migration; promoting access to health and voluntary family planning services; improving water supplies and sanitation; improving food security; and promoting new livelihood activities.35

And there are other groups as well who think that human populations need to be stabilized in order to prevent the loss of biodiversity and eco-systems, but do not have anything against people. Their view is: There are plenty of people already, so why bring more into the world when this will entail the loss of a different, albeit lesser good?36

The American bishops maintain that “Christian love forbids choosing between people and the planet.”37 However, the reality is that conflicts between the two do arise.38 This is clear from the quotation above concerning water that affirms that human well-being is to be chosen in preference to preserving an ecosystem. And the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church affirms that there are situations where “hunger and poverty make it virtually impossible to avoid intense and excessive exploitation of the environment.”39 Consequently, I take the bishops to be articulating an ideal, and one that can only be achieved if we exercise appropriate environmental stewardship. Such stewardship includes alleviating the poverty that pushes people to engage in environmental destruction that would otherwise be unnecessary,40 and sharing environmentally friendly technologies with developing nations.

However, it also seems that stewardship of creation requires at a certain point that people overall have fewer children. For there is no doubt that the earth is a finite planet with only so much space on it and so many mineral resources and fossil fuel deposits. If human population on earth
grows endlessly, this will inevitably take a heavy toll on biodiversity and on the variety of ecosystems. This is already occurring in certain areas, such as the Amazon.

Humans are the only earthly beings that are created in the image of God and called to share God’s own life for all eternity, and this means that a human individual has more worth than an entire species, and indeed more worth than the entire planet. By the same token, however, God entrusted the care of creation to us. In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

In God’s plan man and woman have the vocation of “subduing the earth” as stewards of God. This sovereignty is not to be an arbitrary and destructive domination. God calls man and woman, made in the image of the Creator “who loves everything that exists,” to share in his providence toward other creatures; hence their responsibility for the world God has entrusted to them.

In a similar vein, the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms:

The seventh commandment requires . . . respect for the integrity of creation by the prudent and moderate use of the . . . resources of the universe with special attention to those species that are in danger of extinction.

When our numbers threaten the integrity of creation, we have a responsibility to check further population growth. The American bishops affirm this in two separate documents when they include “respect for nature” as something to be weighed in planning family size:

Thus, the Church addresses population issues in the context of its teaching on human life, of just development, of care for the environment, and of respect for the freedom of married couples to decide voluntarily on the number and spacing of births. In keeping with these values . . . it continues to oppose coercive methods of population control. . . . Respect for nature ought to encourage policies that promote natural family planning and true responsible parenthood. . . .

Amore responsible approach to population issues is the promotion of “authentic development,” which represents a balanced view of human progress and includes respect for nature and social well-being. Development policies that seek to reduce poverty with an emphasis on improved education and social conditions
for women are far more effective than usual population reduction programs and far more respectful of women’s dignity.\textsuperscript{46}

It is worth noting that the latter passage sheds light on the American bishops’ position that we should not have to choose between “people and the planet.” Improved education and social conditions for women generally lead to their having fewer children.\textsuperscript{47} Educated women tend to marry later, and women who have access to health care do not feel the need to have many children simply to insure that some of their offspring will survive them. We can gather from this, and from the importance that alleviating poverty has in protecting the environment, that practices that promote human dignity,\textsuperscript{48} far from being opposed to caring for the integrity of nature, are actually means of doing so.

Secular environmentalists who advocate population control out of concern for the integrity of nature, then, should not be dismissed by Catholics, for the goal these environmentalists embrace is not as such anti-life. Though the means they advocate are often anti-life, the goal they aim at in advocating curbing population growth accords with the Church’s teaching on our responsibility to care for the integrity of creation. This, of course, does not mean that in every case they estimate correctly the need to reduce population in order to protect biodiversity and ecosystems.

3. HUMAN POPULATION GROWTH NEEDS TO BE CHECKED BECAUSE WE ARE A CANCER ON THE EARTH

Those who regard a human life as having no more worth that the life of the member of any other species advocate population control with the explicit goal of reducing the numbers of the species that they regard as a pest on the planet, namely, us. These people lament that certain human individuals are alive today and even wish death upon them. For example, a 2009 news article bemoans: “Unfortunately, population growth has generally maintained a steady pattern in Kenya—upwards.”\textsuperscript{49} And in a 2008 BBC interview:

Dr. Blackmore said the ‘fundamental problem’ facing the planet today is that ‘there are too many people.’ Professor Gray agreed. Then Dr. Blackmore declared: ‘For the planet’s sake, I hope we have bird flu or some other thing that will reduce the population, because otherwise we’re doomed.’ So, it’s official: at the Beeb [BBC] . . . it is perfectly OK to wish death upon large swathes of mankind.\textsuperscript{50}

The motive of these proponents of population control is directly anti-human-life. Unlike the more moderate environmentalists concerned about
the integrity of nature, these people have no sense of the superior worth of a human individual compared to other natural beings.

One can point to various points of inconsistency in such people’s views and actions. First, it seems never to be these people or their loved ones who are at fault for overpopulating the planet; it is always other people. Whence the news article reporting Blackmore and Gray’s views was appropriately titled: “Malthusian snobs pray for cure for overpopulation: A misanthropic dinner party elite wants to see the human race decimated by disease—just so long as it doesn’t affect them.” Secondly, those who claim that no species is more important than any other are being inconsistent when they eat food that involves the killing of plants or animals.51 Thirdly, those who maintain that we are just one animal among others have no reason to tell us that we ought to do anything at all; like other animals we would pursue what contributes to our survival and reproduction without a thought of how it affects other species on the planet.

Those who espouse the culture of life should be ready to articulate a rational defense of human dignity, something which is at the foundation of the pro-life ethic, even though in most cases it will fall on deaf ears. This defense, in a nutshell, consists in showing that non-human animals lack the capacity for abstract thought.52 The latter is seen most clearly in light of the efforts to teach language to the animals most likely to possess abstract thought, namely, the great apes. These animals never advance beyond using symbols to get things, in the manner in which pigeons can be conditioned to push colored buttons in a certain sequence to get a grain reward. Chimps, orangutans, etc., never use language in a way that shows genuine understanding: they never use it to acquire knowledge for its own sake or to share such knowledge with others.53 Incapable of abstract thought, they cannot formulate principles of morality, and thus are not moral agents. We, on the other hand, are capable of abstract thought; we can evaluate our motives for actions. For this reason, unlike other living things that merely have a life cycle, we have a life project: we determine what kind of people we want to be, and set personal goals for ourselves.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that when it comes to the environmental question of regulating human populations, those who embrace the culture of life need to realize that the motives of the environmentalists who advocate reducing human populations vary widely. Some environmentalists are fundamentally anti-life as they deny that the life of a human individual has more worth than the life of individuals of other species. To the extent such people are open to rational argument, those who espouse the culture of life have a re-
sponsibility to show them the inconsistencies in their views and to explain to them why a human life is more precious than the life of any other kind of earthly being.

The more moderate advocates of population control do not deny our superior dignity, but think we should reduce our numbers in view of preserving the integrity of nature. These environmentalists have a motive that is not as such anti-life. Catholic social teaching agrees with them that non-rational creation is a good that we are to care for. Since human numbers can put the integrity of nature in jeopardy, protecting the latter can be a legitimate motive for people to have smaller families.

Other environmentalists are motivated by various humanitarian concerns. Included here are those who desire to insure that situations where the environment is overtaxed to the point that human life and health are threatened are not worsened by the addition of more human individuals, and those who fear that our activities are changing the climate of our planet, ultimately to the detriment of especially those weakest among us. These are pro-life motives.

My focus in this paper has been the goals proposed by various environmentalists for stabilizing or reducing human population, and not on the means by which they propose to do so. The reason I have chosen to do so is that Catholics sometimes tend to overlook how much we share in common with certain secular environmentalists, because we are so focused on the differences as to the means proposed for limiting family size. However, I note in closing that some of the means the Church proposes to insure both that the earth sustains the entire human family and that biodiversity and ecosystems are protected merit more consideration than they are generally given by secular environmentalists. The Church brings to our attention that something that is a goal in itself, namely, the promotion of human dignity, often turns out to be at the same time an appropriate means to achieving environmental goals. Lifting people out of poverty, sharing environmentally safe technologies with them, educating them, and insuring that they have adequate health care generally results in them taking better care of the environment and in having smaller families, which in turn safeguards the integrity of creation.

Notes

1. The “Gospel of Life” (Evangelium vitae) is the title of John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical on “the value and inviolability of human life.” This teaching is part of Catholic social teaching; see Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 2004), no. 155: “The teachings of Pope John XXIII, the Second Vatican Council, and Pope Paul VI have given
abundant indication of the concept of human rights as articulated by the Magisterium. Pope John Paul II has drawn up a list of them in the encyclical Centesimus Annus: ‘the right to life, an integral part of which is the right of the child to develop in the mother’s womb from the moment of conception. . . . The first right presented in this list is the right to life, from conception to its natural end, which is the condition for the exercise of all other rights and, in particular, implies the illegitimacy of every form of procured abortion and of euthanasia.’”

2. Another example where the size of the population resulted in harm to people took place in India where the large number of people burning dung resulted in clouds of particulate matter so large that they affected weather patterns. The resulting increase in the number of droughts plainly had a negative impact on human lives. See Charles W. Petit, “A Darkening Sky,” U.S. News & World Report, March 17, 2003, 46–48.

3. Scott Wisor, in his article “Is There a Moral Obligation to Limit Family Size?,” Philosophy & Public Policy Quarterly 29:3/4 (Summer/Fall 2009): 29, makes the following claims: “While it is certainly prudentially and morally appropriate for parents to think about whether they will be able adequately to care for and provide for future children . . . and what impact the children will have on their community and the world, it shouldn’t be the primary way in which we make decisions about children. Our love for our existing family members, our love for our future children, and the desire to have a large, supportive family are more morally appropriate ways to think about our future children.” Wisor fails to realize that to love someone is to want the good for that person. To intentionally bring a child into the world when one has moral certitude that that child is going to die of starvation is plainly not to want the good for the child.


6. See Allan Carlson, “Weapon of Misinstruction: Paul Ehrlich’s The Population Bomb,” Touchstone Magazine 19:2 (March 2006): 12: “The Population Bomb stands as one of the most effective propaganda tracts ever published in America. On every college and university campus, the specter of imminent doom caused by human numbers motivated the children of the Baby Boom to embrace Ehrlich’s ‘obvious first answer’: ‘Set an example—don’t have more than two children.’ The Baby Bust followed, with American fertility dropping to a historic low by the mid-1970s, well under a two-children-per-couple average. The drop was particularly sharp among American Catholics. As late as 1967, twenty-eight percent of young ‘devout’ Catholics still planned to have five or more children. By 1971, less than seven percent did.”

Pope Paul VI mentions the concern about population explosion in his 1968 encyclical, Humanae vitae: “The changes that have taken place are of considerable importance and varied in nature. In the first place there is the rapid increase in population which has made many fear that world population is going to grow faster than available resources, with the consequence that many
families and developing countries would be faced with greater hardships” (www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc _25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html, no. 2).


8. Food shortages are often due to problems in distribution. I am considering here whether the actual amount of food produced would in fact feed the entire human population, were it to be appropriately distributed.


11. See ibid.

12. See Steven W. Mosher, “Baby Seven Billion, Welcome,” http://www .pop.org/category/weekly-briefing/weekly-briefing-2011-v13: “According to the UN’s ‘low variant projection’—historically the most accurate—the population of the world will peak at 8 plus billion in 2040 or so, and then begin to decline.”

13. See World Watch Institute, “The State of Consumption Today,” http:// www.worldwatch.org/node/810: “The United States, with less than 5% of the global population, uses about a quarter of the world’s fossil fuel resources—burning up nearly 25% of the coal, 26% of the oil, and 27% of the world’s natural gas.”


20. *Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, Acton Institute publication (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Acton Institute, 2007), has a section on global warming (87–96) which documents the positions of a number of scientists who are in disagreement with or who are skeptical of the received views on different aspects of the global warming debate. Lawrence Solomon’s book *The Deniers* (Richard Vigilante Books, 2008) contains a list of more than thirty scientists with
impressive credentials who reject many of the typical claims concerning global warming. Roy W. Spencer and William D. Braswell’s peer-reviewed article “Potential Biases in Feedback Diagnosis from Observational Data: A Simple Model Demonstration,” *Journal of Climate* 21 (November 2008): 5624–28, generated a lot of controversy as it argues that we cannot determine whether temperature changes cause the changes in the amount of radiation in the atmosphere or whether it is vice versa. The non-scientist is in no position to figure out which side is right.

21. See Traditional Values Coalition, “Central Figure In Climategate Email Scandal Comes Clean—Sort Of,” February 18, 2010 (accessed at traditionalvalues.org; no longer available): “Dr. Phil Jones, the main character in the Climategate email scandal, has apparently decided to try to salvage what’s left of his career by admitting certain facts about climate change that he and his cronies have denied for decades. In an interview with the BBC last weekend, Jones admitted the following: Warming rates from 1860–1880, 1910–1940, and 1978–1998 are identical. In addition, rates from 1975–2009 ‘are similar and not statistically significantly different from each other. From 1995 to the present there has been no statistically significant global warming.’”

22. Another example of the inaccurate presentation of climate data is noted in Christopher Landsea’s open letter explaining why he resigned from the IPCC; see http://www.climatechangefacts.info/ClimateChangeDocuments/LandseaResignationLetterFromIPCC.htm.


24. It is generally held that holding down the warming of the climate to two degrees Celsius represents a critical threshold for reining in a disastrous change in climate, and that this requires that the concentration of CO$_2$ in the atmosphere be prevented from exceeding 450 ppm. “Scientists have used a new probability model to calculate how much CO$_2$ our atmosphere tolerates under these target specifications. . . . From 2000 to 2050, a maximum of 1000 billion tonnes of CO$_2$ may be emitted into the atmosphere. Roughly speaking, today, around one third of this has already been shot” (*ScienceDaily*, “Climate Change: Halving Carbon Dioxide Emissions By 2050 Could Stabilize Global Warming” [May 2, 2009], http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/05/090502092019.htm). In other words, a drastic cut in emissions is called for in a relatively short period of time: “In order to achieve the long-term stabilization of the atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration, the emissions will then have to be reduced by 56 percent by the year 2050 and approach zero towards the ends of the century” (*ScienceDaily*, “New Carbon Emissions Model” [August 2, 2010], www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/08/100802110827.htm).

25. McKibben advocates that those in developed countries limit their family size to one child on the grounds that people in developed countries use far more resources and produce far more pollution per capita than those in developing countries. Taken as a broad-brush statement, it is true; however, many developing nations are moving to a per-capita level of consumption comparable to developed ones. Also to be noted is that by 2024 the developing world is projected to add virtually all of the next billion of the world’s population (see 2011 World Population
Data Sheet, “The World at Six Billion,” p. 6, http://www.prb.org/Publications/Datasheets/2011/world-population-data-sheet.aspx). Thus, if climate change is a concern, there is reason to advocate that families in developing nations as well aim at smaller family sizes. In other words, a couple in a developed nation having one child instead of two at the present time will have a far greater environmental impact than a couple in most developing nations doing so (e.g., a child born in the US, on the average, has ten times the environmental impact of one born in India), and thus will make a greater contribution to the reduction in CO₂; still, reducing the sheer numbers of people in the developing world also stands to make a significant contribution to CO₂ reduction. Note further that there are other means of tackling CO₂ emissions apart from reducing population, e.g., meeting certain standards in the construction and retrofitting of buildings.


27. See Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 80: “In the Church’s social doctrine the Magisterium is at work in all its various components and expressions. Of primary importance is the universal Magisterium of the Pope and the Council: This is the Magisterium that determines the direction and gives marks of the development of this social doctrine. This doctrine in turn is integrated into the Magisterium of the Bishops who, in the concrete and particular situations of the many different local circumstances, give precise definition to this teaching, translating it and putting it into practice. . . . Insofar as it is part of the Church’s moral teaching, the Church’s social doctrine has the same dignity and authority as her moral teaching. It is authentic Magisterium, which obligates the faithful to adhere to it. The doctrinal weight of the different teachings and the assent required are determined by the nature of the particular teachings, by their level of independence from contingent and variable elements, and by the frequency with which they are invoked.”

28. CCC, no. 2415.
29. CCC, no. 2416.

30. See the website “Mountain Justice” regarding the impact of mountaintop-removal mining on people and the environment: http://mountainjustice.org/facts/steps.php. Another example of the defacing of creation is the scarred, desolate, and toxic waste–covered landscape that results from companies extracting petroleum from oil sands.


33. Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate* (2009) no. 48. The priority of human lives over the lives of other living things is also affirmed in the *CCC*, no. 2418: “It is likewise unworthy to spend money on them [i.e., on animals] that should as a priority go to the relief of human misery.”


36. See Population Action International, “Why Population Matters to Biodiversity,” http://populationaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/PAI-1293-BIODIVERSITY_compressed.pdf, 1: “Human population size, growth, density and migration are underlying causes of biodiversity loss. Global population is projected to grow to anywhere between 8 billion and 11 billion by the middle of the century, with much of the growth expected to take place in the humid tropics whose ecosystems harbor the planet’s richest forms of biodiversity. Increased demand for goods and services to meet the needs of a growing population will undoubtedly exert more pressure on the components of biodiversity—ecosystems, genes and species. Slowing population growth will not only ease off pressure on biodiversity, but will also empower women and their families.” The group’s motto is “Healthy Families, Healthy Planet.”

37. See USCCB, “Renewing the Earth,” 11.

38. Another example where a choice has to be made between “people or the planet,” concerns a proposed desalination plant: “United Water New York . . . provides water and waste water services to about 270,000 customers in Rockland and Orange Counties. Haverstraw Bay, where the water intake pipe would be[,] is considered the aquatic nursery of the Hudson River, hosting marine life that enters the river to spawn before heading back to the Atlantic Ocean, *The Journal News* reported. In its opposition to the plan, the Rockland Water Coalition posted this statement on its Web site: ‘Sustainable water strategies can strengthen our economy while protecting our environment. We call on Rockland County to adopt a water management policy that includes: better coordination of land-use planning, an active program to preserve open space, green infrastructure to reduce flooding and increase recharge of aquifers; and an energetic program of water conservation and efficiency. Finally, Rockland County must face the fact that limits to development, based on sustainable use of resources, are essential if we are to avoid the social, economic, and environmental costs of desalination’” (Elizabeth Mooney, “As Hudson River Desalination Plan Advances, Local Groups Push Back,” *EcoPolitics Daily*, 23 February 2012, http://nylev.org/ecopoliticsdaily/20120223_as_hudson_river_desalination_plan_advances_local_groups_pus).


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41. See CCC, no. 356: “Of all visible creatures only man is ‘able to know and love his creator.’ He is ‘the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake,’ and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity.” See also CCC, 357: “Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. . . . And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead.”

42. See Gaudium et Spes, nos. 14–15: “Now, man is not wrong when he regards himself as superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the city of man. For by his interior qualities he outstrips the whole sum of mere things. . . . Man judges rightly that by his intellect he surpasses the material universe, for he shares in the light of the divine mind.”

43. CCC, no. 373.


47. See Paul VI, Encyclical Letter Humanae vitae (1968), no. 23: “The family is the primary unit in the state; do not tolerate any legislation which would introduce into the family those practices which are opposed to the natural law of God. For there are other ways by which a government can and should solve the population problem—that is to say by enacting laws which will assist families and by educating the people wisely so that the moral law and the freedom of the citizens are both safeguarded.”

48. John Paul II also notes the connection between respect for human dignity and care for the integrity of nature; see “Peace With God the Creator, Peace With All of Creation,” no. 7. “The most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of respect for life evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution. Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples. In these cases, pollution or environmental destruction is the result of an unnatural and reductionist vision which at times leads to a genuine contempt for man.”


50. The Week with the First Post, “Malthusian snobs pray for cure for overpopulation: A misanthropic dinner party elite wants to see the human race decimated by disease—just so long as it doesn’t affect them,” 14 November 2008, http://www.theweek.co.uk/25209/malthusian-snobs-pray-cure-overpopulation:

51. For an example of such inconsistency, see Albert Schweitzer, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” originally published in Christendom 1 (1936): 225–39,
posted at http://www1.chapman.edu/schweitzer/sch.reading4.html: “It [Schweitzer’s ‘absolute ethics’] says of no instance of life, ‘This has no value.’ It cannot make any such exceptions, for it is built upon reverence for life as such. It knows that the mystery of life is always too profound for us, and that its value is beyond our capacity to estimate. We happen to believe that man’s life is more important than any other form of which we know. But we cannot prove any such comparison of value from what we know of the world’s development. True, in practice we are forced to choose.”

52. Peter Singer, one of the first to popularize the notion of speciesism, maintains: “If a being suffers[,] there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering—insofar as comparisons can be made—of any other being. . . . So the line of sentience (using the term as a convenient if not strictly accurate shorthand for the capacity to suffer and/or experience enjoyment) is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others. To mark this boundary by some other characteristic would be to mark it in an arbitrary manner” (Animal Liberation [New York: The New York Review of Books, 1990], 8–9). To pursue in depth how to respond to this view, and to views advanced by others who denounce speciesism, goes beyond the scope of this paper. See Wesley Smith, A Rat Is a Pig Is a Dog Is a Boy (New York: Encounter Books, 2010), for refutations of many anti-speciesist positions.


54. See CCC, no. 339: “Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection. For each one of the works of the ‘six days’ it is said: ‘And God saw that it was good.’ ‘By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws.’ Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things which would be in contempt of the Creator and would bring disastrous consequences for human beings and their environment.”