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Declining fertility rate: causes, catholic desiderata, and "openness to life"

Descenso de la tasa de fertilidad: causas, postulados católicos y "apertura a la vida"

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Abstract

For half a century, humanity has been experiencing a sustained decline in its fertility rate. According to recent reports from the UN Population Division, it is highly likely that a period of human population decline will begin toward the end of this century. In this paper, we identify and analyze three causes that explain, at least partially, the phenomenon of the decline of the global fertility rate: the economic difficulties faced by young couples, the effects of the sexual revolution, and the current zeitgeist. These causes help explain why people of reproductive age choose not to enter marriages open to life. We also define six desiderata that any solution to the challenge of the low fertility rate should meet from a Catholic moral perspective and offer two arguments in favor of an "openness to life" position.

Keywords: fertility, family, catholic moral theology, population, sexuality.

1. Introduction

The human population is undergoing profound demographic transformations. The 2024 report by the Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs confirms that fertility rate has declined significantly in recent decades. The rates have changed from being as high as 5.3 births per woman in the 1960s (baby boom), to 3.3 in 1990, and to the current rate of 2.2. At present, more than half of the countries do not reach 2.1 births per woman, the rate required to maintain a country's demographic stability between generations (the "replacement rate"). This group crosses all regions and income groups and includes some of the world's most populous nations, such as India, China, the United States of America, Brazil and the Russian Federation. Countries such as Spain, Italy and South Korea with a fertility rate of less than 1.4 have what is known as an "ultra-low" fertility rate.[1]

[1] All figures are taken from World Fertility 2024 (1). At the time of writing this paper, this is the latest report available from the UN Population Division.

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This phenomenon of low fertility is usually analyzed in conjunction with another phenomenon: the significant improvement in life expectancy. In 1950, global life expectancy was less than 50 years. Biomedical and pharmaceutical improvements, advances in infrastructure and nutrition, and the decrease in infant mortality are contributing factors to the current global life expectancy of 73.3 years. Although there are exceptional events that can alter life expectancy (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic or major famines) and inequalities between rich and poor countries, there is a clear trend towards improved life expectancy worldwide. It seems that, on average, humans are living longer and reproducing less. When demographers speak of "population aging" they usually refer to these two phenomena together. Populations are aging because they are composed of an increasing percentage of older people due to increased life expectancy and fewer births.

In this paper, we will focus specifically on the decline in the fertility rate. The fact that the number of births is declining each year poses undeniable practical challenges, even if life expectancy remains stable or improves marginally. Immediate future generations will face unbalanced relationships between the number of active and retired workers. Countries are already facing significant challenges for the sustainability of their health, security and social assistance systems. The projections in the UN Population Division report indicate that this situation is likely to worsen. If the trend continues, some communities could find it difficult to produce basic goods and services to meet the basic human needs of their members. It is important to note that while international migration can mitigate population decline in specific wealthy nations in the short term, it does not offer a systemic solution. As the decline in fertility becomes a global phenomenon (affecting both developing and developed nations) the pool of potential migrants is shrinking.

Public discourse on appropriate responses that should be taken has reduced the issue to numbers, economics, and external incentives while ignoring the question of human dignity. However, as Pope Francis pointed out, the problem is not only (or even centrally)

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economic (2). The current decline in the fertility rate could be indicating, among other things, a state of hopelessness among human beings regarding the future, that deserves careful reflection by academics in the field of humanities and social sciences. This paper aims to contribute to that reflection.

The paper is structured as follows: in section II, we present data on the current situation of the fertility rate and its historical perspective; in section III, we analyze some causes that could explain, at least partially, the decline in fertility rate; in section IV, we introduce (a) six desiderata that a response to this challenge should satisfy from a Catholic moral perspective centered on the recognition of human dignity, and (b) two arguments in favor of an "openness to life" position.

2. Data on the declining fertility rate

The global population has not stopped growing in the last centuries: in 1800, there were 990 million human beings in the world, in 1900, 1.65 billion, in 1974, 4 billion, by the end of the 20th century, 6 billion. It is projected that by 2058, there will be 10 billion people worldwide. However, the global population growth rate peaked in 1963 and has been falling ever since. In 1963, the global population was growing at 2.2% per year and now it is growing at a rate of 0.9%. Projections indicate that the global population will peak around 2086 and then humanity will enter a period of population decline (3).

The global population growth rate mainly considers global mortality and fertility rates. The fertility rate is defined as the total number of births occurring in a year per woman of childbearing age (15-49 years). The global fertility rate has shown a marked decline since the 1960s. Currently, the rate is 2.2 births per woman (just above the replacement rate). Within this index, countries and regions with very different demographic realities are subsumed. More than half of the countries have a fertility rate below the replacement rate (including US, Brazil, Germany, France and Russia) and 24 countries have an

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ultra-low fertility rate. If this trend continues, each generation will be significantly smaller than the previous.[2] The UN Population Division states that it is highly unlikely that countries with ultra-low fertility will reach the replacement rate again in the next 30 years.

It might be assumed that the human population is moving toward a new equilibrium after a period of very high birth rates (like those seen in the 1960s). This is what demographers call a "fertility transition" (from high fertility rates to lower rates, but still above the replacement rate). One might even believe that this is desirable in terms of economic, social, and ecological sustainability.

However, the decline in the fertility rate that has been occurring over the last six decades has two characteristics that make it especially worrying: the speed of the decline, which undermines the ability of countries to adapt to the new demographic reality (in terms of health, pensions, social security and urban planning) and the level at which the fertility rate has settled, namely, below the replacement rate. The fertility rate has not stabilized at a level that ensures demographic equilibrium. Instead, it has dropped so sharply that it threatens the functional viability of specific communities, which may soon lack the generational renewal required to uphold their social, cultural, and economic foundations. Thus, it is essential to distinguish between a managed demographic transition (which under certain conditions could be desirable) and a structural collapse. While moving from high fertility rates to a more moderate level (around the replacement rate) entails 'transitional costs' such as a gradual aging of the population that societies must inevitably learn to manage, the current global phenomenon is defined by its unprecedented speed and its sub-replacement floor.

Let's illustrate this with a simple example. If a population X has a fertility rate of 1.5 (common today in Europe and Asia), each gener-

[2] In this sense: "In a population that is closed to migration, when fertility remains below the replacement level for an extended period, the number of women of reproductive age starts to decline as successive cohorts become smaller and smaller. In countries with populations that have already peaked, the number of women in the reproductive age range is projected to shrink by 33 per cent between 2024 and 2054." (1, p. 11).

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ation is 25% smaller than the previous one. If that rate is maintained, population X will not stabilize at a smaller size but will continue to decline exponentially until it eventually disappears. Therefore, it is important to clarify that the declining fertility rate does not represent a challenge because it contradicts some kind of normative claim that the human population must increase infinitely. It is not a numerical problem of a decrease in the number of human beings (globally or locally). Rather, it represents a structural challenge because it has reached levels that are leading the population into a spiral of permanent demographic contraction.

This is clearly seen in the fluctuations of population growth projections. For example, in 2013, the UN Population Division estimated a 30% chance that the global population would peak this century. The 2024 report estimates increased this probability to 80% due to a larger than expected drop in the fertility rate in some countries. Therefore, if the downward trend in the fertility rate deepens, population decline will begin earlier than expected.

In countries that do not reach the replacement rate, we observe a change in their demographic pyramid, with an increasing percentage of older people and a decreasing percentage of younger people in the population. In the short and medium term, this creates challenges for the economy, pension systems and health services. In the long term, without radical changes, the very continuity of the community is threatened.

Some may argue that advancements in automation and artificial intelligence could offset the shrinking workforce by increasing productivity. However, technology cannot fully replace the human-centric nature of care work required by an aging population, nor can it replicate the social dynamism and generational innovation that historically drive progress. Relying solely on technological fixes ignores the fact that a society in permanent contraction loses not just labor, but the vital spark of renewal that each new generation provides.

Since there are pronounced differences in the fertility rates of different regions, it is possible to project that each will reach their peak population growth at different times. The evolution of the rate

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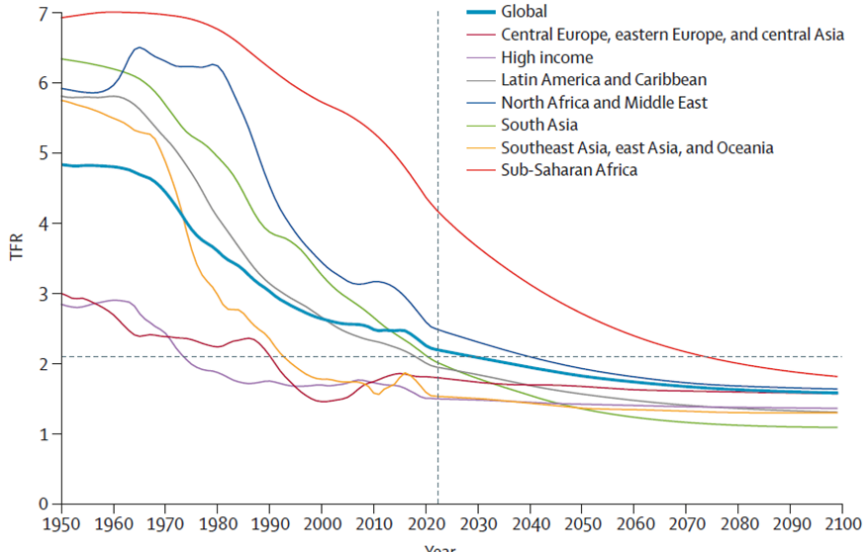
in each region can be seen below, taking three years as a reference: 1960, 1990 and 2022.

- Sub-Saharan Africa (1960: 6.6; 1990: 6.3; 2022: 4.5)
- Middle East & North Africa (1960: 6.9; 1990: 4.9; 2022: 2.6)
- North America (1960: 3.7; 1990: 2.1; 2022: 1.6)
- Latin America & Caribbean (1960: 5.9; 1990: 3.3; 2022: 1.8)
- Europe & Central Asia (1960: 2.8; 1990: 2; 2022: 1.7)
- South Asia (1960: 6.1; 1990: 4.3; 2022: 2.2)
- East Asia & Pacific (1960: 4.6; 1990: 2.6; 2022: 1.5)

Graph 1 shows that all regions exhibit the same tendency to reach, in the long term, levels below the replacement rate (4).

Graph 1. Tendency to reach in regions



Source: GBD 2021 Fertility and Forecasting Collaborators. Global fertility in 204 countries and territories, 1950-2021, with forecasts to 2100: a comprehensive demographic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021. The Lancet. 2024; 403(10440): 2057-2099. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(24)00550-6

The term "demographic winter" can sometimes be found to describe this decreased fertility rate. However, this seems misleading since natural winter precedes spring, but there is no guarantee that this demographic winter will be followed by a corresponding spring. On the contrary, according to projections, it appears that winter will continue or even worsen. The situation merits serious reflection on the possible causes of this trend and actions that might help to reverse it.

I. Understanding the decline: Structural and cultural conditions shaping fertility decisions

The declining fertility rate responds to a multiplicity of causes and can be explained by different reasons in different regions and/or countries. It is clear that no single cause taken in isolation can account for the real complexity of the phenomenon. Since the causes are related to each other, we believe that all of them should be taken into account. In this section, we are interested in highlighting (A) economic difficulties of young couples, (B) the effects of the sexual revolution, and (C) the current zeitgeist.

A. *Financial and labor difficulties*

There seems to be a consensus among specialists that this generation lives worse, in economic terms, than their parents did. This is at least true for middle- and low-income youth although there are clear differences between countries (5, 6). Beaujouan and Berghammer's study measuring the potential reasons for a gap in fertility intention (stated lifetime family size ideals) versus actual fertility (total family size of the same birth cohort of women at a later date) state that the strongest factors for not reaching intended fertility were due to economic conditions and the inability to reconcile work and family demands (7). In Australia, falling birth rates are attributed to rising costs of childcare, insecure housing, and poor parental leave policies

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(8). In the United States, fertility decline correlates with expanded access to education, delayed marriage, and the aftermath of the 2008 recession, not a rejection of motherhood. The relaxation of the one-child policy in China has not led to higher birth rates among urban women, who cite workplace discrimination, care burdens, and familial expectations as key deterrents (9).

The instability of the labor market, the high cost of basic commodities, the impossibility of owning their own home and the inability to cover family expenses on a single salary are features that describe the situation of many young people globally and affect their ability to build the family they desire to have. As an example, consider the current price of housing, which is very high in urban centers (the places with the best job opportunities). One response to this problem has been the construction of "micro-apartments". In 2013, the Metropolitan Museum of New York organized an experiment called *Making Room*, in which a person lived in a 30-square-meter space (10). The aim of the experiment was to demonstrate that the quality of life was not affected by living in very small apartments, it was just a matter of "managing the space well". The romanticization of the worsening living conditions implied by this experiment is remarkable. The solution that the real estate market has offered is not designed for families, but for isolated individuals who spend as little time as possible at home.[3]

Difficulties in reconciling work and parental obligations also appear to be a major reason young people give up or postpone parenthood. The current participation of women in the labor market is a clear difference between the current time and that of the "baby boom" (12). The current economic situation often requires both parents to work outside the home and workplaces often do not offer childcare. In many countries, the alternatives appear to be daycare and/or private nannies, which can be costly. Improved life expectancy and meager retirements mean that many older adults are still in the labor market, causing today's young people to potentially have

[3] For a study on the impact of housing on fertility, see (11).

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less extended family support compared to those of previous generations.[4] The economic situation and lack of extended family/societal support make it challenging for couples to have a large family.

Several countries who have implemented policies rewarding or incentivizing couples who choose to have children give us reason to be cautious about their impact (14). In East Asia, state-led pronatalism has largely failed. South Korea's fertility rate has remained unchanged despite major investments in IVF subsidies and parental leave. Feminist analyses argue that government policies frame women as reproductive instruments while ignoring deeper structural issues such as gendered labor norms, extreme work hours, and unaffordable housing (15,16).

Currently, studies seem to indicate that "economic income" has a positive but marginal impact on the number of children a couple decides to have (17). These factors alone do not fully explain the phenomenon of declining fertility, why it has been declining since 1963 (when economic conditions were not so dire) nor why it affects populations with very diverse economic realities in a similar way.

B. *Sexual revolution and contraception*

Another factor contributing to low fertility rate is the sexual revolution that began during the 1960s, which changed cultural perspectives with regard to sex and interpersonal relationships. The idea of feminism and reproductive autonomy began to shape family life and influence reproductive decision-making. According to the Magisterium of the Church, the sexual act can only be rightly conceived as an act of conjugal love, which unites two inseparable aspects, namely, the unitive aspect and the procreative aspect (18, no. 12; 19, no. 2366). Sexual acts are an expression of the mutual and total self-giving that unites the spouses and, at the same time, an opening to the transmission of life. Although, as Pope Francis has pointed

[4] For a study that considers the importance of kin assistance in the US fertility transition between 1850 and 1935, see (13).

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out, at times, in the context of evangelizing work, some Catholics may overemphasize the procreative aspect to the detriment of the unitive one, both are indispensable (20, no. 36). The Magisterium emphasizes the moral virtue of *chastity*, which consists in a mastery of one's passions so that the person fully integrates sexuality into his or her state of life (single, married, celibate). Like any virtue, chastity requires spiritual work, divine grace and a cultural environment conducive to its development. As the Second Vatican Council states, "Man's social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on one another" (21, no. 25). Moreover, not just individuals but couples, as an union, are called to chastity (22, no. 9)

Some of the substantial cultural changes that the world has undergone since the 1960s are in opposition to the Catholic understanding of human dignity. Ultimately, these cultural changes are underpinned by a negative understanding of freedom, namely, as the absence of impediments to the satisfaction of one's subjective desires and drives. Within this approach, any impediment (moral or other) to the use of sexual faculties is perceived as an attack on freedom. Christian morality, on the other hand, proposes that properly identified limits to freedom are necessary for its full exercise. In the Magisterium, freedom is the capacity to choose what can be rationally recognized as good and just. This, in turn, implies the existence of objective moral criteria, which operate as constraints on the moral agent. When actions reflect a rejection of these objective constraints, the moral agent makes a disordered use of his or her freedom *qua* capacity, leading him or her to the "slavery of sin" (19, no. 1733; 23, nos. 3-6). As our Savior explicitly stated in the Gospel, it is the truth that sets us free (John 8:32).

One plausible driver of increased use of contraceptives since 1960 is the desire for sexual pleasure, without the probable and expected natural effects that this entails. The risk of pregnancy was seen as an impediment to the fully free use of sexual faculties, which contraception came to remove (24).

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As Leslie Woodcock Tentler (25) points out, contraceptive practices (by natural and artificial methods) were a source of public controversy in previous decades. On December 31, 1930, Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical *Casti Connubii*, reaffirming the constant teaching of the Church against contraception, in response to the Anglicans' Lambeth Conference of that same year which reversed its previous stance against birth control for a guarded blessing of its use in difficult marital circumstances (25, p. 73). But it was the appearance and massification of the contraceptive pill that produced a socio-cultural turning point. The contraceptive pill is seen as a pivotal part of the 1960s "sexual liberation" movement. According to Britt Ingjerd Nesheim, professor emerita and retired senior consultant at the Women's Clinic at Ullevål University Hospital and University of Oslo, "having access to a secure contraceptive made it possible to decide not to have children if you didn't want them. The opportunity to securely control your own sexuality and childbirth was something completely new" (26).

St. John Paul II rightly warned that the procreative aspect of the sexual act cannot be voluntarily undermined without denaturing its meaning as a human act and, finally, also undermining its unitive aspect (27, no. 32).[5] When sexual activity is conceived as a domain of human experience without objective limitations and governed by hedonism, interpersonal relationships are seriously impoverished (28, no. 23).[6]

[5] St. Paul VI also warned about the wrongness of attacking the unitive aspect: "Men rightly observe that a conjugal act imposed on one's partner without regard to his or her condition or personal and reasonable wishes in the matter, is no true act of love, and therefore offends the moral order in its particular application to the intimate relationship of husband and wife" (18, no. 13).

[6] The Magisterium of the Church condemns the "contraceptive mentality" that is implied in the widespread use of contraceptives, especially the contraceptive pill (but which can now be seen in contraceptive implants or chips), since the 1960s. For a philosophical defense of this teaching of the Magisterium, see (29). St. John Paul II' s *Familiaris Consortio* is the first encyclical in which the expression "contraceptive mentality" appears.

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Openness to life should be total but exercised prudentially. Couples may decide to space children or postpone conception for health, economic, or social reasons. This discernment is compatible with respect due to human dignity when aided by morally permissible family planning methods, which respect both the unitive and procreative dimensions of the conjugal act. One widely used approach is the Billings Ovulation Method, which helps couples identify fertile and infertile phases through observation of cervical mucus patterns, allowing couples to plan or avoid pregnancy without interfering with the natural fertility cycle.

The massive introduction of artificial contraceptive methods changed the way men and women perceive each other. People came to see each other as providers of experiences instead of recognizing the intrinsic worth of each person. The satisfaction of one's own subjective desires now becomes the ultimate justification for their actions, even if it uses and dispenses another human being as a material good. Louise Perry has developed the concept of "sexual disenchantment" to account for this phenomenon, which she considers especially harmful to women. In Perry's words: "Sexual disenchantment is a natural consequence of the liberal privileging of freedom over all other values, because, if you want to be utterly free, you have to take aim at any kind of social restrictions that limit you, particularly the belief that sex has some unique, intangible value" (30, chapter 1). The expected outcome of this denaturalization of sexual act seems to be loneliness, isolation and the inability to establish permanent commitments (31, pp. 119-121) -- precisely, the capacity necessary to imagine the possibility of forming a family, having children and assuming the corresponding parental responsibilities.

C. *Zeitgeist*

Cultural norms and challenges of this generation come together to create the current *zeitgeist*: a set of ideas, beliefs and feelings that mark a certain historical moment. We point out three features that allow

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us to illustrate, albeit incompletely, how this generation's zeitgeist is in tension with the possibility of developing a family life that is open to life.

First, in the current stage of liberal capitalism, a "pro-entrepreneurship" discourse is emphasized, in which people are called upon to "be their own bosses" and "manage their own schedules". This brings about a weakening of familial identity, replacing it with identification through participation in certain consumer choices, political parties, and workplaces (32). Whereas previous generations may have prioritized the importance of the good of the community/family, today's generation seems to prioritize the needs of the individual. The erosion of any permanent link between employees and employers is presented in the mass media and social media as progress in the relations of production.

This discourse is aimed at covering up the precariousness of the labor market, junk contracts and the atomization of the employee with respect to his or her coworkers. The great labor conquests of the 20th century, which arose because of the union struggle, would have been much more difficult to obtain in a context of atomization such as the current one. In such an individualistic society, it is harder to share challenges with one another and find common ground to seek a collective solution. This leads to the feeling of isolation, a personalization of these problems and a negative impact on mental health.

Second, the current zeitgeist discourages human experiences that imply a greater degree of vulnerability and dependence on others. The human being is conceived as a "self-sufficient" individual, who achieves his fulfillment in the success of the projects he has given himself. This anthropology has been referred to by some authors as "individualistic expressivism" (33). An effect of this is the devaluation of all those people (born or unborn) who cannot respond to this model of self-sufficiency. Contrary to what this approach postulates, human beings throughout their lives go through different instances of dependence and vulnerability, not only in childhood, in

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old age or because of a disability (34, p. 49). The human being is naturally a communal being, who depends on the actions of others to flourish *qua* human being in the context of a community. The fragility and the needs of the other members of the great human family impose positive moral duties on us, from which we cannot voluntarily detach ourselves. The most valuable accomplishments a person can achieve involve total commitment, ergo, a greater degree of dependence and vulnerability toward others. Among these is marriage and having children.

Third, there is a marked tendency towards the denial of the exceptional character of the human being in creation. This tendency is expressed in two ways, the first is in certain environmentalist discourses adopting a Malthusian or misanthropic approach, according to which human procreation would be a problem for the earth and climate (35- 37). Human beings have a special moral status within creation because of the distinctive characteristics that define their nature. Men and women are endowed with intelligence or rational capacity (which enables them to know themselves, to know the rest of creation and to access moral truths), free will (to conform their actions to the demands of moral truths) and are called to holiness (to enter a personal, full and eternal love relationship with their creator). The exceptionality of these qualities of the human spiritual soul, which indicate its transcendental destiny, was captured by G. K. Chesterton in *The Everlasting Man* (1925) in the following expression: "Man is not merely an evolution but rather a revolution".

Arguably, at times the assertion that humans are different from the rest of creation has led to a form of destructive relationship with the environment and animals. This destructive relationship was strongly denounced by Pope Francis (38). The earth (with its fruits and animals) has been given to men and women as a divine gift to be subdued and to provide for their needs, but also for them to take care of and protect for future generations (19, no. 2456). Catholic engagement with population decline must be attentive to ecological limits and intergenerational responsibility. Scholars working in the

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wake of Laudato Si', such as Celia Deane-Drummond (39) and Daniel P. Scheid (40), caution against framing fertility primarily in terms of economic productivity or national survival. Some accounts of voluntary childlessness, they note, emerge not from individualism but from a sense of solidarity with future generations and nonhuman creation. Christiana Peppard (41) similarly emphasizes that care for human life cannot be severed from care for the ecological systems that sustain it. A morally robust response to declining fertility must situate reproductive decisions within a broader horizon of care for the common home.

That said, we believe that Malthusian environmentalist discourses pose a false dilemma: there is no reason to choose between environmental care and sustained human procreation. But to avoid this false dilemma it is necessary to revise the current mode of production and consumption of goods. The Malthusian discourse implicitly presupposes the impossibility of designing an economic and social system that places the satisfaction of human needs at the center (including the need for a certain degree of demographic stability) in a way that is compatible with human dignity and respect for creation. But it is possible to reject this premise by modifying the present economic and social system and promoting alternative forms of communitarian and global life. In the words of Pope Francis:

> But human life is not a problem, it is a gift. And at the root of pollution and starvation in the world are not children being born, but the choices of those who think only of themselves, the delirium of an unbridled, blind and rampant materialism, of a consumerism that, like an evil virus, undermines the existence of people and society at the root. The problem is not how many of us there are in the world, but the world that we are building - this is the problem; not children, but selfishness, which creates injustice and structures of sin, to the point of weaving unhealthy interdependencies between social, economic and political systems (2).

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The second way in which we tend to undermine the human character is in the increased way of conceiving the treatment of domestic animals as similar to the treatment of children (42). As Pope Francis pointed out at the General Audience of January 5, 2022, many couples prefer to have pets instead of children in their lives (43). The Magisterium of the Church acknowledges that one may love animals, but such affection should not be directed toward them in place of the love due to human persons. (19, no. 2418). The bond that can be established with a pet is of a different nature than that with a child (natural or adopted). Preferring a pet to a child can be explained by the desire not to be bound by the demanding parental obligations that one has towards a child by virtue of its special moral *status qua* human being. The expression of love that a person makes within a relationship is normatively conditioned by the nature of the loved one.

II. Addressing the challenge by focusing on human dignity

A Catholic response to declining fertility is best articulated not as a demand for higher birthrates but as a commitment to social structures that honor human dignity across the life course. Drawing on David Hollenbach's account of solidarity and the common good, such an approach would prioritize just wages, accessible healthcare, care for the elderly, and the ethical welcome of migrants alongside support for families (44). Interpreting *Amoris Laetitia* through the work of family ethicists such as Julie Hanlon Rubio (45) and Lisa Sowle Cahill (46) underscores that moral growth occurs through accompaniment and attention to concrete circumstances rather than abstract demographic ideals. Under these conditions, openness to life may emerge as a response to justice rather than coercion.

Any proposal to address the declining fertility rate, to be morally robust from a Catholic perspective, must consider the eternal purpose for which we are created. We believe that the Magisterium of the Church offers a comprehensive vision of the human person,

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human sexuality, and the interconnectedness of human experience, serving as a remedy to the current state of affairs. Solutions that are in opposition to God's design for creation and undermine the dignity of the human person will be unsustainable in withstanding cultural changes and challenges that will present itself through generations to come. The following list has no hierarchical order and is not intended to be exhaustive but aims to set some points of consideration.

A. *Catholic desiderata*

Pro-natalist policies as pro-marriage policies: Any policy aimed at supporting an increase in fertility rate must primarily promote the marriage institution, within which births are to take place. The family is the "original cell of social life" (19, no. 2207) and civil authorities have a grave duty "to acknowledge the true nature of marriage and the family, to protect and foster them" (19, no. 2210).[7] Faced with the challenge that low fertility rate represents for economic stability, important figures in public debate have declared themselves "pro-natalist." Probably the most famous is Elon Musk, who has fathered 14 children with four different women, many of whom were born through IVF. Positions that conceive fertility as a strictly economic problem (or, in some communitarian variants, as a challenge to the preservation of certain racial, religious, or national groups) are dangerously misguided. Children are not a social commodity, but a gift from God, who have the right to be "the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his parents" (19, no. 2378).

From a catholic perspective, procreation should not be promoted simply as a response to social or economic pressures, such that any policy that increases births would be acceptable. Instead, ethical family policy emphasizes justice, the well-being of both parents,

[7] We affirm the catholic understanding of the marriage institution, namely, the indissoluble union between one man and one woman. This understanding has been recently argued for by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (47).

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and the dignity of children, rather than only demographic targets. Demographic stability is a positive side effect that arises because of men and women committing themselves, for life, to a covenant that is open to life. Thus, thinking about fertility, from a catholic perspective, requires attention to the cultural, social, and moral conditions that make people want to marry and start a family, including supportive healthcare, social equality, and reproductive justice. Policies that ignore these dimensions risk instrumentalizing women and children, failing to protect their dignity (for an argument against the instrumental use of procreation, see 48, chapter 5).

Ban on reproductive alternatives that violate human dignity: The Magisterium of the Church condemns the use of artificial reproductive techniques that involve the freezing, manipulation and discarding of embryos which establish a dissociation between fertilization and the personal conjugal act of the spouses (49, no. 4). Likewise, the practice of surrogacy must be rejected, not only because it incurs in the aforementioned dissociation between fertilization and the conjugal act, but also because it violates the dignity of the pregnant woman, who places her body at the service of the desire of others, and of the child, who is reduced to a commodity to be traded on the market (50, nos. 48-50)

Equality between men and women: At times, the weight of the social view on the number of children is placed unequally on women. From a catholic perspective, this is a mistake. Openness to life in marriage is a matter for men and women equally, working together in different roles to provide a suitable home and environment where their children can flourish. Care must be taken that the improvement in fertility rate does not come only at the expense of a worsening of women's professional and/or academic opportunities. catholic moral theology has increasingly emphasized women's moral agency in reproductive decision-making. Cristina Traina (51) and Margaret Farley (52) argue that reproductive choices are not merely biological acts but expressions of embodied moral discernment shaped by relational responsibilities, vulnerability, and justice. From this perspective, declining fertility cannot be interpreted as a moral

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failure without first attending to the conditions under which women are asked to bear and raise children.

The current economic situation calls society to create infrastructure that provides accessible childcare services, reasonable parental leave for both parents, and greater flexibility to accommodate work and parental obligations.[8] Governments and societies should also provide resources for those families who choose to have one spouse work in the home ("stay at home"). This can include financial incentives to have parents stay at home and care for their own children and making public places more accessible and welcoming for families with young children (e.g. changing tables available in both gender bathrooms). Additionally, it is important for society to create a culture that welcomes children and foster a hopeful outlook on our future: with movies and books to include scenarios where both parents are competent at caring for their children, and with life-affirming rather than an apocalyptic view of the future. Such societal infrastructure and outlook can make it possible for couples to yearn for children and discern the best way to provide for their family.

Respect for vocations: The Church recognizes that some are called marriage and others to celibacy. It is important that, in the context of a demographic crisis, people who have vocations that include celibacy or virginity are not wrongly condemned as selfish (20, nos. 148-152). All human beings should exercise the virtue of chastity according to his or her state of life (19, no. 2349). In fact, the Son of God, the supreme model of moral virtue, practiced chastity voluntarily outside of marriage and did not have children.

The dignity of the elderly: In a flourishing society open to life, it is also important to value and recognize the dignity of those who are past childbearing age. Concern for the scarce generation of new lives should not imply a disregard for the lives of older adults. In aging societies, older adults tend to be seen as a problem to be solved and not as people with dignity, who demand fair treatment and care

[8] Recent research shows the positive impact that remote work had on fertility rates in the US, see (53).

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according to their needs. A pro-natalist policy should involve all generations in building the community life that future children will join. The elderly have an important role as transmitters of cultural and historical memory of their people. It is their presence in homes, clubs, parishes, schools, squares, and not their discarding in hospices and residences, which will allow the new members of the human family to recognize themselves as part of a history that precedes them and that they will continue to write (28, no. 94).

Immigration, equality and polyhedron: The challenge posed by population decline may be an opportunity for many countries to welcome people seeking a better future, some of them escaping war, famine and/or persecution. It is important that two conditions are met in the process of welcoming the foreigner: the immigrant should not be received as a second-class citizen, but as a brother, in whom we recognize Christ himself (55, no. 84), and openness should not imply an abandonment of one's own cultural traits. Countries have a right and a duty to protect their local culture. Only by strengthening one's own characteristics and traditions can one open and perceive the original and distinctive contribution of the other. This should result in communities being richer in culture and traditions. As Pope Francis affirmed: "Everyone loves and cares for his or her native land and village, just as they love and care for their home and are personally responsible for its upkeep" (54, no. 143).

From a Catholic social and ecological perspective, immigration and demographic policies must also consider sustainability and justice for future generations. Population trends, family size, and migration are closely linked to environmental stewardship and equitable resource distribution (38). Communities that embrace diversity while attending to ecological and social sustainability embody the "polyhedron" model, in which each face retains its unique value (54, nos. 144-145).

B. *Two arguments for the openness to life*

Openness to life is a moral and theological obligation intrinsic to marriage, independent of a nation's fertility rate. Couples are called

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to discern their openness in the context of their marital vocation, health, and social circumstances, exercising moral agency while respecting the dignity of each family member. This openness is not a mere abstract principle; it involves concrete decisions, prudential judgment, and ethical responsibility toward children, the family, the community, and creation. Up to this point, we have focused on the causes that might explain why people do not have children. We will now briefly mention two arguments to support why it is morally desirable for couples to adopt an open-to-life stance.

Duties towards community and future generations: It seems to be true that we may have moral duties towards future generations. For example, one argues of the negative effects that not fulfilling care for our environment would have on future generations. Also, it is reasonable to think that there may be duties to contribute to a cooperative scheme whose benefits we will enjoy later. For example, imagine that a group of neighbors decides to build a shelter to protect themselves from a heavy snowfall during the harsh winter. If a person benefits from the existence of such shelter in the future and it is within his reach to collaborate in its construction without incurring an unreasonable cost to himself and without performing an intrinsically immoral act, then it would be at least morally desirable for him to collaborate with the group of neighbors. Similarly, it can be argued that there is a *pro tanto* moral duty or, at least, that it would be morally desirable for individuals to contribute to the demographic stability of their community. In societies with a sustained fertility rate below the replacement rate, the young of future generations will face greater difficulties in sustaining health, security and welfare systems. The negative effect on the welfare of the future generations creates a moral reason to maintain a position of openness to life, when it does not involve unreasonable costs nor intrinsically immoral actions. Finally, since human beings are by nature communal and interdependent beings, all members of a community will benefit from some degree of demographic stability. People who choose not to procreate will, in the future, benefit from others choosing to procreate, from taking on caregiving roles, or producing technological

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innovations to improve quality of life. Given that the benefit will have an impact on all members of the community, a contribution in accordance with that benefit can be expected; we insist, when this does not entail an unreasonable cost (such as abandoning one's vocation) or intrinsically immoral acts (such as reproduction outside the conjugal act).

Formation of virtues: The family can be conceived as a school of moral virtues, not only for children but also for their parents. As the *Catechism* points out, "the family should live in such a way that its members learn to care and take responsibility for the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped, and the poor" (19, no 2208). A person is more likely to become more perceptive of the injustices of the current situation when she has children. For example, she will perceive more acutely the ignominy of a miserable salary when she cannot support the food, education or health of her three children than when she is a single, atomized individual living in a "micro-apartment". You will quickly identify the "throwaway culture" and the health care system as a "structure of sin" when you learn about the abortion of babies who have a disability like your child. You will recognize the harmful impact of the "hyper sexualization" of countless aspects of social life when you seek to preserve your child from that influence. You will feel reflected in the cry of a mother weeping over the death of her child because of the bombing of a civilian population in the context of a war. This does not imply that a person who does not have a marital vocation cannot reach a keen perception of these injustices. It is simply that parental obligations towards children make the parent-child relationship a more favorable context for the development of this point of view and, ultimately, for the flourishing of the human being in conformity with the moral virtues of justice (the disposition to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good: 19, no. 1807). Parenthood fosters justice, prudence, compassion, and attentiveness to human dignity, while children themselves remain ends in their own right. Through daily care, moral formation, and

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shared responsibilities, parents develop virtues that benefit not only their children but also the broader community.

III. Concluding remarks

The current decline in fertility rate merits reflection and attention so that future generations may continue to flourish. Societal outlook on having large families and raising children has changed partly due to economic challenges faced by young couples, the effects of sexual revolution, and the current zeitgeist. Young people face complex economic and labor challenges that impede their desire for marriage that is fully open to life. At the same time, there is a cultural background that discourages permanent commitments and projects an image of the human being as an atomized individual, with a moral status equivalent to that of the rest of creation.

To truly understand the problem, such as the thought process that young couples undergo in deciding to have a child or more children, more qualitative studies should be done globally. Themes from these studies may emerge to discover challenges and concerns that affect today's young generation and ultimately can help in identifying solutions. This paper is just a contribution for a necessary ongoing debate.

The complexity of the problem suggests the likely need for a multifaceted solution to effect cultural change. Today, we are inundated by news of ongoing war, violence and destruction that can foster a sense of hopelessness for our world. Themes that emerge in our art, books, and media augment this apocalyptic view: humans being replaced by robots, spouses in conflict with each other resulting in broken marriages, as well as death and destruction of societies and the world. Perhaps we can make a conscious effort to reflect on the goodness of creation and friendship, the beauty in the presence and innocence of children and other cultures, as well as the wisdom of the older generation. Artists, writers and entertainers should explore and present themes of this kind. Families that live these realities with joy, despite difficulties, can inspire others to do the same.

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All while working to improve societal aspects that can promote human flourishing.

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