THE VALUE OF LIFE

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IN THE EARLY 1960S Julian Simon convinced me that the dire conclusions of population "experts," including the belief that we were at sometime in the future likely to squeeze one another to death, had little scientific foundation and no economic warrant. I had come to a similar belief, namely, that we were being seriously led astray by tracts such as Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*,[i] on the basis of moral and spiritual considerations. Consequently, I was greatly disturbed by our attempt to bring these arguments before Catholic students at the Newman Club at the University of Illinois. Our presentation on the value of life, argued on both economic and moral grounds, met much resistance, even some hostility. Moreover, the response was thoughtlessly prejudicial, made without reference to scientific evidence and without consideration of what I took to be traditional Catholic doctrine and belief. This dismaying conclusion led me to try to set out a simple enunciation of what you might call lay Catholic beliefs in ways that partially paralleled Julian Simon's scientific arguments. My contention went (and still largely goes) roughly as follows.

We have been subjected, courtesy of Planned Parenthood, the Zero Population Growth movement, and other such groups, to a concerted campaign of population-control designed to constrain the size of the population of the United States and of other counties. That campaign has had a strong impact on Americans generally as well as on American Catholics. In presenting their case against population-growth these groups rely upon some exceedingly shaky scientific evidence. But, more to the point, they call into question the notion that life itself is a value, a value superordinate to other values that animate social life. This value—the value of life itself, unmodified and uncompromised—has been the center of Catholic experience, Catholic belief, and Catholic liturgy. The Church, as a community of people, can perform a spiritual as well as a social service in these times by preaching to Catholics and to non-Catholics alike the value of life as the central value in human affairs.

But is life the central value in Catholic thought? I always presumed that it was. The admonition to "be fruitful and multiply" was part of a shared heritage of Judaism and Christianity, and it is more than an incitement to copulation or domination. Life is the greatest gift of God to man. The ability to create life is God's noblest bestowal upon us, and, in turn, the creation of life the greatest gift we can return to God. It is, I think, the central belief of Catholicism: not only did the Word become flesh, but in return the flesh became word. However mean or dispirited in a material sense, life remains the source of awe, mystery, and joy.

And it is precisely this sense of life that the population-control movement attempts to undercut. By playing on a modern reversal of meanings, such movements find that life, as it is ordinarily lived, is awful rather than awe-full. In the literature of this movement, there is a frequent metaphor in which life consists of "worms in a bucket." People in groups and crowds are described as "massed" and "teeming." They are depicted as consuming the earth: eating, fornicating, defecating, and despoiling. Such people are rarely seen as spiritual creatures, creatures capable of love, nobility, and friendship, capable of contributing to a shared life. This image and this metaphor have taken over the discussion of population: an image of massed humanity and a metaphor of animality. Its implicit commitment is to the belief that life is only really lived in American communities at a particular standard of living; others, living at "lower" standards of living are less alive, less spiritual, less human. This image and metaphor, and the beliefs that they harbor, are contrary to Catholic experience and values.

I am hardly one to discuss the Church's doctrine on these matters. But I have looked at John Noonan's histories of Catholic attitudes toward contraception and abortion, and I believe that his work is consistent with the mainstream of Catholic thought. Discussions of contraception, abortion, and infanticide arose within a Catholic community living amidst the Roman Empire, where these were widespread practices. "By these signs they shall know us." Christians distinguished themselves from the Roman community by the reverence they expressed for life. Early Christians opposed these ordinary practices of Roman life, not only because they were morally repugnant in themselves but because they sinned against a larger conception of human nature and human value. It should be remembered that the central iconography of the early Church was not the crucifixion. It should also be remembered that an emphasis on death does not preclude—in fact, it often discloses—an intense interest in life: metaphorically, through death into life. Not until the tenth century does the crucifixion move from a marginal to a central place in Christian iconography. Early Christian art is concerned with healing, miracles, and hopeful aspects of the faith such as the Ascension and the Resurrection. In this respect, the focus of church art and liturgy was a direct expression of the force of life itself: growth, healing, exfoliation. To many modern minds, including some Catholics, this belief now seems naive and parochial.

The early Church, the doctrinal Church, was drawn to a stand on contraception and abortion because these practices pointed beyond themselves toward a value at the root of the Christian community: the value of life itself and the supreme position of this value relative to those other clamorous values with which it has always struggled: wealth, power, success, domination. But to discover the value of life in Catholic experience and belief, one needs to look beyond the doctrinal Church to the living community. In an exchange of letters between John Henry Cardinal Newman and Sir James Stephens, Stephens implores Newman to take up the attack against the Utilitarians, "the most subtle enemy which Christianity has ever had." Newman replies something to the effect that Stephens had it wrong: the Utilitarians attacked the doctrines of the Church, but the Church was not principally her doctrines. It is in the Church of sacraments and tradition, the Church as community, that one encounters the value of life. No one, let us remember, ever joined the Church and only few leave it because of a conflict over abstract doctrine. One joins and stays with the Church because of what one encounters sacramentally: the actual physical exchange through taste, touch, and ear with the Godhead, that sacramental realization and promise that one will come to know life in spiritual community. These central sacramental symbols are precisely about life itself. To put it this way—the only way possible in discursive prose—is immediately to distort the matter. The "idea of life" is never experienced as an "idea" about anything. The Church is not about ideas. Life is experienced through touch, taste, and sight as an immediately apprehensible truth and reality. It is not a doctrine to be debated or a truth to be realized by the methods of formal philosophy.

There are two ways of losing sight of the central place that life holds as a value in the Church. The first is to become preoccupied by the connection of the central symbols of ritual to death. On Passion Sunday, on Ash Wednesday, and on Good Friday one is directly reminded of the power of death. But one cannot be interested in life without also being interested in death. (It is the attempt to deny both that is so troubling in modern culture.) One is merely the reverse of the other. Those who find life the ultimate value will also, at least in general, be intensely interested in death: in the special meanings and possibilities that the shadow of death casts back upon life.

The second way to miss the point of the living Church is to assume that life is a central value only insofar as it is spiritual life that we are discussing, to assume that spiritual life has no direct, intrinsic connection and linkage to human, corporeal life. Yet, the most attractive figure in the modern Church, St. Francis, contradicts such a view, and his immense influence stems from his capacity to blend the spiritual and the natural. His joyful prayers and canticles celebrate the world he so happily abjured.

Whenever life is presented in the liturgy of the Catholic community, spiritual life and human life are happily interfused. One does not live spiritually by casting up a world of forms independent of the concretely human. In the liturgy, therefore, there is a constant, reiterated presentation of the spiritual and the natural fused, but not transcended, in metaphor: "it will become for us the bread of life," "by rising from the dead he destroyed death and restored life," "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come," "the Lord and Giver of life."

The same emphasis is found in the liturgical calendar, which fixed the beginning of the year in Advent, like the beginning of life in pregnancy. Life is seen as human and divine at Christmastide, and as if to punctuate the relation of humanity and divinity, the Annunciation is placed nine months before the birth of Christ. The entire liturgical year pivots about this central event of birth.

These values, of course, were never exclusively Catholic. The Church in its early years attempted to vivify pagan celebrations of life by deepening and widening their spiritual significance. The ancient practices of bouncing seeds off the buttocks of a woman during planting or throwing the same seeds at the womb of a bride testifies eloquently to the longstanding reverence for life and the capacity for so-called primitive peoples to see life in a spiritual context. Contemporary people are so often divorced from this structure of feeling that they can see in the central symbols of primitive art—the representation of female genitals—only superstition or eroticism or nascent pornography. But if one is part of a people who revere life, who find it the central, mysterious principle of existence, who see it manifest in the regenerative, creative power of nature, the primal linkage of the self and the world, then how better to represent this mystery and belief in potent and dramatic form than in the sexual organs. The breast engorged with milk is the gift of nature that sustains the gift of life.

Catholic tradition infused these pagan practices with the personage of Christ and Mary: Mother as creator and child as the gift of life. From the personage derives the central core of Catholic belief: that it is good to increase life, to share it with as many as can partake of its banquet. The value is not thoughtless; it incorporates a prudential world of limitation and complication. Yet, within that recognition is a commitment to the vocation of life.

A brief passage from a book at once intensely Catholic and deeply agnostic, one of the greatest books written in English in contemporary times, William

Gibson's *A Mass for the Dead*,[ii] brings home this commitment to life in unusually vivid terms. Gibson wrote his "mass" as a substitute for offering one, and the sections of the book bear such titles as "*Sanctus*," "*Pater Noster*," "*Confiteor*," "*Dies Ira[e]*," and "*Ite, Missa Est*." In a section entitled "*Kyrie*" he writes of his dead uncle and of the relationship of his uncle to his own children:

> It is my uncle's shadow that falls upon my boys. The sense of mortality irks them at odd moments, and sleepless at bedtime one boy invites me to "figure out a way" he need not die, and I think how the animal wants to live; sitting at his hip I say he will be immortal in his son as I am in mine, which satisfied neither of us....
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> But when he is asleep, and I am out on the hill for my nightly count of stars, I think, is this townful of roofs not a miracle? I can tell my son how we have dug for the forgotten hands and surmised a million centuries that crept by the beast living isolate in caves; only yesterday he perceived that in bands he might overcome the mammoth and changed wilderness into cities; and he did not rape, homicide, plunder, incest, cannibalism; he laid down another imperative, it was the tool he invented chief of all tools, and it moved the earth. He called it conscience, a knowing together, and I can tell my boy it is our warranty of human life, which houses us under the hopes of these roofs.
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> Tonight the wind is contaminated; on other roofs in each country men are measuring the fall of the shadow, strontium, carbon, cesium, across the loins of every child.... Murder enough is around me on this hill, mole, snake, owl, and I make this eleison to the stars.... Now, as before it is outgrow or die.... And faint in the roar of the foundries I hear again the feet of my father walking the streets of the city that year, with his brother dead, when... he marked on the calendar for the wife and kids his vow to outgrow, and taught me the animal wants to live.
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> It is his eleison I make. Have mercy upon my increase. And thus saith God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited.

Not in vain, but to be inhabited, to be filled with life; this is the essence of Catholic life as I understand it. An essence consistent, as Julian Simon has argued, with the laws of economics, but more to the point, consistent with the essence of the Christian admonition: "I have that you may have life and have it abundantly."

As a Catholic I am worried that this essence is draining out of the Catholic community, partly because it has been under savage assault from those who find life an affront to nature and mechanics and, paradoxically enough, from those as well who center on the problem of abortion and on the Right to Life movement. We are the ultimate heirs, the contemporary proprietors, of a grand and noble vision of the value of life and that is what we must keep firmly in mind. Life is the issue, social, moral, and theological—not the selling of condoms in Connecticut or the performance of abortion in New York. Abortion is only a concern in terms of the larger theological commitment to what is behind and transcendent to it: life itself in all its enigma and complexity. Abortion may, I fear, stand in the same relationship to Catholic history as did the temperance movement to Protestant history: an episode in which a people win a battle but lose a culture. Protestants, too, tried to reform a community not by witness and humility, but by assertiveness and constitutional amendment. In struggling so hard with the dragon, they became a kind of dragon themselves. In order to secure legislative and congressional acceptance, Catholics may have to redefine their entire culture so much that they forget the historical meaning and experience that animates their concern and thus win a merely pyrrhic victory. Catholics must largely accept the secular definitions of life in order to struggle politically for the "right to life." But the right to life is not just a constitutional right, not a legal right, not even a natural right in the Western political sense. Life, its growth and development and enhancement, as a gift from God and for God is the Catholic value, and no court, only a community of faith and belief, will adequately protect it.

The great contribution which the Catholic community has to make to contemporary life is not to struggle in the courts and legislatures about technical definitions of whether or not the fetus is protected by the first ten amendments, although in simple justice I think that it should be. Its real contribution comes from the commitment, as witnessed presentation, that life is the central value in human experience. Catholics are the only group (the Latter Day Saints excepted) in which this value, this sense, is a known remnant of historical experience and living theological concern. The nurture of this sense is the contribution of Catholics to themselves and to the wider community in which they live.

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i. Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (Rivercity Press, 1968).

ii. William Gibson, *A Mass for the Dead* (Pleasantville: Akadine Press, 1996).