

# FAITH, FAMILY AND FERTILITY: INTRODUCTION

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This special issue of the *Heythrop Journal*, guest edited by Julie Clague, is devoted to the theme of 'Faith, Family and Fertility'. It is the product of two colloquia held at Campion Hall, Oxford on 1–2 July 2013 and 9–11 April 2014 under the aegis of the Heythrop Institute: Religion and Society. These colloquia brought together theologians, social scientists and public health and international development professionals in order to discuss Catholic approaches to matters concerning family and fertility.<sup>1</sup> While the family and fertility are topics of perennial concern they have been the subject of particular interest in recent months, reflecting events both inside and outside the Church. Within the Church, the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on 'Pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelisation' has captured the interest of Catholics worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the ecclesial walls, yet of great importance to Catholics across the globe, have been the high level discussions at the United Nations concerning world population dynamics and the post-2015 sustainable development agenda.<sup>3</sup> The articles in the current issue of the *Heythrop Journal* seek to contribute to the wider discussions on these important matters.

In October 2013, a few months after his election to the papacy and in one of his first acts as pontiff, Pope Francis convened a third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, held in Rome, 5–19 October 2014, on the theme 'Pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelisation'. The call for an Extraordinary General Assembly was remarkable given that an Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, on the theme 'Jesus Christ reveals the mystery and vocation of the family', was already scheduled for 4–25 October 2015. Interest among Catholics was heightened by the request to Bishops made by Cardinal Baldisseri, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, that the Preparatory Document for the Extraordinary Assembly, which contained a series of consultation questions, be circulated 'as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received regarding the themes and responses to the questionnaire, as well as any helpful statistics, for the preparation of the *Instrumentum laboris*'.<sup>4</sup> This unprecedented outreach to local churches, and the explicit attempt to consult clergy and laity regarding the pastoral challenges facing families, prompted widespread discussion within the Church on family matters and generated a great eagerness to contribute to the Synod consultation.

Julie Clague's 'Catholics, Families and the Synod of Bishops' traces the preparations for the Extraordinary General Assembly, examines some of the available data about Catholic attitudes to the contemporary pastoral challenges facing families, and discusses the implications of these findings for the Synod. Reliable sociological data on family life that can inform the Synod deliberations is not in extensive supply for all parts of the Catholic world. However, Monique Baujard, Director of the Family and Society division of the Bishops' Conference of France, in 'Perspectives on Birth Rates and Responsible Parenthood in France', offers an analysis of

*Familles 2011*, a detailed study of family life in France commissioned by the French Bishops. Baujard provides data on marriage and childbearing trends in France, details the challenges facing contemporary French families, and discusses how the French government's family-friendly policies influence couples' decisions about child raising. Though the French situation is in some respects unique, many of the trends in family life identified in *Familles 2011* are being replicated across Europe and beyond.

The articles by Ethna Regan, Head of Theology at Mater Dei Institute in Dublin, and Joseph Selling, Emeritus Professor of Moral Theology at the Catholic University of Leuven, are text-based analyses of magisterial teaching. In 'Barely Visible: The Child in Catholic Social Teaching', Ethna Regan points to an area of magisterial teaching that is somewhat under-developed, highlighting 'the paucity of references to children' and the comparative neglect of the child as a subject of concern in the papal and conciliar documents of the Church. She also identifies 'an imbalance between the consideration given to unborn and born children'. There is no dearth of Church teaching on the regulation of fertility, which is the focus of Joseph Selling's article. In 'Regulating Fertility and Clarifying Moral Language', Selling outlines the development of Catholic teaching on the regulation of births during the twentieth-century and discusses the language used (such as 'intrinsic evil') to express the key aspects of Church teaching. Selling argues that 'the official teaching of the church with regard to the regulation of fertility suffers from a lack of clarity that leads to confusion and impedes comprehension'. This failure to communicate effectively on the part of the Church, such as through the frequent recourse to arcane or ill-defined concepts in the presentation of Catholic sexual ethics, was identified as a contributory factor in the non-reception of Church teaching during the consultation for the Synod of Bishops meeting in October 2014.

The year 2014 marks the twentieth anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994. The Cairo conference proved to be a contentious and deeply divisive affair, where questions of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and reproductive rights became a focus for sometimes antagonistic confrontations between conservative groups, including the Holy See, and pro-choice women's groups. Notwithstanding these polarised debates, 179 governments signed up to the ICPD Programme of Action in 1994, which set out a twenty-year agenda for international action on population and development.<sup>5</sup> The most significant (and controversial) aspects of the Programme of Action involved the pledges to provide universal access to family planning, sexual and reproductive health services and reproductive rights, and to promote gender equality, the empowerment of women, and equal access to education for girls. The ICPD Programme of Action also influenced the formulation of the eight millennium development goals (MDGs) at the Millennium Summit in 2000, which set a target date of the end of 2015 for the achievement of these key development indicators.<sup>6</sup> Attention has now turned to the ICPD beyond 2014,<sup>7</sup> and to the post-2015 development agenda, specifically in defining the sustainable development goals.<sup>8</sup> Along with other civil society organisations, faith communities and faith-based organisations (FBOs) are being encouraged to play a full role in the formulation and delivery of the post-2015 sustainable development agenda.<sup>9</sup>

The ICPD has affected the lives of Catholics in a variety of ways; the remaining articles in this themed issue explore this connection. The Philippines, where 80% of the population is Catholic, is a signatory to the ICPD Programme of Action. However, for over a decade, Church opposition stymied government efforts to expand sex education and access to birth control. In 'The Catholic Church and the Reproductive Health Bill Debate: The Philippine Experience', Eric Genilo SJ, of Loyola School of Theology in Manila, analyses the history and nature of the Church's opposition to the *Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act 2012* and

examines the effect of the Philippine Church's tactics on its moral authority and influence in Philippine society. Fr. Genilo draws some lessons from this episode for the Church as a whole.

The ICPD Programme of Action signalled a shift in international discourse on population, which reflected the more extensive participation by and inclusion of community groups in the shaping of international development policies. The ICPD moved international discourse on population away from a depersonalised statistical focus based upon state control of population numbers towards a person-centred (if somewhat individualistic) focus based upon respect for human rights and gender equality (female empowerment).<sup>10</sup> In other words, population policies – formerly the exclusive domain of national and international actors – came to be viewed in a more devolved, democratic and participatory manner and were rebranded (not unproblematically) in terms of reproductive choice as an expression of the responsibility and right of the individual and family. This ICPD ethos was an attempt to connect large-scale, high-level population and development policy to the real lives, wellbeing and moral agency of individuals and communities. It is now widely accepted that it is a right and proper goal to enable individuals to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and access sexual and reproductive health services. Somewhat controversially, the same informed decision making approach to SRH has been adopted by the Dutch Catholic development agency Cordaid, which promotes family planning and the use of condoms in HIV prevention. In 'Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Practice of the Dutch Catholic Development Agency Cordaid', René Grotenhuis, who served as Cordaid's Chief Executive Officer 2003–2013, discusses the factors that influenced Cordaid's policy on SRH and offers a justification for its stance.

For a variety of reasons, the international development and public health worlds have developed an increasingly secular bent in recent decades. This is despite the importance of faith to the vast majority of the world's population. In this secular context, religion and religious values are not well understood. As a result, faith may be treated with suspicion or dealt with inappropriately. In her role as senior advisor on culture at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Azza Karam works closely with faith communities and faith-based development agencies. UNFPA has been in the vanguard of building linkages with faith-based actors within the UN system, thereby helping to connect the faith communities to the largely secularised international development and global health worlds and overcome some of the mutual suspicions that exist on both sides – especially in relation to the contentious issues of sexual and reproductive health. Karam's article 'On Faith, Health and Tensions: An Overview from an Inter-governmental Perspective' sets out the reasons why, at the inter-governmental level, the faith communities are increasingly recognised to be essential partners in tackling the many health challenges across the globe. The most basic reason is that faith groups are major providers of health care and health-related services around the world. Faith groups are also important channels for service delivery to grassroots and hard-to-reach communities. UN agencies and faith groups collaborate in areas such as maternal and child health, malaria, tuberculosis, polio, HIV treatment and care, disability-related health issues, many aspects of gender-based violence, and engaging men and boys around family health matters. Karam notes that the extensive HIV care and support that faith communities provide has done much to improve secular perceptions of religious actors. Tensions arise, however, concerning faith groups' attitudes to sexuality, gender, and reproduction, and concerning politicised religion and the proselytising agendas of certain faith groups. Karam argues that where concerns over the religious exploitation of vulnerable populations exist, these 'should be addressed in a more studied fashion and should not be allowed to stand in the way of important partnerships needed

to address critical matters of health and human dignity'. She concludes that inter-governmental outreach to key partners in the world of religion is highly necessary.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the UN is explored in some detail by Tina Beattie, Professor of Catholic Studies at Roehampton University, in 'Whose Rights, Which Rights? – The United Nations, the Vatican, Gender and Sexual and Reproductive Rights'. Beattie argues that 'if the Church is to make a constructive contribution to promoting sustainable human development in keeping with Catholic social teaching, then it needs to rethink the role played by the Holy See in the UN'. Beattie contends that 'the Holy See has undermined its moral authority in the UN by aligning itself uncritically with the politics of religious conservatism as far as sexual ethics are concerned'. She demonstrates the linkages between the Vatican and the American Christian right around issues of marriage, the family, homosexuality and abortion. Such alliances, according to Beattie, are possible because, since *Humanae Vitae*, 'the official teachings of the Church have become increasingly detached from the real lives of ordinary Catholics as far as sexuality is concerned'. 'While it remains to be seen what, if any, change Francis might be willing or able to make with regard to the Church's teaching on sexuality, marriage and procreation', Beattie continues, 'he has ushered in a more pastorally sensitive and pragmatic approach to such issues'. Beattie regards this as a potential game-changer for how the Vatican is viewed at the UN and one that could transform the Church's contribution to international development. As Beattie points out, 'the Holy See is the only member of the UN that represents a global constituency, including many of the world's poorest and most marginalised people'. The presence of the Catholic Church at the inter-governmental level is therefore of great importance: 'In spite of its failings, it [the Church] has used its voice to speak out repeatedly in favour of a more all-embracing idea of social and economic justice than that which is promoted by sexual rights campaigners on the one hand and population control advocates on the other'.

The post-Cairo context of declining fertility rates is scrutinised by Christine Gudorf, Professor of Religious Studies at Florida International University. In 'After Cairo: New Complexities in Fertility and Development', Gudorf proposes four steps that might be taken by the Catholic Church in this more complex demographic context that would reflect a more environmentally sustainable approach to development. The first would involve the Church's acceptance of modern methods of contraception in order to stabilize population at replacement levels. The second step would be for the Church and wider society to support families through the provision of affordable child-care and education (including university education) for all. This would help address the barriers to child raising that keep fertility rates below replacement level. The third step would be for the Church to augment its teaching that parenting responsibility is equally shared by men and women. As Gudorf states, 'Many men have little connection to children. Not only for the good of the children and their mothers, but also for the good of men themselves, men need to be more connected to the domestic world'. In various parts of the world, marriage rates are falling and divorce rates are rising. As a fourth step, therefore, the Church should promote marriage. According to Gudorf:

the erosion of stable working class employment for men is the principal barrier to marriage for many young couples ... it is male employment that is seen as the enabler of marriage ... Thus middle class couples with higher levels of male education and employment have higher marriage rates, and lower rates of children born outside marriage. In the working class where conditions for marriage are uncertain, marriages are less common.

In order to promote marriage, Gudorf argues that the Church should recognize remarriage after divorce and different stages of marital relationship. She states, 'to open communion to divorced

and remarried Catholics might be a first step to stopping remarried spouses, their children and families from leaving the church'. Gudorf also proposes the establishment of religious rituals that would recognise trial marriages, in order to encourage cohabiting couples to participate in the parish life. 'At present', she states, 'many such couples feel branded as sinners, and not welcome in church'. Gudorf concedes that the changes in Church teaching required of these four proposals would meet with considerable Catholic opposition: 'Only when bishops see these trends affecting the most devout and connected of their laity are they likely to see the trends as imposed by historical circumstances, and not simply as moral weaknesses'.

In '“On the Other Hand ...” The Catholic Church and Some Discourses on Population', Gillian Paterson, research associate and visiting lecturer at Heythrop College University of London, examines the difficulties that confront Catholics who wish to engage in dialogue and debate on matters of parenthood, population and family planning in the Church and in the wider public sphere. In both these contexts, there exist multiple discourses and a variety of interlocutors, some of whom may be overtly hostile to certain types of Catholic voice. As Paterson observes, 'Church spokespeople avoid speaking in public to Catholic positions, wary of coming across as authoritarian and unsympathetic, or on the other hand of provoking personal attacks from an ever-watchful cadre of self-appointed guardians of Catholic orthodoxy'. The media's tendency to caricature Catholic positions and its preference for polarised and oppositional debate also leads many Catholics to opt out of public engagement. According to Paterson, 'this reluctance to take the risk of engaging in public conversation is unfortunate because it shows moderate Catholic voices in public life being, in effect, silenced when it comes to addressing an important group of topics that includes the “how” and the “why” of family planning'. In the absence of Catholic voices, 'the quest for truth is disabled' and the impression is too easily gained that the Catholic Church is 'rigid', 'univocal' and not 'rooted in the realities of people's lives'. In the papacy of Francis, Paterson sees signs of a more sophisticated approach to the multiple Catholic discourses that exist on parenthood, population and family planning. Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* expresses concern over the factionalism and intolerance in the Church. 'It may be argued', states Paterson, 'that the outlawing, within the Church, of open dialogue on sexuality and responsible parenthood is a major contributor to the lacuna between Pope Francis' “warring factions”'. The Synod of Bishops consultation on family life demonstrates greater openness to listen to the variety of Catholic experiences of parenthood and family life and, in Paterson's words, 'has aroused tremendous hope, among the faithful, for a humane and reality-grounded discourse of marriage, sexuality and reproduction'.

Thanks are due to all those who participated in the colloquia, to the current and former masters of Campion Hall, Brendan Callaghan SJ and James Hanvey SJ, for hosting the colloquia, and to Patrick Madigan SJ, editor of the *Heythrop Journal*, for his unswerving support in publishing these papers. The colloquia were the idea of Dr. Gillian Paterson, research associate at Heythrop College, London. It is she who was the driving force behind their organisation, and she who raised the funds for this research initiative. It is in recognition of her tireless work promoting Catholic approaches to health and development that this issue is dedicated.

## Notes

1 See Gillian Paterson and Joseph Selling, 'Catholic Discourses on Population and Development', *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church Forum*, 14 April 2014 <http://www.catholicethics.com/forum-submissions/catholic-discourses-on-population-and-development> (accessed 15 July 2014).

2 See the Holy See webpage, 'Synod of Bishops' [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/index.htm) (accessed 15 July 2014).

3 United Nations, 'Millennium Development Goals and Beyond 2015' <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/beyond2015.shtml>; United Nations Population Fund, *Population and Sustainable Development in the Post-2015 Agenda: Report of the Global Thematic Consultation on Population Dynamics*, 2014 <http://unfpa.org/public/home/publications/pid/16152> (accessed 15 July 2014).

4 The letter from Cardinal Baldisseri addressed to Archbishop Tartaglia of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland is available on the website of the Diocese of Motherwell: [http://www.rcdom.org.uk/documents/PastoralChallengesToTheFamilyInTheContextOfEvangelisation\\_001.pdf](http://www.rcdom.org.uk/documents/PastoralChallengesToTheFamilyInTheContextOfEvangelisation_001.pdf) (accessed 15 July 2014).

5 United Nations Population Fund, *The International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action*, 1995 <http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/publications/pid/1973> (accessed 15 July 2014).

6 See United Nations website, 'Millennium Summit (6–8 September 2000)' [http://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/millennium\\_summit.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/millennium_summit.shtml); United Nations Development Programme, 'The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014', 7 July 2014 <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/mdg/the-millennium-development-goals-report-2014.html> (accessed 15 July 2014).

7 See website of ICPD Beyond 2014: <http://icpdbeyond2014.org/> (accessed 15 July 2014).

8 See the United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 'Sustainable Development Goals' <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300> (accessed 15 July 2014).

9 See United Nations Population Fund, 'Consulting with Faith-Based Organizations on the Post-2015 Agenda', 12 September 2012 <http://www.unfpa.org/public/cache/offonce/home/news/pid/12178;jsessionid=59167F6294DC49712D82069030875171.jahia02> (accessed 15 July 2014).

10 See United Nations Population Fund, 'ICPD – International Conference on Population and Development' <https://www.unfpa.org/public/icpd> (accessed 15 July 2014).