

‘ON THE OTHER HAND ...’ THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND SOME DISCOURSES ON POPULATION

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The current world population of 7.2 billion is projected to increase by almost one billion people within the next twelve years, reaching 8.1 billion in 2025 and 9.6 billion in 2050. Most of the population growth will occur in developing regions, which are projected to increase from 5.9 billion in 2013 to 8.2 billion in 2050. Growth is expected to be most rapid in the least developed countries, which are projected to double in size from around 900 million inhabitants in 2013 to 1.8 billion in 2050. Overall, birth rates in economically advanced countries are consistently falling, the age-balance shifting towards an increasing number of people who are older or chronically sick, and therefore placing worrying pressure on health and social services. Meanwhile, economic, political and environmental factors are bringing about increases in migration levels, and making it difficult to predict population figures in receiving countries.¹

This paper is motivated by the difficulties encountered by Catholics engaged in negotiating some Catholic discourses on population in the public sphere. Paul Ricoeur’s discourse theory is used to review some secular and Catholic discourses that are influential in the global dialogue, and to argue that although the Roman Catholic Church gives the impression of speaking as one voice, there are in fact different discourses operating within it. Turning to *Evangelii Gaudium*, it quotes Pope Francis in arguing the need to be able to say ‘on the other hand’, and argues the case against employing discourses of judgement, either inside or outside the Church.

LOOKING FOR A VOICE

In July 2012, a high-profile global ‘summit’ on family planning was held in London. Its aim was to mobilise the commitments and funds to enable 120 million more women and girls to use contraceptives by 2020.² Attended by world leaders and professionals from five continents, this ‘summit’ was jointly promoted by the British government’s Department for International Development and the Gates Foundation. Accordingly, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, addressed the meeting, and questions were invited. The first one, strongly applauded, was: ‘What are “we” (*sic*) going to do about the Vatican?’

The speaker was apparently assuming that everyone present at the conference would wish to be included in the word ‘we’: not just the non-Catholics, who, in his view, had ‘got it right’ but also Catholics. Chairing the session was Melinda Gates, who describes herself as ‘a believing and practising Catholic’. To more warm applause, she stated:

Of course I wrestled with this. As a Catholic I believe in this religion ... but I also have to think about how we keep women alive. I believe in not letting women die, I believe in not letting

babies die, and to me that's more important than arguing about what method of contraception [is right].³

On the following day a separate, satellite meeting was held, convened by the US-based network Christian Connections for International Health (CCIH), and designed to bring together delegates representing a range of religious bodies. Some well-qualified and experienced Catholic academics were present, and were invited to speak about Catholic approaches to family planning and contraception. Only one agreed to do so. Two others said it was not worth taking the risk of being wrongly or selectively quoted, or having their attempts at taking a balanced and objective view of Catholic teaching reported as if it were anti-orthodox polemic, either in the secular press, or by self-appointed 'watchdogs' in the Catholic community. One said he was unwilling to risk involving his own institution in potentially negative publicity. It was clear that they both believed the lone Catholic speaker to be foolhardy, although the word that was used was actually 'brave'.⁴

Sure enough, at the end of the session, the speaker was mobbed by media representatives, offering invitations to appear on radio and TV, and plying her with urgent questions. These included enquiries about 'which side' she was on, whether or not she 'agreed with the pope', and where she stood in relation to so-called 'splits in the Catholic Church' (*sic*) on a range of issues that included contraception, HIV prevention and (oddly enough) gay adoptions. Needless to say, such invitations were refused, designed as they were to feed into politicising media narratives of conflict and division. The fact that they were issued, though, indicates why Catholic academics might wish to keep a low profile on these issues.

Nevertheless, 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. Subsequently, the quest for truth is disabled, and the Catholic narratives that reach the public ear are likely to be constructed either by non-Catholics, or by official spokespeople either of Bishops' Conferences or of pressure groups with an openly expressed campaigning agenda. What the public gets to hear are the polarised narratives that make for good press stories or the hyper-critical approach summed up in the conference question mentioned in the opening paragraph: namely, 'what are "we" going to do about the Vatican?'

Take, for example, the politicised world of HIV and AIDS. It is now generally accepted that the Catholic Church has been a pioneer in the field of AIDS, often playing a leading role in religious responses, and providing around a third of home-based care in the world.⁵ The global response to the HIV pandemic would be infinitely poorer without Catholic input. And yet in global fora, such as the biennial International AIDS Conference (IAC), the Catholic Church is regularly represented as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Speakers may find themselves booed; and words like 'genocide' and 'murder' are used publicly and with impunity, by normally well-mannered people, including members of other Christian denominations. It is common to find the Church being scapegoated for the fact that HIV prevention strategies are 'not working': against which allegations it is regarded as 'uncool' to protest, with speakers and organizers expressing astonishment at the news that a Catholic colleague has been offended.

This is a pastoral problem, as well as one of politics, pedagogy and communication. Faithful Catholics, in all parts of the world, can feel vulnerable and exposed, as they struggle to uphold Catholic social and moral teaching in what can feel like a hostile environment. 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. Academics committed to exploring this group of issues at the cognitive level may, for similar reasons, be nervous about being reported. Members of Catholic organizations, who are engaged, in good faith, in policy discussions in ecumenical or secular contexts, can find themselves on the defensive in settings where hostility is entrenched and anti-Catholic assumptions already fixed. As scholars, committed to the search for truth, we are letting them down by colluding in the silence that surrounds these issues within the Church.

This is to be regretted. The Church's social and moral teaching has so much to offer to the world. The last hundred years have seen a succession of papal documents that display an evolving and often profound response to technological, social and economic change: a body of thought which has been enriched by contributions from other Catholic leaders and theologians. And yet, on issues of parenthood, population and family planning, we have seen Catholic social and moral discourses being narrowed down to a sterile focus on artificial methods of contraception, creating in the public mind a caricature of Catholic teaching, undermining the Church's evangelising thrust, and short-circuiting its efforts to contribute to public debate or the formation of policy at local, national and international level.

In 2013, believing this state of affairs needed to be actively addressed, the Heythrop Institute – Religion and Society brought together an international, interdisciplinary group of academics, practitioners and policy-makers, most of them Catholic or with a strong professional involvement with Catholic activity. The group was invited to identify and explore issues arising from their own experience, work or fields of study, to suggest ways in which Catholic teaching is able to respond, and to come up with some proposals for opening a conversation within the Church on a group of issues that related to population and parenthood. It was pointed out that 2014 would mark the 20th anniversary of the United Nations' International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994. The meeting resolved, therefore, that its first focus should be on Catholic approaches to the issue of population. This issue of the *Heythrop Journal* is one result, devoted as it is to Catholic approaches to population, and timed to coincide with the Cairo+20 process.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CAIRO 1994

Cairo 1994 proved to be a landmark event in modern approaches to population, differing from its predecessors at Bucharest (1974) and Mexico City (1984) because of the unprecedented involvement of civil society organizations. Participants and press representatives remember it for the very public struggles that took place between three major protagonists, namely the international women's movement, the US government and the some conservative religious leaders whose main spokesperson was the Holy See.

The unprecedented participation by NGOs brought a new focus to discussions. Strong media interest contributed to a heightened political environment in which discourses on demography gave way to a more person-centred concern for communities and individuals, accompanied by a focus on women's health that hinged less on economics (as it had in the past) than on rights, status and empowerment. The ambitious Programme of Action was an extraordinary tribute to the lobbying activity of international women's movements, committing member states to provide universal access to family planning and to sexual and reproductive health services,⁶ and urging a commitment to reproductive rights (that is, the rights of women to exercise choice over when, whether and with whom they bear children). It also committed member countries to gender equality, the empowerment of women and equal access to education for girls.⁷ This

trajectory was to be strengthened at the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), held a year later in Beijing.

Twenty years on, in 2014, member nations of the UN have been engaging in a further series of regional consultations, designed to engage a wide range of stakeholders in reviewing progress and reformulating the Programme of Action. Popularly known as Cairo+20, this process is designed to produce the 'ICPD Beyond 2014 Review': an opportunity to influence the future of global population and development policy at national, regional and global levels. The Review will analyse experience, progress and achievements in relation to the 1994 Programme of Action and will identify the implications for the review of the Millennium Development Goals, scheduled for 2015, and designed to link with a global post-2015 development agenda.

All of this makes it sound as if the population agenda were lofty, theoretical, divorced from the social networks we recognize, and a million miles from the everyday concerns of most of us. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) would strongly deny this. Population is not about facts and figures: it is about people, their values and beliefs, and how they operate in the context of their most important and intimate concerns and relationships. This is why it is so important for civil society bodies to be active participants in the debate, and in particular, why the process demands the perspective of religion.

The Holy See is an observer member of the UN, making the Roman Catholic Church the only religious organization in the world to enjoy this status. Envied by some and resented by others, this role gives its delegations to the UN the right to speak, make alliances, lobby, and in practice do anything they want to except to vote. In 1994, the Holy See delegation became something of a *cause celebre*, as a focal point for a group of conservative, mainly Muslim leaders, who fought the new approach, objecting even to such apparently-anodyne language as 'safe motherhood' and 'unwanted pregnancy'.

FOUR DISCOURSES

Attended by around 20,000 people, Cairo 1994 marked a fundamental shift in the discourses that currently frame the global dialogue on population: a 'reframing' process that involved a series of furious confrontations between different global or national players. These delighted the press, distressed many delegates, and proved highly interesting for those who found they gained an expanded understanding of the underlying justice issues that arise when different people are at the table.

In identifying some different threads within this multi-coloured tapestry, Paul Ricoeur's work on discourse analysis is helpful.⁸ What follows is a brief review of four important sets of discourse that were present at the Conference.

Neo-Malthusian discourses. Until the latter part of the twentieth century, the study of population had been dominated, for 200 years, by a set of principles set out by the British clergyman and economist Thomas Malthus in his 'Essay on the Principle of Population', published in 1798.⁹ Malthusian discourse was strongly influenced by the turmoil of thinking that occurred in Europe during the decade 1789 to 1799, in particular by the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen' (1789), which destined to become a core statement on the development of liberty and democracy.¹⁰

Claimed to be based on 'natural law', Malthusian discourse is a highly impersonal one, framed quantitatively by tools of mathematics and statistics, but passing (because of its statistical, scientific basis) as neutral and non-ideological. In this discourse, the future of the human race hangs on a simple equation: a quantifiable relationship between (a) the number of people

in the world (or the nation), and (b) the resources needed to keep them alive. Born out of a revolt against the power of Church and aristocracy, the secular, rationalist character of this discourse was assured: within its very DNA lies an argument for systems of government and social morality that are independent of religion.

Economic development discourses. The development 'industry' came into being in the second half of the twentieth century, drawing in a wealth of NGO activity and exercising a powerful influence on the agenda of the emerging member bodies of the UN system. For these discourses, the challenge of world poverty is integrally connected with that of population, high-level planning being based on the so-called 'demographic transition model' (DTM) which provided a normative link between population and development, and aimed at an orderly transition from high-to-low birth-rates and death rates as countries developed from pre-industrial to industrialized economic systems. Women's fertility was often targeted by governments implementing population policies, further justified since the early 1980s by the emergence of global consciousness of the key role played by women in economic development. Today, many NGOs and civil society groups from the developing world (women's ones in particular) see the development activity of international organizations as yet another manifestation of Western economic and political hegemony.

This proved to be another highly secular discourse. Keen to distance themselves from colonial and mission history, most emerging nations developed secular models of governance. Both governments and development agencies often found it expedient to deny the influence of religion, such that during the eighties, the British churches' development agency, Christian Aid, actually discussed removing the word 'Christian' from its title.

Feminist discourses. For the first time, at the 1994 ICPD, women's voices were prominent. By 1994, there was much empirical evidence of the link between economic security, family size and the education of girls. Clad in language of 'targets' and 'incentives', women's contribution to economic progress had become an orthodox component of development theory. Now, though, a new language of 'reproductive rights' began to emerge. Feminist discourses emphasised women's rights, women's health, and control over the body. Consequently, the final ICPD Programme of Action had women at its heart. UN member states committed themselves to promoting universal access to family planning and sexual and reproductive health services, and to developing programs committed to gender equality, empowerment of women and equal access to education for girls.

However, the newer language (of choice, reproductive rights, etc.) proved controversial, especially among religious groupings that accepted the development argument but held their own, profound convictions about gender relations, sexuality and reproduction. 'If approved,' said one participant, '(the Programme of Action) would suggest a dramatic shift in attention and resources away from reducing numbers of people as rapidly as possible to investing in the entire wellbeing of people, especially women.'¹¹

Catholic discourses. Before the Cairo conference opened, there was concern among Catholic politicians about its planned agenda. At a preparatory meeting in New York, a Vatican official told the New York Times that the conference was basically 'about a type of libertine, individualistic lifestyle, and it would be the first time the United Nations would adopt such a lifestyle'.¹² Mgr. Diarmuid Martin (now Archbishop of Dublin) was in the unenviable position of leading the Holy See's delegation. He set out the group's position in an admirably lucid way, commenting, when shown the draft final Programme of Action:

... The Holy See will support such a notion of 'reproductive health': one that is open to the creation of an environment where women and men can make free and responsible decisions

that will enable them to procreate without endangering their own health or that of the children they bear. However, the Holy See cannot support any concept of 'reproductive rights' which would include abortion as an appropriate means of family planning or the notion of an internationally recognized fundamental right to abortion.¹³

These measured comments were far from the strident tone of some Catholic voices. Nor do they support media representations of the Church's aggressive objections to conference resolutions. Nevertheless, there was an ongoing voice of concern. 'The document is marked in fact by an extremely individualistic understanding of the person and of human sexuality. It accepts, almost as an unrestricted right, that each individual, including adolescents from an early age, may be "sexually active"'.¹⁴

In contrast to the official stance represented above, there were other Catholic representatives (not necessarily members of the delegation from the Holy See) who took upon themselves a doctrinal policing role. They questioned the honesty of those with whom they did not agree, and they interpreted every discussion of family size or responsible parenthood as a Trojan horse designed to smuggle in a covert, hidden agenda that included the promotion of abortion as a form of family planning (a policy which the UN was, and still is, erroneously believed to advocate). 'Back at the Vatican,' says Robert Calderisi, 'the delegation was being swiped at from Left and from Right, with extreme conservatives briefly persuading the pope that the delegation was betraying the agreed position and misleading him on developments.'¹⁵

The Chair of the drafting committee was Dr Fred Sai, the eminent Ghanaian physician and former advisor to the World Bank. Tired of the litany of claims by religious voices to a monopoly on the moral high-ground, Dr Sai is said to have lost his composure when one persistent representative claimed that anyone who opposed the Church's position lacked ethical principles. 'The Vatican is not the only one with moral views on population issues,' he barked, in exasperation.¹⁶ Religion continued to fare badly when Iran, on religious grounds and in the final hours of the conference, managed to secure the deletion of fifty-seven mentions of 'sexual rights' in the final document. Nevertheless, the official Holy See delegation continued to hold its ground, provoking infuriated boos when – after a prolonged debate on 'safe abortions' – it still objected to the agreed wording: though it did, apparently, give 'partial' endorsement to the final document.

TRUTH, DISCOURSE AND THEOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

The value of discourse theory is that it provides a useful analytic tool for unravelling what is going on in titanic encounters such as these. Its most basic requirement of the interlocutors is a willingness to listen to the other and to give the other credit for sincerity, even if one does not agree with the conclusions of the other. The greatest danger is that of regarding one's own discourse as the last word: that is, the absolute, incontestable, inviolable and (most important) the *un-discussable* truth.

In discourse theory, every narrative is co-constructed by the speaker and the interlocutor or interlocutors, and geared to an intended response. Delegations to international conferences of this kind are in exposed and complicated positions. In this case, who are the interlocutors? Allies or opponents among the participants? The ever-present media, with their instant links with the rest of the world? The people back at the 'sending' organization, to whom one will ultimately report? Greek mathematician Archimedes allegedly said: 'Give me a place to stand and with a lever I will move the earth'. The Church might claim that this 'place' is to be found in its sacred texts as interpreted by its social and moral teaching and in the living faith of 1.3

billion Catholics worldwide. But just how secure is that place, if the public voice emanating from the Church is not perceived to be rooted in the realities of people's lives?

Rowan Williams devotes the whole of the first Chapter of *On Christian Theology* to a discussion of theological integrity.¹⁷ How may one claim, of any discourse, that it has or lacks integrity? First, says Williams, we must ask 'whether such a discourse is really talking about what it says it is talking about.' One example is the rhetorical use of the language of life and death to clinch a point and put a stop to dialogue: a metaphorical construct that is used, too often, in order to close down rational debate on difficult moral issues. As Williams writes: 'A discourse is without integrity if it conceals its true agenda,' because 'discourse that conceals is a discourse that (consciously or not) sets out to foreclose the possibility of a genuine response.'¹⁸ By avoiding dialogue, the two-level discourse 'steps back from the risks of conversation, above all from those two essential features of conversation, the recognition of an "unfinished" quality in what has been said on either side and the possibility of correction.'¹⁹

The silencing of difference, says Williams, is a political matter, in that 'to make what is said invulnerable by displacing its real subject matter is a strategy for the retention of power,' which forces the powerless to adopt the language of the powerful in order to gain access to 'their world, their resources'. This is demonstrated by the impression that many people seem to have taken away from the 1994 ICPD, namely that the Catholic Church is rigid, univocal and unable to 'speak in a way which allows of answers'.²⁰

Today, we need to look not just at the prevailing discourses in the global conversations about population, but at the parallel discourses that exist within the Catholic Church. For the Church does not bring just one discourse to the public arena, as the above account might suggest. Nor should it. In one of his final interviews, Cardinal Martini said:

I don't think this is the time or place to look for generally applicable answers. ... Especially in these deeply human questions of love and physicality, it is not a matter of recipes but of paths that begin and continue among people. ... We cannot require perfect lives from our children and youth. They will gradually find their way.²¹

This wise comment brings to mind Rowan Williams' claim that there are currently two main streams of Christian exegesis in operation: the 'hermeneutic' (or synchronic) and the 'narrative' (or diachronic).²² In the hermeneutic approach, we look for overlapping, synchronic meanings in what happens or has happened. But in practice, it is diachronically that we live out the moral narratives of our lives, which in turn are part of the long narrative of the family, community and public life that gives them context, and also meaning. A diachronic approach also allows for a less deterministic view of power, a more provisional, more critical view of text and tradition, and an opportunity to visualise the possibility of a different tomorrow. Theologically, it admits an eschatological, yet-to-come dimension into a discourse that can easily get bogged down in no-win wrangles between tradition, institutional morality and existential reality. After all, the Church's commitment is not to an unending cycle of reading and re-reading the world: it is to a world of healed relationships on a pilgrimage towards the ultimate reconciliation of the eschaton.

Contextual theologian Stephen Bevans provides a further, helpful perspective on the discourses that co-exist within the Church. He speaks of two basic theological 'orientations', which shape the way we understand evangelisation and which underpin our spirituality, ecclesiology and ethics. He says:

A creation-centred orientation sees the world as sacramental, the place where God reveals God's self. It is characterised by the conviction that culture and human experience are

generally good. Grace builds on nature, but only because nature is capable of being built on.²³

A redemption-centred theology, by contrast, is characterised by a conviction that culture and human nature are either in need of radical transformation or in need of total replacement. In this context, grace cannot build on or replace nature, because nature is corrupt. Rather than being a vehicle for God’s presence, the world distorts God’s reality and rebels against it. Rather than being holy with the presence of God, Christ must be brought to that culture for it to have any saving meaning whatsoever.²⁴

BUT ON THE OTHER HAND ...

In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis speaks of the complex character of truth, and the need for it to be grounded in reality. He states:

Differing currents of thought [...], if open to being reconciled by the Spirit in respect and love, can enable the Church to grow, since all of them help to express more clearly the immense riches of God’s word. For those who long for a monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance, this might appear as undesirable and leading to confusion. But in fact such variety serves to bring out and develop different facets of the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel.²⁵

‘This principle,’ he says, ‘has to do with incarnation of the word and its being put into practice’. A word ‘already made flesh and constantly striving to take flesh anew is essential to evangelisation.’²⁶ In order to keep our feet on the ground, ‘We need to sink our roots deeper into the fertile soil and history of our native place, which is a gift of God.’²⁷

Thus *Evangelii Gaudium* speaks of the need to care with particular love and concern ‘for unborn children, the most defenceless and innocent among us.’²⁸ ‘This defence of unborn life,’ he says, ‘is closely linked to the defence of each and every other human right. [...] Human beings are ends in themselves, and never a means of resolving other problems.’²⁹ Francis is uncompromising on the basic message. ‘The Church cannot be expected to change her position on this question. I want to be completely honest in this regard. This is not something subject to alleged reforms or “modernisations”. It is not “progressive” to try to resolve problems by eliminating human life.’³⁰

But now he enters a different discourse: the world of human praxis, from which doctrinal and moral certainties must never be divorced.

On the other hand, it is also true that we have done very little to adequately accompany women in very difficult situations, where abortion appears as a quick solution to their profound anguish, especially when the life developing within them is the result of rape or a situation of extreme poverty. Who can remain unmoved before such a painful situation?³¹

In that ‘on the other hand’ lies a profound truth. Francis is trying to balance two kinds of moral discourses: one that (rightly) takes an absolute view on the principle of the value of vulnerable human life, and another that (rightly) exhibits a compassionate appreciation for vulnerable people in the context of their lived human realities.

These discourses, though, need not be in competition. It is significant that ‘not warring among ourselves’ is the title of one full section of *Evangelii Gaudium*.³² Francis makes clear his deep concern about the group mentality of intolerance, factionalism and the anger that exists within the Catholic community.

It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all cost, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts. Whom are we going to evangelise if this is the way we act?³³

Today, perhaps time for the first in its history, the institutional church appears to be poised to address its handling of both public and internal discourse. In 1994, Mgr. Martin appeared to present a more nuanced approach to the ICPD than had taken place in previous meetings. On the brink of marking the twentieth anniversary of that event, Pope Francis announced two general assemblies of the Synod of Bishops that will be dedicated to the topic of the family. The *Lineamenta* (preparatory document) for the first, extraordinary general assembly of the synod of bishops (2014) was accompanied by a call for wide consultation from the church as a whole – not simply from the bishops – regarding the topics to be discussed, and these will inevitably touch upon the entirety of sexual ethics as well as the discipline regarding divorce and remarriage.³⁴ The response to this call, although certainly not global, was virtually unprecedented, and large numbers of the faithful volunteered their own, personal testimonies.

Several months later, however, the Vatican issued an *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document)³⁵ for the October 2014 event that seemed to offer little beyond the teaching of *Familiaris Consortio* (1981). It made no reference to the discourses that had begun to emerge from the faithful in previous months, despite the ample evidence that the faithful have strong opinions on the issues at hand and are hoping – at the very least – for an open discussion on issues that deeply affect their daily lives.

Thus, as this journal goes to press, and the Vatican prepares for the first of these Synods, the signals are conflicting. Within the Church and among its leaders, there are different discourses operating. In addition, there are still areas of silence, where Catholics are afraid to speak out, and which have so readily provided safe spaces for abuse to take place. Issues of sex, marriage, family, reproduction, and population are of vital importance to the vast majority of the faithful: in public fora and among Catholics themselves (particularly the young), it can seem (at the very least) puzzling that legislation should remain in the hands of male prelates with no experience of marriage or parenthood.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis himself has expressed himself forcefully on the subject of teaching that ignores reality, or gives in to ‘those who long for a monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance’.³⁶ The current process has aroused tremendous hope, among the faithful, for a humane and reality-grounded discourse of marriage, sexuality and reproduction. It would be a tragedy if the Synod were to give way to fear that any discourse originating from outside the ranks of the episcopate will lack credibility, undermine the true teaching of the church and create moral chaos.

In short, there is an urgent need for more work to be done, and an end to the demonization of those academics and practitioners who, in trying to conduct honest and legitimate research on these topics, are immediately perceived as trying to supplement or challenge current orthodoxies. It may be argued 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’. There is a particular need for a closer study of the discourses surrounding the so-called ‘culture of life’ and ‘culture of death’: concepts that are often used, at the affective level, to put an end to discussions and trump sincere efforts at dialogue within the frame of the cognitive and the scholarly.

Undoubtedly there are people who find discourse theory threatening, fearing that an analysis that settles for the language of discourse is settling also for the partial character of human

understanding, and giving up on the search (on which all theological activity must be based) for a unitive ‘discourse of God’. One senior colleague told me that his beliefs are (and indeed must be) absolute and ‘beyond theory’. Discourse theory, he said, will always be the beginning of a slippery slope that ends with the intellectual chaos implicit in the irritating, relativist colloquialism, ‘whatever’.

That is not a reason for allowing a discourse to become what Williams calls ‘ideological bondage’. Religious talk, Williams says, is in an odd position:

On the one hand it is making claims about the context of the whole moral universe; [...] it is thus not likely, *prima facie*, to be content with provisional statements. On the other hand, if it really purports to be about the context of the moral universe, it declares itself to be uniquely ‘under judgement’ and to be dealing with what supremely *resists* the urge to finish and close what is being said.³⁷

All speakers, he says, ‘speak from a perspective, social and historical, and their words are part of the universe they claim to see as a whole.’³⁸

On four occasions, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis, too, uses the phrase ‘on the other hand’: when speaking of the need to encourage vocations;³⁹ on the image of Christian life that is projected in preaching;⁴⁰ in the section on abortion, quoted above;⁴¹ and on the balance, in the law, between doctrine and praxis.⁴² Perhaps it is the prayerful acknowledgement of this ‘on the other hand’ that make us realise just how painfully unfitted we humans are to the task of sitting in judgement. In the words of Augustine of Hippo:

Whoever thinks that, in this mortal life, one may so disperse the mists of imagination as to possess the unclouded light of unchangeable truth [...] understands neither what he seeks nor who it is that seeks it.⁴³

Notes

1 See UN News Centre, ‘World population projected to reach 9.6 billion by 2050 – UN report’, 13 June 2013 <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=45165> (retrieved 25 June 2014).

2 See Department for International Development, ‘Family Planning: London Summit, 11 July 2012’ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/family-planning-london-summit-11-july-2012> (retrieved 25 June 2014).

3 Joanna Moorhead, ‘Melinda Gates challenges Vatican by vowing to improve contraception’, London: *The Guardian* newspaper, 11 July 2012 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/11/melinda-gates-challenges-vatican-contraception> (accessed 29 June 2014).

4 This is a personal story. The writer was the speaker at this meeting.

5 Based on a survey of all Catholic Bishops Conferences in the world; quoted by Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan, President of the Pontifical Council of Health Care, ‘World AIDS Day address’, 26.11.2005.

6 Sceptical participants and commentators predicted, accurately, that there would turn out to be a disjunction between the process that produced the Programme of Action and the strategies and infrastructure that would be required to mobilise the resources to implement it.

7 See UNFPA, ‘ICPD – International Conference on Population and Development’ <http://www.unfpa.org/public/icpd/> (retrieved 25 June 2014).

8 See P. Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

9 T. Malthus (ed. D. Winch), *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

10 <http://www.hrcr.org/docs/frenchdec.html> (accessed 29 June 2014).

11 M.J. Danguilan, *Women in Brackets: A Chronicle of Vatican Power and Control* (Manila: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 1997) pp. 20-1.

12 Alan Cowell, ‘Vatican Fights UN Draft on Women’s Rights’, *New York Times*, June 15, 1994 <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/15/world/vatican-fights-un-draft-on-women-s-rights.html> (accessed 29 June 2014).

- 13 Msgr. Diarmuid Martin, 'Speech to the Population Conference Planning Session', 4 April 1994 <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCJPCAIR.HTM> (retrieved 25 June 2014).
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 R. Calderisi, *Earthly Mission: The Catholic Church and World Development* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013) p. 188.
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