

WHOSE RIGHTS, WHICH RIGHTS? – THE UNITED NATIONS, THE VATICAN, GENDER AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

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This is a crucial time for the United Nations with regard to international development. 2014 marks the end of the twenty year programme of action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were broadly based on the ICPD programme, are due to expire in 2015. The international community must agree upon far-reaching policies relating to sustainable human development, at a time when the UN is deeply divided over issues of population, development and human rights, in part due to intractable ideological conflicts over the language of gender and sexual and reproductive rights.

The transformation of the papacy under Pope Francis makes it difficult to predict the Vatican's future role in these debates. 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, he has ushered in a more pastorally sensitive and pragmatic approach to such issues. He has expressed dismay over the Church's 'obsession' with abortion, contraception and gay marriage,¹ and he has repeatedly called for the Church to become 'a poor Church of the poor'. This could be a mandate for change with regard to how the Holy See engages with its opponents in the UN,² and it has far-reaching ramifications for the Church's contribution to international development.

In what follows, I consider the rapidly evolving discourse of sexual and reproductive rights since its emergence in the 1980s, and the ways in which the Holy See and some Catholic NGOs have positioned themselves in the heated debates this has provoked. My intention is to survey and comment upon the current situation, as a contribution towards fostering a more informed and reasoned debate between Catholic and non-Catholic voices in the UN. 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, while defending its fundamental principles of human dignity, social justice and the integrity of creation.

I. POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT – CAIRO

Richard Parker makes the point that, prior to the Declaration and Programme of Action of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, 'no international instrument relevant to human rights makes any reference whatsoever to sexuality or sexual rights'.³ Parker attributes the dramatic emergence of sexuality as a topic for analysis and advocacy primarily to 'the

growing feminist and gay and lesbian movements that emerged from the 1960s as among the most important forces of social change during the 1970s and 1980s'.⁴

In the 1980s feminists began to raise questions of sexuality and reproduction in the context of human rights, motivated by a range of concerns to do with unsafe abortion, access to family planning, and the perceived need for women to have autonomy with regard to their reproductive choices. Sonia Corrêa, a Brazilian researcher and advocate for gender equality, notes that 'The etymology of the term "reproductive rights" is mostly to be found among women's groups and in a non-institutional framework. Its conceptualisation was directly linked to the struggle for the right to safe, legal abortion and contraception in industrialised countries in the 1970s and 1980s'.⁵

The increasing prominence given to these issues in international discourse has fuelled a bitter polemical struggle between secular liberals and feminists on the one hand and cultural and religious traditionalists, including the Holy See, on the other. The Cairo conference was the first major battle in this increasingly hostile war, with a well-funded population control agenda driven by powerful national and corporate interests lurking in the background of the debate.

In the run-up to the Cairo Conference, concerns were expressed both by the Vatican and the women's movement that the draft programme was too heavily focused on population control, amounting to what some saw as a neo-Malthusian approach to population and development. Feminist scholar and women's rights advocate Françoise Girard observes that 'the main impetus for activists going into Cairo was to reverse the population control agenda and its excessive focus on curbing the fertility of poor women in the global South'.⁶ Extensive preparation by women's groups around the world ensured that the language of population control was largely replaced by references to women's sexual and reproductive health, women's empowerment through education, and opposition to violence against women. These endeavours were helped by a parallel campaign among medical institutions, including the family planning network and the World Health Organization, to secure the right to reproductive health. While this was related to population concerns, it was also motivated by the growing crisis of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The Holy See delegation, headed by Archbishop Renato Martino, made virulent enemies at Cairo, not only among feminists and liberal member states but also among some Islamic states, including the host country Egypt, by its obstructive interventions and delaying tactics over abortion.⁷ There is widespread agreement even among some allies of the Holy See that its performance in Cairo was a disastrous exercise in public relations. The late Julian Simon, an economist who was highly critical of UN population control policies and was broadly sympathetic to the Vatican's position, wrote:

The Roman Catholic church's reaction to the Cairo population conference is a monumental political blunder ... The church is allowing the opponents of true reproductive freedom to steal the issue of personal liberty and thereby look like the good people. By so doing, the Catholic Church is defeating its own larger – and admirable – goals.⁸

Rosalind Petchesky claims that the final ICPD programme of action 'enshrines an almost feminist vision of reproductive rights and gender equality in place of the old population control discourse'.⁹ She declares that a global coalition of women's movements was largely successful in defeating 'the Vatican-fundamentalist offensive'.¹⁰ While expressing disappointment over the failure of the programme 'to include access to safe, legal abortion as a necessary part of women's reproductive health and rights',¹¹ she concludes that:

Contrary to the insistence of the Vatican and other fundamentalists on a single, universally normative family structure (the patriarchal, conjugal, heterosexual kind), the Programme

reiterates many times its recognition that ‘diverse family forms’ prevail in many of the world’s societies and cultures. While not acknowledging freedom of sexual expression or sexual orientation as a human right, the Cairo Programme does not limit the right to ‘a satisfying and safe sex life’ to married people or heterosexuals. Indeed, it proposes that adolescents be given access to ‘integral sexual education and services’ that ‘can help them understand their sexuality and protect them from unwanted pregnancies’ and STDs, while making the ‘distribution of high-quality condoms’ an integral component of all reproductive health care services.¹²

Petchesky’s summary identifies issues that would become the topic of repeated confrontations over the next two decades – marriage, homosexuality and the nature of the family, the meaning of sexual and reproductive rights including abortion rights, the provision of sex education, and adolescent sexuality.

In the light of Petchesky’s secular feminist, anti-Catholic endorsement, one might expect conservative Catholics to have reacted with dismay to the ICPD programme of action, but George Weigel gives an entirely different interpretation. He describes the intended agenda of the Cairo conference as ‘the Great Cairo Turkey Shoot: a political slaughter in which the enemies of “individual autonomy,” “sustainable growth,” “global carrying capacity,” “reproductive rights,” “gender equity,” abortion-on-demand, and the sexual revolution would be utterly, decisively routed.’¹³ However, he observes with satisfaction that the Cairo Conference proved a turning point, because the planners ‘had failed to take into account ... the moral power of Pope John Paul II’. According to Weigel, whatever other factors might have prevailed, ‘the sine qua non of the defeat suffered by the international advocates of the sexual revolution was the public campaign of opposition to the Cairo draft document mounted throughout the summer of 1994 by John Paul II’ in a series of audiences focusing on marriage, the family and the right to life.

Weigel highlights as particularly significant the paradigmatic shift at Cairo from ‘population control’ to ‘the empowerment of women’. He argues that this shift potentially brings the UN into line with developing countries where women’s empowerment is not coupled with the sexual revolution. Rather, the empowerment of women might ‘lead to a revitalization of the traditional family and a reaffirmation of the distinctively maternal power of women’, despite the protests of western feminists. Weigel claims that, in speaking out against ‘coercive governmental birth control programs’ in the run-up to Cairo, ‘the feminist sans-culotterie could not win; but they were harbingers of an unanticipated irony in the outcome of the conference’. These very different accounts by Petchesky and Weigel illustrate what is at stake in the confrontation between western feminists and the Vatican.

The Holy See and some of its Latin American allies ensured that the final ICPD programme of action made no reference to sexual rights, though it was harder to garner support for the exclusion of references to the right to sexual health in the face of HIV/AIDS. The final programme of action, which included sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights but not sexual rights, was signed up to by 179 governments and has shaped international policy on these issues for the last twenty years. It was partially endorsed by the Holy See, which was the first time that it had given even qualified support to a programme of action on population, having refused to endorse the documents produced at the 1974 and 1984 UN conferences on population in Bucharest and Mexico City respectively.

II. SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS – BEIJING

If Cairo was, as Weigel claims, a success for the Holy See, it was a pyrrhic victory. Feminist activists went to the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing the following year

with renewed determination to lobby for the inclusion of sexual rights, including those relating to abortion, sexual orientation and same-sex relationships. Petchesky observes that 'Beijing was the pivot, the moment where our thinking about sexuality shifted. The Vatican's reactions and anticipatory attacks made us think. It was a dialectical process, and in that process concepts were developed.'¹⁴

Meanwhile, Pope John Paul II did a great deal to promote a more positive image of the Church's engagement with women's rights in the run-up to the Beijing Conference. While he was developing his 'theology of the body' with its opposition to abortion, contraception and homosexuality and its emphasis on the positive significance of human sexuality in the context of marriage and procreation, he was also issuing a number of statements and addresses which emphasised the importance of women's rights, in language that could almost have been borrowed from feminist theologians.¹⁵

The Holy See's delegation to Beijing was led by Harvard law professor and human rights lawyer, Mary Ann Glendon, and included Kathryn Hawa Hoomkwap, a former Nigerian health official. The Vatican could hardly have done more to salvage its reputation. The damage done at Cairo would not be easily forgotten or forgiven, however. Reporting from the conference for Catholic weekly *The Tablet*, Annabel Miller remarked upon the open hostility shown by secular feminist groups to the Vatican delegation. She wrote that the Vatican delegates 'had clearly been chosen not only for their loyalty to the Church, but for their intellectual – and street – credibility', but that 'this was not enough to break through the wall of prejudice, even hatred, among some secular feminists.'¹⁶

So the battle lines were drawn, and while its interventions and reservations were more temperate than those at Cairo, the Holy See continued to function as a tenacious opponent of those who would use the UN to promote a sexual rights agenda, to sanction abortion or homosexuality, or to undermine marriage and the sexual complementarity of male and female. With regard to the latter, a particular surprise to sexual rights campaigners at Beijing was the Holy See's decision to target the language of gender. Girard observes that

The Holy See's arguments about the 'hidden meaning' of gender highlighted its understanding of contemporary debates about sexuality. While most governments and feminist activists at the negotiations were in fact using 'gender' in accordance with contemporary political usage, as a proxy for 'women,' the Holy See recognized the far-reaching implications of detaching social roles, identities and expressions from biological sex.¹⁷

She describes the Holy See's 'preemptive move' as 'an acknowledgement that fluid or multiple gender identities or expressions (transgender, cross-gender, queer) bring into question the very notion of binary categories, like "woman/man" or "femininity/masculinity," and of preordained social roles.'¹⁸

In spite of the growing prominence given to sexual and reproductive rights, the continuous process of bartering and negotiation means that their articulation remains a complex and confusing issue. At Cairo, the language of sexual rights was bartered away in order to retain resolutions relating to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. At Beijing, the implicit inclusion of sexual rights was achieved through the bartering away of references to sexual orientation. The idea of sexual rights gained support from many African delegations on condition that it was understood in the context of HIV and violence against women, and not in the context of same-sex relationships. The relevant paragraph (96) of the Beijing Platform of Action reads:

The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free

of coercion, discrimination and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent, and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences.¹⁹

As Corrêa observes, ‘although [paragraph 96] does not explicitly mention “sexual rights”, it does spell out what its elements would be’.²⁰

In her closing statement on behalf of the Holy See, Glendon gives partial support to the Beijing Platform of Action, saying that on a number of issues such as poverty, literacy and education, there is ‘close correspondence’ with Catholic social teaching.²¹ However, she records the Holy See’s strong disagreement with other aspects of the text, including ‘an exaggerated individualism’ which led to a selective engagement with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, marking ‘another step in the colonization of the broad and rich discourse of universal rights by an impoverished, libertarian rights dialect’.

The statement registers numerous reservations to do with the language of gender, reproductive health, sexual health and reproductive rights, and dissociates the Holy See entirely from Chapter IV section C on Women and Health, which includes paragraph 96 above. Glendon states that

This section devotes a totally unbalanced attention to sexual and reproductive health in comparison to women’s other health needs, including means to address maternal mortality and morbidity. Furthermore, the Holy See cannot accept ambiguous terminology concerning unqualified control over sexuality and fertility, particularly as it could be interpreted as a societal endorsement of abortion or homosexuality.

However, she adds a caveat saying that the Holy See associates itself with ‘the condemnation of violence against women asserted in paragraph 96, as well as with the importance of mutuality and shared responsibility, respect and free consent in conjugal relations as stated in that paragraph’.

The statement of the Holy See also introduces a qualification with regard to the language of gender, limiting it to heterosexual identities and relationships:

The term ‘gender’ is understood by the Holy See as grounded in biological sexual identity, male or female. Furthermore, the Platform for Action itself clearly uses the term ‘Both genders’. The Holy See thus excludes dubious interpretations based on world views which assert that sexual identity can be adapted indefinitely to suit new and different purposes. It also dissociates itself from the biological determinist notion that all the roles and relations of the two sexes are fixed in a single, static pattern.

Commenting on this focus on gender, Judith Butler suggests that ‘If the Vatican seeks to replace the language of gender with the language of sex, it is because the Vatican wishes to rebiologize sexual difference, that is, to re-establish a biologically narrow notion of reproduction as women’s social fate.’²²

To date, Beijing marks a high point for pro-sexual rights activists. Although the language of sexual rights also appears in the programme of action for the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development in 1995, intense debates and disagreements about the extension of rights to same-sex relations have fractured the fragile coalitions that began to emerge at Beijing. Vigorous campaigning for the inclusion of sexual orientation at subsequent UN gatherings was met by strong resistance both from conservative religious representatives and from many member states which had supported the inclusion of sexual rights at the Beijing conference. A number of African and Muslim delegations resisted what they saw as the imposition of western concepts

of homosexuality on cultures which they insisted had no such concepts. A 2008 General Assembly resolution supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights remains open for signature, though a resolution proposed by South Africa in support of LGBT rights was passed by the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2011.

III. THE HOLY SEE AND THE AMERICAN CHRISTIAN RIGHT

In a study of the UN and its religious affiliates, Doris Buss and Didi Herman refer to a ‘curious global alliance ... around a “natural family” agenda’,²³ which emerged at the end of the twentieth century, uniting religious conservatives against advocates of sexual and reproductive rights. They suggest that this has made the Vatican ‘one of the most important international conservative voices in the area of gender, sexuality, and the family’,²⁴ in a way that has enabled the American Christian Right [CR] to promote its highly politicised agenda through the UN. The American Christian Right

is not simply interested in combating ‘secular liberalism’ on American soil; rather, the CR is intent on both internationalizing its domestic concerns and shaping its domestic activism in light of CR global understandings. ... [I]nternational orthodox alliances, for example between conservative Christianity and conservative Islam, are proving to be significant actors in global politics.²⁵

If the Catholic Church’s concerns for social and economic justice make this an uneasy alliance, the moral absolutism of the magisterium under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI made the Vatican a powerful ally of the Christian Right around issues of marriage, the family, homosexuality and abortion. The official interventions of the Holy See in the UN have been supported by an influential and well-funded network of North American Catholic NGOs with close links to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Vatican.

Canadian lawyer and academic Jane Adolphe is a member of the Holy See Secretariat of State who has been part of its UN delegation. Adolphe writes extensively on issues of gender and sexuality. In an article titled ‘New Challenges for Catholic-Inspired NGOs in Light of *Caritas in Veritate*’, she writes that ‘Many members of the lay faithful have worked together with others from various Christian denominations to establish NGOs to monitor and to promote the rights of the unborn, the natural family and many other topics of common interest.’²⁶ Adolphe points out that through consultative relations mediated by ECOSOC (the UN’s Economic and Social Council), ‘the non-governmental organization (NGO) is not only a disseminator of information, monitor of human rights or provider of services but also a shaper of national, regional and international policy.’²⁷

There are numerous websites and articles generated by Catholic think tanks and NGOs to promote the agenda outlined by Adolphe. One frequently cited document is a White Paper titled *The Millennium Development Goals In Light of Catholic Social Teaching*, written by D. Brian Scarnecchia, JD and Terrence McKeegan, JD.²⁸ Scarnecchia is the founding president of an American organisation known as International Solidarity & Human Rights Institute, which was established for ‘Forming tomorrow’s leaders and creating a “culture of peace” through Catholic Social Teaching’.²⁹ McKeegan is an international lawyer and a member of the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the UN. The White Paper is produced by the ‘International Organizations Research Group’, which describes itself as a programme of the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (C-Fam). C-Fam was established ‘in order to monitor and affect the

social policy debate at the United Nations and other international institutions'.³⁰ Buss and Hermann describe the president of this Institute, Austin Ruse, as 'a key spokesperson for the CR UN'.³¹

Scarnecchia and McKeegan's paper offers a wide-ranging critique of the MDGs, while defending the Holy See's consistent support for UN-led campaigns and resolutions that target poverty, sexual exploitation and abuse, and lack of access to education. They frame their argument in the context of the need for development to build 'community *with*, not simply *for*, the poor,³² and they argue that carefully worded UN resolutions are being hijacked by special interest groups, driven by pro-abortion and homosexuality campaigners. Overall, they claim that 'The Holy See supports the MDGs as an expression of a "preferential option for the poor" and therefore a "permanent task and commitment." At the same time, it calls them "off target" because of an undue focus on population control and unsubstantiated claims.'³³

In terms of the neo-liberal economics that inform the political alliances of the Christian Right, the repeated emphasis on poverty and economic justice roots this White Paper firmly in the soil of Catholic social teaching. However, its rhetorical style betrays a searing antagonism towards the UN and the MDGs, particularly with regard to Goals 2 to 5.

Goal 2 – 'achieve universal primary education' – is criticised for failing to recognize the role of the family in the education of children, and because it risks becoming 'not an end, but a means for an unstated goal – population control'.³⁴ UN attempts to relieve adolescent girls of the burden of pregnancy or sibling care in order to allow them to continue their education are interpreted in terms of a 'hidden ideological agenda': 'Girls' education is not just about bringing girls to school, but about "empowering" them, inculcate [*sic*] in them an awareness of their "rights," a sense of their "freedom to choose," their "autonomy" and "control" over their life and other values of the new postmodern ethic.'³⁵ The authors conclude that 'the MDGs approach to universal primary education may simply accelerate the marginalization of parents in the developing world and further threaten noble indigenous cultural values and practices'.³⁶

Goal 3 – 'Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women' – is criticised because the word 'gender' creates considerable consternation. It 'remains a proverbial *mystery inside an enigma* in all UN documents'.³⁷ While the word 'appears innocuous in both the *Beijing Platform for Action* ... and Goal 3 of the MDGs, ... this is no guarantee it will not be used by overreaching international agencies as a catalyst for social change, including an international push for abortion on demand and broad homosexual rights'.³⁸ Goal 4 – Reduce Child Mortality – 'completely misses the link between strong families and healthy children'.³⁹ The paper quotes Pope John Paul II's insistence that '*The first right of the child is to "be born in a real family."*'⁴⁰

Turning to Goal 5 – 'Improve Maternal Health' – the paper points to 'two opposing camps' with regard to how to combat maternal mortality. The first, which it claims 'has the support of much of the UN bureaucracy and the international community', emphasizes 'universal access to sexual and reproductive health, with promotion of "safe" abortion as the centerpiece'.⁴¹ The second, which the authors say better reflects international consensus, focuses on skilled attendance at delivery which includes the means to deal with obstetric emergencies. The White Paper points out that, while references to gender proliferate in UN documents, there are very few references to mothers and motherhood, and these refer only to problems with maternal health. They argue that 'Pope John Paul II reminded us that motherhood is not so much an indicator for maternal health risk, but a temporal and eternal blessing'.⁴²

It is not possible here to unpick all the exaggerated and decontextualized claims in this White Paper – the 'real family', the reification and idealization of culture, the linking of female education with population control, are just a few of its distorted ideas. However, despite the polemic, some of the criticisms are legitimate.

It is true that the positive values of marriage, motherhood and family life – which in one form or another constitute the desires and commitments of the majority of the world's women – are repeatedly devalued in favour of minority sexual rights and reproductive health. It is true that vast philosophical and sociological questions surround the role of education in a globalised culture where western neo-liberal values insinuate themselves into different societies with all-pervasive potency. It is true that maternal death results more frequently from obstetric emergencies in the third trimester than from early conditions in pregnancy. However, it is also true that, if abortion is rarely necessary physically to save a woman's life, nearly 13% of all maternal deaths (an estimated 47,000 deaths per year) are the result of complications from unsafe abortion, with thousands more women suffering serious injury.⁴³ I have argued elsewhere that, even if the Catholic Church maintains a principled moral objection to abortion, the pre-modern tradition distinguishes between the moral gravity of early and late abortion, which might allow for a more constructive and reasonable debate around this complex ethical dilemma.⁴⁴

Perhaps the most pertinent criticism made by Catholic commentators but also by many others, is the extent to which population control targeted at the world's poor continues to function as a driving force in these debates.⁴⁵ In a scathing critique of the Cairo Conference, Australian academic and women's rights activist Renate Klein lambasted the ICPD for privileging the campaigns of well-funded feminists from the North while neglecting the economic and social issues which informed the preparatory documents of women from the global South.⁴⁶ Petchesky qualifies her endorsement of the Cairo Conference by criticising its failure to challenge broader social and economic structures which impede the struggle for sustainable human development. She acknowledges that some women's organisations from the South lamented 'the disproportionate time and energy devoted in the conference deliberations to debating abortion and reproductive rights as opposed to ... crucial macro-economic and social issues'.⁴⁷ In a summary of these divisions and debates, Wendy Harcourt writes that

The gender and development discourse, as it emerged from the 1990s UN conferences and gender and development programmes and research that surrounded them, essentially continued to create a colonized poor and marginalized woman who needed to be managed, educated, trained for work and local decision making, and controlled reproductively and sexually through a multiple series of development processes designed for 'women's empowerment'.⁴⁸

There is then a growing sense of disillusionment with the UN as an effective forum for justice for women. As Harcourt observes, 'The global women's rights movement since 2000 is clearly tired – "conferenced out" – and sceptical about the MDGs and other bureaucratic processes.'⁴⁹

Yet there has also been a significant shift of energy from feminists of the North to feminists of the South. The new millennium has seen the emergence of highly politicised women's movements across many regions of the global South, with diverse cultural, religious and ethnic traditions and affiliations, but with a common determination to challenge the control and exploitation of female bodies by the combined forces of corporate and economic power, political corruption, cultural patriarchy and religious conservatism.⁵⁰

With the exception of some religious groups, the majority of these women's organisations campaign on a platform of sexual and reproductive rights in the context of a holistic approach to development, human dignity and social justice. So, while their economic and social concerns might be well represented by Catholic voices in the UN, they do not generally share the 'natural family' agenda for the good reason that this romanticised ideal has little purchase on the lives of people struggling with social and economic breakdown, one-parent families, enforced migration, war and conflict, and the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

IV. CONCLUSION

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. This has prompted campaigns to strip it of its Permanent Observer status, including the ‘See Change Campaign’ run by the pro-sexual and reproductive rights organisation Catholics for Choice.⁵¹

However, 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. In spite of its failings, it 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 problem is that since Pope Paul VI’s encyclical on birth regulation, *Humanae Vitae*, in 1968,⁵² the official teachings of the Church have become increasingly detached from the real lives of ordinary Catholics as far as sexuality is concerned. With regard to the grassroots Church, Catholic health care providers and pastoral workers are in the frontline of dealing with the kind of crises that have been elided by the ideology of the ‘natural family’ – a bourgeois fantasy which insulates itself from the complex challenges that face real families in today’s world, particularly those who are poor.

One interviewee who features in a recent CAFOD study of the effects of the MDGs on the lives of the poor tells a story that is emblematic of the struggles faced by the world’s poorest women. Anna is a 47 year old Ugandan widow and mother of seven children, who is living with HIV and also caring for her late sister’s three children. Here is her story:

I was given land by my late husband’s family but now as a widow, the land has been grabbed away from me. ... And also someone like me who is living with HIV, all the time you worry about the education of your children. ... What prevents me from living well is taking care of orphans without anyone helping me. Because I am taking care of orphans of two families: my brother-in-law killed my sister and he also shot himself. He was a soldier and I do not know why he did that. So I am suffering with their children together with mine. I am the one educating them yet I am also a widow. All the time I do not find happiness in my family and I am living with HIV.⁵³

Anna lives in a situation in which all the complex factors of poverty, land insecurity, HIV/AIDS, domestic violence and war intersect. Catholic social teaching has become uprooted from lives such as these, by allowing itself to be increasingly driven by the highly politicised agendas of a conservative elite. Women like Anna are served neither by feminist narratives of ‘empowerment’ nor by religious narratives of the ‘natural family’, yet Anna is one of many millions of quietly heroic women, struggling against all the odds to provide hope for a generation of children on whom the world has turned its back.

If the Church is to stand with and for those who are poor, then it must embrace the messy realities and challenges of the lives of people like Anna and the children she cares for. Only then will it be recognisable as the kind of Church Pope Francis says he wants: ‘a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security’.⁵⁴

Notes

1 See Antonio Spadaro, S.J., ‘A Big Heart Open to God’, The exclusive interview with Pope Francis, in *America*, 30 September, 2013 at <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview> [accessed 16 June, 2014].

2 The Holy See has a Permanent Observer Mission to the United Nations, meaning that it is a member state but does not have a vote. The State of Palestine is the only other such member. Strictly speaking, the Holy See is distinct from the Vatican and the Catholic Church as a whole. However, these are not sharp distinctions and I use the terms interchangeably in what follows, except when referring specifically to the Holy See's status in the UN.

3 Richard G. Parker, 'Sexual Rights: Concepts and Action', *Health and Human Rights*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2nd International Conference on Health and Human Rights (1997), pp. 31–7, p. 34.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

5 Sonia Corrêa, 'From Reproductive Health to Sexual Rights: Achievements and Future Challenges', *Reproductive Health Matters*, Vol. 5, No. 10, The International Women's Health Movement (November 1997), pp. 107–16, p. 108.

6 Françoise Girard, 'Negotiating sexual rights and sexual orientation at the UN' in Richard Parker, Rosalind Petchesky and Robert Sember (eds) *SexPolitics: Reports from the Frontlines*, Sexuality Policy Watch, pp. 311–358, p. 322, at <http://www.sxpolitics.org/frontlines/home/index.php> [accessed 7 June 2015]. This undated e-book comprises a collection of documents based on research carried out between 2004 and 2007 on sexuality and politics in Brazil, Egypt, India, Peru, Poland, South Africa, Turkey, Vietnam, the United Nations and the World Bank.

7 See Barbara Crossette, 'Vatican Holds Up Abortion Debate at Talks in Cairo', *The New York Times*, September 8, 1994 at <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/08/world/vatican-holds-up-abortion-debate-at-talks-in-cairo.html> [accessed 8 June, 2014].

8 Julian L. Simon, 'The Politics of Population and the Cairo Conference' (22 September 1994). This article first appeared in the *New York Times* before the Cairo conference. The updated version I refer to here is posted on Simon's website: www.juliansimon.com/writings/Articles/POPNAM.txt [accessed 9 June, 2014].

9 Rosalind Petchesky, 'From Population Control to Reproductive Rights: Feminist Fault Lines', *Reproductive Health Matters*, No. 6 (November 1995), pp. 152–61, p. 152. The Programme of Action is available at the UNFPA website: <https://www.unfpa.org/public/icpd> [accessed 30 May 2014].

10 Petchesky, *ibid.*, p. 153.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

12 *Ibid.*

13 George Weigel, 'What Really Happened at Cairo', *First Things*, February 1995, at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1995/02/002-what-really-happened-at-cairo> [accessed 16 June, 2014].

14 Girard, 'Negotiating Sexual Rights', p. 332, quoting from an interview with Petchesky.

15 Cf. Pope John Paul II, 'Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to Mrs. Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women of the United Nations' at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19950526_mongella-pechino_en.html [accessed 16 June, 2014]; 'Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women', 29 June, 1995 at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women_en.html [accessed 16 June, 2014]. See also Tina Beattie, 'The End of Woman: Gender, God and Rights Beyond Modernity' in Patrick Claffey and Joseph Egan (eds), *Movement or Moment?: Assessing Liberation Theology Forty Years after Medellín* (Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 161–81.

16 Annabel Miller, 'The Holy See in the Public Square', *The Tablet*, 23rd September, 1995, pp. 4–6, p. 4.

17 Girard, 'Negotiating Sexual Rights', p. 335.

18 *Ibid.*

19 United Nations, *Report on the Fourth World Conference on Women*, Beijing, 4–15 September 1995, Section IV C, 'Women and Health' at <http://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/off/a-20.en> [accessed 8 June 2015].

20 Corrêa, 'From Reproductive Health to Sexual Rights', p. 109.

21 See written statement submitted by the Holy See, United Nations, *Report on the Fourth World Conference on Women*, Beijing, 4–15 September 1995 at <http://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/off/a-20.en> [accessed 8 June 2014].

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