For Debate

Papal policy, poverty, and AIDS

David Morley

I recently visited the Philippines as a consultant in child health. The visit led to a strong conviction that papal pronouncements have been a major cause of the country's increasing poverty and of its failure to promote the only public health method proved to limit the spread of AIDS. Historians may well be able to show a strong correlation between poverty and the rapid spread of AIDS in communities that follow practices recommended by Rome.

Under normal conditions women are capable of bearing an average of 17 children. Families of such a size are not uncommon in developing countries. The Guinness Book of Records documents the most prolific living mother as Leontia Albina of Chile, who has given birth to 55 children.

In the average developing country, if all 17 children were to survive the population would increase at a rate of 6-7% each year and would double every 10 years. Fortunately, no country's population is increasing at this rate, although Kenya has a growth rate of 3-4% and will double its population in 17 years. The reasons for family sizes vary from country to country (see figure).

In countries such as Bangladesh breast feeding and various taboos that limit the frequency of sexual intercourse limit the size of families. At the other extreme there are countries such as the United Kingdom in which the average family size is 1.8 children. This is due almost entirely to the widespread use of contraceptives, the adoption of which was claimed by McKeown to be the most important public health measure initiated in Europe in the past 50 years.  

Poverty in the South has in the past been due in part to colonialism and is now due in part to the unfair interest charged on debts created when loans were made freely available in the 1960s. In 1979 $40 billion flowed to the South—but now the North receives $20 billion yearly from the South.  

No country, however wealthy, can cope for long with a population that is doubling in 20 or 30 years. In the Philippines, which has a growth rate of 2-3% and is likely to double its population in 29 years, strenuous efforts are being made by the government to increase the frequency and duration of breast feeding. However, neither these nor the so-called natural methods of family planning are likely to make a real impact on population growth.

The poor are trapped. They lack the knowledge and the strength of purpose, let alone the necessary funds, to ignore the rulings of the Catholic Church. Without ready access to modern contraceptives families will have seven children or more. The elite in the Philippines are 90% Catholic and, like the populations of France, Italy, and Malta, disregard the policy of their church and have small families, thanks to the use of contraceptives. Because contraceptives are not available in Latin America, abortion is widely used and is the leading cause of death in women aged 15 to 39.

The Philippines is industrialising rapidly, and already excellent latex surgical gloves are made by its latex industry and exported to other countries. Businessmen in this industry, however, do not see a future in producing condoms in the Philippines. Yet only local production and widespread availability of condoms will slow down the spread of AIDS. Surveys in Manila show that in 1989 only five to 10 per 1000 prostitutes were positive for HIV. There is, however, no case for complacency. Other countries in Asia have seen dramatic increases in the prevalence of HIV infection in two to three years.

Pope John Paul has been lecturing the young people of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso to avoid drugs and sex, adding that youth must face the plagues of modern times. Although the Pope did not identify the plagues he had in mind, Monsignore Carlo Caffara, dean of John Paul II's Institute for Marriage and Family Studies at the Vatican, told a recent conference that when one partner of a married couple is positive for HIV it is preferable to risk catching the AIDS virus than to use condoms.

In his writings St Paul condoned slavery, which was accepted without question in his time but would be unacceptable in virtually any community today. If he were among the poor and the prostitutes of Manila today he would surely approve the use of modern contraceptive methods for those who desired them.