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Embracing the Autonomy of Catholic Women –

Discussing the Healthcare and
Environmental Consequences of
the Church's Ban on Contraception

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I have no financial relationships to disclose.

Introduction

The Catholic Church

- represents a body of **1.3 billion people** worldwide
- provides a **dominant religion** in **Latin America** and in **Sub-Saharan Africa**
- issues documents on different topics including **family issues**
- the latest 2016 Papal document echoed the previous documents, stating that **periodical abstinence is the only contraceptive method possible for Catholic Christians**
- **1.3 billion people worldwide are forbidden to use (modern) contraception**

Methodology

This presentation is based on the analysis of following documents

- 2016 Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (the Pope Francis)
- 1968 Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (the Pope Paul VI)

- 2017 Newsletter *Women's Health Challenges* (FIGO)
- 2017 Presentation *The Global Epidemic of Unintended Pregnancies* (FIGO)
- 2011 Document *Abortion, Facts & Figures in 2011* (PRB)
- 2018 Fact Sheet *Global HIV & AIDS Statistics* (UNAIDS)

- 2019 Report *World Population Prospects* (UN)
- 2017 Report *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice* (Alliance of World Scientists)

The Church's Documents on Contraception

Amoris Laetitia (2016)

- **periodical abstinence is the only contraceptive method possible**
- **other contraceptive methods including sterilization (and induced abortions) were rejected**
- *“unacceptable even in places with high birth rates”*
- *“a mentality often opposed to life [...] promoted by the world politics of reproductive health”*

Humanae Vitae (1968)

- uncovers Catholic reasons for opposing modern contraception
- **why is periodical abstinence the only accepted method?**
- *“in the former the married couple rightly use a faculty provided them by nature, [...] in the latter they obstruct the natural development of the generative process”*
- **the rejection of modern contraception is very vigorous**
- *“condemns as always unlawful the use of means which directly prevent conception, even when the reasons given for the latter practice may appear to be upright and serious.”*

The Present

- there are no specific documents after *Humanae Vitae*, *Donum Vitae*, *Evangelium Vitae* and *Amoris Laetitia* about the topic of human procreation
- the position of the Catholic Church is that **natural family planning** (Billings, symptothermal...) **is the only practice to be implemented**

The Healthcare Consequences
of unavailability or a ban on contraception

Women's Health Challenges (2018)

Unintended pregnancies

- globally, **41% of all** pregnancies are **unintended/unwanted**
- the highest percentage is in Latin America (58%)
- globally, 303,000 women die a year due to pregnancy-related issues
- 2/3 of these deaths happen in Sub-Saharan Africa

Adolescent pregnancies

- significant health and social consequences
- the highest rates are in Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa followed by Latin America

Women's Health Challenges (2018)

Induced abortions

- globally, there are 56 million (safe/unsafe) abortions a year
- the highest rates of abortions are in Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa, followed by Latin America
- globally, 47,000 women die a year due to unsafe abortions

Spread of sexually transmitted infections and AIDS/HIV pandemic in Africa

- 2/3 of all HIV positive people are Africans
- 25% of population is HIV positive in some African countries (Swaziland, Lesotho)
- other sexually transmitted infections (gonorrhoea, syphilis, chlamydia, etc.)

Women's Health and Rights (2018)

Unintended pregnancies and their consequences just as sexually transmitted infections are well preventable if

- **women are well informed about contraception and family planning methods and services**
- **women are well educated in sexual and reproductive health**
- **women are free to choose a contraceptive method based on their personal opinion, expectations, contraindications, etc.**

The Environmental Consequences of unavailability or a ban on contraception

World Population Projects (2019)

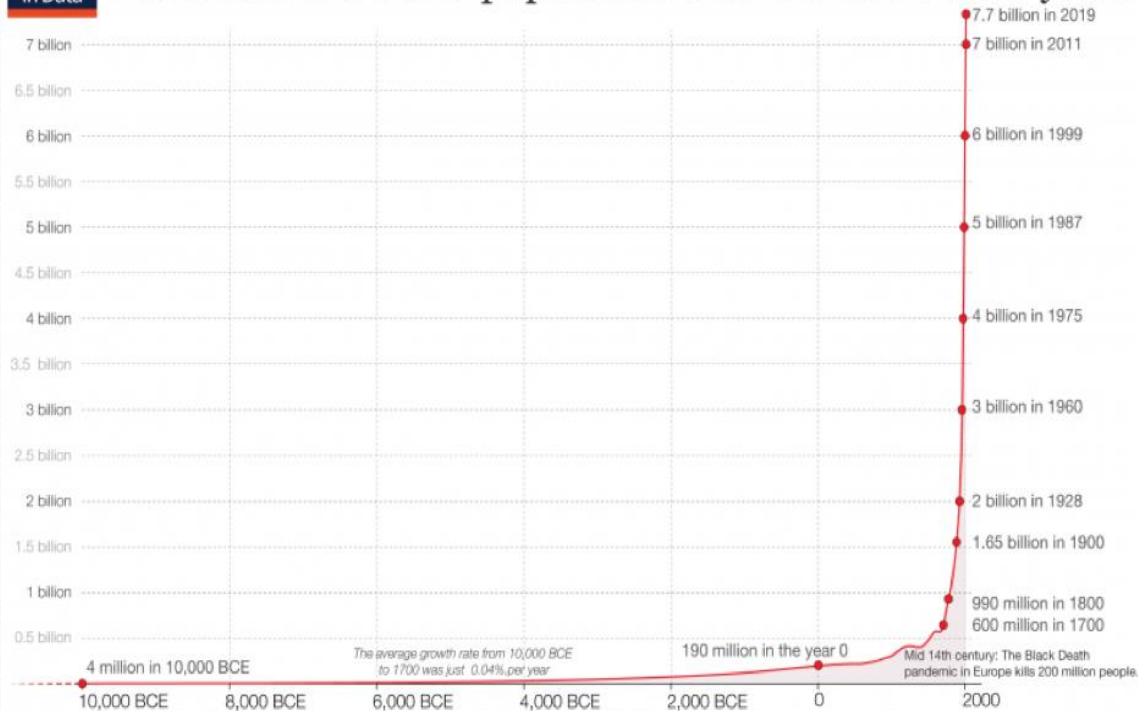
Unintended pregnancies

- globally, **41% of all** pregnancies are **unintended/unwanted**
- greatly contribute to the current rapid population growth – **over 80 million people a year**
- the human population is **7.9 billion** (2021)
- despite decrease in fertility rates and slowing population growth there are no signs of slowing down in the foreseeable future –
- current medium-variant predictions are **8.5 billion (2030)**, 9.7 billion (2050), and **10.9 billion (2100)**

World Population – The Past and the Future

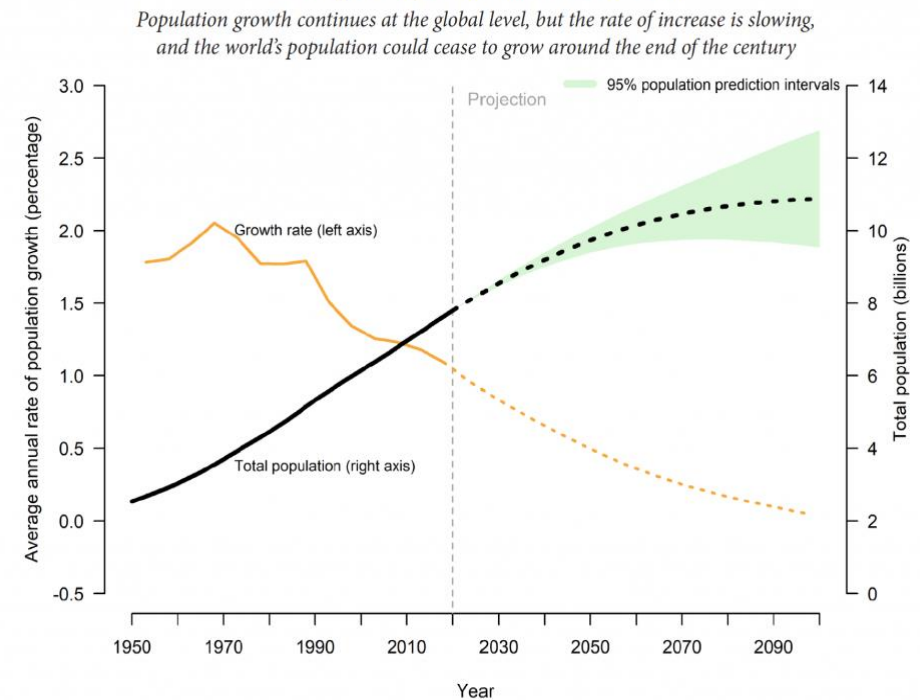
Our World
in Data

The size of the world population over the last 12,000 years



Based on estimates by the History Database of the Global Environment (HYDE) and the United Nations. On OurWorldinData.org you can download the annual data. This is a visualization from OurWorldinData.org, where you find data and research on how the world is changing. Licensed under CC-BY-SA by the author Max Roser.

Figure 1. Population size and annual growth rate for the world: estimates, 1950-2020, and medium-variant projection with 95 per cent prediction intervals, 2020-2100

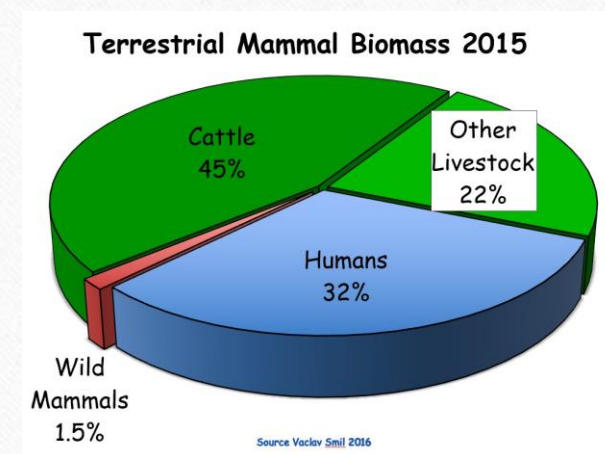
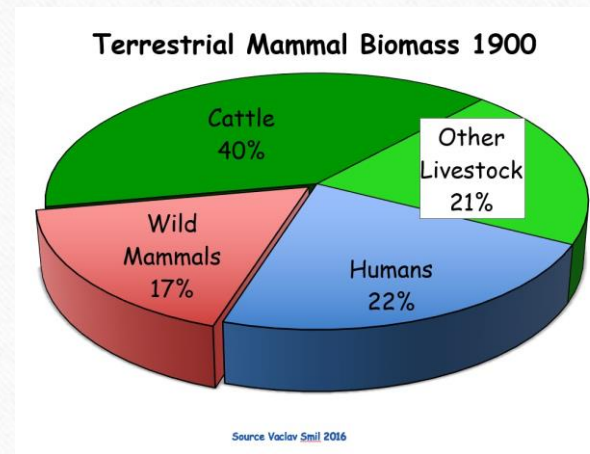
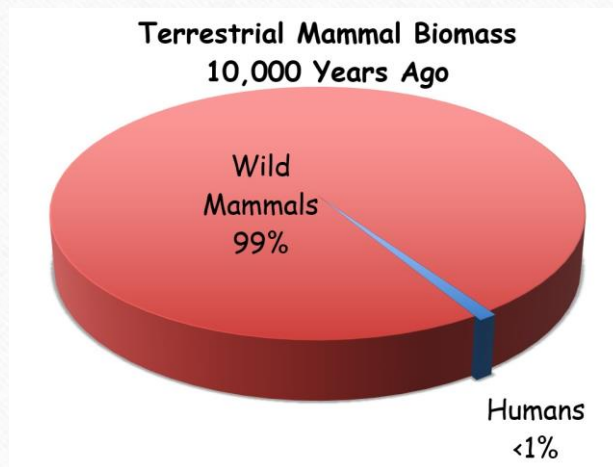


Data source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Prospects 2019*.

World Scientists' Warning to Humanity (2017)

Unintended pregnancies

- thus, greatly contribute to the environmental crisis humanity and the planet face, namely:
- **climate change, environmental degradation and pollution, resource depletion, increase in municipal waste, biodiversity loss, deforestation, desertification, mass species extinction (species genocide)**



Further Problems

- **water scarcity**, food insecurity, starvation, malnutrition
- **pandemic emergence**, inadequate healthcare services
- increased poverty, slowing economic growth, inadequate housing
- **forced migration**, climate refugees
- radicalization, extremism, widespread conflict, **resource-driven wars**

Further Problems

- a major obstacle to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals
(1) No poverty, (2) Zero hunger, (3) Good health and well-being, etc.



The Key to Sustainability

Voluntary family planning

- contraceptive prevalence as the greatest factor for a country's fertility rate
- essential, wanted, needed and doable; the greatest medical achievement alongside vaccination
- greater investments into family planning worldwide are necessary; currently one percent of development aid

Education and empowerment

- girls' education (and women's empowerment) among the most powerful forces on the planet
- educated girls are healthier and wealthier; it benefits whole communities and economics

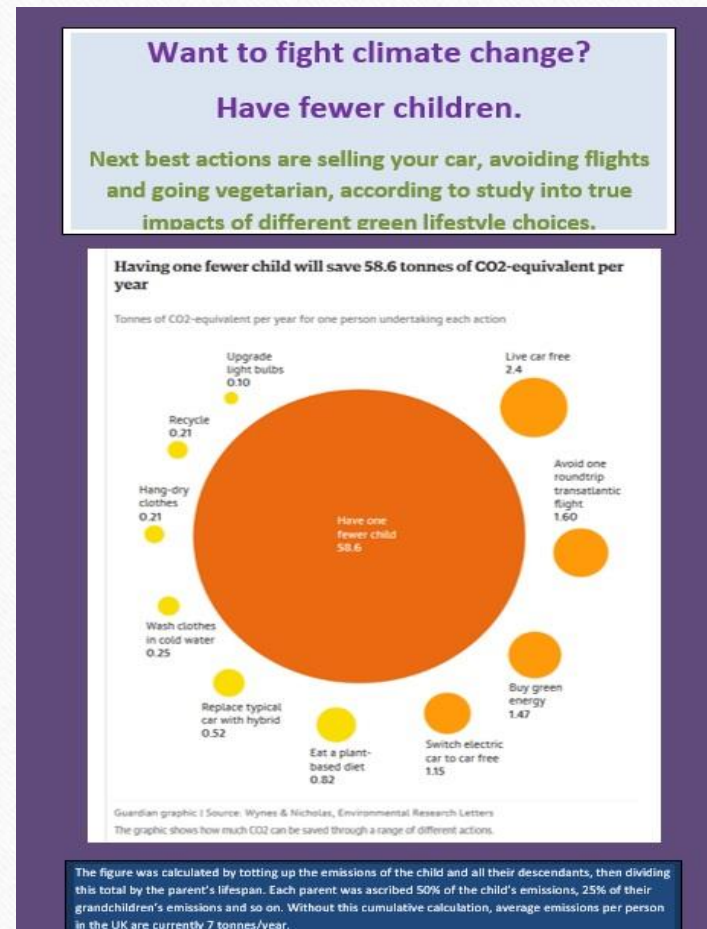
Important in themselves, also for curbing unwanted and coerced fertility (five roots of population growth:

(1) mortality decline, (2) population momentum, (3) wanted fertility, (4) unwanted fertility and (5) coerced fertility)

Global Positive Effects of Contraception

Contraception prevents:

- poverty
- climate change
- mass species extinction
- pollution
- wars, and many more



Individual Positive Effects of Contraception

Contraception prevents:

- ovarian, endometrial, colorectal **carcinoma**
- **dysmenorrhoea**, PMS, PCOS
- **deep pelvic inflammation**, ovarian cysts
- maternal and infant **mortality and morbidity**
- adolescent and elderly women from **high-risk pregnancies**
- **induced abortions (the best prevention)**
- **sexually transmitted infections** (some forms of contraception)

Contraceptive Care

- **healthcare providers offer the methods, women make the choice**
- **is never coercive; on the contrary, it respects a woman's autonomy**
- as such, it **rejects any forced state interventions** in favour of contraception (respecting a woman's autonomy protects from the coerced interventions of public power)
- tries to reach all who need contraception including **the hardest to reach:** rural women and girls, refugees, minorities, people with disabilities, etc.
- as such, it is **a truly humanitarian intervention**

Conclusion

- every pregnancy should be intended
- every child should be a wanted child
- it is child's right to be born into a family that wants him/her and that is prepared for him/her (economically, mentally, and so on)
- a woman's autonomy to freely choose her preferable contraception is **THE KEY** to it
- like education and nutrition, contraception is fundamental to human dignity and critical for human health as well as the planet's

The Need of Dialogue – Building Bridges

- for the aforementioned reasons, (bio)ethicists need to openly discuss the healthcare and environmental implications of the Catholic Church' ban on (modern) contraception
- despite many who think otherwise, **a dialogue** between the Church and gynecological organizations (religion and science) **is possible**; this building bridges can be beneficial for our planet, its biosphere, humanity (and women especially) and the dignity of humanity
- it can lead to allowance of **some forms of contraception (if not all) to some groups of people** (married couples that have already fulfilled their reproductive plans, women with potentially high-risk pregnancies, people in the poorer settings struggling for life, etc.)

Thank You for Your Attention

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