

ABORTION THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AND THE POPE

by K. D. Whitehead

American Catholics can only reflect with deep shame on the role their government played in the preparation for and participation in the recent UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. The Cairo conference itself surely represented some kind of moral low point in the modern world's relentless slide into official immorality and decadence; and from the outset the U.S. government played the most active and prominent role in making the Cairo conference what it was.

Would anyone, twenty-five years ago, have thought that there could actually be a UN-sponsored international conference which would attempt to impose through government action a totally materialistic and utilitarian view of human beings upon the whole world?

Or would anyone ever have imagined that those opposed to the ruthless decimation of the next generation by abortion – supposedly required on the pretext that the world is, or will be, “overpopulated”- would be the ones automatically assumed to be the “bad guys” at such an international conference? Or that those who do not perceive any objection to having large numbers of the next generation killed off by abortion before they have a chance to be born would be the ones automatically assumed to be the “good guys?” The well-worn phrase of Nietzsche, “transvaluation of all values,” doesn't succeed in conveying the truth of what has happened to traditional morality in the world of today. And it was Cairo that made it all happen. The world surely has traveled far and fast in the past quarter century.

As the Cairo conference demonstrated, however, the present administration in Washington proved to be only too willing to enlist all the power and prestige of the United States in order to help drive the world yet farther and faster down the wrong road which it has now chosen. The U.S. Government went into the Cairo conference with a firm and well-documented policy frankly aimed at promoting government "population control."

When publicly challenged, notably by Pope John Paul II, whose unusually pointed criticisms of U.S. population policy were strongly echoed by a letter from the six American cardinals addressed to President Clinton himself, the U.S. Government clumsily tried to deny what its policy was and to deflect the criticisms back upon the pope and the Vatican; and then, when the heat apparently became too great, U.S. Government spokesmen, including both the president and the vice president, openly lied about what the U.S. policy verifiably was.

And as if this official, bare-faced lying was not disgraceful enough for the government of a great nation, the proud media of that same nation tamely tended to accept at absolute face value the government's own assertions of what its policy was, rather than inquiring into the real truth of the matter. There were times, indeed, when the Clinton Administration was exonerated in the very same news story which was reporting other, damning facts which should have pointed to a conviction rather than to an exoneration. Where the U.S. Government's population policy was concerned, however, especially with regard to its position on abortion, the kind of adversarial, "expose" journalism at the expense of the White House made famous in such affairs as Watergate and Iran-Contra temporarily disappeared from the American media. What was the U.S. Government's international abortion policy going into the Cairo conference? In March 1994, the U.S. State Department sent out a cable outlining this policy to all American

diplomatic and consular posts abroad in order to allow them to inform the governments to which they were accredited about the U.S. policy in question. This State Department cable made it absolutely clear that the U.S. intended to exert its influences with the other governments, with the World Bank, and with the International Monetary Fund to "advance U.S. population policy interests." The implication was that if underdeveloped countries failed to go along with the policy the U.S. was promoting for Cairo, they might find aid and development money drying up.

And the policy the U.S. intended to push for in Cairo definitely included what was described as "the need to ensure universal access to family planning and related reproductive health services, including access to safe abortion." In the parlance of the modern family planning industry, the phrase "reproductive health services" virtually always includes abortion, and precisely as a method of "family planning," as Americans will discover in connection with health care reform if they are not careful. But in this particular document, the reference to the inclusion of abortion was made explicit, probably in order to be able to stress the safety angle. When carefully perused, then, the text here does indeed call for nothing else but "universal...access to safe abortions." That was the U.S. Government's international abortion policy going into the Cairo conference.

As the September 5 date for the opening of the Cairo conference approached, the rhetoric intensified, much of it at the expense of the Vatican, and some of it inspired by the U.S. Government's own efforts in support of population control. This same pattern would carry on in Cairo itself after the convening of the conference. Papal "attacks" and Vatican "obstructionism" were regularly deplored in press accounts. National Public Radio – which employed the virulently anti-papal Frances Kissling of the oxymoronic "non-organization" Catholics for a Free Choice as its expert on the

Cairo conference – characterized the papal proposition as “strident.”

The Vatican was out of step and out of date, it was reported – or else out of touch, isolated, with perhaps only a couple of Latin American countries going along with its views, a Liechtenstein, or a Malta. How could the pope even continue to hang on? Surely he was on the ropes.

No: suddenly the Vatican was responsible for stirring up Muslim opposition, for encouraging Islamic fundamentalism: the Holy See was actually seeking support for its positions even from such radical regimes as those in Libya and Iran. *Washington Post* columnist Jim Hoagland described this as a “moral nadir” for the Vatican.

One of the favorite approaches of the pro-population-controls, anti-Vatican media was to feature prominently the vaporous emissions of Catholic malcontents and turncoats prepared to take a public stand with the neo-pagan modern world against the Church they still claimed to belong to (although they were apparently not equally prepared to fulfill some of the requirements of true Church membership).

Or else the media resorted to citing polls indicating how many Catholics today supposedly disagree with the teachings of the Church on such topics as abortion, birth control, sexual morality, and the like – as if such disagreement by individual Catholics somehow invalidated the Church’s position or nullified her ancient claim to be the authoritative interpreter of a divine revelation which she has guarded and handed down from the time of the apostles, her ancient claim, that is, to be literally the authoritative voice of Jesus Christ in the world speaking to each generation. For, as everybody really knows, the Catholic Church bases her “policies” neither on the results of public opinion polls nor upon any democratic majority vote, but rather upon what she firmly believes to be the special guidance of the Holy Spirit

promised to her by Christ concerning what we must believe and do in order to achieve our sanctification and salvation. Once unleashed, however, the campaign against the pope and the Vatican eventually got out of hand, at least from the point of view of the Clinton Administration. In late August, just before the conference convened, and even while asserting that the U.S. Government did not want the conference to become a "U.S.-Vatican showdown," the State Department's population coordinator, Faith Mitchell, nevertheless said that the Vatican's disagreement with the U.S. had to do, in her view, "with the fact that the conference [was] really calling for a new role for women, calling for girls' education and improving the status of women." (On the evidence of such a statement as this, it surely could not have been a surprise to anyone to learn that this same Faith Mitchell had been a population-control activist in San Francisco before joining the Clinton Administration.)

Among other reactions to this false and bigoted statement, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights was obliged to publish in the *New York Times* an open letter to President Clinton signed by Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon and endorsed by a number of other distinguished Catholic women and women's organizations. The open letter pointed out the irrefutable fact that the Catholic Church had long led the world in providing the education of girls and it called on the president to direct Faith Mitchell to retract her statement.

Eventually this kind of mounting heat on the Clinton Administration was perceived as being too great. After all, Catholics still do vote in the United States. And certain Catholics close to the White House who also possessed a modicum of political savvy, including current White House chief of staff Leon Panetta, and former California Congressman Tony Coelho, who is now with the Democratic National Committee, were suddenly to be found conceding candidly to reporters that yes, indeed, some members of the Clinton

Administration had been guilty of anti-papal and "anti-Catholic sentiments requiring White House discipline," according to one press report in the *Washington Times*.

No doubt privately the same or like-minded officials apparently succeeded in convincing their own administration that the continuing ongoing open warfare in the media with the pope and the Catholic Church was hardly likely to be conducive to electoral success with many traditionally Democratic Catholic voters. However that may be, the Clinton Administration's principal "solution" to the public embarrassment it now realized it faced turned out to be even more insulting and mendacious than its creation of the original "problem."

The solution was that on August 25 Vice President Al Gore himself stepped before the cameras and microphones at the National Press Club and, without batting an eye, declared that "the United States has not sought, does not seek, and will not seek an international right to abortion." Anyone who pointed to the obvious fact that the preparatory document for the Cairo conference which had been largely engineered by the United States did attempt to call for precisely that – or that U.S. policy on numerous previous occasions had, again, called for precisely that – was guilty of an "outrageous allegation," the vice president unblushingly declared. In other words, the pope himself, who knew and had said what the real U.S. policy was, could only be at the head of the line of the guilty ones.

The U.S. policy certainly *had been* to promote abortion internationally, the vice president's statement notwithstanding to the contrary. As Bishop James T. McHugh of Camden, New Jersey stated, the American delegation had been "determined and intransigent" in continuing to insist on including abortion as a method of family planning because it was a basic woman's right.

Now, however, Vice President Gore was apparently signaling

that henceforth this was no longer going to be U.S. policy. When he himself limped up to the rostrum in Cairo on crutches as a result of a tennis accident- although the crutches surely constituted a very apt symbol of how the Clinton Administration had been handling the whole thing – the vice president, in what turned out to be an unusually mild speech, repeated his claim that the United States did not seek to impose the legalization of abortion on other countries. Correspondent Morton Blackwell, reporting from Cairo in *Human Events*, wrote that “this was contrary to the frequently expressed position of President Clinton’s U.S. delegates and that of the conference managers, but leftists here quietly accepted Gore’s sop to Roman Catholic opinion in the United States.”

In the event, because of what turned out to be the opposition of more than 30 countries out of the 152 which sent delegations to the Cairo conference, the conference itself was forced to back off from the initially proposed universal-access-to-abortion language in its final document, even though the speakers there who advocated this position were cheered on the floor of the conference itself, while those who agreed with the Vatican’s position were as often as not unceremoniously booed. The headline of one *Washington Post* story datelined Cairo gave the flavor: “Vatican’s Abortion Stance Riles Many At Forum.” (It appears that Catholic Christians today will have to get used to the fact that the tenets of their faith no longer enjoy much acceptance or respect in certain rather prominent sectors of today’s world.)

In the end, the Cairo conference was evidently forced to retreat from the extreme position most of the delegates there favored because the U.S. Government had been forced to retreat from its extreme position. As one story in the *Washington Times* reported:

“...the informal coalition between the Vatican and Islamic fundamentalists appears to have caught the U.S. administration

by surprise. U.S. officials were certain a month ago that the issue of contraception and abortion could be pushed through, if necessary, by a formal vote, since the Vatican at that time was supported by only four other small countries. Now even moderate Arabic nations are backing away from any suggestion that they should permit abortion...."

Concerning all this American Catholics can only muse how God truly does work in mysterious ways...

For the much ballyhooed 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo finally ended up deciding, contrary to what the American delegation among others had originally pushed for, that "in no case should abortion be permitted as a method of family planning." Similarly, the Holy See and its allies successfully insisted on language to the effect that family reproductive health matters should conform to local laws, cultures, ethics, and religion, and that the conference proposals were not intended to overturn national laws or social customs.

These points represented notable victories for the Vatican and for what by common consent was conceded to be its very competent delegation in Cairo. Morton Blackwell wrote that "the best speech given here was by the head of the Vatican delegation, Monsignor Renato Martino. In 20 minutes of sensible and eloquent remarks, first he advised the conference to focus more on achievable economic development. Then the assembly quieted noticeably as he urged delegates not to dismiss the moral dimension of irresponsible or immature behavior."

In his Cairo speech Archbishop Martino took note of the fact that there had "been efforts by some to foster the concept of a 'right to abortion' and to establish abortion as an essential component of population policy." This concept, the archbishop went on to say, correctly, "would be entirely innovative in the international community and would be

contrary to the constitutional and legislative positions of many states as well as being alien to the sensitivities of vast numbers of persons, believers and unbelievers alike.”

At least on a few such points, then, the Vatican prevailed against all the odds, proving itself to be the true defender of underdeveloped countries against the arrogance and excesses of the rich, developed countries, including, unfortunately, the United States. And behind all the work of the Vatican delegation at the conference there were the words and example of Pope John Paul II himself – an adversary that President Clinton and Vice President Gore probably never took very seriously in the beginning.

Of course the degree to which the Vatican “victory” in Cairo is going to alter very many things in practice in today’s world should not be exaggerated. The population controllers, after all, did end up getting their official reference to making abortion “safe.” They got some of the other things they wanted as well, so that the Holy See could only endorse the final document in an “incomplete” and “partial” manner.

Not even John Paul II, apparently, could fight and win the whole battle. The victories stigmatizing legalized abortion and favoring local autonomy were probably the most that could be won in the present climate highly favorable to “population control.” For American Catholics, however, even these small “victories” cannot be anything but very bittersweet ones, considering how vigorously their own government pushed for universal legalized abortion for as long as it perceived it was able to do so; and then, when it was forced to retreat, resorted to a disgraceful series of official lies and obfuscation.

More than that, if “anti-Catholicism” were against the law, and the present U.S. Government were ever put on trial for it under such a law, it is hard to see, on the evidence, how it could ever expect to be acquitted.

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