



The Holy See

*Lettre aux chefs des Etats membres de l'ONU, à propos de la prochaine Conférence internationale sur la population et le développement*19 mars 1994*

1. The international community recently began its celebration of the International Year of the Family, a timely initiative promoted by the United Nations Organization.

The International Conference on Population and Development, also organized by the UN and to be held in Cairo in September 1994, likewise represents one of the important events of this year. International leaders will thus have an opportunity to reconsider the reflections and commitments of the previous Conferences on these themes held in Bucharest (1974) and Mexico City (1984). But public opinion is especially looking to the Cairo meeting for guidelines for the future, conscious as it is of the important matters everyone clearly recognizes to be at stake, including the well-being and development of peoples, the growth of world population, the rise of the median age in some industrialized countries, the fight against disease and the forced displacement of whole peoples.

2. The Holy See, in conformity with its mission and using the means at its disposal, willingly associates itself with all these efforts to serve the human family throughout the world. On 26 December last, the Catholic Church also inaugurated a "Year of the Family", for the purpose of encouraging all the faithful to engage in a deeper spiritual and moral reflection on this human reality, fundamental to the lives of both individuals and societies.

I myself decided to address all families personally by writing them a Letter. It restates the fact that every human being is "called to live in truth and in love" (n. 16), and that the family unit continues to be the "school of life" where the tensions between independence and communion, unity and diversity are lived out on a unique and primary level. It is in the family, I believe, that we find a human resource which produces the best creative energies of the social fabric. This is something which every State ought carefully to safeguard. Without infringing on the autonomy of a reality which they can neither produce nor replace, civil authorities have a duty, in effect, to strive to promote the harmonious growth of the family, not only from the point of view of its social vitality but also from that of its moral and spiritual health.

3. This is why the draft of the final document of the forthcoming Cairo Conference was of particular interest to me. I found it a disturbing surprise.

The innovations which it contains, on the level both of concepts and wording, make this text a very different one from the documents of the Conferences of Bucharest and Mexico City. There is reason to fear that it could cause a moral decline

resulting in a serious setback for humanity, one in which man himself would be the first victim.

One notes, for example, that the theme of development, on the agenda of the Cairo meeting, including the very complex issue of the relationship between population and development, which ought to be at the centre of the discussion, is almost completely overlooked, so few are the pages devoted to it. The only response to the population issue and to the urgent need for an integral development of the person and of societies seems to be reduced to the promotion of a lifestyle the consequences of which, were it accepted as a model and plan of action for the future could prove particularly negative. The leaders of the nations owe it to themselves to reflect deeply and in conscience on this aspect of the matter.

Furthermore, the idea of sexuality underlying this text is totally individualistic, to such an extent that marriage now appears as something outmoded. An institution as natural, fundamental and universal as the family cannot be manipulated by anyone.

Who could give such a mandate to individuals or institutions? The family is part of the heritage of humanity! Moreover, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states that the family is "the natural and fundamental group unit of society" (art. 16, 3). The International Year of the Family should therefore be a special occasion for society and the State to grant the family the protection which the Universal Declaration recognizes it should have. Anything less would be a betrayal of the noblest ideals of the United Nations. Even more serious are the numerous proposals for a general international recognition of a completely unrestricted right to abortion: this goes well beyond what is already unfortunately permitted by the legislation of certain nations.

Indeed, reading this document - which, granted, is only a draft - leaves the troubling impression of something being imposed: namely a life-style typical of certain fringes within developed societies, societies which are materially rich and secularized. Are countries more sensitive to the values of nature, morality and religion going to accept such a vision of man and society without protest?

4. As we look towards the year 2000, how can we fail to think of the young? What is being held up to them? A society of "things" and not of "persons". The right to do as they will from their earliest years, without any constraint, provided it is "safe". The unreserved gift of self, mastery of one's instincts, the sense of responsibility - these are notions considered as belonging to another age. One would have liked, for example, to find in these pages some attention to the conscience and to respect for cultural and ethical values which inspire other ways of looking at life. We may well fear that tomorrow those same young people, once they have reached adulthood, will demand an explanation from today's leaders for having deprived them of reasons for living because they failed to teach them the duties incumbent upon beings endowed with intelligence and free will.

In writing to you, I have not only wished to share my deep concern about the draft of a document. Above all I have wished to draw your attention to the serious challenges which need to be faced by those taking part in the Cairo Conference. Questions as important as the transmission of life, the family, the material and moral development of societies: all these undoubtedly call for deeper reflection.

That is why I am appealing to you, who are concerned for the good of your own people and of all humanity. It is very

important not to weaken man, his sense of the sacredness of life, his capacity for love and self-sacrifice. Here we are speaking of sensitive issues, issues upon which our societies stand or fall.

I pray that God will grant you discernment and courage, and enable you to Join the very many people of goodwill, both in your own country and throughout the world, in blazing new paths, where all can walk hand in hand and together build a renewed world which will truly be a family, the family of peoples.

From the Vatican, 19 March

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