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Church's ban on contraception starves families and damages ecosystem

Jamie Manson | Feb. 6, 2012 Grace on the Margins

Editor's note: Starting this week, Jamie Manson's column, Grace on the Margins, will be posted on Mondays.

As the battle over contraception coverage raged in our national debate last week, a small report on "PBS NewsHour" demonstrated the devastating effects that the Catholic church's ban on contraception has on poor nations [1].

The report was part of a series called "Food for 9 Billion," which considers food security in the face of a surging global birth rate. Reporter Sam Eaton's story intended to spotlight food insecurity and population growth in the Philippines. But he also offered an invaluable commentary on the human and ecological toll of hierarchy's rigid stance on contraception.

In the United States, the renewed debate over contraception is mostly a battle of ideologies, but in the Philippines, fighting the church's ban on contraception is a battle between life and death.

Today, the Philippines has a population of almost 100 million. By 2080, demographers predict that this number could swell to 200 million.

Tragically, most of these new generations of Filipinos will be born into cycle of poverty that is nearly impossible to break. They will live in slums, picking among garbage to find items to sell. If they are lucky, they will have one small meal of rice to eat everyday.

Most Filipino diets consist of rice and fish. According to the World Bank, every major species of fish in the waters of the Philippines shows signs of severe overfishing.

It isn't greed that is causing the over-fishing, but the desperation of starving families. As Eaton shows, some are going to extreme measures, like using dynamite or cyanide, to find and kill the fish. The effect on the reefs of fishing villages has been devastating.

Although volunteers are cracking down on these practices, most fishermen understand that, even in the best conditions, the ocean simply cannot provide for this surging demand.

Back in the cities, slums grow increasingly overcrowded and families stand in line for more than 12 hours to receive a government assistance check. One sister I spoke to who oversees a Filipino soup kitchen told me they must limit their guests to street children, the elderly and homeless people with severe disabilities.

Many government officials know that the only solution to this mounting crisis is to curb population growth through the availability of birth control. Unfortunately, for poor families, a pack of condoms costs as much as a weekly food bill. For the past decade, some leaders have tried to pass a reproductive health bill in congress that would provide birth control pills and condoms for couples in need.

In a city like Manila, where the maternity wards are so full that new mothers have to share one bed with two other patients, the bill would give Filipino women the tools they need to choose their family size.

But in the deeply Catholic Philippines, church leaders still hold sway over politics. The president of the Philippines, Benigno Aquino III, has been threatened with excommunication for his support of the bill.

"That's why I say don't fool with the church. Because she will bury you," Filipino Archbishop Emeritus Oscar Cruz told Eaton in an interview. The archbishop wears a clean, pressed white shirt. He sits in a comfortable residence and looks well fed.

"From contraception, abortion comes. It's just one step below," the archbishop insists.

But in an interview with the BBC in December, Aquino appealed to his faith to support his decision.

"We're taught that when you come before the Almighty, you will be asked: 'What have you done to the least of your brethren?'" he said. "I cannot in good conscience say we saw the problem and we refused to see it, we refused to talk about it, we refused to hear it. That would be criminal, against the oath that I subscribe to. That would be against the teachings of the church I belong to."

But church officials have found a sympathetic ear among some government leaders. Boxer Manny Pacquiao, who was recently elected to the Filipino parliament, has sided with church. His rationale? If his parents had used birth control, he would not have gone on to become the world welterweight champion.

According to an official document issued by the House of Representatives in the Philippines, Pacquiao has a net worth of approximately $26 million.

"God said go forth and multiply," he said after a meeting with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, according to *The Telegraph*. "He did not say go and have just one or two children."

But for Filipino families who do have access to birth control, having one or two children seems to be bearing a different kind of fruit: three meals a day, financial stability and better opportunities for education.

Some smaller villages have benefited from a program run by the PATH Foundation Philippines, Inc. This community-based family-planning program, funded mostly by USAID, makes birth control accessible and affordable by allowing couples to purchase the pill for as little as 70 cents a month.

The program is popular among parents who remember starving as children with eight and 10 siblings. Crisna Bostero, who participates in the PATH program, said, "We would only eat once a day because we were so poor. We couldn't go to school. I did not finish my school because there were just so many of us."

Because of PATH, she and her husband, Jason, were able to choose to have two children. They can provide three meals a day and send their children to school. The program enables them to be stewards not only of their sexual health, but of their environment, too. Jason and his neighbors have created a marine sanctuary to aid in reviving the fish stocks.

According to Eaton's report, "A recent study by the Guttmacher Institute found that the cost of providing birth control to the quarter-billion women on the planet who want it -- but don't have access to it -- is about $4.50 a year, per person. But it could mean having 8 billion mouths to feed by the end of the century, instead of 15 billion."

But Cruz believes Filipinos should focus on food production, not family size.

"Which would you prefer: to have less mouths to feed or to have more food to eat?" he asked in an interview with Eaton.

In the Philippines, however, the demand for rice is expected to rise by at least 50 percent in the next few years. Increasing food production will only be possible through a bioengineered rice strain, a breakthrough scientists say is decades away. At the same time, farmland throughout the Philippines is being lost to new highway and industrial park projects.

Attempts at meeting these swelling demands for food mean certain doom for the country's already compromised ecosystem.

It seems an imminent humanitarian and ecological disaster is not enough to transform the hearts of the Filipino hierarchy. Even the new Filipino Archbishop, Luis Antonio Tagle, whom *NCR*'s John Allen recently characterized as "a guitar-playing cleric who eschews clerical garb and takes public transportation," opposes the contraception bill.

Although Tagle has been lauded for his humility and seeming solidarity with the Filipino people, he clearly refuses to hear their voices. According to a 2011 poll by Social Weather Stations, a local Filipino social research institution, 82 percent of Filipinos say family planning is a personal decision of couples that no one should interfere with. Sixty-eight percent believe that the government should fund both natural and artificial means of family planning.

As the debate in the United States continues over the rights of the church to be exempt from providing government-mandated contraceptive care to employees, it's remarkable to see that even in a country filled with church-going, deeply faithful Catholics, the hierarchy's rules on contraception are overwhelmingly viewed as a matter of individual conscience.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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