

**A written submission from Catholics for Choice to the
42nd session of the UN Commission on Population and Development
March 30 to April 3, 2009**

Background

Catholics for Choice shapes and advances sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well-being and respect and affirm the capacity of women and men to make moral decisions about their lives. Through discourse, education and advocacy, CFC works with a global network of prochoice Catholics in Europe and the rest of the world, including sister organizations throughout Latin America. Catholics for Choice has consultative status at the United Nations through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

CFC supports policy making and governing structures that make a clear separation between church and state. At the same time, we also recognize that religion can make a positive contribution to law and policy making, particularly in relation to social justice and the dignity of the human person. We strongly support the right of religious institutions to participate in the life of nations, to express their values, and even to attempt to influence public policy but do not feel that religious organizations should be granted special dispensation merely because they are religious.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the United Nations has, through a series of international conferences and plans of action, addressed a number of serious problems facing the world and its people: human rights, the environment, population and development, social development, housing and women's rights. Few areas have been more contentious or difficult than the question of reproductive health, which embodies differing, deeply embedded political and religious views of women's rights, gender and sexuality.

At the UN International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994, a Programme of Action was adopted by the world's governments. The next year, the Fourth

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World Conference on Women in Beijing continued this work. More recently, the Millennium Declaration in 2000 outlined a series of goals (the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs) to improve the lives of the world's poor and marginalized.

Our support for the Programme of Action and the MDGs comes from the perspective of values and principles enlightened by the Catholic social justice tradition. The agreements reached at the Cairo conference represented what has been called by many a “paradigm shift” in the world's approach to development. In this shift, an emphasis on demographic targets gave way to an emphasis on human needs and the common good. In the new paradigm, we see hope, a reverence for life, health and well-being, and an impulse toward respect for human dignity, social justice and equality among all people. Especially evident in the Programme of Action is a new-found respect for the moral agency of women. This paradigm shift was continued in the MDGs.

Our primary area of concern is in how the institutional Catholic church, the hierarchy, responds to these crises, and how its response impacts the work of governments and the UN around the world. While we could provide many detailed examples of Vatican interference, we have chosen to outline two that we feel reflect the reality of the Catholic hierarchy's positions on these matters and the urgency for action to stem its influence in public policy decisions.

Curtailing Support for the Millennium Development Goals

In September 2005, Catholics for Choice initiated an interfaith religious statement supporting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and calling for the inclusion of reproductive health.

The broad-based statement, “A Faith-filled Commitment to Development Includes a Commitment to Women's Rights and Reproductive Health: Religious Reflections on the Millennium Development Goals,” was focused on the MDGs and poverty eradication. It was an initiative of the International Interfaith Network for Development and Reproductive Health, a project sponsored by Catholics for Choice, and is available online at www.catholicsforchoice.org/news/pr/2005/documents/mdgreliouenglish.pdf.

However, high-ranking Vatican officials instructed Catholic bishops to ensure that “no ‘religious leader’ of the Catholic church and subject to our jurisdiction agree and sign” the statement.

A memo issued by Cardinal Angelo Sodano articulating the Vatican's orders resulted in bishops' conferences warning bishops throughout Latin America against signing the declaration. The Vatican's order put forward oft-repeated misinformation regarding UN definitions of reproductive health, insisting that they include abortion, and mischaracterized the religious leaders' declaration as a statement promoting abortion. The memo was leaked to the Latin American press and was widely seen as part of an ongoing effort by the Vatican to eliminate any references to reproductive health in UN documents.

US Government Funding to Mitigate the Impact of the HIV and AIDS Pandemics, 2008

We have serious concerns about the Vatican's continued and active lobbying around the world and at the United Nations to restrict people's access to condoms, claiming that condoms cause AIDS, not prevent it. An excellent example of this took place in the US Congress in 2008.

The Lantos/Hyde HIV/AIDS Global Leadership Act was gutted of several practical, life-saving programs as a result of lobbying by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Despite increasing funding overall, the US Congress:

- decoupled vital family planning services that can prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV;
- expanded the “conscience clause” that enables organizations receiving US funding to pick and choose the prevention and treatment services they wish to provide;
- retained the anti-prostitution pledge, further marginalizing an extremely at-risk group; and
- imposed a complex formula that calls for at least fifty percent of prevention funding to be spent on abstinence and faithfulness programs, rather than allowing experienced agencies to decide how best to spend the funds depending on local circumstances.

The US bishops, in partnership with Catholic Relief Services (CRS), lobbied hard for these damaging measures from a self-serving perspective that few Catholics share, let alone those of other and no religious preference. Catholics in the United States and elsewhere support aid for international family planning and reject abstinence-only programs. Studies show that properly directed funding for international family planning programs saves women's lives and the lives of their children when those women have HIV/AIDS. Many studies, including some sponsored by the US Congress, show that abstinence-only programs do not work. The bishops ignored this evidence to ensure that their own narrow, out-of-the-mainstream beliefs held sway.

These examples are not isolated. It is interesting to note that as reproductive rights become more accepted throughout the world, and significant moves have been made to legalize abortion in regions (such as Latin America) that the Catholic hierarchy once considered to be its own backyard, the bishops are speaking out more and more vehemently. The recent outbreak of Catholic bishops attacking prochoice Catholic politicians is a real sign that the Vatican may recognize that it is fighting a losing battle. After decades of the hierarchy's being able to rely on Catholic politicians to bend the knee when bishops told them how to vote, times are changing.

Moving Forward

The following are the core values we would like to see infused into public policy:

Reproductive Health and Rights

Reproduction is one of the most important and profound aspects of human life and relationships. Through reproduction, we express our hope in the future of humanity. Reproduction is both private and public. It has undeniable consequences for the community and society at large. It is also a matter of public health, religious teachings and government policy. It is an area in which women are the central protagonists, for it is women who bear the risks and consequences of childbearing

and the greater responsibility for childcare. In the just world we work toward, these risks and responsibilities will be equally shared by men and better supported by society.

An ethically based approach to reproductive health and rights has several underlying principles. First, it must be voluntary rather than coercive. The imposition of external limits on family size is unacceptable. Couples must have the right to decide when, whether and how to bring new life into the world. Second, it must be comprehensive rather than focused on family planning alone. Women's reproductive health cannot be extricated from their health, and programs must provide a wide range of services. Third, it must be seen as an integral aspect of human rights. Reproductive rights are grounded in previously recognized human rights. This right was first recognized in 1968 at the International Conference on Human Rights in Teheran, Iran. Fourth, it must be tied irrevocably to respect for the rights of conscience and free will. Couples consider a range of concerns in making the decision whether to have a child. The community, family, religious teachings and social conventions will play a role in reproductive decisions, but in each decision, the individual conscience has the ultimate say.

Contraception

Bringing children into the world is a major responsibility. Safe and effective contraception not only makes responsible procreation more possible, it also allows for a satisfying, pleasurable sexual life with diminished fear of unintended pregnancy. Furthermore, the control over fertility that contraception offers has allowed women to develop aspects of their lives beyond motherhood and prevents the need for abortion.

The Vatican supports, in fact encourages, the practice of family planning, for it recognizes the moral imperative of responsible parenthood. However, only "natural family planning," a set of methods that involve periodic abstinence, is allowed. Making only one method available—and one that does nothing to protect against sexually transmitted diseases—cruelly ignores the reality of people's lives. Women and men must freely decide not only whether they wish to use contraception, but which method is best for them.

Couples worldwide, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, have indicated that they need and want to use contraception. We endorse a commitment to voluntary family planning programs that include a full range of safe, effective and affordable contraceptive choices.

HIV/AIDS

Society's and individuals' responses to AIDS must be rooted in compassion, responsibility and a commitment to life. These principles require that efforts to prevent the spread of HIV must include condoms and condom instruction. Couples should be encouraged to use them to prevent transmission of HIV. We reject the Vatican's opposition to condom use, and we stand with a science- and compassion-based approach to treating and preventing this tragic disease.

Safe Abortion

Abortion is a complex moral and social issue. The Vatican's opposition to abortion is compromised by its unwillingness to accept contraceptive services and devices even though they reduce the need for abortion. Even taking into account

Vatican opposition to abortion, we remain puzzled by Vatican objections to abortion being safe where legal. This dismissal of safe abortion by the church hierarchy is insensitive to the realities women face and to the number of women who die from unsafe abortions every day. Because women everywhere resort to abortion, the alternative to safe abortion is, of course, unsafe abortion.

The hierarchy's preoccupation with eliminating abortion from the world prevents the real issues of justice and health for women being addressed. Such an absolutist position fails to acknowledge the ambiguity and doubt regarding fetal life and ignores the range of moral complexities surrounding each situation. In all cases, it is the poor who suffer most.

In conclusion, we would like others to join us in bringing pressure to bear on the church hierarchy to:

- Work with women's organizations to incorporate into its life-education programs instruction not only about responsible parenthood, but also on the goodness of sexual pleasure and importance of informed choice;
- Educate Catholics about the church's teachings on primacy of conscience, so they can understand how these apply to women and men faced with personal decisions regarding their reproductive health and lives;
- Introduce comprehensive health care and education programs into the teachings, prevention programs and care and treatment of patients in Catholic health-care facilities so that the people they serve can make informed choices about their health and lives; and
- Recognize and address the health impact of unsafe abortion as a major public health issue.