

Let Us Live Not as Fools But as Wise Men! (*Cf. Eph 5:15*)

3rd of the Series of Pastoral Letters of His Grace,
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*On the Issues Contained in the Reproductive Health Bill
and the Church's Response*

Introduction

“So you must live like people who belong to the light, for it is the light that brings a rich harvest of every kind of goodness, righteousness, and the truth.”¹ Impelled by these words of the Apostle Paul, I feel there are things to be clarified in the RH Bill, so that the continuing dialogue between the Church and the government on the issue, may truly be the common concern of all of us, who are called to live not as unwise but as wise men.

The Heart of the RH Bill

The defenders of the RH Bill² want it passed into law for it shall guarantee the health of all, particularly of mothers and infants, even as it will help prevent infant and maternal deaths. The heart of the bill is the right of informed choice of couples over all the methods of family planning, both natural and artificial that shall: 1) promote responsible parenthood, 2) ensure the reduction of population growth, 3) uplift the quality of life, and 4) assure sustainable human development.

Special Concerns on the RH Bill

1. Reproductive Health, Population Control and Development
2. Methods of Family Planning and Responsible Parenthood
3. Mandatory Age-appropriate Reproductive Health Education
4. Contraceptives as “Essential Medicines”
5. No Distinction between Contraceptives and Abortifacients
6. Abortion as a Crime
7. Prohibited Acts and Penalties That Violate Freedom of Conscience and Religious Freedom

The Church's Response to the Reproductive Health Issues

Reproductive Health, Population Control and Development

The Church recognizes that population is a concern of the government.³ Yet it is also the Church's, especially because of its moral aspect. She maintains that the real issue on population is not primarily one of numbers, but of the care of persons, and the improvement of the quality of human life.⁴

The RH defenders claim that decreasing the population growth rate is a key to economic recovery. They insist that there is a direct relationship between population growth and poverty. But, there are studies which debunk this theory.⁵ Obviously, the problem is a confluence of many factors like poor governance and badly implemented economic policies.⁶

The Church states that “the key to the problem is not in external means of control through mechanical and chemical contraceptives, but rather in the development and maturation of inner mastery of one's sexual behavior – in the chastity and self-control demanded by the stable commitment of marriage.”⁷

Methods of Family Planning and Responsible Parenthood

The Church praises the bill insofar as it promotes natural family planning methods, but she rejects it insofar as it promotes the use of artificial methods, for this is contrary to the true meaning of Christian responsible parenthood. Moreover, it must be made known that these methods cause more sickness and even death.⁸

Mandatory Age-appropriate Reproductive Health Education

While the Bill acknowledges the primary right of parents in rearing and educating their children, it mandates an age-appropriate reproductive health education that shall be taught in private and public schools, starting from Grade 5 to 4th Year High School. The curriculum includes among others, the topic on the use and application of all methods of family planning. The Church is concerned with this, because it would compel Catholic educators to teach sections of the curriculum that may be unacceptable for them as Catholics. Besides, it might also usurp the original and irreplaceable role of parents to educate their children on sexual matters according to their beliefs.

Contraceptives as Essential Medicines

Why do the RH Bill proponents call these methods and devices as “essential medicines” if they in fact cause sickness or death? How can they reconcile that the use of contraceptives is “safe and effective” at preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, with the growing cases of the same?⁹ And why are they pushing for its free access and availability to all as “essential medicines” if there is a great lack of vital medicines for ordinary illnesses for ordinary citizens? Why call them “essential medicines” in the first place when it would imply that pregnancy is a disease to be treated?

Moral Distinction between Contraceptives and Abortifacients

The Church morally distinguishes between methods of family planning that are contraceptives (those which prevent pregnancy) and those that are abortifacients (those which terminate pregnancy). But in the Bill, instead, contraceptives are not distinguished from abortifacients. The Bill considers the pill, IUD (intra-uterine device), injectables, condom, ligation, and vasectomy as contraceptives. But, the Church considers the pill and IUD not as contraceptives but abortifacients. This distinction is attested to by scientific studies.¹⁰

Abortion and the Determination of the Beginning of Human Life

The bill states that abortion is prohibited and is a crime, punishable by law. But, it does not determine when abortion does take place: at fertilization or implantation? When does one commit the crime of abortion, at the expulsion of the fertilized ovum or the expulsion of the embryo from the uterus of the mother?

Prohibited Acts and Penalties That Violate Freedom of Conscience and Religious Freedom

The RH Bill prohibits the refusal of “reproductive health care services” and information based on patient’s marital status, gender or sexual orientation, age, religion, personal circumstances and nature of work. It also requires that employers should provide “reproductive health care services” to their employees, as well as public officials to their constituents.

Can a Catholic reproductive health care service provider knowingly perform a legal yet immoral act in good conscience? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* replies: “The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or to the teaching of the Gospel.”¹¹ Can a Catholic health care service provider refuse to take part in information dissemination and execution of acts against life, even if permitted by civil legislation? John Paul II answers: “Christians, like all people of good will, are called upon under grave obligation of conscience not to cooperate formally in practices which, even if permitted by civil legislation, are contrary to God’s law. To refuse to take part . . . is not only a moral duty [but] also a basic human right.”¹²

Conclusion

Why does the Church oppose the RH bill? Because what is at stake is the dignity of the human person, whose defense and promotion have been entrusted to us by the Creator.¹³ Respect for the dignity of persons is inseparable from the respect for the universal right to life, which is fundamental of all rights and from which all other rights are derived, including the women’s reproductive rights. The concern for life is not only a duty of the Church but of all of us Filipinos, Christians and non-Christians alike, for service to, and promotion of, life is everyone’s task and responsibility.¹⁴

¹ Ephesians 5:8-9.

² HB 5043 is the substitute bill that consolidates the four bills on Reproductive Health, namely, HB 17 (An Act Providing for a National Policy on Reproductive Health, Responsible Parenthood and Population Development, and for Other Purposes), HB 812 (An Act Providing for Reproductive Health Care Structures and Appropriating Funds), HB 2753 (An Act To Protect the Right of the People to Information About Reproductive Health Care Services) and HB 3970 (An Act Providing for Reproductive Health Structures and Appropriating Funds).

³ Cfr. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2372.

⁴ Cfr. CBCP's *Pastoral Letter on the Population Problem and Family Life*, 1973.

⁵ Economic studies do not support the assertion that higher population growth causes underdevelopment. See, the findings of Simon Kuznets, the 1986 US National Research Council; the 1992 UN Population Fund Consultative Meeting of economists.

⁶ See, Dr. Roberto de Vera, *Economic Issues* (The Consolidated Reproductive Health Bill in the House of Representatives; *Population Growth and Poverty*, J. Sison, Philippine Daily Inquirer, Feb. 7, 2005.

⁷ *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, no. 1109.

⁸ On top of numerous studies which show the adverse effects of contraceptives, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) of the World Health Organization announced on July 29, 2005 that combined estrogen-progesteron oral contraceptives are carcinogenic to humans.

⁹ Look at the report *Contraception Counts* (2006) from the Guttmacher Institute.

¹⁰ Dr. Jerome Lejuene, expert on Fundamental Genetics, University of Paris; *The Reproductive System, Principle of Anatomy and Physiology*, Tortora and Grabowski (9th Edition copyright 2000, chap. 28, p. 1009).

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2242; See also, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 3 paragraph 2, no. 2; CCC, nos. 1782, 1787, 2108.

¹² John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 74, no. 91.

¹³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 47.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 91.