

The family and economics

By John Allen

Almost as a matter of principle, theological debates are insusceptible of empirical resolution. There's no scientific test to determine whether God is really three persons in one, for example, or whether salvation really comes through faith alone. Some Catholic thinkers, however, believe there is a growing body of empirical confirmation for at least one aspect of church teaching, which is Paul VI's 1968 assertion in *Humanae Vitae* on the immorality of separating the unitive and procreative functions of marriage. The toxic consequences of rewriting traditional concepts of marriage and the family, they believe, are grimly evident in the current demographic implosion in Europe. The lowest fertility rates in human history are being recorded in such traditional Catholic strongholds as Spain and Italy, around 1.2 live births for every 1,000 females of child-bearing age. ("Replacement level," the number of births required to maintain a stable population, is generally reckoned to be 2.1). Continent-wide, the fertility rate hovers around 1.5, meaning that without immigration from other parts of the world, Europe would actually be de-populating.

This demographic crisis took center stage in discussions at a conference on "The Family in the New Economy: Reflections on the Margins on *Centesimus Annus*" sponsored by the Acton Institute Jan. 21 at the North American College, the American seminary in Rome. *Centesimus Annus* is John Paul II's 1991 social encyclical.

Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, the President of the Pontifical Council for the Family, was the keynote speaker.

Lopez Trujillo warned against a "privatized, atomized" view of the family, which focuses only on the rights and freedoms of individuals rather than the family unit as such. In that context, for example, he opposed the push for legal recognition of *de facto*, but unmarried, couples.

Especially in light of the demographic challenges of Europe, Lopez Trujillo argued that an investment in the family is smart economic policy.

"A great historical failure of our day is to forget the human capital and the economic importance of the work of mothers," he said.

Jennifer Roback Morse, a senior fellow at the

Acton Institute, argued that the population implosion in Europe illustrates the failure of what she called "Western European Socialism."

"This is a population decline on the scale of the Black Death, with serious economic ramifications," Roback Morse warned.

Roback Morse said that a social welfare state "marginalizes marriage" by reducing the dependence of elderly people upon their children, and women upon their husbands.

"Children become a consumption good, an optional lifestyle appendage," she said.

Roback Morse suggested that it is almost impossible to reverse fertility declines through expanded social benefits for families, noting that countries that have tried have seen only marginal increases in birth rates after pouring large amounts of resources into the effort. Instead, she said, it is the entire social welfare model that must be rethought.

"Islam adds to the urgency of solving the problem," she warned. "Europe is importing workers it can't assimilate, and who reproduce rapidly ... Islam may win for this reason."

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In the brief period of question-and-answer that followed, Francis Campbell, the Ambassador of the United Kingdom to the Holy See, challenged Roback Morse, saying that he did not recognize England or Ireland in her description of the "social welfare state."

Moreover, Campbell said, earlier periods of social change in Europe have produced periodic expansions and contractions in fertility rates, and the present experience may be nothing more than one of those cycles.

In response, Lopez Trujillo insisted upon the "frightening fact" of demographic trends in Europe, offering to send a document of the Council for Life on this question to Campbell.

"We are realizing the worst prophecies of aging and demographic implosion, and European politicians are seeing this with alarm," he said. "The myth of over-population has collapsed."

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