

Where Are the Children?

Suppose you asked a group of university students “What is the greatest problem facing the world today?”

Many might suggest climate change. Given our present battle with coronavirus, some might cite pandemics. Others would surely bring up overpopulation.

Few, if any, would mention plummeting birth rates in developed countries.

Nations as diverse as Poland, Japan, Russia, China, the United States, France, Spain, South Korea, and others are seeing low fertility rates that will fail to replace their existing populations.

The replacement level for a population is generally considered 2.1 births per woman. In Poland, still regarded as a Catholic country, that [rate](#) is 1.439. In South Korea the [birth rate](#) is 0.98, less than one baby per woman. CNN [reports](#) that Japan’s population, already in steep decline, will drop from 124 million to 88 million in less than half a century. This same report shows the United States with a 1.72 fertility rate, certainly higher than some countries but still below replacement levels.

During his reign (27 BC-14 AD), the Emperor Augustus, faced with a declining birthrate in Rome’s upper class, [enacted various laws](#) penalizing the childless and the unwed, and rewarding those who had three or more children. Today, some countries below the population replacement line are following suit, offering special incentives – more time off from work, money paid directly for bearing children, expanded daycare facilities – to reverse this trend.

Few of these programs are effective.

Why this decline in birth rates?

Widespread use of birth control is one explanation. Abortion is another. Certainly, too, children are not the economic assets they were even 100 years ago, when they served as part of the labor force on family farms. With so many young people intent on pursuing their careers and “the good life,” raising children is both expensive and troublesome.

But there is another reason for this decline.

Marriage rates have [plummeted](#) worldwide in developed countries. From Australia to Egypt, from Japan to the United States, fewer men and women are entering into matrimony. For many reasons – an inability to find a suitable partner, a desire for independence, seeking after jobs and worldly goods, an unwillingness to give up the pleasures of the single life – marriage, like bearing and raising children, is in decline.

Some may cheer this decrease in population. These people would argue that planet Earth is overpopulated and the fewer humans leaving a carbon footprint, the better. That I understand, at least in some respects.

But I have greater difficulty understanding the same cheerleaders who suggest that marriage, the commitment of one woman to one man, is outdated. To agree with that position means the concomitant decline of the family, which until recently was regarded as the basic building block of any society.

Inevitably, these demographic declines must bring about social and cultural turmoil. For reasons cited above, Italy has a birth rate of 1.2. In an [interview](#) with various Italians, Christopher Livesay of PBS News found that many towns in Italy are rapidly becoming depopulated. The hospital in Sicily visited by Livesay had only one newborn in the maternity ward, and Dr. Maria Vena reports that the number of births in the

hospital has dropped from 400 to 200 newborns over 20 years. One man interviewed by Livesay, Angelo Massa, warned that Italy's low birthrate, if it remains unchanged, will have a catastrophic effect on the economy in just a few more decades, with an enormous elderly population needing the services and care of a far smaller group of the young.

Once this decrease reaches the stages that it has in countries like South Korea, Japan, and Italy, putting on the brakes and turning it around becomes nearly impossible. As Massa explains, "If we have less children today, we going to have less parents tomorrow, and even less children and so forth, you know?"

Unasked during this interview, but surely looming in the minds of those Italians grappling with this situation, is this question: Can Italy remain Italy without Italians?

We moderns spend a good deal of time and effort chasing after material goods: jobs, wealth, travel, and personal comforts. Many regard children as obstacles to these pursuits rather than seeing the joy they bring into our lives. That trend leads to a culture of adolescence rather than of adulthood.

But the demographic clock is ticking. In some countries, the hour is approaching midnight. Here in America our public schools and universities offer courses in sexual mechanics while ignoring the utmost importance of family in our society. Isn't it about time we changed course and began celebrating marriage, motherhood, and children?

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