



## Paul VI, Pope and Prophet

1968 was the year of two prophets named Paul. One—Paul Ehrlich—received widespread acclaim for his bestselling book, *The Population Bomb*. The other—Pope Paul VI—was widely vilified for his encyclical letter on the dignity of human life, *Humanae Vitae*

Paul Ehrlich prophesied that doomsday was just around the corner. “The battle to feed all of humanity is over,” he wrote. “In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now.” Ehrlich promoted “crash programs” of population control nonetheless: world-wide contraception to diminish the number of mouths to be fed and worldwide abortion to close mouths that would otherwise cry out to be fed.

But the doomsday starvation Ehrlich prophesied never occurred. By 2018 technological developments he failed to anticipate had brought about a world better-fed than ever before. Its problem was the opposite of what Ehrlich predicted: too *few* people, not too many. As if in defiance of his prophecy, world population did not explode; it imploded.

Throughout the world fertility has plummeted as the size of families shrinks ever smaller. Where the number of deaths outpaces the number of births, many countries now face the prospect of depopulation. In response, governments have exchanged policies that

constrict family size for policies that expand it—policies that encourage couples to have more children. This is not a development that Paul Ehrlich foresaw. Events have thoroughly disproved his population bomb prophecy.

The other prophet of 1968 proclaimed wisdom from the Christian past as a sure guide to the future of peoples. Fully mindful of the impoverishing pressures of population upon food and shelter and married life, Paul VI nonetheless reaffirmed what Christians had always held marriage to be: “the wise institution of the Creator to realize in mankind His design of love”—a love that invited man and woman “to collaborate with [Him] in the generation and education of new lives.”

The pope repeated what the Church had always taught: contraception and abortion violate love’s created design and cannot be made to fit within it. He prophesied that increasingly widespread use of contraception would open a “wide and easy” road toward marital infidelity because men would come to consider woman “a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment” instead of a “respected and beloved companion.” And this development in turn would hasten “the general lowering of morality” in society.

Those who proposed government campaigns for contraception and abortion, Paul VI warned, would place “the most personal” dimension of marital intimacy “at the mercy of public authorities.” This would subject “the mission of generating life” to “the arbitrary will of men” unrestrained by moral respect for their people. “Who will stop rulers from . . . imposing . . . the method of contraception which they judge to be most efficacious?” the Pope asked. It was

not long before India's coercive sterilization campaigns and China's one-child policy coupled with forced abortion would prove how prophetic Paul VI's question had been.

Fifty years ago this summer everyone thought Paul Ehrlich was right and Paul VI was wrong. But with the passing of time we can see who was truly the prophet of 1968.