



“1968: The Year of Two Prophets”

2014 has been filled with world-shaking events: sudden Islamist conquest in Iraq, menacing border confrontations in Ukraine, the ominous outbreak of Ebola in Africa. To find a comparably tumultuous year you have to look back nearly half a century to the Tet offensive in Vietnam, the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. That year was 1968.

It was the year of two prophets named Paul. Paul Ehrlich received widespread acclaim for his bestselling book, *The Population Bomb*. Paul VI was widely vilified, both outside and inside the Church, for his encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. From the hindsight of half a century how have their radically opposed prophecies held up?

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 Paul Ehrlich’s doomsday prophecy failed to come true. The massive starvation he so assuredly predicted never occurred. Instead, fifty years later, the problem turns out to be not population explosion but population

implosion—not a world of too *many* people but one of too *few*. A world-wide plunge in fertility has accompanied the march toward smaller family size. There are not enough births to keep pace with the number of deaths, and 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. His *Population Bomb* prophecy has been thoroughly disproved by events.

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 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.”

Contraception and abortion violate that loving divine design and cannot be made to fit within it. Paul VI 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 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. China’s one-child policy coupled with forced abortion and India’s coercive sterilization campaigns would soon prove how prophetic Paul’s question had been.

In the eventful year of 1968 everyone thought Paul Ehrlich was right and Paul VI was wrong. Half a century later it is time for second thoughts.