



Final Statement of the Tenth Plenary Session on Intergenerational Solidarity, Welfare and Human Ecology



A threefold crisis. The immense and rapid demographic and economic transitions of the late twentieth century have generated a welfare crisis and a crisis in family life both in developed and developing societies. Underlying these crises, and impeding effective remedies, is a crisis in human ecology, a deterioration of the social environment evidenced by a widespread breakdown of social norms. Many elements of these developments are historically unprecedented and thus pose new and difficult challenges for social science, social policy, and Catholic social thought.

The welfare crisis

The combination of falling birth rates and increased longevity is putting pressure on all social systems to which human beings look for support and security in times of need: the family, the structures of civil society, employment and related benefits, and public assistance. Although it is urgently necessary to address the problems linked to a shift in the ratio of active workers to the dependent population, few societies have taken even a few small steps.

The family life crisis

Developments that indicate a widespread crisis in family life include, in affluent societies, dramatic increases in divorce and births outside marriage, dramatic decreases in birth rates and marriage rates, and a rising tendency to treat marriage as primarily for the benefit of the individual adults involved. In many developing countries, family life is undermined by crushing poverty and disrupted by migration. In many African countries, the AIDS pandemic has devastated family life by claiming the lives of parents and productive workers.

The crisis in social environments

The weakening of child-raising families and their surrounding networks, together with a breakdown in social norms, amount to a social “ecological crisis”. This deterioration in social environments has far-reaching implications for welfare – for it is hard to see how healthy economies, or socially conscious states can be sustained without the habits of cooperation, individual responsibility, and concern for others that are primarily nurtured in families and their surrounding networks. As with threats to the natural environment, many of the developments that endanger social environments are the by-products of genuine advances. Thus a central problem becomes: how can social, economic and political progress be advanced without eroding the cultural foundations upon which social, economic and political goods ultimately depend?

Efforts to address these three crises have been impeded by widespread acceptance among policy makers and social scientists of certain flawed assumptions about human beings and society. Discussions of welfare commonly suppose a view of society as composed of self-seeking individuals competing for scarce resources, rather than as a fabric of relationships, to a certain extent ambivalent and conflictual, in need of solidarity. Such views of personhood and society lead to approaching the welfare crisis in terms of conflict – conflict between old and young, rich and poor, men and women, child-raising and childless families.

* This Final Report was drawn up by the President, Professor Mary Ann Glendon, and approved by the participants at the end of the X Plenary Session.