

# 7 billion not too many for this planet

You're one in 7 billion. According to UN estimates, as of Oct. 31, there are now 7 billion people on the planet (well, a few more each day since then). That's a lot of people. Depending on whom you ask, that's a good thing, or a reason to panic.

It's impossible to know, of course, just how many people there are on earth at any given time. We are not issued little tracking transponders at birth. The U.S. Census itself has a hard enough time counting the people in our country every 10 years, given that it's hard to count homeless people and others who don't have a fixed address, much less the babies who arrive and those who die in the normal course of a day. But the United Nations projected that on the last day of October, the population on earth clicked over 7 billion, taking just 12 years to hit that mark from the 6 billion milestone.

Those who see the climbing numbers as a reason to fear point to overpopulation, poverty and global warming (also known as climate change) and other negative human influences on the planet that they say, if unchecked, will lead to ultimate disaster. A new television show depicts earth in 2149 so tightly populated and over-polluted that some humans go back in time 85 million years through a wormhole to live with dinosaurs, reasoning that surviving encounters with prehistoric beasts who'll eat you at the first chance is a better bet than living in our potential future.

On the other hand, some reason that the population is not too large. People are living longer. Infant mortality is lower. More and better crops are being grown. According to a commentary on Baby 7 Billion from the Population Research Institute (pop.org), "As people live longer, naturally there are more of us around at any given time." It further notes: "Enough grain is produced for every person on earth to consume 3,500 calories daily. There is no need for anyone to starve in the midst of this plenty."

Of course, the food doesn't always get to where it needs to go. Some get more than they need; some don't get enough. In the developing world, the problem is

compounded by the politics and corruption that sometimes “misdirects” food and distribution of medical supplies that could help with health and quality of life.

We also see that the birth rate and the fertility rate, that is, the number of children born per woman, varies widely from continent to continent. The fertility rate was about six births per woman in the 1950s; now it is about 2.5. But that number hides the reality that while in many developing countries the rate is much higher than the replacement rate of 2.1 children per female – the rate at which the human race sustains its population – in many other countries the rate is well below 2.1. In those countries, we will see a population decline in the coming years, even as we approach the birth of Baby 8 Billion.

In his 2009 encyclical, “Caritas in Veritate” (“Charity in Truth”), Pope Benedict XVI addressed the problems associated with population growth: “To consider population increase as the primary cause of underdevelopment is mistaken, even from an economic point of view. Suffice it to consider, on the one hand, the significant reduction in infant mortality and the rise in average life expectancy found in economically developed countries, and on the other hand, the signs of crisis observable in societies that are registering an alarming decline in their birth rate. Due attention must obviously be given to responsible procreation, which among other things has a positive contribution to make to integral human development” (CV, #44).

We have been given incredible gifts with which to serve God and to serve each other. We have our intellect, with which we’ve figured out how to grow more and better crops from each acre of arable land, and we’re learning more about aquaculture and other ways of responsible land management. We have enough food to feed those on earth, and then some. Our distribution method isn’t perfect, but we can improve that. And we’re learning better how to take care of our planet so it will be here for our children and their children and their children and so on.

Seven billion is a big number. But that’s not too many people, not if we have enough knowledge and love, both of which we’ve been given in abundance by our Creator.

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