An interview with renowned Italian historian Prof. Angelo Bertolo, a devout Catholic, who believes that both faith and reason teach us that high birth rates lead to human progress, not Malthusian disaster. He is a long-time friend and supporter of PRI and its president, Steven Mosher.

Q: “Professor Bertolo, it is often said that history is the key to understanding the present and the future. What do you think the lessons of history are when it comes to human birth rates?”

A: “History clearly teaches us that there is a direct correlation between fecundity—that is, birth rates—and the progress of civilizations. My study of historical demographics over thousands of years of the rise and fall of different cultures and civilizations has taught me that the benefits of high birth rates include rapid economic progress as well as an explosion of creativity.”

“The opposite is also true. Civilizations and societies with low birth rates commonly regress not only economically but on a number of other levels as well, and sometimes collapse entirely. Creative genius in literature, the arts, sciences and technology blossoms with successive generations of high fertility rates.”

Q: “You are a devout Catholic. How does your faith influence your scholarship?”

A: “I believe that all babies are blessings, and that my pro-life views are not just a matter of faith, but is supported by a lifetime of academic study. The history of population growth, and its relationship to societal and scientific progress make clear that there are multiple
reasons to be a proponent of life. History shows us the propitious results of welcoming children into our midst, and this underscores that fertility is an expression of optimism.

“Having confidence in life is having faith in the future. One can acknowledge this ‘optimism of life’ in numerous ways. From a historical and scientific perspective, the optimism of life is expressed by the existence of man himself, for he—man—has proven to be the most precious resource we have. Additionally, this optimism can be revealed through a religious perspective as one of hope and evidence of the transcendental. Life brings happiness even though we know it is not perfect, for as Catholics, we know that Jesus Christ brings us eternal happiness.

Q: “Do you think these views have been lost in the contemporary world?”

A: “Our contemporary world no longer has this confidence in life or in our future. I have spent much of my career fighting the false ideas of population controllers such as Thomas Malthus, who blamed large populations as the problem. The theories that Malthus presented long ago attempted to convince individuals that the earth had limited resources which would eventually be depleted. He argued that the higher the population, the more readily our valuable and limited resources and goods would be consumed. Malthus and other population controllers also believed that smaller populations would have a better chance at maintaining economic well-being and would not be required to share those limited resources with others.”

“Many have come to believe these claims as true. But I have fought to show that these beliefs could not be further from the truth. Although the Malthusian belief is that the shortage of land and exhaustible resources are a reason to limit populations, I argue that it fails to consider that new resources may be discovered. It also does not consider the productivity of human ingenuity such as technological advances and other discoveries that man has developed throughout history. Thanks to human ingenuity there is more food available for every individual on Earth than there was two centuries ago.”

Q: “We at PRI believe that economics often fails to take “human capital” into account. Why is it that a farmer becomes wealthier with the birth of a calf, but becomes poorer—in per capita terms—with the birth of a child? That doesn’t make sense.”

A: “Malthusian ideology puts forth the concept that much of the population is idle and
therefore produces a zero, or even negative, product margin. Accordingly, if one could eliminate some of that population then the economics would show that a country with a smaller population would, in effect, be wealthier.

“To counter this notion, we must see this not as a population growth problem, but rather a serious governance issue. Governing bodies should be smarter at providing better social infrastructure like education and health services as well as physical infrastructure like power, transportation, and urban planning. The problem remains one of governance, not of population growth.”

Q: “Many believe that population growth causes insoluble problems. What do you say?”
A: “Secular society has been propagandized into believing that higher populations lead to greater problems. For this reason, fertility has thus become viewed as an option — either something that can be embraced as a choice or forfeited in an attempt to help save the world. Those who see fertility as a nuisance—and thus something to be limited by contraception or terminated by abortion—have a pessimistic vision, a lack of faith, in the future. Objectively speaking, such people are working against the general interests of their countries in every way, including the economic sense.”

“It is no coincidence that a secular society expects the world to consider abortion as a fundamental human right. They attempt to destroy the culture of human rights which was understood long ago as the equal dignity of every human being. In pushing this agenda they, too, destroy what was once held as the highest objective in successful civilizations—the protection of human life.”

Q: “Europe is in the midst of population decline. What do you think it means for the future of the continent?”
A: “There is a law of nature that high birth rates lead to more progress for humanity as a whole and those civilizations who have supported it. Population decline thus implies the loss of scientific and technological advances and a degeneration in the economic standard of living, not to mention that low fertility can lead to the very death of that civilization.”

Q: “If Europe, or at least some countries in Europe like Hungary and Poland, can reverse
their population decline, what would be the result?”

A: “With substantial demographic increase comes not only the potential for a better economic standard of living but a better culture as well. Studying the evolution of growing populations, I have seen that in growing civilizations we see a different “personality” develop in that society in the form of the flourishing of the arts such as poetry, philosophy, and literature.”

“High sentiments are found in growing populations, which in the past have been expressed in an unconventional way. Philosopher G.B. Vico (1668-1744) once wrote that “men feel with a perturbed soul, with perturbed emotions.” I believe that times of “aggressive and perturbed emotions” is a time of ferment, of genius. Greats such as Dante, Galileo, Shakespeare and Newton were all products of such societies with growing populations.”

“The creativity that comes with a substantial demographic increase is a sort of anthropological phenomena. Throughout the history of the Catholic Church, both in the West and other developing countries, children who came from large families were typically enriched with a great reverence towards God. Many of the members of large families were ready to sacrifice their lives with what G.B. Vico would have called almost “irrational” vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Big families have an optimism for life and confidence in the future. It is this optimism that encouraged them to embrace the task of being fruitful with great hope and joy. It makes them primary examples for future generations.”