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Adult hand holding a baby's hand (Pixabay/Pexels)

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Thomas Reese

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Vice President JD Vance wants women to have more babies, but he should learn from the Catholic bishops how to make having children more affordable and appealing.

"Our people aren't having enough children to replace themselves. That should bother us," Vance told a conservative crowd in 2019. He said he feared there will not be enough workers for the economy or taxpayers to support Social Security.

Vance is correct: Births are down in the United States, and in most other developed nations. In 2023, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, America had 1.6 children per woman, below the 2.1 children necessary to hold the population at its current level.

Neither Vance nor President Donald Trump sees immigration as a solution to this problem, but Vance does blame Democrats and feminists. He attacked presidential candidate Kamala Harris and other female Democrats as "childless cat ladies" who didn't have a "direct stake" in the country because they had no children. He conveniently forgot Harris is stepmother to two children with her husband, Douglas Emhoff.

Vance blames family problems on ideology, but others would say, "It's the economy, stupid."

For many people, the ideal image is the 1950s family with two or more kids and a stay-at-home mother in the suburbs. But this has never been the reality for poor families, and most Black families. The national child poverty rate is about 16%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

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In the 1950s, the U.S. was an economic and political superpower, with Europe still recovering from the war and other parts of the world at low levels of development. We became smug and were unprepared when Europe recovered and other parts of the world developed into competitors.

We had no idea how fast the world would change. Steel and auto executives were slow to update plants and were challenged to compete with new factories abroad.

Meanwhile, conservative economists told us the magic of the marketplace would make life better for everyone. That marketplace sent manufacturing jobs abroad and kept down the price of many consumer products, but it also made housing, education and health care more expensive.

In 1950, families did not have to worry about retirement or long-term care since average life expectancy, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was about 66 years for men and 71 for women. Today's medical technology extends life but costs a bundle. Medical and retirement expenses mean parents no longer have money to help their children into adulthood. It should be no surprise Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid consume most of the federal budget.

Vance has some good ideas to help families with children, such as a \$5,000 per child tax credit, although this would have to be fully refundable to help those too poor to pay income taxes. It also remains to be seen whether the child tax credit would be sacrificed to find money to pay for Trump's other tax cuts.

Catholic bishops also have good ideas to help families. In their 1991 document "Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for Our Church, Nation and World," the United States bishops' conference laid out a comprehensive plan that still has relevance today.

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"It is time to move beyond rigid ideologies and political posturing to focus on the real needs of families," they wrote. As one side emphasizes moral values and personal responsibility, the other emphasizes the need for the government to help families — a divisive problem still today.

"We," the bishops said, "believe parental responsibility and broader social responsibility, changed behavior and changed policies are complementary requirements to help families."

The bishops also called on the nation to "fight economic and social forces which threaten children and family life: Poverty, joblessness, lack of access to affordable health care, child care, decent housing and discrimination are among the greatest threats to families and children. Efforts to overcome poverty, provide decent jobs and promote equal opportunity are pro-family priorities."

In alignment with the bishops' call, a \$20-per-hour minimum wage, affordable health care, affordable housing and affordable day care would all be immeasurably helpful to those starting families. It is criminal that the federal minimum wage is only \$7.25 per hour and has not been raised since 2009. How can a family of four live on that? Raising the minimum wage will do more to encourage births than denouncing cat ladies.

The cost of health care is outrageous. Every other developed country has cheaper and yet more comprehensive health care systems than we do. I would love to welcome Canada as our 51st state if we adopted its health care system. To cut health care costs, we do not need Elon Musk's chainsaw — we need to learn from

other countries.

Affordable child care is also essential for the modern family. In the past, parents could depend on extended families and friends to help out, but today, adult children frequently move away from parents for jobs. Grandparents may still be working because they cannot afford to retire.

We also must admit that the 1950s dream of a house in the suburbs is dead. Zoning laws that only allow single-family homes have priced young families out of the market.

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Meanwhile, forcing people who are able to work remotely back to the office is also anti-child. It is much easier to be a parent if you can work from home. If the Trump-Vance administration wants to encourage births, they should not force parents to abandon their children to return to the office, as Trump has for federal employees.

Vance is good at spotting problems, but blaming his political opponents is no solution. Our country needs to be more child friendly. A decent wage and affordable housing, health care and child care are what parents need, not a scolding.

All that the bishops said in 1991 is still true. "Our nation," they concluded, "must move beyond partisan and ideological rhetoric to help shape a new consensus that supports families in their essential roles and insists that public policy support families, especially poor and vulnerable children."

The childless bishops — with or without cats — make more sense than the vice president.