



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO ALL THOSE WHO ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE MEETING
OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL OF UNICEF***

*Clementine Hall
Thursday, 26 April 1984*

Mr Executive Director,

I am happy to welcome you this morning to the Vatican, and with you, all those who are associated with the meeting of the Executive Council of UNICEF which is in session in these days in Rome.

Your organization has been entrusted with a very noble and urgent task: that of concern for all the children of the world. The Holy See follows your activities in this field with great attention. Indeed, the Church's mission and duty of service to the human family makes her particularly sensitive to the needs of children, that *precious treasure*, deserving of utmost love and respect, *given to each generation as a challenge to its wisdom and humanity*.

I am pleased, therefore, to have this opportunity to share with you some reflections related to the task before you.

1. Just over four years ago, when I had the honour of addressing the Thirty-fourth General Assembly of the United Nations, I posed the question: "What better wish can I express for every nation and the whole of mankind, and for *all the children of the world* than a *better future* in which respect for human rights will become a complete reality throughout the third millennium which is drawing near" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II, *Allocutio ad Nationum Unitarum Legatos habita*, 21, die 2 Oct. 1979: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II, 2 81979) 539).

Concern for the child is concern for that *better future* about which I spoke to the General

Assembly. What is at stake in childhood and in concern for the child is the fate and the destiny of the person, of human life and existence. The child is a sign of the mystery of life and a testing-ground of the authenticity of our respect for the mystery of life. Every child is in some way a sign of the hope of humanity. He or she is a sign of the hope posited and expressed by the love of parents; a sign of the hopes of a nation and a people.

The child represents a special sign for the Church. Concern for the child is linked, in fact, with the Church's fundamental mission. As I recalled in my Apostolic Exhortation "*Familiaris Consortio*" on the role of the Christian family in the modern world, the Church "is called upon to reveal and put forward anew in history the example and the commandment of Christ the Lord, who placed the child at the heart of the kingdom of God: 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven' (Lc 18, 16)" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 26). Indeed Christ goes so far as to identify himself with children: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Mt 18, 5). Every single child in this world is a living sign of that mystery of life and hope that was revealed in Jesus Christ.

This is why the Church has always considered that every effort invested in the genuine development of the child is an invaluable investment in *a better future* for all of society.

2. While one may take comfort in an increasing awareness within public opinion of the need to devote greater resources, and with ever increasing urgency, to the well-being of children, the fact remains that the plight of so many children in today's world is extremely critical. It is certainly one of the great scandals of our society, with the immense progress that it has been able to achieve in technology and science, that so many children are among those who suffer most intensely. And it is even sadder to note that such children, and especially the poorest of them, are often the first to be hit by economic depression and its consequences. The scandalous imbalances which exist within our society are reflected in a particular way amongst our children: while in one sector of our world children are suffering the lack of the most elementary human necessities, in other sectors children from the earliest age are being inserted into a society based on consumerism, possession, and even waste.

Such a situation is a challenge to the conscience of every man and woman in our world, of every nation and particularly of all those who hold responsibility within the international community. The demands of conscience will not be answered by vague promises, much less by the political exploitation of human suffering. The critical situation of the suffering of the weakest of our brothers and sisters calls for rapid and concerted efforts to assure for all our children the *better future* which is their right.

3. The Church's concern for children emerges also from the fact that *the Church is on the side of life*. The Church considers it a priority aspect of her mission in today's world to proclaim the value of each and every human person, especially those who are least able to defend themselves. For

this reason the Church will never cease to raise her prophetic voice proclaiming that *human life must be respected and protected* from the moment of conception.

Is it not possible to notice in the changing demographic trends of many developed countries a changing attitude to the child and to life itself? Is it perhaps possible that some people in their desire that their children should *have* as much as possible, deprive their children of some of the basic, positive elements of what it is to *be* a genuine human person? Can one not detect a certain fear of the child, a fear of the demands of love and human generosity which the procreation and education of a child require? Do not love, generosity and self-giving belong to the noblest elements of life itself? The *anti-life mentality* which has emerged in today's society is very often a sign of the fact that people have lost faith in life, have lost sight of the most fundamental elements of human destiny.

There is a real danger in resorting to solutions which appear to offer short-term results but which, because these solutions are not based on an integral vision of the person, not only will not lead to the desired solution but will lead to an ulterior estrangement of man from himself.

4. One example of a false response to the critical plight of children would undoubtedly be to adopt policies that result in a weakening of *the institution of the family*, especially in those developing countries where the traditional family system is truly impregnated with human wisdom and nourished by profound moral values.

The Church is convinced that one of the most vital answers to the situation of the child in today's world will come through *reinforcing and strengthening the family* as an institution and through policies which will permit families to carry out the irreplaceable role that properly belongs to them.

Recently the Holy See offered the international community a *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, a document which had been requested by many bishops from all over the world during the 1980 Synod of Bishops held here in the Vatican. This document clearly indicates areas where the rights of families are ignored and undermined. But it is, in the first place, a document which demonstrates the confidence which the Church has in the family, which is *the natural community of life and love* uniquely entrusted with the task of the transmission of life and the loving care and development of the human person, especially in the earliest years.

Healthy family life will contribute greatly to the stability of society. It will ensure that children receive a well-rounded personal development in which their needs will be taken into consideration in an integrated manner. You are well aware, I know, of the vital contribution that families can play in health care, in health education of disease in developing countries. The love and stability which strong and genuine family life can offer, on the physical, cultural and moral levels, must also be seen as an important factor in responding to the new forms of malaise which increasingly affect the children of the developed countries.

In referring to the family, I cannot overlook the important aspect of *the role of motherhood* and the necessity that mothers be afforded all the necessary social protection and assistance during pregnancy and for a reasonable period of time afterwards. An essential element of any policy in favour of the child is that of providing for an effective presence of the mother alongside her young children and of ensuring that mothers are trained to carry out effectively their role in the areas of nutrition and health education. The Holy See has repeatedly advocated appropriate personal and social advancement for women in order to assure the dignity of women and the improvement of the quality of life for the coming generations. Policies aimed at assisting mothers to carry out their task effectively and with satisfaction are based on the principle of giving adequate recognition to the work of mothers in the home because of its value for the family and society.

5. Precisely because the Church realises what a great value the family is, she feels particularly close to all those children who have not had the joy of growing up in a healthy and complete family. As I said in "*Familiaris Consortio*": "There exist in the world countless people who unfortunately cannot in any sense claim membership of what can be called in the proper sense a family. Large sections of humanity live in conditions of extreme poverty, in which promiscuity, lack of housing, the irregular nature and instability of relationships and the extreme lack of education make it impossible in practice to speak of a true family. There exist others who, for various reasons, have been left alone in the world" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 85).

Alongside all the efforts which we must make to see that families are helped to carry out their role more effectively, it is important to dedicate urgent and immediate attention to those children who are deprived of family life. In particular I make *an appeal* to other families *to respond to their vocation to hospitality* and to open their doors to children who need temporary or permanent care. At the same time I renew my appeals to authorities to provide legislation which permits suitable families to adopt children or take care of them for a period. Such legislation should, at the same time, respect the natural rights of parents, also in the religious sphere. It is also important to see that all abuses in this field, both on a national and international level, which exploit children and their needs are eliminated.

Mr Executive Director, I wish you to know without any doubt that all those who work sincerely for a *better future* for all the children of the world will find a staunch ally in the Church and in this Apostolic See. I ask God's blessing on your work and on the work of all those agencies and individuals who in so many and varied ways seek to ensure that the gift of God's life in which each child shares is allowed to develop in the fullest manner for the good of all humanity.

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