

LET US GIVE CHILDREN A FUTURE OF PEACE

World Day of Peace, January 1, 1996

Pope John Paul II

1. At the end of 1994, the International Year of the Family, I wrote a Letter to the children of the whole world, asking them to pray that humanity would increasingly become God's family, living in harmony and peace. I have frequently expressed my heartfelt concern for children who are victims of armed conflicts and other kinds of violence, and I have not failed to call these serious situations to the attention of world public opinion.

At the beginning of this new year, my thoughts turn once again to children and to their legitimate hope for love and peace. I feel bound to mention in a particular way children who are suffering and those who often grow to adulthood without ever having experienced peace. Children's faces should always be happy and trusting, but at times they are full of sadness and fear: how much have these children already seen and suffered in the course of their short lives!

Let us give children a future of peace! This is the confident appeal which I make to men and women of good will, and I invite everyone to help children to grow up in an environment of authentic peace. This is their right, and it is our duty.

Children Who Are Victims of War

2. I begin by thinking of the great crowds of children whom I have met during the years of my Pontificate, especially during my Apostolic Visits to every continent: joyful children who are full of happiness. My thoughts turn to them at the beginning of this new year. It is my hope that all children of the world will be able to begin 1996 in happiness and to enjoy a peaceful childhood, with the help of responsible adults.

I pray that everywhere a harmonious relationship between adults and children will promote a climate of peace and authentic well-being. Sadly, many of the world's children are innocent victims of war. In recent years millions of them have been wounded or killed: a veritable slaughter.

The special protection accorded to children by international law[1] has been widely disregarded, and the dramatic increase of regional and inter-ethnic conflicts has made it difficult to implement the protective measures called for by humanitarian regulations. Children have even become targets of snipers, their schools deliberately destroyed, and the hospitals where they are cared for bombed. In the face of such horrendous misdeeds, how can we fail to speak out with one voice in condemnation? The deliberate killing of a child is one of the most disturbing signs of the breakdown of all respect for human life.[2]

In addition to the children who have been killed, my thoughts also turn to those who have been maimed during or after these conflicts. I likewise think of young people who are systematically hunted down, raped or killed during so-called "ethnic cleansings".

3. Children are not only victims of the violence of wars; many are forced to take an active part in them. In some countries of the world it has come to the point where even very young boys and girls are compelled to serve in the army of the warring parties. Enticed by the promise of food and schooling, they are confined to remote camps, where they suffer

hunger and abuse and are encouraged to kill even people from their own villages. Often they are sent ahead to clear minefields. Clearly, the life of children has little value for those who use them in this way!

The future of young people who have taken up arms is often compromised. After years of military service, some are simply discharged and sent home, where they often fail to fit into civilian life. Others, ashamed of having survived when their companions have not, frequently end up as criminals or drug addicts. Who knows what nightmares must continue to afflict them! Will their minds ever be free of the memories of violence and death?

The humanitarian and religious organizations which attempt to relieve these inhuman sufferings deserve heartfelt respect. Thanks are also owed to those generous individuals and families who welcome orphans with love, and do everything they can to heal their traumas and to help them to fit once more into the communities from which they came.

4. The memory of the millions of children who have been killed, and the sad faces of so many others who are suffering compel us to take every possible measure to safeguard or re-establish peace, and to bring conflicts and wars to an end.

Before the Fourth World Conference on Women which took place in Beijing last September, I asked Catholic charitable and educational institutions to adopt a coordinated strategy which gives priority to issues concerning children and young women, especially those most in need.[3] Now I wish to renew that appeal, and to extend it in a special way to Catholic institutions and organizations which deal with children. I ask them to help girls who have suffered as a result of war and violence, to teach boys to acknowledge and respect the dignity of women, and to help all children to rediscover the tenderness of the love of God who took flesh, and who by dying left the world the gift of his peace (cf. Jn 14:27).

I will continue to point out that all, from the most prominent international organizations to local associations, from Heads of State to ordinary citizens, in everyday actions and at the most significant moments of life, are called upon to make a contribution to peace and to give no support to war.

Children Who Are Victims of Various Forms of Violence

5. Millions of children suffer from other kinds of violence present both in poverty-stricken and in developed societies. These kinds of violence are often less obvious, but they are no less terrible.

The International Summit for Social Development which took place this year in Copenhagen stressed the connection between poverty and violence,[4] and on that occasion States committed themselves to a greater battle against poverty through initiatives at the national level beginning in 1996.[5] Similar suggestions were made by the earlier World Conference of the United Nations on Children, held in New York in 1990. Poverty is indeed the cause of inhuman living and working conditions. In some countries children are forced to work at a tender age and are often badly treated, harshly punished, and paid absurdly low wages. Because they have no way of asserting their rights, they are the easiest to blackmail and exploit.

In other circumstances children are bought and sold,[6] so that they can be used for begging or, even worse, forced into prostitution, as in the case of so-called "sex tourism".

This utterly despicable trade degrades not only those who take part in it but also those who in any way promote it. Some do not hesitate to enlist children in criminal activities, especially the selling of narcotics, thus exposing them to the risk of personal involvement in drug use.

Many children end up with the street as their only home. Having run away, or having been abandoned by their families, or never having known a family environment, these young people live by their wits and in a state of total neglect, and they are considered by many as refuse to be eliminated.

6. Sadly, violence towards children is found even in wealthy and affluent families. Such cases are infrequent, but it is important not to overlook them. Sometimes children are taken advantage of and suffer abuse within the home itself, at the hands of the people whom they should be able to trust, to the detriment of their development.

Many children are also compelled to endure the trauma caused by fighting between their parents, or by the actual breakup of the family. Concern for the children's welfare does not prevent solutions which are often dictated by the selfishness and hypocrisy of adults. Behind an appearance of normality and peacefulness, masked even further by an abundance of material possessions, children are at times forced to grow up in dismal loneliness, without firm and loving guidance and a suitable moral formation. Left to themselves, such children usually find their main contact with reality in television programs which often present unreal and immoral situations which they are still too young to assess properly.

It is not wonder if this kind of widespread and pernicious violence also has its effect on their young hearts, changing their natural enthusiasm into disillusionment or cynicism, and their instinctive goodness into indifference or selfishness. When young people chase after false ideals, they can experience bitterness and humiliation, hostility and hatred, absorbing the discontent and emptiness all around them. Everyone is well aware of how childhood experiences can have profound and sometimes irreparable consequences on an individual's whole life.

It can hardly be hoped that children will one day be able to build a better world, unless there is a specific commitment to their education for peace. Children need to "learn peace": it is their right, and one which cannot be disregarded.

Children and Hope for Peace

7. I have sought to emphasize strongly the often tragic conditions in which many children are living today. I consider this my duty: they will be the adults of the Third Millennium. But I have no intention of yielding to pessimism or ignoring the signs of hope. How can I fail to mention, for example, the many families in every part of the world in which children grow up in an atmosphere of peace? And how can we not note the efforts being made by so many individuals and organizations to enable children in difficulty to grow up in peace and happiness? Public and private associations, individual families and particular communities have taken initiatives the only purpose of which is to help children who have suffered some traumatic event to return to a normal life. In particular, educational programs have been developed for encouraging children and young people to use fully their personal talents, in order to become true peacemakers.

There is also a growing awareness in the international community which, in recent years, despite difficulties and hesitation, has made efforts to deal decisively and systematically with problems connected with childhood.

The results achieved thus far encourage us to continue these praiseworthy endeavors. If children are properly helped and loved, they themselves can become peacemakers, builders of a world of fraternity and solidarity. With their enthusiasms and youthful idealism, young people can become "witnesses" and "teachers" of hope and peace to adults. Lest these possibilities be lost, children should be offered, in a way adapted to their individual needs, every opportunity for a balanced personal growth. A peaceful childhood will enable boys and girls to face the future with confidence. Let no one stifle their joyful enthusiasm and hope.

Children in the School of Peace

8. Little children very soon learn about life. They watch and imitate the behavior of adults. They rapidly learn love and respect for others, but they also quickly absorb the poison of violence and hatred. Family experiences strongly condition the attitudes which children will assume as adults. Consequently, if the family is a place where children first encounter the world, the family must be for children the first school of peace.

Parents have an extraordinary opportunity to help their sons and daughters to become aware of this great treasure: the witness of their mutual love. It is by loving each other that they enable the child, from the very first moment of its existence, to grow up in peaceful surroundings, imbued with the positive values which make up the family's true heritage: mutual respect and acceptance, listening, sharing, generosity, forgiveness. Thanks to the sense of working together which these values foster, they provide a true education for peace and make the child, from its earliest years, an active builder of peace.

Children share with their parents and brothers and sisters the experience of life and hope. They see how life's inevitable trials are met with humility and courage, and they grow up in an atmosphere of esteem for others and respect for opinions different from their own.

It is above all in the home that, before ever a word is spoken, children should experience God's love in the love which surrounds them. In the family they learn that God wants peace and mutual understanding among all human beings, who are called to be one great family.

9. Besides the basic education provided by the family, children have a right to a specific training for peace at school and in other educational settings. These institutions have a duty to lead children gradually to understand the nature and demands of peace within their world and culture. Children need to learn the history of peace and not simply the history of victory and defeat in war.

Let us show them examples of peace and not just examples of violence! Fortunately many positive examples of this can be found in every culture and period of history. Suitable new educational opportunities must be created, especially in those situations where cultural and moral poverty has been most oppressive. Everything possible should be done to help children to become messengers of peace.

Children are not a burden on society; they are not a means of profit or people without rights. Children are precious members of the human family, for they embody its hope, its expectations and its potential.

Jesus, the Way of Peace

10. Peace is a gift of God; but men and women must first accept this gift in order to build a peaceful world. People can do this only if they have a childlike simplicity of heart. This is one of the most profound and paradoxical aspects of the Christian message: to become child-like is more than just a moral requirement but a dimension of the mystery of the Incarnation itself.

The Son of God did not come in power and glory, as he will at the end of the world, but as a child, needy and poor. Fully sharing our human condition in all things but sin (cf. Heb 4:15), he also took on the frailty and hope for the future which are part of being a child. After that decisive moment for the history of humanity, to despise childhood means to despise the One who showed the greatness of his love by humbling himself and forsaking all glory in order to redeem mankind.

Jesus identified with the little ones. When the Apostles were arguing about who was the greatest, he "took a child and put him by his side, and said to them, Whoever receives this child in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me" (Lk 9:47-48). The Lord also forcefully warned us against giving scandal to children: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Mt 18:6).

Jesus asked the disciples to become "children" again. When they tried to turn away the little ones who were pressing in upon him, he said indignantly: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Mk 10:14-15). Jesus thus turned around our way of thinking. Adults need to learn from children the ways of God: seeing children's capacity for complete trust, adults can learn to cry out with true confidence, "Abba, Father!"

11. To become like a little child--with complete trust in the Father and with the meekness taught by the Gospel--is not only an ethical imperative; it is a reason for hope. Even where the difficulties are so great as to lead to discouragement and the power of evil so overwhelming as to dishearten, those who can rediscover the simplicity of a child can begin to hope anew. This is possible above all for those who know they can trust in a God who desires harmony among all people in the peaceful communion of his Kingdom. It is also possible for those who, though not sharing the gift of faith, believe in the values of forgiveness and solidarity and see in them--not without the hidden action of the Spirit--the possibility of renewing the face of the earth.

It is therefore to men and women of good will that I address this confident appeal. Let us all unite to fight every kind of violence and to conquer war! Let us create the conditions which will ensure that children can receive as the legacy of our generation a more united and fraternal world!

Let us give children a future of peace!

From the Vatican, 8 December 1995.

Pope John Paul II

NOTES

1. Cf. United Nations Convention of 20 November 1989 on the rights of children, especially Article 38; the Fourth Geneva Convention of 12 August 1949 for the protection of civilians in wartime, Article 24; Protocols I and II of 12 December 1977, etc.

2. Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter **Evangelium vitae** (25 March 1995), n. 3: AAS 87 (1995), 404.

3. Cf. Message to the Delegation of the Holy See at the Fourth World Conference on Women (29 August 1995): **L'Osservatore Romano**, 30 August 1995, p. 1.

4. Cf. Copenhagen Declaration, n. 16.

5. Cf. Programme of Action, Chapter II.

6. Cf. Programme of Action, n. 39(e).

12/28/95