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## **On the Defense of Children: A Matter of Justice**

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### **Violating the Rights of Children**

Amnesty International insists that as human beings, children are endowed with all the rights laid down in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, accepted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and since ratified by some 180 countries, defined universal principles and norms for the status of children. The *World Summit for Children* in 1990 contributed "to building international momentum for the rights of the child," and various countries have taken concrete steps to improve the status of children. "This, however, is only the beginning. Most of the work for the realization of the rights of the child is ahead of us."<sup>2</sup>

Society today, actively or passively, consciously or unconsciously, often disregards the rights of children and denies them their childhood. I think that many of us, when violations confront us, claim powerlessness and futility. We too often close our eyes and mouths and unwittingly play the role of the priest Levite in the parable of the *Good Samaritan*.<sup>3</sup> A character in one of George Bernard Shaw's works states that "The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them; that is the essence of inhumanity."<sup>4</sup>

Information of violations of the human rights of children is abundant in books, magazines, newspapers, and sundry reports. Those of you who are able "to surf the net" can easily find an extraordinary number of "items" concerning all aspects of the failure to respect the rights of children, as well as information on groups and organizations dedicated to promoting these rights. It is not my purpose, therefore, to present a comprehensive and balanced presentation of the violation of the rights of children. My intention is instead to describe some situations that can serve as a point of reference for our reflections. The five recent colloquia sponsored by the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools – on families, globalization, urbanization, new information technology, and communication of the faith – have helped me to become more sensitive than ever to such violations.

### ***Abortion***

Tragically, society today lacks a moral consensus concerning the right to life of children before birth. Millions of unborn children are aborted every year. The position of the Catholic Church is, of course, unambiguously clear: "From the first moment of existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person" – among which is the inviolable right to life. This life must be respected and protected "from the moment of conception."<sup>5</sup> Reacting to the anti-life policy of abortion on demand, a Bishops' Conference has stated that the "ultimate example of powerlessness is to be destroyed before birth."

Although opposition to abortion is not always an objective of organizations dedicated to the defense of children, I have deliberately included it as a violation of the most fundamental of the rights that children possess, the right to life.

### ***Poverty***

The poverty and even destitution in which millions of children live is well documented. Many inhabit makeshift structures in the slums of major cities throughout the world. Nevertheless, alarming numbers of children are victims of poverty not only in economically poor countries. Between 20% and 25% of children in some of the richest countries of the world are categorized as poor. Children are the principal victims of socioeconomic problems, and few governments have policies that effectively address the situation.

While poverty affects children of all ethnic groups, it strikes primarily those of the so-called “minority” groups, including immigrants and refugees. They are often victims of blatant racism and xenophobia. Many children suffer when the slow rate of economic growth drags down wages, particularly when they are from single parent families. These single parents, usually women, are often young and possess limited work skills. Government assistance is often not sufficient or efficacious.

### ***Street Children***

The United Nations estimates that there are more than one hundred fifty million street children in the world, with the number rising daily. They range from age three to eighteen. Forty percent of them are homeless. The other 60% work on the streets to support their families. They are unable to attend school. Increasingly, these children are the defenseless victims of brutal violence, sexual exploitation, abject neglect, chemical addiction, and other violations of human rights. Officially some of these children have as their address their parents’ home or an institution of social welfare. In practice, however, they have few if any contacts with their parents, school, welfare institutions, or social services. Some of these children have to pay for “protection” and even for the right to sleep in open areas. They are malnourished and frequently sick.

### ***Sexual Abuse***

Gender, ethnicity, caste, and economic status are significant factors in the violation of the human rights of children. Female children face particular disadvantages. The birth of a girl is in some places considered a liability and less is invested in her health and education. In these areas, gender-selective abortions and infanticide are common. Among girls there is a high rate of mortality and illiteracy. Harmful practices such as dowry and child marriage continue to exist. Female children suffer frequently from domestic servitude, violence, sexual exploitation, rape, and even murder.

Millions of children, both female and male, are victims of sexual abuse. Their abusers are sometimes, it is said to say, members of their own families or trusted friends, teachers, priests, and religious. Yet their abusers are also skilled professionals who administer or participate in international sex tourism, including child prostitution, child pornography, and trafficking of

children for sexual purposes. Participants in our colloquium on globalization, held in Sri Lanka, met victims of child sex tourism, as well as dedicated men and women who are struggling against the evils infesting the tourist industry.

### ***Health***

A report on the *State of the World's Children* (1998) says that twelve million children less than five years of age die every year in economically developing countries. The causes of death are hunger or malnutrition, AIDS, malaria, diarrhea, common and preventable infections, failure to receive immunizations, unsafe water, and general poverty.

According to a United Nations report in October 1998, malaria is reaching epidemic proportions, killing nearly one million people a year. One child dies of this disease every thirty seconds. Globally, malaria kills three thousand children less than five years of age every day, a higher mortality rate than AIDS.

During this past year television has brought the starvation of children in the Sudan and other countries of the world into our communities. That children are dying today from lack of food is a tragedy of scandalous proportions. To the problem of starvation we have to add that of malnutrition, which stunts not only physical but also intellectual growth.

### ***Physical, Mental Disabilities***

Over the years I have had the opportunity to visit a number of institutions for partially or totally abandoned disabled children, teenagers, and adults – disabled mentally and/or physically. The Brothers operate a few of these institutions. The condition of many of the disabled defies description. Some are victims of physical or sexual abuse and of alcoholism. When I asked the Brothers about contact the parents have with their children, they responded, to my dismay, “Very little, if any.” When I asked why disabled adults are present in centers designed for children and teenagers, they responded that they are there because they have nowhere else to go. These disabled persons are “privileged” in that they have people who love and care for them. How many others are left to die, abandoned and unloved?

### ***Illiteracy***

A UNICEF report for 1999 states that one billion persons today are illiterate. Two-thirds are female, one-sixth are children. One out of six persons can neither read nor write. One hundred thirty million children of primary school age are not in school. Another twenty million do not complete four years of school, the minimum required to consider a child “literate.” Therefore, one hundred fifty million children can be considered illiterate. In economically developing countries, 25% of children are deprived of their right to study. Poor families frequently permit only one child to go to school, nearly always a male child. Another problem is that the quality of education is often very low. UNESCO calls for literacy training of African women and for the multiplication of “itinerant schools,” such as the twenty-six classroom vans we Lasallian operate in France for itinerant people.

## ***Child Labor***

A recent publication carries a photo of a child factory worker dozing in front of a box of softballs that he is stitching. It occurred to me that someone would punish that child, while other children of the same age would pitch and bat those balls.

A UNICEF report states that in the economically developing countries, 25% of children between the ages of five and fourteen work. Estimates are that two hundred fifty million children are working. More than half of them labor nine hours per day or more. Tens of millions work in appalling and hazardous conditions as prostitutes, slave laborers in factories or plantations, street peddlers, imprisoned and hidden domestic laborers.

## ***Children and Armed Conflicts***

UNICEF declares that during the last decade two million children have been killed during armed conflicts. Amnesty International claims that militants are increasingly targeting children merely because they come from certain geographical areas or because of the politics, religion, or ethnic origin of their family. Four or five million have been disabled, twelve million left homeless, ten million traumatized, one million orphaned. According to Amnesty International more than 100 million landmines have been laid in more than fifty countries. Ninety percent of those killed by the mines have been civilians, one third of them children. Pope John Paul II expresses astonishment “that we are now witnessing an unbelievable and inhuman paradox: mines are still being laid even in places which had already been cleared.”<sup>6</sup>

In their well-documented book, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers*, Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin estimate that two hundred fifty thousand children under the age of eighteen are serving in government armed forces or armed opposition groups. Being more precise is impossible because they are “invisible” – that is to say, those who employ them deny their existence. Children are easier to recruit than adults, whether by persuasion or by force. As soldiers they are exploited as combatants because they are less likely to question orders and are more likely to be fearless. Some children have been recruited as rebel or opposition forces as young as nine years of age. A publication of the *Jesuit Refugee Service* states that children between the ages of twelve and sixteen make up 85% of rebel forces in some countries. The report says that children are made to kill each other to break down their resistance to committing atrocities. Girls are routinely raped and used as sex-slaves as rewards and incentives for the soldiers. A notorious revolutionary band of guerrillas wrote a textbook for children of ten years of age. These guerrillas formed generations of youth revolutionaries by means of this book.

Often when armed conflicts end, former child soldiers, disoriented, unemployed, and still armed, are left to roam the streets and often succumb to lawlessness.

## ***Youth Violence***

What I have said so far could give the impression that I think that the defense of the rights of children concerns almost exclusively children in economically developing countries. Nothing could be further from the truth. Problems in economically developed areas are enormous.

Murders committed by minors occur with alarming frequency. Mass killings in a number of schools in two such countries in recent years have shocked the world. Explaining the phenomenon of children and teenagers who kill is not easy. Still, the availability of guns is undoubtedly a major factor. That countries in which guns are easy to acquire have the highest percentage of killings cannot be dismissed as a coincidence.

Schools in some countries – government schools particularly – are experiencing a significant lack of discipline and even violence. As incredible as it may seem, professional police are assuming normal security and disciplinary functions in some schools. Many young people are not motivated and remain in school against their will. I think that compulsory schooling is good policy, if school programs are adapted to the capacities and needs of the youngsters and if teachers are both capable and dedicated. Otherwise, school makes no sense. Youths fail to experience the pleasure of learning. Furthermore, the high rates of unemployment in some countries lead some teenagers to the conclusion that education will make little difference. It is not surprising that so many young people abandon school.

### ***Youth Offenses***

Research shows that today the most dangerous hours for children in industrialized countries are the after-school hours when both parents are still at work. Police reports in one country reveal that after-school hours account for more than 50% of youth offenses. Some schools try to respond to this situation by providing after-school opportunities for play and study. Such programs are essential. Nevertheless, many schools have no such programs or have eliminated them for budgetary reasons. Private agencies are increasingly providing services, but their high costs are out of the range of poor families.

Surveys in one area reveal that the average youngster spends nine hundred hours watching television. Many parents have abdicated supervising what their children watch. Programs contain increasing amounts of explicit sex, vulgar language, immoral behavior, and violence. Producers of such programs are deliberately – and scandalously – targeting children and teenagers. They justify such programs, claiming that they merely mirror contemporary society. Some parents reluctantly admit that the programs do reflect reality. They say that battling with their children about television is almost pointless, “given the anti-social humor, foul language, and sexual innuendo young people hear everywhere else.” Television, of course, is not the only problem. Films, music, and now the Internet also make inappropriate material readily available.

Essentially related to youth offenses is the problem of incarceration. Overcrowded prisons and inhumane conditions and treatment in many countries militate against rehabilitation and have the opposite effect.

### ***Denying Children Their Childhood***

In all the above, we observe a common denominator: societies – nations, their governments, their citizens – are violating the rights of children by not permitting them to be children. Reverence for children demands that we take them as they are and help them transform themselves into the children they should be and have a right to be. Cardinal William Keeler has severely criticized

societies that deny children their childhood – their directness, innocence, and sense of wonder: “A culture that mocks, threatens, stifles, or kills that innocence and that sense of wonder is a culture that stands under grave judgment.”

I conclude this section with a poignant story. You may draw your own conclusions.

A town of 13,000 inhabitants has witnessed the suicide of eight teenagers during the last three years. One, a boy of fifteen years of age, shot himself in his bedroom with his father’s pistol. It was just before Christmas. He left a note for his parents, who had been separated for ten years: I really don’t know what to say in these dam [sic] things, but I want you to know that I love you mom and dad. I’m not in English class so my spelling doesn’t have to be perfect.” He asked his mother “to quite [sic] smoking” and asked his parents to remarry. “Take good care of my cat . . . also I’m putting my will into this letter.” He left a collection of pictures of sports stars to one friend, his bee-bee gun to another. To still another he left his favorite sports outfit – mentioning that it was in his backpack and needed washing.

He never said why he took his life.

### **The Defense of Children: A New Focus for Lasallian Mission**

The *Declaration* states that one of our primary objectives is to recognize, understand, and respond to the needs of the young people of our day.<sup>7</sup> This prophetic document declares also that solidarity with the people of today, attention to appeals from the Church, and fidelity to the specific intentions of the Founder show clearly “that it is to the poor to whom we are sent by preference.”<sup>8</sup> The *Rule* calls us to be attentive to the educational needs of the poor and sensitive to their right and to their struggle to live in dignity as human beings and as children in the Kingdom of God. More than be attentive, we have to create new works and renew existing works in response to these needs.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter of 1993***

Our last General Chapter urges us to “go to those” who do not have the means to learn and assume their place in society because of famine, war, oppression . . . to “go to those” who are victims of economic and political turmoil and who suffer the brunt of the spasms of a disturbed world – unemployment, substance abuse, AIDS, suicide. The 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter endorses the position of those who call for a “deliberative return to those who are most affected by collective injustice.” It urges us to promote the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, to work constructively and effectively against illiteracy, which blocks development, hinders social integration, affronts dignity, condemns millions to hopelessness, contributes to outbreaks of violence, and breeds degrading passivity.<sup>10</sup>

Earlier I mentioned the five colloquia, organized to carry out a proposition of the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter. The colloquia focused on families, globalization, urbanization, new information technologies, and communication of the faith. In each colloquium, children and youth were at the center, poor children in a particular way.

### ***Thesis of This Letter***

The thesis of this pastoral letter is that the situation of poor children in today's world is an unspeakable scandal and that our Lasallian charism invites us to make solidarity with neglected, abandoned, marginalized, and exploited children a particular focus for our mission . . . We Brothers of the Christian Schools should be in the vanguard of the struggle for justice for such children. This focus can give us new life.

### ***Solidarity with Poor Children***

*All* Brothers and *all* Lasallian Partners, whatever their particular ministries, must be in solidarity with the poor. It is important that we all make our “own the decision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle to go to the poor with the heart of a poor person.” . . . This letter is a call to all of us – Brothers and Lasallian Partners – to commit ourselves with firm and persevering determination to the good of children who are victims of human depravity.

We express solidarity with poor children when – by word, action, and quality of presence – we manifest to them profound love and reverence. In solidarity, we strive to help them grow in “resilience.” Experts on the care of disadvantaged children describe resilience as the capacity to do well in spite of stress or adversity. Resilience resists destruction of the human spirit. It cultivates the capacity to construct a positive life in spite of difficult circumstances.

Nevertheless, concern for the needs of individual persons and apostolic activities in favor of the poor “can never dispense with efforts to establish a just social order aimed at the elimination of poverty.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, we have to cultivate the consciences of our students by teaching them the social doctrine of the Catholic Church and by encouraging them “to participate effectively in the struggle for justice and peace.” We are obliged to help them “become aware of human suffering in its concrete forms” and grow in a “sense of universal brotherhood and sisterhood.”<sup>12</sup>

Solidarity with the poor – poor children especially – ought to be evident in the mission statements of every District, school, and apostolic center and in their annual programs. It must be evident also in the community annual program and our personal programs. Moreover, solidarity with the poor and with neglected children ought to become a dominant and determining factor in the decisions that Visitors, District Chapters, school boards and administrators, religious and educative communities take regarding the present and future mission of the District.<sup>13</sup>

### **Become Heralds of Human Dignity (An Afterward)**

People were bringing little children to him . . . The disciples scolded them, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs” . . . Then he laid his hands on them and gave them a blessing.<sup>14</sup>

Exegete Daniel Harrington, SJ, says that in the time of Jesus, writers presented children “as examples of unreasonable behavior or as objects to be trained. In this passage they are taken seriously as persons and enjoy a relationship with Jesus and the Kingdom.”<sup>15</sup> Earlier in Mark's

Gospel, Jesus says that “whoever welcomes a little child such as this in my name, welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”<sup>16</sup> Harrington says that “in my name” is the key phrase. Whoever receives someone’s emissary receives the person himself. “So whoever receives a child receives Jesus, and whoever receives Jesus receives God who sent Jesus.”<sup>17</sup>

In his moving meditation for Christmas Eve, the Founder associates that thought with *Revelation* 3:20:

For how long has Jesus been presenting himself to you and knocking at the door of your heart in order to make his dwelling within you, and you have not wanted to receive him. Why? Because he presents himself under the form of a poor man, a slave, a man of sorrows.<sup>18</sup>

Jesus comes to us as a poor man because he comes to us as neglected, exploited, abandoned children. The liturgical texts for the Mass of Christmas Day remind us that Jesus is the Word, the Word that became flesh and lived among us.<sup>19</sup> “In the past, God spoke through the prophets,” but in our time “he has spoken to us in the person of his Son.”<sup>20</sup> Jesus speaks to us today in the children who come to us “in his name.”

We meet Jesus Christ in children when we welcome children *as* children, when we love and reverence them *as they are*. As Jesus makes unambiguously clear in his description of the Last Judgment, we respond to Christ when we respond lovingly to people as they are. In reply to the question, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?” Jesus explains that they responded to him when they fed the hungry. “I was hungry and you gave me food.”<sup>21</sup> There is no question of penetrating through a kind of outer “shell” of children to find and love Christ somehow hidden in the center. No. On the contrary, Jesus identifies himself with children *as they are*. It is only when we meet them *as they are* that we meet Christ.

In the Gospel for Christmas Day Mass, John says that those who accept Christ receive the “power to become children of God.”<sup>22</sup> The Lord invites not only young people but all of us to enter the family of God as children. In his meditation for Christmas Eve, Saint John Baptist de La Salle exhorts us to prepare our hearts to receive Jesus so he may “make his home there . . . the Son of God has come to earth and wishes to come into our hearts, to make us share in his nature.”<sup>23</sup> In the opening prayer of the same Eucharistic celebration, we ask God to make us participate in the divinity of his Son.

It is our vocation to share in the divinity of the Son, to “make visible the loving and saving presence of Christ.” We “can and must say” that we “not only belong to Christ,” but that we “have become Christ.”<sup>24</sup> As Christ, we proclaim to children and young people in distress the truth that sets them free. We strive to establish the Reign of God. By what we say, by what we do, and above all by who we are, we proclaim “universal brotherhood and sisterhood, for all men and women are sons and daughters of the same Father and brothers and sisters in Christ.” We call to faith and to conversion those God “confides to our care.” We promote “communion among all human beings with one another and with God.” We work for the “liberation” of children and young people “from evil in all its forms.”<sup>25</sup>



De La Salle says that we too often fail to receive Jesus because he comes to us as abandoned, ignored, and forgotten children.<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Kozol relates the story of a rich lady who said to Saint Vincent de Paul, “The poor frighten me.” Vincent replied, “The poor are frightening, as frightening as God’s justice.” Then Kozol asks, “What do we do to those who frighten us? Do we put them off, as far away as possible, and hope, as one of the students said to me during the previous summer, that they’ll either die or disappear?”<sup>27</sup> As men who consecrate ourselves entirely to God in ministry to youth, poor youth especially, and as animators of the Lasallian Family, we must not allow the tragic situation of exploited children to “frighten” or “put us off.” On the contrary we must be *attentive* and *responsive* to them:

The Institute is above all *attentive* to the need for education of the poor as they strive to become aware of their dignity and to live and to be recognized as human beings and children of God. In accord with what the Reign of God requires, the Institute *establishes, renews, and diversifies* its work.<sup>28</sup>

Pope John Paul II says that the parable of the rich man clearly shows that “in the stark contrast between the insensitive rich man and the poor in need of everything, God is on the latter’s side. We too must be on the same side.” Then the Pope exhorts all Christians, “*Become heralds of human dignity.*”<sup>29</sup>

Brothers, in union with all Lasallians, let us as *heralds of human dignity*, renew and revitalize our commitment to promoting God’s reign, to building an international communion of persons in which all children can live as the children they have the right to be.

God of compassion and mercy, may your Reign come!

## Endnotes

1. Brother John Johnston, FSC (1933-2007) served both as vicar general (1976-1986) and superior general (1986-2000) of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This is a portion of *Pastoral Letter: The Defense of Children, the Reign of God, and the Lasallian Mission*, pages 11-23, 40-42, 44-46, and 57-61.

2. Brochure, *Swedish Save the Children*, page 3.

3. Cf. *Luke* 10:25-37.

4. *The Devil’s Disciple* (1897).

5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Doubleday, 1995), #2270.

6. “Message” by Pope John Paul II, *World Day of Peace*, 11.

7. *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Rome, 1967), #23.3.

8. *Declaration*, #28.
9. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), #11.
10. *Circular 435: The Documents of the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter* (Rome, 1993), pages 19, 20, 23.
11. *Declaration*, #30.3.
12. *Declaration*, #32.1, 2.
13. *Declaration*, #34.2, 4.
14. *Mark* 10:13.
15. *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentice Hall, 1990), page 618.
16. *Mark* 9:37.
17. *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, page 616.
18. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Lasallian Publications, 1994), #85.1.
19. *John* 1:1, 14.
20. *Hebrews* 1:1-2.
21. *Matthew* 25:35-40.
22. *John* 1:2.
23. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, #85.3.
24. *Vita Consecrata* by Pope John Paul II (Vatican City, 1996), #76 & #109.
25. *Redemptoris Missio* by Pope John Paul II (Vatican City, 1990), #43, #15, & #43.
26. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, #85.1.
27. *Amazing Grace* by Jonathan Kozol (1995), page 186.
28. *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, #11.
29. "Message" by Pope John Paul II, *World Day of Peace*, 13.