



POPE FRANCIS PROMOTING SOLIDARITY WITH AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE, ESPECIALLY THE UNACCOMPANIED

Fr. Fabio Baggio, C.S.

Under-Secretary, Migrant and Refugee Section

Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development

I would like to start by thanking the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, the International Catholic Migration Commission and Caritas Internationalis for the invitation to contribute to this important event.

Pope Francis dedicated his Message for the 2017 World Day of Migrants and Refugee to “Child Migrants, the Vulnerable and the Voiceless.”

His predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI had similar concerns in 2008 when he highlighted the pastoral challenges posed by three different situations: unaccompanied minors and adolescents, children apprehended in detention camps, and victims of trafficking.¹ Two years later he stressed that many countries were in default of commitments made with the signing of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.²

Last year Pope Francis affirmed that “No one can claim to be indifferent in the face of new forms of slavery imposed by criminal organizations, which buy and sell men, women and children as forced laborers in

¹ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2008*, 18 October 2007.

² Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2010*, 16 October de 2009.

construction, agriculture, fishing or in other markets. How many minors are still forced to fight in militias as child soldiers!”³

Now, seeing the worsening plight of millions of refugees and asylum seekers, the Holy Father has felt “compelled to draw attention to the reality of child migrants, especially the ones who are alone.”⁴ Migration has become a global phenomenon, which, in the majority of cases, is driven by conflict, natural disasters, persecution, climate change, violence, extreme poverty and inhumane living condition.⁵ Migrating today entails high costs and children are the first “to pay the heavy toll,”⁶ particularly when they are moving alone.

Being aliens makes all migrants vulnerable: they are often neglected, discriminated and marginalized. “And yet among migrants, children constitute the most vulnerable group” for three reasons: “they are children, they are foreigners, and they have no means to protect themselves.” Because they must hide from authorities, unauthorized migrant children cannot access education and health care. The situation of unaccompanied children is especially precarious. Many young boys and girls are “led into prostitution or into the mire of pornography [or] enslaved as child laborers or soldiers.”

The response of Pope Francis comes down to three main recommendations: to protect, to integrate, and to pursue long-term solutions.

First, protect children from the many abuses and violence that are their frequent experience: “The dividing line between migration and trafficking can at times be very thin.” There needs to be joint and coordinated action in the countries of origin, transit and destination to ensure that

³ FRANCIS, *Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2016*, 12 September 2015.

⁴ FRANCIS, *Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2017*, 8 September 2016.

⁵ Cf. FRANCIS, *Address to Participants in the International Forum on Migration and Peace*, 21 February 2017.

⁶ FRANCIS, *Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2017*, 8 September 2016. All subsequent quotations are from this Message.

migrant and refugee children are always safe and protected from abuse. Beyond exchange of information, the greater cooperation needed among organizations and institutions, both ecclesial and civil, should create solid networks for protection and assistance.

Looking at the global picture, Pope Francis regrets the shortage of adequate policies to assist and include migrants. Instead, more and more governments adopt harsher policies to curb irregular entries and to deport unauthorized migrants. Children are often unaware and innocent victims of such drastic measures. The Holy Father insists upon “the duty to resolve and regularize the situation of child migrants, fully respecting their dignity and seeking to meet their needs when they are alone, but also the needs of their parents, for the good of the entire family.”

The effective response to these challenges should always include the effort to eradicate the evils that cause children to migrate, namely “Wars, human rights violations, corruption, poverty, environmental imbalance and disaster”. A safe and just environment is the first condition to assure integral human development to all, particularly to “boys and girls, who are humanity’s hope.”

To conclude, allow me to make my own the words with which the Pope ended his Message: “I wish to address a word to you, who walk alongside migrant children and young people: they need your precious help. The Church too needs you and supports you in the generous service you offer.”