Pope: “Nothing is worth more than the life of a child”

Speaking at the first International Summit on Children’s Rights, Pope Francis urges world leaders to listen to children suffering from war, poverty, and migration, and reiterates his condemnation of the “murderous” practice of abortion resulting from our “throwaway culture.”

“Nothing is worth more than the life of a child.” Addressing world leaders convened in the Vatican for the first global Summit on Children’s Rights on Monday, Pope Francis reiterated his impassioned plea for the protection of children who are victims of conflict, poverty, migration and of a “throwaway culture”, including abortion and neglect, insisting on the urgent need to listen to them.

“Love Them and Protect Them” is the theme of the event at which panelists hailing from across the world are discussing children’s protection from violence and exploitation, access to resources, access to education and health, and rights to a family.

Children victims of wars

In his address, Pope Francis highlighted the ongoing struggles faced by children worldwide, emphasizing that despite global progress, many children still suffer from poverty, war, lack of education, injustice, and exploitation.

The Pope drew attention to the particularly dire conditions of children in war-torn and impoverished regions but also stressed that even in wealthier societies, children face vulnerabilities such as mental health struggles, violence, and social marginalization.

“To a much greater extent than in the past, schools and health services have to deal with children already tested by many difficulties, with anxious or depressed youngsters, and adolescents drawn to forms of aggression or self-harm. Moreover, a culture of efficiency looks upon childhood itself, like old age, as a ‘periphery’ of existence.”

He observed that young people, who should symbolize hope, increasingly struggle with despair and a lack of optimism for the future. This, he said, is “sad and troubling.”

One of the most alarming issues he addressed was the devastating impact of war on children. “What we have tragically seen almost every day in recent times, namely children dying beneath bombs, sacrificed to the idols of power, ideology, and nationalistic interests, is unacceptable,” he said.

Victims of ‘pathological individualism’

Pope Francis denounced what he termed the “pathological individualism” visible in developed nations, where children often face abuse, neglect, or even infanticide by those meant to protect them.

He again decried the loss of young migrant lives, as countless children die at sea, in deserts, or on dangerous journeys driven by desperation. This too is “unacceptable,” he said.

“A childhood denied is a silent scream condemning the wrongness of the economic system, the criminal nature of wars, the lack of adequate medical care and schooling,” the Pope insisted, warning against becoming desensitized to these tragedies, “losing what is noblest in the human heart: mercy and compassion.”

Scourges of child slavery, trafficking and abuse

Pope Francis went on to recall the suffering of displaced children, highlighting staggering statistics: over 40 million children displaced by conflict and 100 million homeless. He also decried the persistence of child slavery, forced labour, trafficking, abuse, and child marriages, citing the heartbreaking reality that 160 million children are victims of these injustices.

He further drew attention to 150 million “invisible” children who are unregistered at birth, making them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation due to their lack of legal identity. “This phenomenon of unaccompanied minors is increasingly frequent and serious,” he said, citing the example of Rohingya children fleeing Myanmar.

“Sadly,” the Pope noted, “this history of oppression of children is constantly repeated” in wartime, as elderly people who lived through wars tell us. “Also listening to those children who today live in violence, exploitation, or injustice serves to strengthen our ‘no’ to war,” the Pope remarked.

A particularly forceful part of the Pope’s speech was his condemnation of the “throwaway culture,” where human lives, including the unborn, are discarded without consideration.

“In the name of this throwaway mentality, in which the human being becomes all-powerful, unborn life is sacrificed through the murderous practice of abortion,” which the Pope emphasized “cuts off the source of hope for the whole of society.”

Listening to children to build hope for a better future

Pope Francis therefore urged world leaders to listen to children, not only through their words but also through their silences, expressions, and experiences. “With their looks and their silences, too, they speak to us, so let us listen to them!” he urged.

“How important it is to listen, for we need to realize that young children understand, remember and speak to us.”

He expressed hope that the Vatican-hosted Summit will contribute to building a better world for children, reaffirming the moral duty to place children, their rights, and their dreams at the centre of global concerns.

Concluding, Pope Francis encouraged participants to make the most of the opportunities afforded by this meeting and expressed his hope that their contributions will help to build a better world for children and, consequently, for everyone.

“For me, it is a source of hope that we are all here together to put children, their rights, their dreams, and their demand for a future at the centre of our concern.”

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