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Address of the Holy Father to the participants in the World Leaders Summit on Children's Rights

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the World Leaders Summit on Children's Rights took place. Entitled "Love them and protect them", the Summit was organized by the Pontifical Committee for World Children's Day.

The following is the address delivered by the Pope to the participants in the Summit at its inauguration:

Address of the Holy Father

*Your Majesty,
Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!*

I greet the Secretary of State, the Cardinals and the distinguished participants in this World Leaders Summit on Children's Rights, entitled "Love them and Protect them". I thank you for accepting the invitation and I am confident that, by pooling your experience and expertise, you can open new avenues to assist and protect the children whose rights are daily trampled upon and ignored.

Even today, too often the lives of millions of children are marked by poverty, war, lack of schooling, injustice and exploitation. Children and adolescents in poorer countries, or those torn apart by tragic conflicts, are forced to endure terrible trials. Nor is the more resource-rich world immune from injustice. Where, thank God, people do not suffer from war or hunger, there are problematic peripheries, where little ones are not infrequently vulnerable and suffer from problems that we cannot underestimate. In fact, 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.

Increasingly, those who have their whole life ahead of them are unable to approach it with optimism and confidence. It is precisely young people, who are the signs of hope in every society, who struggle to find hope in

themselves. This is sad and troubling. Indeed, “it is sad to see young people who are without hope, who face an uncertain and unpromising future, who lack employment or job security, or realistic prospects after finishing school. Without the hope that their dreams can come true, they will inevitably grow discouraged and listless” (Bull *Spes Non Confundit*, 12).

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. In truth, nothing is worth the life of a child. To kill children is to deny the future. In some cases, minors themselves are forced to fight under the effect of drugs. Even in countries without war, violence between criminal gangs becomes just as deadly for children, and often leaves them orphaned and marginalized.

The pathological individualism of developed countries is also detrimental to children. Sometimes they are mistreated or even put to death by the very people who should be protecting and nurturing them. They fall victim to quarrelling, social or mental distress and parental addictions.

Many children die as migrants at sea, in the desert or along the many routes of journeys undertaken out of desperate hope. Countless others succumb to a lack of medical care or various types of exploitation. All these situations are different, but they raise the same question: How is it possible that a child’s life should end like this?

Surely this is unacceptable, and we must guard against becoming inured to this reality. 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 burden of these injustices weighs most heavily on the least and the most defenceless of our brothers and sisters. At the level of international organizations, this is called a “global moral crisis”.

We are here today to say that we do not want this to become the new normal. We refuse to get used to it. Certain practices in the media tend to make us insensitive, leading to a general hardening of hearts. Indeed, we risk losing what is noblest in the human heart: mercy and compassion. More than once, I have shared this concern with some of you who represent various religious communities.

Today, more than forty million children have been displaced by conflict and about a hundred million are homeless. There is also the tragedy of child slavery: some one hundred and sixty million children are victims of forced labour, trafficking, abuse and exploitation of all kinds, including compulsory marriages. There are millions of migrant children, sometimes with families but often alone. This phenomenon of unaccompanied minors is increasingly frequent and serious.

Many other minors live in “limbo” because they were not registered at birth. An estimated one hundred and fifty million “invisible” children have no legal existence. This is an obstacle to their accessing education or health care, yet worse still, since they do not enjoy legal protection, they can easily be abused or sold as slaves. This actually happens! We can think of the young Rohingya children, who often struggle to get registered, or the “undocumented” children at the border of the United States, those first victims of that exodus of despair and hope made by the thousands of people coming from the South towards the United States of America, and many others.

Sadly, this history of oppression of children is constantly repeated. If we ask the elderly, our grandparents, about the war they experienced when they were young, the tragedy emerges from their memories: the darkness – everything is dark during the war, colours practically disappear – and the stench, the cold, the hunger, the dirt, the fear, the scavenging, the loss of parents and homes, abandonment and all kinds of violence. I grew up with the stories of the First World War told by my grandfather, and this opened my eyes and heart to the horror of war.

Seeing things through the eyes of those who have lived through war is the best way to understand the inestimable value of life. Yet also listening to those children who today live in violence, exploitation or injustice

serves to strengthen our “no” to war, to the throwaway culture of waste and profit, in which everything is bought and sold without respect or care for life, especially when that life is small and defenceless. 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. Abortion suppresses the life of children and cuts off the source of hope for the whole of society.

Sisters and brothers, how important it is to listen, for we need to realize that young children understand, remember and speak to us. And with their looks and their silences, too, they speak to us. So let us listen to them!

Dear friends, I thank you and encourage you, with God’s grace, to make the most of the opportunities afforded by this meeting. I pray that your 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. Thanks to all of you, and God bless you!
