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DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

COVID-19 VATICAN COMMISSION

CHILDREN AND COVID-19

The Pandemic's Most Vulnerable Victims

The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown countless children into severe poverty and left many without parents and caregivers. Worldwide, there has been increased exploitation of and violence against children and reduced or suspended access to educational facilities. Governments, civil society organizations, and the Church must come together to alleviate the escalating suffering of the most vulnerable children among us

1. Situation

A generation of children is bearing the brunt of the economic, health, and social impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Sudden global increases in severe poverty, rising food insecurity, and public quarantine measures have put major stress on households. Covid-19 strikes quickly, leaving families and communities little time to prepare for the death or long-term illness of parents and caregivers. Reports of violence, abuse, and exploitation of children have sharply increased since the pandemic began. Poorer communities disproportionately bear these adversities.

There is growing recognition that guaranteeing and protecting children's rights can promote longterm economic and social development. Children who live in a protective and nurturing environment are more likely to reach their full potential and are less likely to fall into poverty. They are less likely to come in conflict with the law and experience substance abuse or mental health issues. Covid-19 resembles other humanitarian issues in that the shocks to affected children and households have been profound— only in this case, however, the shocks are global in scale. Low, middle, and highincome countries have been affected, particularly the poor and vulnerable.

- **By September 30, 2021, over 5 million children are estimated to have lost a parent, custodial grandparent, or secondary caregiver to Covid-19.**[1] This translates to a child losing a parent or caregiver every 12 seconds. Conservative estimates suggest that over the next several years, millions more children will suffer these losses and be at an enhanced risk of increased poverty, loss of family care, placement in orphanages, and reduced access to education.[2]
- **Children are facing sharp increases in household poverty**, which are projected to continue in 2021 in low-income countries.[3] After decades of poverty reduction, Covid-19 plunged 150 million children into poverty. For the first time in decades, the number of children in child labor rose, reaching 160 million.[4]
- **Rising food insecurity is harming large numbers of children.** The 6-7 million new cases of acute malnutrition of children under the age of 5 in 2020 translate to an estimated 10,000 child deaths per month, 80% of those in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.[5]
- **Children are suffering significant educational setbacks.** More than 168 million children missed an entire school year during the first twelve months of the pandemic, and many more experienced reduced or remote schooling.[6] This will lead to an estimated loss of US\$10 trillion in future earnings for this generation, compounded by additional economic losses from early childhood education closures.[7]
- **Children are at much higher risk of violence and exploitation.** Violence prevention and response services have been disrupted for 1.8 billion children.[8] The U.N. Secretary General has expressed concern that there has been a “horrifying global surge in domestic violence” due to Covid-19, with calls to domestic hotlines significantly increasing in some countries.[9]
- **Girls are disproportionately at risk.** Some ten million girls are at risk of child marriage due to the pandemic, and there are widespread reports of an upsurge in child pregnancies.[10]
- **Children who are immunocompromised or with disability are especially vulnerable to Covid-19.** This risk is greater for children in residential congregate care settings.[11]

2. Analysis

Prior to the pandemic, the world was “slow in developing economic institutions and social initiatives which can give the poor regular access to basic resources” (Laudato Si’, 109). With the onset of the pandemic, the world has been “forced to confront a series of grave and interrelated socio-economic, ecological, and political crises” (Pope Francis, 7 April 2021). **The impact on children has been particularly profound.** Jesus “identifies especially with the little ones,” and this reminds us “that we are called to care for the vulnerable of the earth” (Evangelii Gaudium, 209). The “silent cry” of poor children should “find the people of God at the forefront, always and everywhere, in efforts to give them a voice, to protect and support them in the face of hypocrisy and so many unfulfilled promises, and to invite them to share in the life of the community” (Pope Francis, 15 November 2020).[12]

Children who lose a parent or caregiver due to the pandemic should remain in a family whenever possible. The Church recognizes that parents “have the duty to love and respect their children as persons and as children of God and to provide, as far as possible, for their physical and spiritual needs” (Compendium, 460). Family life is the “initiation into the life of society” (Compendium, 457). Children who lose a parent or caregiver, and who cannot be cared for by their kin, can turn to those who can “show their generosity by way of foster care or adoption... [i]n this way they realize a precious spiritual fruitfulness” (Compendium, 501). The parents of “children in grave difficulty” should not be left alone– “[w]e should accompany them in their toil, and also offer them moments of shared joy ...” (Pope Francis, 8 April 2015).[13]

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." (Mt 18:5)

Violence against children is contrary to the Gospel message that entrusts us with the care and protection of the weakest and defenceless(Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio).[14]“The unrestrained competition for quick and easy profit brings with it the cultivation of perverse scourges such as child trafficking, the exploitation and abuse of minors and, generally, the depriving of rights intrinsic to childhood as sanctioned by the International Convention on the Rights of the Child” (Pope Francis, 15 January 2017).[15]“In this moment of reflection, in which we seek to shape our future action and shape a post-Covid-19 international agenda, we should pay particular attention to the real danger of forgetting those who have been left behind. They run the risk of being attacked by a virus even worse than Covid-19: that of selfish indifference” (Pope Francis, 17 June 2021).[16]

- **Today’s children are the foundation of our future.**“If the parents are in some sense the foundations of the home, the children are like the ‘living stones’ of the family” (Amoris Laetitia, 14). Children who are nurtured and protected are more likely to reach the full potential of their physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual development.[17]They are also more likely to attend school, perform better academically, and have improved lifelong health. Supporting the welfare of children today will contribute to the reduction of poverty and inequity over generations.

- **Valuing family-based care.**“Children, once born, begin to receive, along with nourishment and care, the spiritual gift of knowing with certainty that they are loved. This love is shown to them through the gift of their personal name, the sharing of language, looks of love and the brightness of a smile.” (Amoris Laetitia, 172). Further, “[t]he family, the natural community in which human social nature is experienced, makes a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the good of society” (Compendium, 213). Our physical and spiritual efforts should focus on strengthening the ability of families to care for those children, especially the poor.

- **Our responses to children’s vulnerability from the pandemic should be holistic.**The full spectrum of children’s needs should be addressed during the pandemic and beyond. This is the basis of integral human development. When schools around the world closed in 2020, some 39 billion in school meals were missed leading to increased child malnutrition.[18]Worsened poverty during the pandemic increased the likelihood of child marriage, for example, as a way to relieve financial pressure during economic uncertainty.[19]“Inequity affects not only individuals but entire countries; it compels us to consider an ethics of international relations” (Laudato Si’, 51). Those ethics include the duty to maximize our efforts to secure in tandem the protection, care, health, and education of every child– an approach that will fundamentally reduce that inequity over time.

3.Action

To policymakers and civil society:

- **Promote the equitable distribution of the Covid-19 vaccine.**The impacts of the virus on child adversity can only be fully mitigated if the spread of COVID-19 is limited. Getting a vaccine is “an act of love,” “love for oneself, love for our families and friends, and love for all peoples.” (Pope Francis, 18 August 2021).[20]

- **Strengthen systems that promote family-based care for children:**COVID-19 moves quickly and leaves families little time to prepare. All efforts should be made to prevent child separation and to provide for care by surviving kin or foster/adoptive families. Catholic Relief Services and its partners have launched Changing the Way We Care, which has helpful resources on how governments and their partners can keep children in families.[21]Bereaving children should be provided with psycho-social support.

- **Devote increased budget expenditure to the protection of children.**Governments should recognize how the protection of children from violence, exploitation and neglect can contribute to their long-term education, health, and poverty reduction goals. Protection of children is often a low priority and receives minimal government funding.[22]Governments should develop, strengthen, and fund their child protection systems.

- **Combine cash transfers for the poor with complementary programs.**Studies show that cash social protection transfers that target income poverty are much more effective when combined with social welfare programs like psycho-social support and positive parenting that address the significant non-financial barriers that poor children

and families face.[23]

- **Protect trauma-affected children as schools re-open.** Many children re-entering schools will have been affected by trauma during quarantine, including physical and sexual violence. Many girls may never return to the classroom due to the specific challenges faced by girls. Schools should work to address the needs of trauma-affected children and to reach out to assist children facing barriers to access and participation in school.

To Church organizations:

- **Dioceses and parishes should be prepared to intervene rapidly when families are affected by Covid-19:** As Covid-19 progresses quickly, parishes can assemble rapid response teams to proactively identify at-risk families, provide them with prayer and care, guide them through the bereavement process, and support them after their loss. The sudden onset of poverty can compound the risk of a child separating from their family.

- **Ensuring safe and nurturing family-based care should be a Church priority.** Parish members can mobilize support to ensure Covid-19 impacted children remain in family care. In the event of parent or caregiver death, churches can also help to identify and support kin to care for the child, or support the foster care or adoption of the child.

- **Redouble efforts to find a family for every child.** The International Union of Superiors General has launched Catholics Care for Children International, which is addressing the needs of an estimated 5.6 million children in Catholic residential care facilities. The aim is to find a loving family for as many of those children as possible and transition orphanages to other community assets such as daycare facilities or other social service providers.

- **Directly address the rising tide of violence against children during Covid-19.** Children are the future of the Church. Parishes can work to reduce the normalization of violence against children within and outside of the family. They can create safe spaces where children at risk can receive counseling and support as a full and valued member of the parish community. They can also set up peer support groups to reduce the social isolation of children and youth during Covid-19. Positive parent-child relationships can be promoted through parent training programs delivered in groups and individual households. Churches can also identify children at risk of violence and provide direct support or connect them to available programs and services.

Vatican City, December 15, 2021

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