



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE COMMITTEE OF EUROPEAN JOURNALIST  
FOR THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD**

*Saturday, 13 January 1979*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am happy to receive today the "Committee of European journalists for the rights of the child", accompanied by representatives of the Italian National Commission for the International Year of the Child, under the patronage of which your first meeting, here, in Rome, is taking place. I thank you for this visit and for the trust it shows. In the framework of the International Year of the Child, you have wished to take initiatives in order that you yourselves may study the situation of certain groups of underprivileged children and then, I suppose, drive home to your readers the problems of these children.

The Holy See is not content to regard with interest and sympathy the good initiatives that will be undertaken this year. It is ready to encourage everything planned and carried out for the real good of children, for it is a question of an immense population, a considerable part of mankind, which needs special protection and advancement, in view of the precariousness of its fate.

The Church, happily, is not the only institution there is to cope with these needs; but it is true that she has always considered material, affective, educational and spiritual assistance for children an important part of her mission. And if she acted in this way, it was because, without always using the more recent vocabulary of the "rights of the child", she considered the child, in fact, not as an individual to be utilized, not as an object, but as a subject of inalienable rights, a newborn personality to be developed, having a value in itself, an extraordinary destiny. There would be no end to enumerating the works that Christianity set up for this purpose. It is only natural, since Christ himself put the child at the heart of the Kingdom of God: "Let the children come to me ... ; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:14). And these words of Christ spoken on behalf of destitute humans, and which will judge us all, "I was hungry and you gave me food ... ; I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me" (Mt 25:35-36), do they not apply

particularly to the helpless child? Hunger for bread, hunger for affection, hunger for education ... Yes, the Church wishes to take an ever greater part in this action in favour of children, and to stimulate it more widely.

But the Church desires just as much to help to form the conscience of men, to make public opinion aware of the child's essential rights which you are trying to uphold. The "Declaration of the rights of the child", adopted by the Assembly of the United Nations Organization twenty years ago, already expresses an appreciable consensus on a certain number of very important principles, which are still far from being applied everywhere.

The Holy See thinks that we can also speak of the rights of the child from the moment of conception, and particularly of the right to life, for experience shows more and more that the child needs special protection, *de facto* and *de jure*, even before his birth.

Stress could thus be laid on the right of the child to be born in a real family, for it is essential that he should benefit from the beginning from the joint contribution of the father and the mother, united in an indissoluble marriage.

The child must also be reared, educated, in his family, the parents remaining "primarily and principally responsible" for his education, a role which "is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute" (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 3). That is made necessary by the atmosphere of affection and of moral and material security that the psychology of the child requires. It should be added that procreation founds this natural right, which is also "the gravest obligation" (*Ibid.*). And even the existence of wider family ties, with brothers and sisters, with grandparents, and other close relatives, is an important element—which tends to be neglected today—for the child's harmonious balance.

In education, to which, together with the parents, the school and other organisms of society contribute, the child must find the possibilities "of developing in a healthy, normal way on the physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual and social plane, in conditions of freedom and dignity", as the second principle of the Declaration of the rights of the child asserts. In this connection, the child has also the right to the truth, in a teaching which takes into account the fundamental ethical values, and which will make possible a spiritual education, in conformity with the religion to which the child belongs, the orientation legitimately desired by his parents and the exigencies of freedom of conscience, rightly understood, for which the child must be prepared and formed throughout his childhood and adolescence. On this point, it is natural that the Church should be able to exercise her own responsibilities.

Actually, to speak of the rights of the child is to speak of the duties of parents and educators, who remain in the service of the child, of his higher interests. But the growing child must take part himself in his own development, with responsibilities that correspond to his capacities; and care

must be taken not to neglect to speak to him also of his own duties towards others and towards society.

Such are the few reflections that you give me the opportunity to express, with regard to the goals that you set yourselves. Such is the ideal towards which it is necessary to strive, for the deepest good of children, for the honour of our civilization. I know that you give prior attention to the children whose elementary rights are not even satisfied, in your own countries as in those of other continents. European journalists, do not hesitate, therefore, to look also to regions of the globe less favoured than Europe! I pray to God to enlighten and strengthen your interest in these children.

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