

PUTTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FIRST: A CHALLENGE FOR OUR CHURCH, NATION AND WORLD
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National Conference of Catholic Bishops

I. INTRODUCTION: CHILDREN WITHIN A FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

Our nation is failing many of our children. Our world is a hostile and dangerous place for millions of children. As pastors in a community deeply committed to serving children and their families, and as teachers of a faith that celebrates the gift of children, we seek to call attention to this crisis and to fashion a response that builds on the values of our faith, the experience of our community, and the love and compassion of our people. We seek to shape a society—and a world—with a clear priority for families and children in need and to contribute to the development of policies that help families protect their children's lives and overcome the moral, social, and economic forces that threaten their future. We focus on the situation of our children for several reasons: Our children are a test of both our humanity and our faith. As Pope John Paul II said in *Familiaris Consortio*, "In the Christian view, our treatment of children becomes a measure of our fidelity to the Lord himself." Our children are hurting, in the United States and around the world. They are among the most vulnerable members of the human family. The lives, dignity, rights, and hopes of literally millions of children are at risk. Our children are our future—they will be the leaders, the believers, the parents, the citizens of tomorrow. In responding to their needs today, we shape a better future for all. Our children are our present. Our children bring us special gifts, today, not just tomorrow. They are the sign of God's continual gift to the world. Thus, we need to respect them and place their rights as a priority in our society and our Church. Parents need support and help in meeting the challenges of raising children in the face of the cultural, economic, and moral pressures of our day. No institution can substitute for the committed love, daily sacrifice, and hard work of parents in caring for their children. But every institution should support parents in their essential tasks. Our Church must be an ally and advocate for parents as they struggle to meet their children's needs at home and in an often hostile world where powerful economic and social forces can overwhelm the love and care of a family. Our purpose is to share the facts of a society failing its children and a world neglecting children, and to explore the moral dimensions, human consequences, and religious meaning of these failures. We invite the Catholic community and the broader society to respond to this urgent moral challenge and to suggest some basic values and directions for our families, nation, and world in meeting it. We urge a reordering of priorities—personal, ecclesial, and societal—to focus more on the needs and potential of our children. This message is a call for conversion and action—a spiritual and social reawakening to the moral and human costs of neglecting our children and families. In these reflections, we build on our past efforts especially our statements on family, human life, and social justice. We focus on children, not as unconnected individuals, but as members of families. Every family has a mission "to guard, reveal, and communicate love" and children are at the center of that mission. We address the needs of children from a family perspective. If society seeks to help children, it has to support families, since children's lives are nurtured or neglected, enhanced or diminished by the quality of family life.

II. THE REALITIES

Childhood should be a happy, secure, and safe time of growth and development. For many children, it is. We are learning more and more about the remarkable human, moral, and spiritual development of young people. They are resilient, adaptive, and resourceful. But for far too many of our children all over the world, childhood is an often dangerous and overwhelming struggle.

A. Children in the United States

We ask you to consider these sad facts of our national life: Every year 1.6 million of our children are destroyed by legalized abortion even before they are born. They are denied their most basic right, the right to life itself. Children are the poorest members of our society—one out of five children grows up poor in the richest nation on earth. Among our youngest children, a fourth are poor. Children are nearly twice as likely to be poor as any other group. Among children, the younger you are, the more likely you are to be poor in America. And poverty means children miss the basics—the food, housing, and health care they need to grow and develop. They are deprived in a way that hurts and distorts their lives. Forty thousand children born each year in the U.S. do not live to see their first birthday. Sixty-seven newborn babies die each day in our land. Our infant mortality rate puts us last among twenty Western nations. The United States has the highest divorce rate, the highest teenage pregnancy rate, the highest child poverty rate, and the highest abortion rate in the Western world. An estimated 5.5 million U.S. children under twelve are hungry; another 6 million are underfed. The rate of teenage suicide has tripled in thirty years. More than 2.5 million children suffer physical, emotional, or sexual abuse or neglect in one year in the United States. More teenage boys die of gunshot wounds than from all natural causes combined. More than 25 percent of our teenagers drop out of school; SAT scores have declined 70 points since 1963. More than 8 million children are in families without health insurance. Mothers and children make up an increasing proportion of the homeless in our land. Children need a secure and stable family life. However, families today are facing enormous pressures and significant change: Many parents, regardless of income, struggle to meet the emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of their children in the face of powerful moral, economic, and social pressures that make their task more difficult. Divorce has quadrupled in thirty years to touch almost half of all marriages. Half of all noncustodial parents do not see their children in the first year after divorce. Three-quarters of these parents have no contact with their children after ten years. Most families need two incomes to meet their economic needs. More than half of mothers with children under six are in the paid work force. Almost a fourth of our children are growing up in single-parent families, most of them headed by women who are more likely to live in poverty. More middle class families are experiencing greater difficulty affording a home, obtaining quality health care, and paying for their children's education, especially college. Families face diverse challenges in raising children: the reality of crime and violence, the allure of materialism and consumerism, continuing prejudice and intolerance, media that often belittle family values, and public policy and corporate practices that too often ignore the family responsibilities of parents. These pressures are exacerbated by prejudice and discrimination. African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Native American families have remarkable strengths often unappreciated by others. Against pervasive discrimination, the family in these communities has been both a refuge and a launching pad; however, minority children still face very significant obstacles. Forty-three percent of African American children grow up in poverty. A majority of these children are in single-parent families. The poverty rate for Hispanic children (32 percent) is growing more rapidly than for any other group. In addition, discrimination against women means that they still earn significantly less than men; this often has devastating consequences for children in families headed by women. However, common stereotypes are often misleading. Only one out of ten poor children is a black child living in a female-headed family on welfare in a central city. Most poor children are white; most are from working families; and the child poverty rate in rural America is higher than for the nation as a whole. Changes in economic life, personal values, and American culture have combined to leave children vulnerable. Joblessness and declines in real wages have squeezed many families. Antifamily welfare, tax, health, and workplace policies have undermined children's lives. The national failure to invest adequately in programs that clearly work (e.g., Head Start, WIC, Child Health Services) has left many families without the help they need. Broader cultural and social forces, including the media, have also undermined family values and the importance

of children. We are faced with a pattern of national neglect that seriously shortchanges our children. We have neither a comprehensive family policy nor a consistent concern for children. And the youngest members of our society are paying a huge price for our neglect.

B. Children in the World

Across the globe—and especially in the poorest countries—the picture is even more stark and discouraging: Millions of children are dying—from starvation, disease, poverty, and military conflict. According to UNICEF, forty thousand children die every day from malnutrition and related diseases. Wars have killed nearly 2 million children in the last fifteen years; more than twice that number have been physically disabled; and it is not possible to even estimate the number who have been traumatized as a result of these conflicts. Seven million children are growing up in refugee camps because of war and natural disasters; a slightly larger number have been uprooted from their homes in their own countries. More than five thousand refugee children without parents have been resettled over the last decade by our Church here in the U.S.; while, unfortunately, other undocumented children without their parents who have entered the U.S. are held in detention under terrible conditions. Approximately 80 million children work in often monotonous, repetitive, and dangerous jobs; in some countries these exploited children earn wages of five to seven cents an hour. Fifteen percent of the world's 2 billion children under fifteen years of age live under what UNICEF terms "especially difficult circumstances." Millions, for example, live in the streets of the exploding Third World cities, resorting to theft, drug trafficking, prostitution, and other desperate measures to survive. Children's futures are undermined by war, injustice, and denial of human rights around the world. For example, children pay the highest price for apartheid in South Africa, violence in Central America, repression in China, and war in the Persian Gulf and Croatia. Sickness ravages poor families. Diseases long banished or generally unknown in the industrialized world—measles, malaria, sleeping sickness—kill hundreds of thousands annually. And now we see the worldwide consequences of AIDS, which will produce an estimated 10 million orphans in this decade in Africa alone. As in our own nation, poverty around the world falls most heavily and directly on women and children. They are the most likely to suffer from the chronic hunger which results from poverty and powerlessness. Their future is mortgaged to flawed "development" which increases a nation's gross national product, but worsens its distribution, helping the rich at the expense of the poor. It is women and children who suffer most when the elites of poor nations invest abroad rather than at home, and when foreign aid from more affluent nations is reduced. And they are the first victims of the cuts in social services made by developing countries to "adjust" their economies in order to pay their burdensome debts. As we pointed out in our statement on the external debt, children are literally dying of the consequences of that debt. The sheer magnitude of these national and international statistics can obscure and overwhelm the human dimensions of this crisis. Imagine the loss and despair of a parent watching a child die of hunger. Consider the pain of a parent who cannot provide a home for a child. These realities are not abstract issues, but human tragedies and moral challenges. We believe that behind each of these numbers is a sister or brother, a child of God. The tragic fate of too many children is not simply an economic or social problem, but a sign of moral failure and a religious test.

III. THE MORAL AND RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS

In the Catholic community, we draw on three basic resources to shape our response to this moral challenge: the Scriptures, Catholic teaching, and our experience in serving children and their families.

A. The Lessons of Scripture

In the Bible, children are both a blessing from God and a test of the community's values. The ancient Hebrews believed children were a sign of God's favor (Gn 15:1-6). Our fathers and mothers in faith prayed for children, and God answered their pleas (Gn 15:1-6; 1 Sm 1:9-21). But the Scriptures also record terrible sins against the young. Children were the victims of abuse (Ps 10:18; 94:6; Jb 22:9). Orphans were especially vulnerable and became objects of God's special care. God and his Covenant upheld the rights of abandoned children (Ps 68:5; Jer 49:11), provided for their support (Dt 24:19-22), and demanded their protection (Ex 22:22-24). Holiness and justice are to be found in those who are ready to give wholehearted, generous support to the vulnerable children: "To the fatherless be as a father, and help their mother as a husband would. . ." (Sir 4:10). "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God . . . is this," the letter of James declares, "to care for orphans and widows in their affliction . . ." (Jas 1:27). Under the covenant, care of orphans and widows, like that of aliens and the poor, was the responsibility of both families and the whole society. The prophets inveighed against the people for their failure to do justice "by advancing the claim of the fatherless" (Jer 5:28) and by exploiting widows and orphans (Ez 22:7). Indeed, God's continued presence among the people depended on doing justice to the oppressed: Only if you thoroughly reform your ways and your deeds; if each of you deals justly with his neighbor, if you no longer oppress the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow; . . . will I remain with you in this place, in the land which I gave your fathers long ago and forever (Jer 7:4-7). In the New Testament we read how Jesus came into the world as a vulnerable and homeless child. We also hear of God's love for us and the frequent reference to children in the parables. For example, in explaining the goodness of God, Jesus says, "Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him" (Mt 7:7-11). Jesus welcomed and blessed children (Mt 19:12-15) and called his disciples to act as children in receiving the word of God. Jesus tells his disciples: "Whoever receives one child . . . in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me" (Mk 9:36-37). This parallels the story of the last judgment, where we learn that in serving "the least among us," we serve the Lord; this parable insists that our judgment depends on our response to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked (Mt 25). In our day the "orphans and widows" are poor children and single parents; the "least of these" are hungry and homeless children; unwanted, unborn children; crack babies; and children with AIDS. The Scriptures call on believers to stand up for the poor and vulnerable. "Speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of the destitute, open your mouth, decree what is just, defend the needy and the poor" (Prv 31:8-9). And, the early Church was called in the first letter of John to put love of God into action, ". . . [W]e should love one another. . . . If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him? Children, let us love not in word or speech but indeed and truth" (1 Jn 3:11-17).

B. The Teaching of the Church

1. TRADITIONAL SOCIAL TEACHING

The biblical call to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves and to make Christian love real and active has taken explicit shape over the last century in the traditional social teaching of our Church. This tradition and its key principles shape and guide our response to the moral challenge of our children. These principles include the life and dignity of the human person, human rights and responsibilities, the call to family and community, the dignity of work, the option for the poor and vulnerable, and the principle of solidarity. These principles take on increasing urgency and relevance as they are so clearly violated in the lives of so many children. Applying Catholic social teaching today requires a priority focus on children.

2. TEACHING ON FAMILY

We also share a more specific ecclesial heritage of teaching on children and families. Through children, God shares with women and men a special participation in creation.[1] If we are to protect and nurture this gift of children, we must have strong families.[2] The physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual health of children is intimately linked to the health of families. In Christian terms, the family is sacred and holy, a “community of life and love,” which prepares, nourishes, and sustains the youngest members of the Church in their task of building up the kingdom of God.[3] In social terms, families are the “first and vital cell of society,” the building block of community.[4] Our family perspective demands that the rights of children are directly linked to the rights and responsibilities of families. These rights were outlined in the Holy See’s Charter of Family Rights. They include the right to found a family, to a stable marriage, to bear and educate children in one’s faith, to social and economic security, to decent housing, to protect children from harm, and to immigrate.[5] These rights are linked to the responsibilities of families, including four fundamental tasks: Families form children in a loving community. Each member of the family shares in the responsibility to build this unique community of love. Children contribute to this community through their gift of love, respect, and obedience toward their parents. Parents, in turn, nurture their children in self-giving love, mutual respect, and discipline. In these ways, families challenge the exaggerated individualism and selfishness that so distort our society. Families serve the life and dignity of children. Men and women joined in marriage share in God’s love and power as Creator by their free and responsible cooperation in transmitting the gift of human life through the moral exercise of the gift of human sexuality. This participation in God’s creative activity involves both bringing children into the world and taking part in their upbringing and education. Parents are the first and most important educators of their children. Responsible parenthood is a cornerstone of the Church’s teaching on family and a healthy society. Families bring children to participate in the development of society. Parents help children grow in moral and spiritual maturity and also help to build a caring and just society. Through families, children should come to identify with the most needy in the community, especially poor and suffering children, and should develop a life-long commitment to respond through service of the poor and disadvantaged and through action for justice and peace in their own communities and the world. Families enable children to share in the life and mission of the Church. In the family, parents communicate the Gospel to their children, and children as well as parents learn to live it in their daily lives. Parents have a responsibility, through word and example, to help make prayer and the sacraments an integral part of their children’s lives. The Gospel of Jesus and the life of faith are enormous gifts to our children, offering meaning, direction, and discipline in a world that often lacks them. Parents instill in their children a commitment to loving service of others, helping them to discover in every person the image of God. These tasks of families are shared with others, especially extended families, parishes, and other networks of family support. An African proverb suggests “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” In our society it takes grandparents and godparents, friends and relatives, teachers and pastors, and many others. We recognize and support the diverse sources of strength and help for families.

3. SOCIETY: PROTECTOR AND PROMOTER OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Social institutions increasingly share many of the family’s responsibilities toward children, but they can never take the place of families. Rather, social institutions—government at all levels, employers, religious institutions, schools, media, community organizations—should enter into creative partnerships with families so that families can fulfill their responsibility. The Holy Father also insists that the strengths and efficiency of a market economy like our own need to be harmonized with the needs and rights of

families, especially the poor and workers, and he warns against overly bureaucratic responses to family needs.

C. The Experience of the Catholic Community For decades, even centuries, the Catholic community has been deeply involved in meeting the human, pastoral, and educational needs of children and their families. In 1727 the Ursuline Sisters founded the first Catholic home for abandoned children in New Orleans. Presently, millions of families are served by Catholic Charities, which offers help in meeting basic needs, providing foster care and adoption, family counseling and alternatives to abortion. Hungry and homeless children are assisted in our shelters, by our soup kitchens and our parish-based food pantries. Our elementary and secondary schools offer educational opportunities to millions of children. Through parish religious education and adult education programs, we provide ongoing programs of marriage preparation and enrichment, natural family planning, family ministry, youth ministry, and parenting skills. Our national and state conferences of Catholic bishops, Catholic Charities, arch/diocesan ministerial offices, and other organizations are deeply involved in advocacy for children and families. We also provide ongoing programs of family ministry and marriage preparation and enrichment. The Campaign for Human Development helps to empower families in their search for justice. Around the world, missionaries, Catholic Relief Services, Holy Childhood Association, and our immigration and refugee programs offer hope and help to desperate children and families. Because of our long and continued involvement with children and families, the concerns on which we now focus are neither new or abstract, but rather evidence of real, continuing, and perhaps worsening conditions for children. We bring not only our values to this concern, but also broad experience and expertise in caring for children and their families. No institution is more deeply involved in serving the needs of children than our community of faith. We bring not only deep conviction, but also vast experience to the challenge of meeting the needs of children.

IV. THE MORAL CHALLENGE

Believers, as heirs of this religious tradition, cannot confront the tragic situation of so many children and turn away. As family members and citizens we must measure our choices as individuals, as a nation, and as a global community for their impact on children and families. Within our families, we need to teach—by word and example, by our priorities and our lives—the values that help our children grow to be responsible, faithful, caring, and disciplined. Our love, our values, and our faith are passed on not only by what we say, but also by how we live. Parents, especially, show love for their children by providing for their emotional and spiritual needs, as well as their material needs. This occurs, for example, when parents spend time with their children, when they discipline and guide them, when they show affection, and when they teach their children to pray and grow in faith. In our churches we need to help families in their essential roles, offering both support and challenge. This requires liturgy and pastoral care responsive to children and families, first-rate religious education, schools, and other vital ministries. We can prepare people for marriage and help families learn the skills of parenting. We need to lift up the vocation of marriage and family life and offer to people the resources of our spiritual and sacramental heritage in effective and creative ways: through education, family life movements, family retreats, outreach to families in distress, support groups, youth programs, counseling, and the timeless spiritual resources of prayer, liturgy, and meditation. As a nation, we need to make children and families our first priority; to invest in their future; to combat the forces— cultural, economic, and moral—which hurt children and destroy families; to manage our economy, shape our government, and direct our institutions to support and not undermine our families. In our society, we need to resist the trends toward excessive individualism, materialism, and the quest for personal pleasure above all else. Real happiness and satisfaction come from who we are and how we care for one another rather than from

what we have. Our news and entertainment media, despite some laudable efforts, too often attack family values, undermine moral principles, and expose children to violence and to sexual themes on a daily basis. Fundamental values of integrity, compassion, respect for others, and honesty must be encouraged and reinforced by the culture at large. In an interdependent world, we need to see clearly how children pay the price for global poverty and indifference, for official corruption, for far too much debt and not enough development, for a global economy dominated by the industrial countries which further impoverishes the poor. We need to understand and act on the links between the children we see dying on the nightly news and the economic and political structures that bring poverty and hunger to millions. As believers and citizens, we need—each of us—to use our values, voices, and votes to hold our public officials accountable and to shape a society that puts our children first.

V. CRITERIA FOR NATIONAL POLICY

The most important work to help our children is done quietly—in our homes and neighborhoods, our parishes and community organizations. No government can love a child and no policy can substitute for a family's care, but clearly families can be helped or hurt in their irreplaceable roles. Government can either support or undermine families as they cope with the moral, social, and economic stresses of caring for children. There has been an unfortunate, unnecessary, and unreal polarization in discussions of the best way to help families. Some emphasize the primary role of moral values and personal responsibility, the sacrifices to be made and the personal behaviors to be avoided, but they often ignore or de-emphasize the broader forces which hurt families, e.g., the impact of economics, discrimination, and antifamily policies. Others emphasize the social and economic forces that undermine families and the responsibility of government to meet human needs, but they often neglect the importance of basic values and personal responsibility. The undeniable fact is that our children's future is shaped both by the values of their parents and the policies of our nation. Families are undermined by parental irresponsibility and discrimination and poverty. Children's lives are enriched by their parents' sacrifices and by economic policies that help mothers and fathers meet the demands of parenthood. It is time to move beyond rigid ideologies and political posturing to focus on the real needs of families. We believe parental responsibility and broader social responsibility, changed behavior and changed policies are complementary requirements to help families. Our nation must move beyond partisan and ideological rhetoric to help shape a new consensus that supports families in their essential roles and insists that public policy support families, especially poor and vulnerable children. We will continue to advocate policies, programs, and priorities which meet these basic criteria: 1. Put children and families first. Analyze every policy and program—diocesan, parish, domestic, and international—for its impact on children and families; look at every proposal from a family perspective. Poor and vulnerable children have first claim on our common efforts. 2. Help; don't hurt. Insist that economic, tax, education, welfare, immigration and refugee, and human service policies support families rather than undermine families; that programs encourage self-help rather than promote dependency. 3. Those with the greatest need require the greatest response. This is the "option for the poor" in action. While every family needs support, poor families and families facing discrimination carry the greatest burdens and require the most help. With limited resources, we need to focus assistance on those with the greatest needs. 4. Empower families. Help families meet their responsibilities to their children. Families need to be empowered to make the choices that meet their diverse needs—in education, child care, health, work, and other areas. Tax, workplace, divorce, and welfare policies must help families stay together and care for their children. 5. Fight economic and social forces which threaten children and family life. Poverty, joblessness; lack of access to affordable health care, child care, and decent housing; and discrimination are among the greatest threats to families and children. Efforts to overcome poverty, provide decent jobs, and promote equal opportunity are pro-family priorities. 6. Build on the strengths of families;

reward responsibility and sacrifice for children. Policy must recognize the resiliency and capacity for self-help of families and reward members of families who avoid destructive behavior. 7. Recognize that foreign policy is increasingly children's policy. Global poverty, armed conflict, and systematic injustice threaten the lives of millions of children and their families. Children will pay a terrible price for indifference toward international, economic policy and neglect of human rights. These criteria have led our conference to support a wide variety of pro-family initiatives at both the national and international level: family and medical leave, pro-life legislation and alternatives to abortion, broad-based child care which allows for religious and cultural values, an increase in the minimum wage and Earned Income Tax Credit, pro-family welfare reform, proposals for choice in education, civil rights laws, laws prohibiting housing discrimination against families with children, family-based immigration, asylum and refugee policy, new federal budget priorities, increased access to health care and decent housing, support for substance abuse programs, broader proposals for economic justice and family support, and reform of U.S. foreign assistance programs.

VI. DIRECTIONS FOR NATIONAL POLICY

In fashioning national policy, our society must recognize a serious problem both in our national and personal priorities. Our society neglects the needs of poor children. When our nation makes a commitment, it can make a difference. Decades ago poverty haunted large numbers of our elderly citizens. As a society we decided this was intolerable and put in place Social Security, Medicare, and other measures to protect the dignity of the elderly—with an impressive drop in poverty among their population. Now, our children are more likely to be poor, but our government spends less on children's needs. Cuts in federal expenditures have come disproportionately in programs serving children. Children don't vote; they don't contribute to political campaigns, and therefore, they are more likely to be ignored by governments and policy makers. Money alone will not solve the problems of poor families, but there is no substitute for wise and thoughtful investment in meeting the needs of America's children. We need to invest now, because the children are suffering now; and if we do not invest now, we will all suffer later. At the same time, national policy should reinforce basic moral values while recognizing the diversity of America's families. The problems of American families stem from the misplaced priorities of our federal government, of some parents, and of society at large. Studies indicate that parents spend 40 percent less time with their children today than they did just twenty years ago. The absence of many fathers is a particularly serious problem—not only economically but socially as well. Public policy ought to reward parents who take their responsibilities seriously and encourage more responsible behavior in those who do not. The policies of our nation should neither exaggerate nor ignore the changes in family life. They must recognize both the diversity of families and the fact that, in general, stable, loving two-parent families offer the best chance for children. Traditional moral values are not relics of a bygone age. Rather, they are the best guides to a productive future for our children and health for our society. A case in point is the often confused discussion of the best way to confront the AIDS crisis and its growing impact on young people. We continue to insist that our response should combine both compassion for those who live with AIDS and responsibility in avoiding behaviors which put people at risk. Instead of promoting the illusion of safe sex, we need to warn our children and society of the dangers of sexual promiscuity and drug abuse. Our moral convictions about expressing human sexuality within marriage now represent not only appropriate moral guidance, but also wise health counsel. Responsibility, unselfishness, concern for others, fidelity in marriage, and commitment to children are the building blocks of a creative and satisfying life and a just and decent society. They ought to be recognized in our public policies, encouraged in our media, and supported by our community institutions. In our society, we need to develop incentives and rewards for policies and behaviors that serve the needs of children and disincentives for those actions and policies which

threaten or hurt children. There is growing consensus in this area. A series of studies, reports, and a bipartisan commission have documented the needs of children and the failures of our society to meet those needs. And increasingly, experts and organizations including marriage and family counselors have shown signs of rethinking the positive values of stable marriage, the human costs of easy divorce laws, the social costs of excessive individualism, and the consequences of economic pressures on families. We welcome and support renewed efforts of the helping professions to promote the reconciliation of spouse as a viable alternative to divorce. We acknowledge the significant changes in family life; we affirm the major contributions of women in the work force; and we support and applaud the often heroic efforts of single-parent families. We also emphasize the value of parents staying together and sacrificing to raise children. Children generally do best when they have the love and support—personal and material—of both their parents. Many single-parent families overcome huge economic and social obstacles, but others are overwhelmed by these forces. Government efforts need to help families stay together and overcome the many pressures that pull families apart. We owe special help to those parents—mothers or fathers—who face family life alone, knowing how discrimination and other forces make a difficult job even tougher. This is especially true when single parenthood is combined with poverty, as it often is.

A. Protecting the Lives of Children

1. UNBORN CHILDREN

From conception, unborn children are most at risk from this nation's antilife policy of abortion on demand. The ultimate example of powerlessness is to be destroyed before birth. And a terrible sign of national failure is the implicit suggestion to many women—especially poor women—that they must choose between life for their unborn child and a decent future for themselves and for their families. We need to shape a society where economic and social forces do not leave women facing fundamental questions of life and death alone and isolated without the support of a caring community. We reiterate our strong opposition to abortion and government funding for abortion. We will continue through education to expose the realities of abortion, to promote life-giving alternatives to abortion, and to provide the loving choice of adoption and caring support for pregnant women and mothers and children, especially the poor. Unborn children are also at risk from AIDS and substance abuse, both of which call for expanded national efforts at education and prevention, the provision of prenatal and other health care, and treatment and rehabilitation of abusers of alcohol and other drugs.

2. ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Children are hurt and killed by violence within families. Families are destroyed by verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. These brutal and tragic realities threaten the lives and welfare of millions of children and women. They require education, treatment, and prevention. The family must be a place of safety, not of danger. And society must act to protect children and women from family violence and sexual abuse. Physical and sexual abuse of children constitutes a terrible betrayal of trust, a threat to their emotional and physical health, and a challenge for every institution that serves children. Child pornography represents a particularly terrible threat to children. They serve as subjects in the production of pornography and sex objects for those who make use of pornographic materials. This illegal and immoral use of children for sexual purposes and profit must be confronted and stopped. Pornography demeans women, degrades our society, and destroys the love at the center of human sexuality. We need effective, constitutional remedies which protect children, women, and all of society. Growing violent abuse and neglect of infants and children have led to families where children are not only

rejected but also endangered and to the phenomenon of the “no parent” family. These sad realities have created widespread strains on our child welfare system, including lack of adequate foster homes, inadequate support services, a shortage of trained personnel, inappropriate placements, and a serious absence of preventive services. System-wide reform is called for, including special attention to families where there is substance abuse and families in which children have serious emotional problems. The primary goal of reform should be preserving families, wherever possible, through long-term, home-based services and programs designed to meet individual family needs before children’s safety is jeopardized. We need far more coordination in the provision of family services, emphasizing prevention and replacing fragmented individual programs with concern for the whole family. We also support policies which assist families who choose to adopt children or provide loving foster care for children at risk. Special efforts are needed to help minority and older children and children with disabilities find loving and supportive homes. Creative public policy and private action are needed to help every child find a home where his or her unique needs can be met.

B. Economic Help for Families

1. POVERTY AND FAMILIES

Poverty is not merely the lack of adequate financial resources. It often entails a more profound kind of deprivation; a denial of full participation in the economic, social, and political life of society; and an inability to influence decisions that affect one’s life. It means being powerless in a way that assaults not only one’s pocketbook but also one’s fundamental human dignity. Many children are poor because they were born to young parents who are unmarried and are not equipped to support them, but many others are poor because their parents are casualties of economic forces beyond their control: recession, industrial restructuring, erosion of real wages, unemployment, and discrimination in hiring and promotion. Staggering increases in the costs of essentials such as rent and medical care have meant that even full time work is no guarantee against poverty. Moreover, the holes in the safety net have gotten larger, making it much harder for families to recover from a layoff or extensive medical bills.

2. DECENT JOBS AT DECENT WAGES

Despite the long uninterrupted period of economic expansion in the 1980s, child poverty increased significantly in this nation. Clearly, economic growth alone is not sufficient to solve the problem, and the recent recession has already cost 2 million Americans their jobs. As we wrote in our 1986 pastoral letter on the U.S. economy, targeted economic policies are necessary to create sufficient jobs at adequate wages to support families in dignity. Decent jobs at decent wages—what used to be called a “family wage”—are the most important economic assets for families. Periodic increases in the minimum wage to reflect inflation would be a useful step in this direction. Too many of our young people come to adulthood without goals or the skills needed in the world of work. All too often some succumb to the allure of crime or to the despair of a life without direction or accomplishment. Greater public and private efforts are needed to introduce young people to the challenges and rewards of meaningful work. Communities, in partnership with the public sector, should offer the kinds of training, apprenticeships, and service opportunities that will prepare young people to use their talents and energy in positive ways. National policies should ensure that all those who can work in fact have the opportunity to contribute to the common good by their labor.

3. CHANGING TAX POLICY TO HELP FAMILIES

The 1986 tax reform law and later expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit have lightened some of the federal tax burden of poverty-level families with children, but the tax code needs further reform to bring fairness to the treatment of families, especially to those raising children on modest incomes. The current tax code fails to reflect the real costs of raising children and offers inadequate help to families with children. We welcome proposals to reform the tax code to help families cope with the high cost of raising children. These proposals, which have drawn bipartisan support, would allow middle income families with children to keep more of what they earn and would help lift low income families out of poverty. Such proposals deserve serious consideration and general support in light of the current bias against children in our tax laws, especially those in low and moderate income families. As one commentator pointed out recently, taxpayers in America today can receive a bigger tax break for breeding racehorses than for raising children. We continue to support an expanded earned income tax credit to assist poor, working families. This pro-work, pro-family provision needs to be enhanced and supported as an important contribution to tax fairness.

4. HELP FOR POOR CHILDREN

Children's lives are diminished every day in this nation because of the low level of welfare benefits. Misleading stereotypes of welfare families and misguided budget priorities are largely responsible for the failure of both federal and state governments to protect children from hunger, homelessness, and deprivation. We reiterate our call for a minimum national welfare benefit that will permit children and their parents to live in dignity. A decent society will not balance its budget on the backs of poor children. Sadly, the fiscal difficulties in many of our states has meant disproportionate cuts and unfair burdens for poor families. Some aspects of welfare are antifamily. For example, in many states, unemployed fathers must leave the home so that the children can get welfare assistance beyond an initial six month period. We have frequently called for true welfare reform that would be both pro-family and pro-child. No family should have to separate as a condition of receiving assistance. At a time when most mothers of young children are employed at least part time, our society sometimes loses sight of the value of parental care of young children. As preschoolers in day care becomes the norm, we fear the work of mothers in the home is becoming devalued, since it does not offer the economic rewards or recognition of other work. Our conference strongly supports effective voluntary programs to equip parents with education and job skills. We oppose compulsory and poorly designed efforts to require them to hand over to others the daily care of their preschool children. The fact that children are poor and in need of government aid does not take away their basic human right to be cared for by their parents if that is their family's choice.

C. Helping Families at Work

1. FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES

Families need workplace policies that promote responsive child-care arrangements; flexible employment terms and conditions for parents; and family and medical leave for parents of newborns, sick children, and aging parents. Increasing corporate efforts in this area are a major sign of hope for employees who are also members of families. Public policy should ensure and promote these family-friendly workplace arrangements, adequate public funding of broad-based and inclusive childcare and other essential services needed by families, especially poor families. In our own structures and institutions, we need to move toward personnel policies that more fully reflect our commitment to family life. For seven years our conference has called for a law to protect people who have to take time away from their jobs to handle serious family responsibilities. Parents should not have to worry about

losing their jobs when they welcome a new child, nurse a sick spouse, or comfort a dying parent. 289 Passage of a family-leave bill would not only protect the jobs of parents whose employers might otherwise penalize them for taking time for family responsibilities, but it would also send a message that the nation sees children as a real priority for all of society.

2. CHILD LABOR

Another aspect of children's vulnerability to economic exploitation is new signs of child labor abuse. This abuse accompanies changes in industrial and agricultural patterns, in increasing pools of immigrants, in the dramatic increase in families living below the poverty line, and in the disregard for this nation's long established laws designed to protect children. Improved child labor law enforcement must be combined with adequate family economic support so that families do not depend on exploitation of children for economic survival.

D. Families and Discrimination

1. RACE

Racial and ethnic discrimination hurts many families, limiting the income and future of African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Native American families. Black children are twice as likely to be poor as white children. Minority children are also more likely to lack health care, to live in substandard housing, and to attend inadequate schools. Equal opportunity in education, affirmative action in employment, and nondiscrimination in housing are essential steps to ensure a productive and just future for children in minority families.

2. GENDER

The lives of children are clearly bound with the lives and welfare of women in multiple ways. Discrimination against women continues to be a major contributor to children's poverty. Measures to combat economic discrimination against women—whether working in or outside the home—deserve strong support. Family decisions about parents' job choices should not be dictated by economic pressures which require both parents to work full time outside the home or should not be frustrated by discrimination which limits women's opportunity. Public policy and private action should encourage a range of possibilities, so that parents are able to work at home or are able to use job-sharing, flex time, and other means to better meet their obligations both as workers and as parents to their children. Mothers who work outside the home to support their children often still struggle to balance work and family responsibilities and are confronted with continuing discrimination. As a group, women are still often relegated to jobs where low wages and few opportunities for advancement are common. Even in other occupations, some women experience continuing discrimination and sexual harassment, making it difficult to support their children with dignity. In *Economic Justice for All* we called for attention to proposals to correct the disparities in men's and women's wages, and we have supported legislation to protect women from discrimination in hiring and promotions. A society that discriminates against women impoverishes its children.

E. Meeting Children's Basic Needs

Children need the love, acceptance, and support of a family that cares for them. But families need to be able to meet basic physical and social needs to help their children grow and develop.

1. EDUCATION

Adequate preschool, primary, and secondary education is essential to full development of our children. Nevertheless, several factors combine to produce increasing numbers of school dropouts, unskilled citizens, and functionally illiterate adults. Inadequate education is one of the surest predictors of poverty, contributing strongly to intergenerational cycles of poverty. Programs that work—Head Start for preschoolers, education for children with disabilities, and vocational training—must be made available to every child who needs them. Society at large is increasingly recognizing the effectiveness of Catholic schools in meeting the educational needs of children, including poor and minority children. Families must be given genuine choice in education—selecting the public, parochial, or private school that best serves their family’s needs. Parents have the primary right and responsibility for the education of children. For this reason, our nation needs education policies that respect parental choice such as vouchers and tax credits. We also need creative policies that will improve poor quality schools, increase parental and family involvement, and encourage teacher excellence in education. All schools need to support and affirm parents in their roles as the primary educators of their children—reinforcing basic values, discipline, honesty, character, citizenship, and concern for others.

2. FOOD AND HUNGER

The continuing reality of hungry children in our midst is a dismaying sign of failure. We see signs of this failure in our food pantries, soup kitchens, parishes, and schools. New investment and improvements are needed in basic nutritional programs, such as food stamps, to ensure that no child goes hungry in America. An urgent priority is the Women, Infant & Children (WIC) program, that still does not reach all expectant mothers, infants, and young children in need.

3. HEALTH CARE

The lack of basic health care—and factors tied directly to poverty—have been documented in the tragic reality that poor children are twice as likely as other children to have physical or mental disabilities or other chronic health conditions that impair daily activity. Our nation’s continuing failure to guarantee access to quality health care for all people exacts its most painful toll in the preventable sickness, disability, and deaths of our infants and children. Beginning with our children and their mothers, we must extend access to quality health care to all our people. Quality and accessible prenatal care is essential for healthy children. There can be no excuse for the failure to ensure adequate health care and nutrition for pregnant women. Nothing would make a greater contribution to reducing infant mortality than progress in this area.

4. HOUSING

Many families cannot find or afford decent housing, or must spend so much of their income for shelter that they forego other necessities, such as food and medicine. National policy has neglected the housing needs of families—with serious consequences for children who are growing up in shelters or in overcrowded or substandard housing. We support housing policies which seek to preserve and increase the supply of affordable housing and help families pay for it. We urge national and local governments as well as community groups to work together in bringing about housing, planning, and zoning policies that reflect the needs for affordable housing for families. We also continue to call for efforts to eliminate housing discrimination, especially against families with children.

5. FAMILIES WITH PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Children with disabilities are fortunate indeed when they are born into or adopted by families that recognize that the spark of life is valuable, despite what impairments may accompany that gift. However, most disabled children are born into families who have no prior experience with such challenges. Families with disabled children need and deserve extra support and encouragement from society, their communities, and the Church. Government at all levels must do more to ensure that children receive the medical, educational, rehabilitation, and social services they need to grow up to realize their full human potential. For example, the conference has pressed for several years for reform of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Program to make benefits available to the many disabled children whose requests for assistance had been denied. Recent court decisions and legislative action setting more reasonable criteria and requiring outreach should be implemented as soon as possible. Parents with disabilities are sometimes prevented from providing adequately for their children. Job discrimination, physical barriers in public transportation and work sites, and lack of rehabilitative services all contribute to the isolation and segregation of disabled parents and their children. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 has been called the most significant civil rights legislation since 1964. For the first time it was required that employment, transportation, public accommodations, and telecommunications be made fully accessible to disabled persons. All Americans need to work together to see the new law fully and properly implemented to benefit children and adults with disabling conditions.

F. Divorce and Child Support It is also time for society to reconsider the consequences of permissive divorce, particularly in the case of couples with children. All of us have a stake in strong, stable families; yet, as a society, we do too little to help couples stay together and work things out during the inevitable times of stress and conflict. While many single parents struggle heroically to provide the love and care that normally require two parents, who can doubt that growing up in a secure environment with both parents generally gives children a head start? In the United States today, one million children see their parents' divorce each year. Another million children are born annually to single parents. Social and economic realities now confirm values which the churches have long taught—that the economic, emotional, and spiritual well-being of children is significantly diminished by divorce and out-of-wedlock birth, and that the negative consequences for children's futures, the lives of women, and for society at large are numerous and pervasive. The facts are that family structure remains an important predictor of economic standing in society, and two-parent families generally are the most effective units for raising children. Public policy must be designed to help families stay together, to enhance their capacity for child-rearing and for passing on moral and social values to their children, and to reinforce parental responsibilities. As a Church, we need to reinvigorate our pastoral ministry to families, being a companion to parents whose marriages are strained, offering hope and practical assistance to them in times of trouble, and helping them strengthen their marriage for their children, of course, but also for themselves. While keeping families together is our goal, we recognize the widespread tragedy of divorce and the realities of violence and destructive behavior within some families. We are not advocating that people remain in relationships which seriously endanger or harm members of a family. We do advocate that laws recognize the frequently devastating consequences of divorce on children. In the area of divorce law, society should (1) embrace a "children first" principle that focuses on adequate property and income to meet the needs of the children and their custodial parent before resolving disposition of marital and individual property; (2) take into account the impact of motherhood on a woman's earning capacity as well as the per capita expenses of the household with women and children; and (3) introduce "braking" mechanisms that encourage, for example, resolution of matters involving a child's future before settling questions of property and maintenance. Our nation also needs tough new rules for establishing and collecting child support from absent parents and for

closing the gap between what can reasonably be collected and the actual costs of raising children. Effective means must be found to ensure that absent parents provide for their children's needs. Among the possibilities that should be considered are (1) establishment of minimum child-support awards based on the number of children and the absent parent's income; (2) automatic wage withholding, not only on new cases as required by law, but on existing child-support orders; (3) possible registration of social security numbers of both parents on birth certificates; and (4) more vigorous efforts by state agencies to establish paternity of children born out-of-wedlock. Perhaps most important, states must invest more resources to locate and collect support from runaway parents who frequently move across state lines to escape their responsibilities. While much is appropriately said about how the lives of women and children are bound so closely together, we wish to say a specific word about the importance of fathers. A crucial measure of a man is the manner in which he cares for his family— whether children see his love, respect, and care for their mother; and whether he is involved in their daily care, emotional support, spiritual growth, education, and development. For too many women, the care of children is a lonely commitment lacking the full and active participation of fathers. In these cases, children lose vital emotional support, and fathers miss one of the

VII. INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS

Internationally, the needs are no less urgent and the problems are, if anything, more intractable. The cheap labor of children helps debt-ridden Third World countries pay their creditors. The intensification of local conflicts through the international arms trade and, until recently, the competing strategies of superpowers, displaces children and diverts public spending from meeting their basic needs. And adjustment programs conceived in macroeconomic terms by donor governments and international development institutions bring increased suffering to families and children who are already the victims of ill-conceived development policies. But our actions for children abroad are likely to be less direct and our prescriptions less detailed. We do not—and should not—control the internal policies of Third World governments. Yet the United States, representing nearly one third of the world's economic powers, cannot escape a heavy responsibility to those who do not benefit from the global economy, especially, in our view, its least responsible victims—the millions of desperate Third World children. The fate of children, however, cannot be separated from the fate of their societies. As long as so many nations languish in poverty, the fate of many children will be grim. To overcome the legacy of neglect and mismanagement, indifference, and corruption will require new policies in our nation, in other affluent societies, and in the poor countries themselves. The UN World Summit on Children and its Convention on the Rights of the Child outlined a constructive agenda for action. The promises made at that summit must be kept. The basic human rights of children must be respected and promoted, and their basic needs must be met. The agenda is long and comprehensive: · shelter and relief for refugees and the homeless; · food aid for disaster victims; · medical treatment for the sick; · maternal and child health programs; · basic education and child care; · improved nutrition; and · the elimination of child labor, children in military service, and other exploitative practices. But more fundamental reforms are necessary. Foreign policy, military policy, and international economic policy are also children's policies. Advocates for children need to be deeply involved in designing, implementing, and assessing international policy since the international economic system and the policies and practices that support and perpetuate it are taking the future of so many children hostage. As recent papal encyclicals have pointed out, we need a new vision of solidarity in which poor children are seen not as remote issues or abstract problems, but as our sons and daughters, members of a global human family. We especially need to be their advocates here in the United States where global economic policy is so often made. U.S. economic policy touches four key international economic relationships—trade, aid, finance, and investment. We need an international trading system that helps poor children by allocating the benefits

of trade more equitably and ensures that poor countries receive fair prices for their exports. The exploitation of child labor for competitive advantage is essentially wrong; nor does it lead to authentic development. Unbridled competition is not an adequate or acceptable rationale for a trade policy; neither is selfish protectionism that simply restricts imports from the developing world. We need a foreign aid program that gives greater priority to the basic needs of families and children in the developing countries than to the national security or competitive advantage of the United States or the military appetites of Third World governments. Development must be understood and promoted in terms of helping poor people improve the quality of their lives and build for their future, rather than merely increasing the quantity of their possessions and their nation's military arsenal. We need a global financial system that looks at the human consequences of the massive external debt of the developing countries and realistically attempts to relieve it through a genuine sharing of responsibility among creditors and debtors. We cannot approach this problem as no more than a question of exchange rates, inflation, and debt service. This results in policies in the debtor countries that further punish children and others by reducing housing, education, transportation, and other public services. It also often deprives them of food in order to increase the export of agricultural products that will earn the foreign exchange required to pay external debts. And we need an increase in both foreign and domestic investment in developing countries which neither creates dependency nor enriches investors at the expense of poor families. Business firms in the United States and elsewhere have 293 demonstrated many times that there is no intrinsic contradiction between the pursuit of reasonable profit and the realization of social and economic justice. It is neither moral nor necessary to invest in enterprises that injure or exploit natural resources or people, especially children. There are other important priorities. We are required to address the continuing danger for children that comes with the still unresolved conflicts in the Middle East, Central America, and other parts of the world. The antichild and antifamily coercive population and abortion policies of some societies deserve our continued opposition. We cannot ignore the pervasive discrimination against women in some parts of the world which jeopardizes the lives of female infants and deprives girls of a promising future. Finally, the continuing human costs of the lethal international arms trade which robs children of opportunity and assistance require our active resistance as well. Our work for peace is a work for the children of the world since children pay a huge price for warfare. Catholic Relief Services and the UN report the terrible suffering of children in Iraq in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War. Our conference has joined with others in advocating the restructuring of economic sanctions to pursue regional security and effective arms control without putting at risk the vulnerable children of Iraq. Environmental concerns touch our children. The United Nations' 1990 report on "Children and the Environment" puts this point very succinctly: "What do we owe these children—our children and our grandchildren? We owe them a planet fit to live on and capable of sustaining the future." We also need to recognize fully the family dimensions of refugee and immigration policies, seeking to keep families together and to respect the rights and dignity of families driven from their homes by violence, oppression, or injustice. In the international arena, as in the national, we need policies and programs aimed not only at solving problems, but also even more at preventing them. Preventive medicine is almost always less costly than other treatment, but foresight is also harder and less clear than hindsight. But we now know more clearly from experience how debt burdens accumulate, what kinds of investments create or perpetuate dependency, what sorts of development assistance programs work or do not work, and how trade practices harm working people and the poor here and abroad. In our hearts, we know something is wrong as we watch children die on the nightly news. We need to link those heartbreaking pictures of hunger and desperation to the structures of debt and development, conflict and violence which contribute—directly or indirectly—to the death of those children. We can no longer remain indifferent. We need to respond not only with sadness and contributions, but with concrete commitment to seek change in the way the world treats children. Foreign policy is frequently children's policy and people who care for children need to be

deeply involved in assessing the consequences of economic policy and military action for its impact on children. We need to see and hear more clearly the stories of our missionaries and Catholic Relief Services who share with us the terrible consequences of violence, poverty, debt, and injustice on the lives of children. We need to see Jesus in the hungry and helpless children who haunt our world.

VIII. A CALL TO ACTION

We are approaching the Third Millennium. Can we summon the will and the ways to make our families, our nation, and our world welcoming and decent places for our children? We hope the Catholic community will become a persistent, informed, and committed voice for children and families, urging all American institutions from neighborhood associations to the federal government to put our children first. Let us find life-giving and loving alternatives to the despair of abortion. Let us insist that by the year 2000 we will finally eliminate poverty among children in this affluent society, and we will have a world where children will no longer die of hunger. Let us support all families in their struggle to offer children the values, help, and hope they need. Let us seek to break the cycle of poverty and destructive behavior which leaves so many children imprisoned. 1992 is an election year. While others are campaigning for public office, let us campaign for children. Let us insist that the needs of our children, all children, but especially unborn children and poor children, take first place in the dialogue over the values and vision that ought to guide our nation. Let us also campaign within our Church to develop a genuine family perspective in our own policies and programs and in our ministries and services. As bishops we pledge to keep these concerns before our conference through our various committees and our offices so that we, too, move beyond rhetoric to action on behalf of our children. We call on the institutions of Catholic life to join with us in continuing to reach out and support children and their parents. A great deal is already being done—in thousands of parishes and schools, in Catholic Charities, and diocesan programs. Let us build on this solid foundation to assess all our efforts from a family perspective and become even more effective sources of help and advocacy for children and families. In the months and years to come, let us with even greater urgency and commitment focus our pastoral care, direct our services, and lift our voices to enhance the life and dignity of all children, especially poor children. It is not only poor children, however, who are vulnerable and in need of our concrete commitment; all children need our active concern. The children of affluence, too, can experience poverty, a spiritual and moral poverty according to Robert Coles, noted author and psychiatrist, and others. These children—indeed, all children—need parents who care enough about them to give them time, one of the surest measures of human love. They also need appropriate discipline, i.e., loving limits in which they can grow into mature men and women, who themselves are full of care for the next generation. And when parents are unable to fully meet their children's needs, other adults must demonstrate that children belong to a larger, loving community, and society at large must act to protect the life, dignity, and rights of all God's children. In closing, we would like to say a special word to parents—a word of appreciation, gratitude, and hope. We recognize the joy and hope and occasional sadness and hurt that come with the difficult and exhilarating responsibility of being a good mother or father. Children challenge, but they also educate. They can open our eyes to new depths of spiritual and religious insight. They test our patience, touch our hearts, and fill our lives. We appreciate the sacrifice, care, and hard work that make a parent the clearest example of God's love in our midst.

IX. CONCLUSION

For generations, the Catholic community has reached out to children—to welcome them into our faith, to teach them, to serve their spiritual growth, and to offer food, shelter, and help at times of need. We have defended their right to life itself and their right to live with dignity, to realize the bright promise

and opportunity of childhood. Now we renew this commitment and build on it. We seek to bring new hope and concrete help to a generation of children at risk. We seek to measure our ministry, our nation, and our world for the manner in which we protect the lives, dignity, and rights of all God's children. This is a work of faith: a commitment of a community that believes that we are judged by our response to those most in need—poor and vulnerable children. This is a work of hope: a commitment to the future, to the children who will shape the Church, the nation, and the world of tomorrow. This is a work of love: a commitment to reach out and care for the children in our midst and around the world who desperately need our help. Two thousand years ago, Jesus said, "Let the children come to me . . ." (Lk 18:16). Today, as his followers, we say let us put our children first; let us shape our families, churches, nation, and world to care for our most precious gift—our children.

ENDNOTES

[1] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 50.

[2] We define family here as "an intimate community of persons bound together by blood, marriage, or adoption for the whole of life." In our Catholic tradition, the family proceeds from marriage—an intimate, exclusive partnership of husband and wife. This definition is intentionally normative and recognizes that the Church's normative approach is not shared by all (Ad Hoc Committee on Marriage and Family Life National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *A Family Perspective in Church and Society: A Manual for All Pastoral Leaders*, 19).

[3] Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 17, 50.

[4] Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 11.

[5] *Familiaris Consortio*, 46.