COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 52

The social subjectivity of the family – Dignity and rights of children
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"Our children are our future" - a statement bandied around worldwide. Do we truly understand what this statement means in terms of our responsibility as adults?

"The Church's social doctrine constantly points out the need to respect the dignity of children. In the family, which is a community of persons, special attention must be devoted to the children by developing a profound esteem for their personal dignity, and a great respect and generous concern for their rights. This is true for every child, but it becomes all the more urgent the smaller the child is and the more it is in need of everything, when it is sick, suffering or handicapped" (*Libertatis Conscientia*)."

How can we as a community of persons ensure that all children are included in the provision of essential services such as education, health care, water, love, protection from abuse and violence and that their participation in the community is encouraged? According to UNICEF's report, "The State of the World's Children 2006", the society must do three things:
1. Understand the plight of excluded and invisible children and the factors behind their marginalisation, and develop programmes for these children as part of national strategies on child rights and development
2. Address the root causes of exclusion and the factors making children invisible. These factors often include absence of a stable family, poverty, armed conflict, HIV/AIDS and discrimination.
3. All elements of society must recommit to their responsibilities to children, including the creation of a strong protective environment.

"The rights of children must be legally protected within juridical systems. In the first place, it is necessary that the social value of childhood be publicly recognised in all countries: 'No country on earth, no political system can think of its own future otherwise than through the image of these new generations that will receive from their parents the manifold heritage of values, duties and aspirations of the nation to which they belong and of the whole human family. The first right of the child is to be born in a real family' (*L'Osservatore Romano*), a right that has not always been respected and that today is subject to new violations because of developments in genetic technology."

"The situation of a vast number of the world's children is far from being satisfactory, due to the lack of favourable conditions for their integral development despite the existence of a specific international juridical instrument for protecting their rights (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*), an instrument that is binding on practically all members of the international community.

These are conditions connected with the lack of health care, or adequate food supply, little or no possibility of receiving a minimum of academic formation or inadequate shelter. Moreover, some serious problems remain unsolved: trafficking in children, child labour, the phenomenon of 'street children', the use of children in armed conflicts, child marriage, the use of children for

commerce in pornographic material, also in use of the most modern and sophisticated instruments of social communication.

It is essential to engage in a battle, at the national and international levels, against the violations of the dignity of boys and girls caused by sexual exploitation, by those caught up in paedophilia, and by every kind of violence directed against these most defenceless of human creatures. These are criminal acts that must be effectively fought with adequate preventive and penal measures by the determined action of the different authorities involved."

Here in Trinidad and Tobago we have very real examples of how the dignity and rights of children are not protected. The names Akiel Chambers and Sean Luke and more recently, Emily, are very horrid reminders. Too often our newspapers contain news of child abuse, rape and street children; but there are many others that go unnoticed.

The society must create a protective environment; and this is the responsibility of all members of the community. According to UNICEF's report, "The State of the World's Children 2006" the key elements of a protective environment include:

- Strengthening the capacity of families and communities to care for and protect children.
- Government commitment to child protection by providing budgetary support and social welfare policies targeted at the most excluded and invisible children.
- Ratification and implementation of legislation, both national and international, concerning children's rights and protection.
- Prosecution of perpetrators of crimes against children and avoidance of criminalising child victims.
- An open discussion by civil society and the media of attitudes, prejudices, beliefs and practices that facilitate or lead to abuses.
- Ensuring that children know their rights, are encouraged to express them and are given vital life skills and information to protect themselves from abuse and exploitation.
- Availability of basic social services to all children without discrimination.
- Monitoring, transparent reporting and oversight of abuses and exploitation.

Our future depends on our children. "We must be their partners - seeking to empower them as well as to include and protect them, with the knowledge that realising the Millennium Declaration's vision of a world of peace, equity, tolerance, security, freedom, respect for the environment and shared responsibility depends on ensuring that no child is excluded or invisible.

The children of the world, especially those who so often miss out on the opportunities they need to grow and thrive, are counting on us" (*UNICEF 2006*)

Next week we move into Chapter 5, Part IV a, Solidarity in the Family.