

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 74

Child labour

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“Children work because their survival and that of their families depend on it, and in some cases, because unscrupulous adults take advantage of their vulnerability. Child labour is also due to weaknesses in education systems and is deeply rooted in cultural and social attitudes and traditions. The problem is further compounded by the fact that child labour remains hidden from public view, making the problem seem less of a priority.” (International Labour Organisation (ILO) Caribbean Website 2006).

“Child labour, in its intolerable forms, constitutes a kind of violence that is less obvious than others but it is not for this reason any less terrible. This is a violence that, beyond all political, economic and legal implications, remains essentially a moral problem. Pope Leo XIII issued the warning: ‘in regard to children, great care should be taken not to place them in workshops and factories until their bodies and minds are sufficiently developed. For, just as very rough weather destroys the buds of spring, so does too early an experience of life’s hard toil blight the young promise of a child’s faculties, and render any true education impossible’ (1998 World Day of Peace Message). After more than a hundred years, the blight of child labour has not yet been overcome.”

According to UNICEF’s website “an estimated 246 million children are engaged in child labour. Of those, almost three-quarters (171 million) work in hazardous situations or conditions, such as working in mines, working with chemicals and pesticides in agriculture or working with dangerous machinery.

They are everywhere but invisible, toiling as domestic servants in homes, labouring behind the walls of workshops, hidden from view in plantations. Millions of girls work as domestic servants and unpaid household help and are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Millions of others work under horrific circumstances.

They may be trafficked (1.2 million), forced into debt bondage or other forms of slavery (5.7 million), into prostitution and pornography (1.8 million), into participating in armed conflict (0.3 million) or other illicit activities (0.6 million). However, the vast majority of child labourers – 70 per cent or more – work in agriculture. In Latin America and the Caribbean there are approximately 17.4 million child workers. (16 per cent of children work in the region).”

While everything in the paragraph above may not be relevant to us, we have our own issues with child labour which must be addressed. The good news is work on child labour in the region was initiated in 2000-2001 when the ILO Sub-regional Office for the Caribbean launched its Regional Child Labour Project which seeks to contribute to the progressive elimination of child labour, beginning with the worst forms of child labour, in the English and Dutch-speaking Caribbean.

The project targets Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Belize, Suriname, Barbados and the Bahamas.

Taking Trinidad's case, a study done by Desmond Hunte and Cheryl Lewis in 2002 as a result of this regional project highlighted clear evidence of the existence of child labour in Trinidad. Child labour (under 18 years of age) was evident in scavenging, agriculture, domestic work, prostitution and pornography.

The main characteristics of these child workers were they came from poor families and communities, most only obtained primary level education, in some instances, especially those involved in agriculture and prostitution there was some secondary education. The majority of the child workers indicated that they started working below 15 years of age (12, 13, 14).

They all indicated that they would have liked to spend more time in school. Some of the risks faced by these children included dengue infections, accidental deaths, violence, contracting sexually transmitted diseases, physical and sexual abuse.

“Even with knowledge that, at least for now, in certain countries the contribution made by child labour to family income and the national economy is indispensable, and that in any event certain forms of part-time work can prove beneficial for children themselves, the Church's social doctrine condemns the increase in ‘the exploitation of children in the workplace in conditions of veritable slavery’ (Message for the 1998 World Day of Peace). This exploitation represents a serious violation of human dignity, with which every person, ‘no matter how small or how seemingly unimportant in utilitarian terms, is endowed’.”

The Church therefore, as a community of persons, has a responsibility to be vigilant in an effort to recognise evidence of abuses as well as to work closely with governments and international agencies to eliminate this form of abuse. Further the Church can advocate and be actively involved in rehabilitation and counselling programmes for those who have suffered at the hands of child labour abuses, so that such persons can fully reach their human potential

For more information on the topic, you may visit the following website:
<http://www.ilocarib.org.tt/childlabour/>

There is much useful information on child labour in the Caribbean.

Next week we look at Immigration and Work.