

Theme 4 – Caring for the Common Good

Presentation: Children's Rights

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The ten-year-old United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by most of the countries in the world (with the exception of perhaps two or three), but hardly any other convention is violated to the extent that this convention on the rights of the child is violated. This is not to say that it is without any value; it is indeed of great value. It has good implementation machinery and is duly implemented by many countries. However, the extent to which it is being violated in many countries is unacceptable.

Throughout the 20th century a much greater number of civilians, including many children, have been exposed to wars than in previous centuries. During the First World War, about 5% of the victims were civilians; during the Second World War, the percentage was 50%; during the Vietnam War the percentage of civilian victims rose to 80%. I do not know how high the percentage has been during the most recent conflicts in the Balkans, but it is certainly very high, and children exposed to war, whether they are soldiers or civilians, are especially vulnerable because of their young age.

Child soldiers

The Geneva Convention has as many as 17 articles specifically protecting children, but there is one very serious omission: there is no prohibition against using children as soldiers.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is also weak on this point, simply stating that: "all feasible measures should be taken to avoid that children below the age of 15 should be used in armed conflict". Note that the minimum age suggested here for engagement in armed conflict is 15. It goes without saying that this provision is inadequate. Every effort should be made to change it.

There are at present between 200,000 and 300,000 children enlisted in armies all over the world. According to the UN Convention, all persons under 18 are regarded as children. This causes problems in countries like Africa where half the population is below 18. In such countries, some will say that it is very difficult to adhere to a rule whereby any child under the age of 18 cannot be in an army, because there are simply not enough people over 18 to make up an army. This may be true, but if that is the case then we must find other ways to prevent armed conflicts. In Europe, there is no reason at all why we should not have a general prohibition against using children in our armies.

Organisations like Save the Child have been making representations about this issue and at a recent official conference in Berlin, it was implied that a protocol might be adopted as an addendum to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, changing the minimum age for a soldier from 15 to 18. It is my hope and our duty to make sure that this protocol is ratified as soon as possible.

Land mines

Land mines or anti-personnel mines are another serious issue of great importance for children. After many years of effort, a convention prohibiting the production, storage and sale of land mines was finally drafted in Oslo in 1997. This convention is now open for signature and has been ratified by 87 out of 189 member countries. However, there are still some important countries in Europe and in the rest of the world that have not yet signed up to it. These include Turkey, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and, indeed, the United States. These countries are failing to express their political will to ratify that convention and to declare that they will be legally bound by it in the future.

Land mines are especially wicked weapons, frequently injuring or killing children, who are not as careful as adults. When war is over, the land mines remain, and many parts of the world continue to face huge difficulties in removing them.

It is vital that we try to convince those countries that have not yet signed or ratified this convention to do so in the very near future.

The mass media

We have reasons to be optimistic and to believe that our physical environment may be changing for the better and I believe that the efforts made by these symposia¹ and by our governments and other organisations have produced results. However, how useful is this if a generation, or two or three generations, are lost because we do not take care of their mental health?

In many industrialised countries, where narcotic abuse, alcoholism and poverty prevail, numerous children who lack proper parental care are exposed to television and videos for hours every day. Research has proved that watching violence affects the minds of children and that exposing children to large amounts of violence can make them criminals. The fact that children are without any protection in this area is clearly a violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Indeed, there is a paragraph in the Convention that was specifically designed to prevent this situation but it appears to have been totally forgotten.

It is a difficult problem. Politicians in all countries are keen to affirm that they are tough on crime. However, when it comes to violence on television and the mass media, they fail to take any action, as any politician who wishes to impose any kind of limitation on television and the mass media is immediately perceived as wishing to restrict freedom of expression. However, to use this freedom of expression in order to expose our children to violent videos and films for commercial gain is a distorted way of understanding “freedom of expression”.

I very much hope that it will prove possible to adopt new attitudes and that we can convince politicians that we certainly do not regard efforts to protect our children from these influences as any kind of restriction on freedom of expression. We have a strong case and it should be possible to convince our politicians that if they do act, they need not be afraid of being unpopular or voted out in the next elections just because what they are doing is unpopular in the newspapers and on commercial television.

Conclusion

The issues surrounding child soldiers, landmines and the dangers of the mass media are all easily understood and the effects of any action would readily be seen. It should not be too difficult to convince the public, or the politicians, of our arguments and to try to bring about change on behalf of our children and future generations. No-one can legitimately argue that we are too helpless or that we do not have the financial resources to act in any of these areas.

Because my theme has been the prevention of future generations being involved in war, and because we must examine all possible means of avoiding war, speaking in Bulgaria I wish to make one final point. I believe that Bulgaria has suffered disproportionately because of the Security Council's economic sanctions on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Economic sanctions must certainly be enforced but, according to United Nations statute, compensation should be paid to those countries that suffer because of their close geographic location to, and trade links with, the boycotted country. If economic compensation is not offered to countries like Bulgaria that suffer because of them, then how can we expect sanctions to be implemented in the future and how can we expect economic blockades to reduce the number of wars?

Note

¹ Revelation and the Environment AD 95-1995, 1995 and The Black Sea in Crisis, 1997.