



Final Statement of the Plenary Session on Vanishing Youth

1. The XII Plenary Session (28 April – 2 May 2006) of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences was devoted to the topic “Vanishing Youth? Solidarity with Children and Young People in an Age of Turbulence”. This meeting marked a significant step within a long-term project aimed at examining the impact of the economic and demographic transformations of the past few decades upon relations between the generations. Two years ago we focused on the implications of declining birth rates and aging populations for social security and health care systems. This year we turned our attention to the challenges posed for children and young people. The Academy’s deliberations on this topic were enriched by contributions from a panel of young people, one from each major region of the world, who were specially invited for this purpose. In this final statement we report our principal findings and offer certain recommendations.

2. Children and young people are literally and figuratively “vanishing”

A principal finding of the conference is that there are several different senses in which children, and childhood itself, can be said to be vanishing in contemporary societies.

* In the first place, declining birth rates, in combination with improved longevity, have created increasingly adult-centered societies where children are less visible. We note that while aggressive population control policies were used to achieve extremely low birth rates in China, the “demographic winter” in East and West European countries and Japan resulted from a mass of uncoerced individual decisions that have led to similar rates.

* The “vanishing” that lies behind declining birth rates includes countless children lost through abortion, including vast numbers of “missing girls” in parts of the world where prenatal sex selection has created a serious imbalance between men and women.

* Children are also literally vanishing due to extremely high infant mortality rates in some parts of the developing world.

* Childhood itself vanishes when children are forced to grow up too quickly, and are thus deprived of a stage of life that is necessary for full human development. In many parts of the globe, children and young people are deprived of their childhood by child labor, exploitation as child-soldiers and child prostitutes, and even for traffic in human organs. Youth can also be cruelly curtailed by having to take on the responsibilities of adults due to poverty, disease or family breakdown. In affluent societies, many young persons are propelled directly from childhood into highly sexualized and materialistic adult practices.

In sum, it is a matter of grave concern that the socio-demographic indicators show a general deterioration of relations between generations in many respects – social, economic, cultural, and spiritual – on a global scale. These developments not only work to the detriment of the most vulnerable members of the human family, but undermine the conditions that are necessary for the healthy functioning of economies and governments. When children and young people, our most precious human resource, are at risk, the entire future of humanity is at stake. We regard as especially ominous the increasing devaluation of prenatal life, the declining proportion of children who have the benefit of a two-parent family, the signs of emerging conflicts over resources between the young and the elderly, and the likelihood that the “demographic winter” implies a certain indifference to, or lack of hope in, the future.

3. The main causes of these developments

The Regional Reports on Asia, Africa, East and West Europe, Latin America and North America illuminated the many factors that are contributing to the “vanishing” of children and childhood. These factors range from material poverty and poor health conditions in the developing countries to the breakdown of cultural transmission and educational failures in richer countries. African youth is particularly afflicted by armed conflicts and epidemics (the malaria that is the principal killer of children and HIV/AIDS that claims the lives of so many parents). The future of South American youth is seriously compromised by the prevalence of fatherless families, and an enormous “social debt” incurred by the governments and leaders of these countries. North American youth suffers particularly from the troubled and weakened family, resource-rich, but uneven, elementary and secondary schools, and a highly sexualized, media-driven cultural environment. European youth faces similar problems, as well as the looming crises that are the likely consequences of an especially severe demographic winter.

Although we can observe great differences within and between countries, there are some causes, common to all countries, that deserve to be emphasized. Everywhere, the vulnerability of children and young people is primarily due to the crisis of the family, which has led to forms of family life that are characterized by precariousness and poverty, both material and relational. The fragmentation of the family including kinship networks is one of the principal factors associated with poverty in childhood, both in developing and developed countries. In particular, the increase of single-parent families is a key factor in the impoverishment of children and young people.

The second common cause lies in features of the modernization processes that have eroded the culture of reciprocity between generations. That culture still survives, especially in traditional societies that can be found in parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but it has suffered deep erosion in the more modernized sectors and countries. The demographic trends outlined above are both causes and consequences of the deteriorated relations between generations that make children and young people more and more socially weak, invisible and marginalized. As a matter of fact, what is operating at the world level is a vicious cycle of deprivation: the more that youth vanishes, the more childhood and youth become uncertain and vulnerable. The breakdown of the solidarity links between generations inevitably leads to a loss of human and social capital with serious economic and political implications.

With the “vanishing”, in the sense of the declining proportion and visibility, of children and child-raising families in many contemporary societies, the risk is high that policy makers will fail to attend to the conditions required for the flourishing of coming generations. “Out of sight, out of mind,” as the saying goes.

4. Recommendations

Specific responses to the question of what we owe to children and young people will vary according to the diverse circumstances that prevail within and among the various parts of the world. In this, as in other areas, Catholic social thought wisely confines itself to proposing principles, rather than specific programs and policies.

The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences believes, however, that intensified efforts are urgently required in order to better understand and address the conditions that are causing so many children to literally vanish and so many others to be deprived of their childhood. The need to ensure a human ecology for the new generations is one of the greatest challenges of the XXI century. This is a task which can be accomplished only through the combined efforts of states, international and supranational organizations, and the organs of civil society. Accordingly, we make the following recommendations:

The participants agreed, first, on the need to foster and promote new cultural attitudes toward childhood and youth. Children are not mere assets or liabilities or consumption goods; they are valuable in themselves as human persons, regardless of the cultural setting or the level of economic development.

Second, a new effort should be made at all levels to sustain and renew the socio-cultural transmission between generations, and in particular the transmission of religious faith.

Third, in order to achieve these goals, it must be recognized that the family is the primary, fundamental and irreplaceable setting for the pursuit of a sound and appropriate intergenerational solidarity. Of course, the family should be seen and promoted within the context of its surrounding communities where all people concerned with children and young people are included, such as educators, the relevant professionals and policy makers, and persons engaged in pastoral care.

Fourth, these efforts need to be supported by adequate family friendly policies, recognizing, in particular, the value of child-raising.

Fifth, the question of children’s and parents’ rights needs to be given new attention, based on the recognition that the family provides the context where these rights are brought to life. If we want to achieve a true intergenerational solidarity, within a framework of a sound human ecology, we must develop a concept of relational rights that refer not to the individual child *qua talis*, but to his/her personal being in relation to the ‘significant others’ in his/her lifeworld: first of all his or her parents, and secondly his or her kin, friends, neighbours, all the people linked to him or her in the web of the local community. The first such relational right is the right of the child to a family. If solidarity with children and young people means to envisage a “human ecology”, as defined in *Centesimus Annus* (38), we need to embark on a new generation of human endeavours relating to children and young people.

5. Recommendations for the Church

The Catholic Church will play a central role in building a culture of authentic intergenerational solidarity, with its worldwide network of charitable and educational agencies that provide living exemplars of charity and solidarity between the generations. Accordingly, the Academy respectfully submits three recommendations to the Holy See.

The first is that the Holy See consider elaborating a specific document dealing with the issue of intergenerational solidarity at the world level.

The second is that the Holy See consider constituting an inter-dicasterial working group with the object of integrating the efforts of solidarity with young people emanating from the different departments of the Holy See. The Catholic Church currently possesses the world's most extensive network of agencies dealing with children and young people – primary and secondary schools, universities, youth movements and Catholic Action, educational associations, organizations devoted to the care of children, family movements, charitable institutions, hospitals, and communications media. A main task of such a group would be to identify and promote the best practices that have been developed in this vast network.

Finally, since one of the most pressing problems the Church currently faces is the transmission of the faith to the coming generations, we recommend an intensified, global effort aimed not only at providing improved religious education, but encompassing children, young people, adults and the elderly, within families and outside families, in an integrated, lifelong project of formation.

We submit these recommendations in the spirit suggested by the Holy Father in *Deus Caritas Est*: “[B]uilding a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew. As a political task, this cannot be the Church's immediate responsibility. Yet, since it is also a most important human responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically” (28).