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“Children are a gift from God”

Pope Francis dedicated his 8 January general audience to children, speaking about the scourge of child labour.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I wish to dedicate this and the next catechesis *to children*, and to reflect in particular on the scourge of *child labour*.

Nowadays we want to turn our gaze towards Mars or towards virtual worlds, but we struggle to look in the eyes of a child who has been left at the margins and who is exploited or abused. The century that generates artificial intelligence and plans multiplanetary existences has not yet reckoned with the scourge of humiliated, exploited, mortally wounded childhood. Let us think about this.

First of all, let us ask ourselves: what message does the Sacred Scripture give us about children? It is curious to note that the word that occurs most frequently in the Old Testament, after the divine name of *Jahweh*, is the word *ben*, that is, “son”: almost five thousand times. “Certainly, sons (*ben*) are a gift from the Lord, the fruit of the womb, a reward” (*Ps* 127:3). Children are a gift from God. Unfortunately, this gift is not always treated with respect.

The Bible itself leads us through the streets of history where songs of joy resound, but also the cries of victims are raised. For example, in the book of Lamentations we read: “The tongue of the infant cleaves to the roof of its mouth in thirst; children beg for bread, but no one gives them a piece” (4:4); and the prophet Nahum, recalling what had happened in the ancient cities of Thebes and Nineveh, writes: “Even her little ones were dashed to pieces at the corner of every street” (3:10). Think of how many children, today, are dying of hunger and destitution, or torn apart by bombs.

The storm of the violence of Herod, who slaughters the infants of Bethlehem, erupts immediately even on the newborn Jesus. A dismal tragedy that repeats in other forms throughout history. And here, for Jesus and His parents, is the nightmare of becoming refugees in a

foreign country, as still happens today to many people, to many children (cf. *Mt* 2:13-18). Once the storm has passed, Jesus grows up in a village never named in the Old Testament, Nazareth; He learns the carpenter's trade from His legal father, Joseph (cf. *Mk* 6:3; *Mt* 13:55). In this way, "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon Him" (*Lk* 2:40).

In His public life, Jesus went preaching from village to village together with His disciples. One day, some mothers approached Him and presented Him their children to bless; but the disciples rebuked Him. So Jesus, breaking with the tradition according to which children were considered simply as passive objects, calls the disciples to Him and says: "Let the children come to me and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these". And

He thus indicates the little ones as a model for adults. And He solemnly adds: “Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it” (*Lk* 18:16-17).

In a similar passage, Jesus calls to a child, places him among the disciples, and says: “Unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (*Mt* 18:3). And then He cautions: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (*Mt* 18:6).

Brothers and sisters, the disciples of Jesus Christ must never allow children to be neglected or mistreated, to be deprived of their rights, not to be loved or protected. Christians have the duty to earnestly

prevent and firmly condemn violence or abuse against children.

Today too, in particular, there are too many children forced to work. But a child who does not smile, a child who does not dream cannot know or nurture his or her talents. In every part of the globe there are children who are exploited by an economy that does not respect life; an economy that, in so doing, consumes our greatest store of hope and love. But children occupy a special place in God's heart, and whoever harms a child will have to account to Him.

Dear brothers and sisters, those who recognize themselves as children of God, and especially those who are sent to bring the glad tidings of the Gospel to others, cannot remain indifferent; they cannot accept that our little sisters and brothers, instead of being loved and protected, are robbed of their childhood, of their

dreams, victims of exploitation and marginalization.

Let us ask the Lord to open our minds and hearts to care and tenderness, and for every boy and every girl to be able to grow in age, wisdom and grace (cf. *Lk* 2:52), receiving and giving love. Thank you.

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