

**First International Meeting for the Pastoral Care of Street Children  
Rome, 25-26 October 2004**

**Final Document**

**THE EVENT**

The meeting was held in the offices of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People in Rome. In addition to the Superiors and two Officials of the Pontifical Council, participants in the meeting included two bishops and various priests, men and women religious, and lay persons representing the bishops' conferences of eleven European countries – Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Russian Federation, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Hungary. Participants, including experts, also came from seven countries of other continents – Bolivia, Brazil, D. R. Congo, Philippines, India, Mexico and Peru. Other participants were the Secretary General of Caritas Internationalis, delegates of *Kindermisssionswerk* (Germany) and representatives of the Salesian Congregation, of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd and of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

A message of encouragement to the participants in the meeting from the Holy Father was received in a telegram signed by the Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano. The Pope sent his greetings and best wishes for the success of the Congress. The text recalls the Divine Teacher's predilection for the little ones. Hence, "the Holy Father hopes that the providential meeting will contribute towards formulating concrete proposals for effective projects to welcome and aid youth at risk, because they have no home or family, and to safeguard the rights and dignity of every boy and girl in difficulty". To seal "this necessary social and religious action", His Holiness assured all the participants of his prayer for all those who are dedicated to evangelizing the world of youth and for those who are entrusted to their care.

After expressing his warm welcome, the President of the Pontifical Council, H.E. Cardinal Stephen Fumio Hamao, introduced the work of the meeting with a talk on the theme, "Children, Including those of the Street in the Light of the Recent Teachings of John Paul II". He emphasized the importance of the phenomenon being studied, which solicits the pastoral charity and attention of the Universal Church and the local Churches. In particular – the Cardinal affirmed – "the street becomes a place for planning a specific pastoral care for the children who live there".

Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, Secretary of the Dicastery, presented some criteria for evaluating this phenomenon in a talk entitled, "The Pastoral Care of Welcome for Street Children". He saw it as a vast and important field of apostolate that also requires new pastoral "objects-subjects". He was referring, with concern, in a particular way to the boys and girls, many of whom live in the heart of big, cold cities.

The subsequent talks by the participants in the meeting stressed various aspects of the present-day "reality" of the street. The Church has deep concern for it and invites us to understand the spiritual and theological values underlying a pastoral commitment that reveals the goodness of God towards street children too, with the awareness, on the part of everyone, of the tragedies underlying this experience. From this arises a special concern for the dramatic increase in the number of children of and in the street, from which flows the urgent need of a pastoral action in addition to the already-existing praiseworthy social initiatives and the difficulty of including that kind of action in today's ecclesial structures.

The paper presented by Prof. Mario Polo, entitled “The Pastoral Care of Street Children” (an overview), provided a general picture of the situation. This was drawn up from the responses to a questionnaire that was previously sent to all the participants. From this it appears that there is really a lack of the more specifically pastoral aspect in what has been done so far.

At the round table discussion with six experts, an attempt was made to “to lay down the main lines of a specific pastoral care”.

After an exchange of information, opinions and deeper knowledge, this international meeting ended with a grateful acknowledgement of the appreciated initiatives that have already been carried out in this field, as well as to the diversity of the pastoral situations in the various countries.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. Street children undoubtedly constitute one of the most serious and disquieting challenges of our century for the Church, as well as for civil and political society. We are before a phenomenon whose vastness was unknown, even to the public institutions: a population of around 100 million children, according to the estimates of Amnesty International (150 million according to the International Labor Organization); moreover it is a phenomenon that is growing almost everywhere: a real social emergency, besides being a pastoral one.
2. It was observed that even when public institutions show a clear awareness of the gravity of the phenomenon, they do not adequately mobilize so as to transform this awareness into effective actions of prevention and rehabilitation. The prevalent attitude in the civil society itself is often one of social alarm, because it is faced with a threat to public order. There is thus more concern about personal protection from the danger that the street children present than a readiness to help them; the humanitarian aspect and sense of solidarity with respect to this problem emerge with difficulty, not to mention a Christian attitude towards it.
3. During the meeting, it was clear that street children, in the strict sense of the term – meaning the children who have made the street their dwelling place, often forced even to sleep there – are deprived of bonds with their family nucleus of origin. Among them a wide range of situations was observed. Briefly, there are those who suffered the traumatic experience of a broken family and have remained alone and those who have been driven away or fled from home because they were too neglected or maltreated. There are also those who reject their home or are rejected due to their involvement in some form of deviant behavior (drugs, alcohol, theft and various stratagems to survive), and those who are persuaded to stay on the streets through promises, seduction or violence by adults or criminal gangs. This often happens to young foreigners who are forced to prostitution or to unaccompanied foreign minors who are forced to go begging. These children experience the interference of security forces in their lives and jail. In developing countries there is an impressive number of children that belong to this category.
4. A category that is different from the preceding one is that of the “children in the street”, which means those who spend much of their time in the street, even if they have a “home” and a bond with the family of origin. They prefer to live day by day, with little or no responsibility for education and the future, in groupings that can hardly be recommended, habitually away from the family, although in there they can still find a place to sleep. Their number is a cause for concern in developed countries too.
5. There are numerous causes underlying this ever more alarming social phenomenon. Among the primary ones, the following were mentioned:

- the increasing break-up of families, tension between parents, aggressive, violent and at times perverse behavior towards the children;
- emigration, with the uprooting from the usual context of life and as a result and disorientation as consequence;
- conditions of poverty and misery that crush human dignity and deprive children of the indispensable needs of life;
- the spread of drug addiction and alcoholism;
- prostitution and the sex industry that continue to reap an impressive number of victims, often forced by spine-chilling violence into this most ferocious form of slavery;
- wars and social disorder that disrupt the normality of life also for minors;
- the spread of a “culture of deviance and transgression” especially in Europe;
- the lack of values of reference, solitude and an ever more profound sense of existential vacuum that characterize the world of the youth in general.

6. The more alarming the seriousness of the problem and the more insufficient the effective presence of the public authorities, the more we recognize the action of private social groups and volunteers in this area as precious and praiseworthy. Associations in the ecclesial field and those of Christian inspiration are active and efficient through absolutely inadequate before the vastness of the needs and, in most cases, linked to a specific organic form of pastoral care. Thus it was noted that the dioceses and the national episcopal conferences do not sufficiently assume this problem both for its prevention and for the rehabilitation of the children. However, some positive things do happen that encourage and stimulate those who consider the field too infertile for more investments of energy in it.

7. In the course of the meeting, it was observed that, in the majority of cases, the activities are planned and carried out by workers who are strongly motivated and well prepared professionally, be they people in charge of such initiatives or the group of volunteers.

8. Although there are a variety of approaches, there appeared to be a substantial agreement regarding the objectives, namely:

- rehabilitation of street children for a normal life, which includes their reincorporation in society, but above all in a family environment, in their family of origin if possible or, if not, in another family, or else in family-type community structures;
- bringing back the child to himself, to self-esteem, to a sense of dignity and, as a result, personal responsibility;
- instilling in the child the authentic desire to go back to school and be professionally prepared to enter society with a job, so as to develop dignified and gratifying plans for life through their very own efforts and not just by depending on others.

9. Quite various and diversified instead were the types of action in favor of street children, such as:

- the so-called commitment in the street, which involves contact with the children in the places where they gather together, so as to establish an empathic relationship of trust that allows wayward children or those in difficulty to be open towards an educator;
- day centers geared towards the promotion of essential conditions so that the children may be able to live with dignity;
- support initiatives to satisfy their primary needs: food, clothing, socio-sanitary assistance;
- structures for education and training: kindergartens, schools, courses for professional training
- welcome residences, where they also receive education and formation, but what counts most of all is human accompaniment that is also supported by psycho-pedagogical skills;
- in some cases there is also spiritual accompaniment based the Gospel in a way committed to interior reconstruction and healing of the heart;

- activities geared to reincorporate the children into the original nucleus where they belonged, or in new communities of adoption;
- activities at a wider range, intended to reach civil and ecclesial society, not only to inform, but also to raise their awareness and above all involve them in prevention of the phenomenon and of support for the children who have been returned to their natural environment;
- training and refresher courses for workers and volunteers so as to guarantee professionalism on everyone's part.

10. As to the method, the following were the main points that emerged in the course of the meeting:

- teamwork among all workers;
- parallel commitment of support to parents if they can be located and are available for collaboration;
- re-insertion in school and in professional training;
- creating and enlarging networks of friendship, even outside the structures of welcome;
- giving great importance to recreational activities and sports and to everything that stimulates the children to actively exercise a responsible role and be creative.

11. Commitment in favor of street children is certainly not easy. At times it can even seem useless and frustrating, and in those cases one can be tempted to lay down one's arms and retreat. This is the time to go back to the basic motivations that inspired one's involvement in this meritorious work. For believers, it is primarily a faith motivation. In any case, it is useful to pay attention to those who have a decidedly positive experience, as clearly emerged during the meeting, to those who rightly claim that the work has satisfying results, in many, at times, the majority of the cases. Prudence, however, dictates wait for time to confirm results by verifying, for instance, after five years the "constancy" of the rehabilitation and normalization of the subject. A relapse could in fact take place, a return to the streets. However, the contrary may also happen: one who earlier resisted the work of educators may later open up to an itinerary of rehabilitation and to the very values previously offered to him.

12. It was generally observed, however, that something had to be done urgently: the name of childhood is "now"; tomorrow is too late. Besides, rehabilitation at an early age is relatively easy, not so when adolescence begins.

13. Unfortunately, in many countries, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, although formally approved, is still quite insufficient in its application.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. It was evident that it is necessary to have a greater awareness of the gravity of the phenomenon and a greater and more systematic commitment to tackle it, including in the ecclesial milieu, wherein actions of a humanitarian character in favor of street children should be accompanied by the primary task of evangelization. Everyone expressed the hope that a specific pastoral care for these children be set up by formulating new strategies and ways of putting them into contact with the liberating and healing power of the Gospel.

2. Nevertheless, as the inquiry undertaken in view of the meeting showed, only a minority of the initiatives, likewise in the ecclesial milieu, go beyond social welfare and psycho-pedagogical actions. At least in the beginning, these do not include a clear pastoral characteristic of first or new evangelization in the attempt to rehabilitate and make the most out of the religious dimension of the child.

3. Two ways of intervening were observed. There are methods that direct the attention right to the religious and specifically evangelical proposal in order to rehabilitate the child, once introduced into the area of faith, towards human values too and liberate him from the conditioning and disorders that led him to the street. There are also those that direct the attention to the human rehabilitation of the child with the of giving him back equilibrium and normality, a full human identity. This patient work is accompanied with religious proposals and references to the extent that this is compatible with the condition of the child himself and of the country where he lives. These two methods – it was considered – should not be placed in contradiction with each other. Either one could be a possible itinerary. The choice would depend on the personal situation of the child, the environment in which he lives and, above all, on the personality of the educators.

4. In any case, this is the frame of reference for those who wish to make use of the religious proposal directly, which remains fundamental because the problem that people of the street have in common with one another is not so much misery, drug-addiction, alcoholism, deviance, violence, criminality, AIDS or prostitution, but rather the terrible evil of the ‘death of the soul’ (“the wages of sin is death”: Rm 6:23). [Often, we have creatures who, in the fullness of youth are ‘dead inside’].

- a) It is therefore necessary to welcome the pressing invitation to a new evangelization which the Holy Father has been repeating for years. Only meeting the Risen Christ can give back the joy. of the resurrection to those who are in death. Only meeting Him who came to bind the wounds of broken hearts can accomplish a profound healing of the devastating wounds of traumatized hearts which have been turned to stone by the experience of too much frustration and violence.
- b) Hence it is fundamental to move from a pastoral care of “waiting” to a pastoral care of “meeting”, acting with imagination, creativity and courage to reach the children in the new places they gather, in the streets, in the squares, as well as those with whom they associate in the “locales”, discotheques and in the ‘hot’ areas of our metropolises. It is necessary to go out to them with love to bring the good news and give witness through our own experience of life that Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life.
- c) It is indispensable to give witness to the light of Jesus that illumines and opens new ways to those who feel enveloped by the darkness. It is therefore urgent to awaken in the Christian community its vocation to service and to mission in a growing and sincere awareness of the salvific power of faith and the sacraments. Too many children, in fact, continue to die in the streets in the midst of indifference on the part of the majority. Failure to welcome with a strong commitment the anguished call of the Holy Father for a new evangelization is a true sin of omission of aid to our ‘dying’ brothers. It is therefore important to include in pastoral planning a great variety of forms of action that bring the first proclamation to those who are ‘far-away’, that give the children of the street the opportunity to be accompanied in establishing a new relationship with their own selves, with others, with God, with the community to which they belong or have adopted and to discover that there is someone who loves them.
- d) The following are therefore encouraged:
  - the formation of communities or groups (parochial or otherwise) in which young people have the opportunity to know and live the Gospel radically, having a first-hand experience of its healing power;
  - the institution of schools of prayer in parishes and other ecclesial entities to give a new impulse to the contemplative and missionary dimension of the various groups;
  - the formation of teams for evangelization to give enthusiastic witness to the wonderful news that Christ came to bring us; training of ‘missionary’ children who bring the Risen Christ’s embrace to their peers and to the ‘new poor’ in our century;
  - likewise in the various dioceses, the formation of young people, who are more professionally competent and who know how to make use of their artistic and musical talents to create new forms of entertainment capable of having a significant impact on prevention and of reaching thousands of young people with the Gospel message;

- hence the creation of centers of formation for evangelization in the streets; the establishment of alternative meeting points for young people that would offer initiatives rich in values and meaning, ‘consultation’ centers and programs of prevention and evangelization in schools;
  - commitment to use the mass media as precious instrument for shouting the Gospel “from the housetops”;
  - the formation of new communities and groups to welcome and accompany the children through a long and committed way towards inner healing, based the Gospel, with the love that Christ taught us; a love that is not content with doing acts of charity, but that takes upon itself the cry, the anguish, the wounds, the death of the little ones and of the poor, a love ready to give up one’s life for one’s friends.
5. During the meeting, it was also observed that even the educator who does not start with an explicit and strong religious proposal can live – and this is true for many – an interior attitude inspired by faith, well expressed – and we hope it is inspiring for everyone – in a triple evangelical icon:
- a) first of all, the icon of Jesus before the adulteress: The Teacher is respectful and affectionate; He does not judge or condemn the person but by his own attitude encourages her to change her life;
  - b) the second icon, the Good Shepherd who goes in search for the lost sheep (much more so if it is a little lamb), encourages us not to wait for, and much less demand from, the lamb to find its way back to the fold and take the following obligatory steps in a pastoral care for street children:
    - observe, listen, understand from within this very mysterious world (the Good Shepherd knows his sheep);
    - take the initiative of meeting, go to the street so that the child may perceive that he is at ease even there where he has chosen, or is forced, to stay (the Shepherd leaves the fold and goes out);
    - establish a spontaneous relationship with him, warm with affection and interest, an authentic friendship that is not necessary to declaim with a lot of words because it shows in every gesture (The Shepherd carries the sheep on his shoulders and celebrates with his friends);
  - c) the third icon, that of the disciples at Emmaus: Finally their eyes were opened before the Risen Christ and at the prospect of resurrection after having walked on a way during which not the eyes but the heart is warmed and opens to the newness of the Gospel.
6. It is clear that with this interior attitude, the second educational itinerary (see N. 3) has much in common with the first, and above all there is only one final goal. The objective and the method are shared too, especially in the following fundamental traits:
- a) stimulate trust and self-esteem, such that the child will understand and experience that he is important for the educator and the educator is important for him: this is the starting point in making the first steps, with conviction, towards another life choice. He must be accompanied towards the discovery of God’s love through the concrete experience of feeling that he is welcomed, accepted unconditionally and personally loved for what he is. This personal contact should also continue later on, even after the child has moved on to the care of other educators or left the welcome center;
  - b) give space to the child so that he may play an active role in the community, stimulate his sense of responsibility and freedom, such that he would feel at home in the community. This means that at “home”, warmth, spontaneity and friendly closeness should predominate over order, discipline and written rules;
  - c) cultivate a personal relationship with every child. In fact, notwithstanding the usefulness of methodologies and general rules, each child is unique, an original world, with his own story. Moreover, many have shown intelligence and energy capable of surviving extremely difficult situations; they proved to be capable, creative, smart. Thus it is necessary to continue making use of these resources, more or less evident, of their personality in guiding them to “change ways”, so that they may become subjects themselves and not only objects of pastoral care for their rehabilitation. Pedagogical and educational programmes, therefore, have the important task of

leading the child to rediscover and value his own positive potential, to let his talents bear fruit and develop his capacities as much as possible;

- d) have the aim (and it is not a utopia) to make the child assimilate the educative project in depth to such a point that, maybe in a few years, he may become a help and a stimulus for other street children to follow his itinerary. He thus goes side by side with his educator, becoming himself an educator, subject of this specific pastoral care;
- e) recognize in the commitment in favor of street children a privileged way in the service of the Lord and for meeting Him: "Insofar as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).

7. It is logical that the best resources reserved to this field must be employed to prepare pastoral workers professionally and spiritually. They in turn must show a great human maturity, be able to put aside immediate success and be confident that the fruit of their commitment would reveal itself later on, maybe after times when it would seem that everything failed. Furthermore, they must have a great capacity to work in harmony and collaboration with the other educators.

8. Planning collaboration with the family of origin (when possible) is needed that would have a positive impact on unhealthy family dynamics. This action should be meant to rebuild the fabric of the family and gradually accompany and reincorporate the child into the nucleus where he belongs.

9. Concerted work must be done not only within the structures where one operates but also with those who are doing the same work in the territory or are in some way interested in it. It is also necessary to look for and welcome the collaboration of other forces that are not ecclesial in nature but are genuinely sensitive, humanly speaking, to the issue. The same goes for collaboration with public offices, even when, by personal choice, it is not possible, or it is not intended, to make use of public funding.

10. Yet it is necessary to be very careful so that the supplementary action of associations and volunteer work not create in those who are supposed to act in this regard a mentality and a pretext for inaction. When necessary, even the Church's function of suggesting and stimulating must be accompanied by constructive criticism and prophetic admonition of unjust and inhuman situations.

11. It is necessary to create in a territory a network that would allow an exchange of good practices and also eventually get the support of those who already have a long experience in this field for those who are just starting.

12. Street children are a "photograph" of the society where they live which did not support them but rather provoked and pushed them towards their present state. Workers must help society become aware of its responsibility and nurture in it some sense of healthy unease with respect to these children. The community of the local Church must receive that same attention.

13. To set everyone in motion in favor of street children, it will be very useful to create a specific office (or a special section of an existing office) within the bishops' conferences and the dioceses primarily involved in this problem. It could be the office for the pastoral care of human mobility, linked with the office for the youth or for the family. It is also desirable that general pastoral projects would include organic, incisive and continuing proposals that would pay special attention to the "pastoral care of the street". In this regard, workers in this specific field are to help the ecclesial community grow in awareness and involvement in looking for significant responses to the urgent problem of street children.

14. It is hoped that the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People would periodically convoke meetings like the one that has just ended, at least at a continental level.