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Remarks from Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Ecumenical Prayer Service
on the eve of the 45th regular session of the
General Assembly of the United Nations

Holy Family Church – New York
17 September 1990



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Your Eminence,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Excellencies and friends:

We assemble today in an era of historic events which have amazed, inspired and excited us, while other events remind us that dangerous forces still afflict our world.

Only weeks ago, we believed that the trends of our era were toward conciliation, collaboration, and realization of the human potential.

More recent events discourage those hopes. But the forthright response of the United Nations to those events is the ultimate assurance that we are, indeed, crossing the threshold to a different, more hopeful world. We who gather today, in this ecumenical service of hope and expectation, surely share that conviction.

We take our assurance from other developments as well. One of the most encouraging is the meeting which will be held on the 29th and 30th of September, in the midst of the General Assembly.

For the first time in history, leaders from throughout the world are coming to sit at a single table ... and they will talk about children.

All of our great religious and spiritual traditions speak of the preciousness and sacredness of life as it manifests in the child, and of the responsibility of adults to protect and care for children. Jesus, rebuking his overly protective disciples, gathered the little children to him, insisting that "the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these". The Koran and Sunna are filled with references to parents' accountability regarding their

children. Buddhists, Jews and Hindus have very refined teachings on the responsibility of parents for care of children, as do others.

The World Summit for Children is an affirmation that the primacy of responsibilities toward children fundamental to all of our religious and spiritual traditions now extends beyond the obligation of parent to child, to be an obligation of all society - of the State, as evidenced by the new Convention on the Rights of the Child, and, increasingly, of the world community of nations, as evidenced by this Summit.

The great writer, Primo Levi suggested to us that:

"Once we know how to reduce torment and do not do it, we become the tormenters."

That is the ultimate question confronting all leaders as they gather for the World Summit, and which must be faced by all persons, everywhere, who think of themselves as leaders. Because experience has clearly demonstrated that the struggle to reduce the number of tormented children must begin with those who lead ... those who guide and teach ... those who inspire ... those who govern and administer. And leadership begins with the knowledge that the lives and healthy growth of children can be protected...that two-thirds of the 40,000 child deaths yesterday, today, and tomorrow could have been readily prevented.

Leaders of the six initiating countries and the Secretary-General demonstrated such leadership in calling for Heads of State and Government to assemble in the World Summit for Children. The overwhelming response to this invitation is testament that world leaders are willing to try to reduce the torment of hundreds of millions of children throughout the world. And in their response, they assure us that Tagore was correct when he suggested:

"Each child is a reminder that God has not lost hope in man."

God has not lost hope. Each day brings new children, new life, new joy, new love, new potential. Each day also brings new capacity to care for those children, to help them survive, to help them grow and develop, and to help their parents feel less compelled to have still more children. And we must not lose hope. For it is in our hands to do God's work on earth ... by bringing the little children unto us ... by ending the torture and refusing to be the tormenters ... and by inviting childhood back into our hearts ... into our leadership ... into our policies and programmes ... into our laws ... into our budgets and priorities. And thus shall we be worthy of the mantle of leadership bestowed upon us.