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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Eighth International Vatican Conference
"The Child is the Future of Society"
Concluding Round Table:
"Giving Priority to Children for the New Generations"

"Putting Children First: A New Ethic for a New Millennium"

Vatican City, The Holy See
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"Putting Children First: A New Ethic for a New Millennium"

I am delighted and deeply honoured to serve as Chairman of the concluding Round Table of this exceedingly important conference. On behalf of UNICEF's more than 6,600 staff working for children's well-being in 120 developing countries worldwide, I would like to commend the Vatican and the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers -- and in particular the Council's President, Cardinal Angelini -- for organizing this most timely and vitally useful gathering. I especially want to extend our gratitude and esteem to the Holy Father for his personal guidance and involvement, while wishing him a speedy recovery from his recent, most unfortunate accident.

Around this table are some of the world's most powerful men and women -- powerful not because they possess vast riches or military might, but because of their luminous and magnetic moral example. Their insights -- and the insights of so many other leaders, experts and practitioners who have gathered here this week -- will contribute powerfully to global efforts to give greater priority to children. And I would strongly suggest that these efforts are at the heart -- indeed, at the cutting edge -- of a growing movement that is desperately needed to prepare the world for the extraordinary opportunities and vexing challenges of the 21st century. So that we may fully benefit from the wisdom and experience of my distinguished co-panelists, I will be brief in my introductory remarks.

Before I begin, however, permit me a personal reflection. My grandfather was a medical missionary and my father a physician whose faith led him to serve as a public health pioneer in some of the world's poorest countries. So the connection between religious conviction and the active promotion of health is part of the bedrock of my experience and my way of looking at the world. That

is why I feel particularly strongly about the responsibility of Christianity and all the world's great religions to inspire and lead us in the effort to promote health and well-being for all -- in particular, for the poorest and most vulnerable among us.

In the interest of time, I will make 10 points in an attempt to summarize UNICEF's experience and our thinking about children in the current critical historical juncture.

13 million morally unconscionable deaths every year

First, I would argue that no feature of contemporary global reality better illustrates the central human dilemma of our times than the deaths, year in and year out, of some 13 million children under the age of five. Each one of them has the same right to live, each has the same right to fulfill his or her potential, each has the same right to be loved and cared for, each has the same right to contribute to civilization, as the child of the wealthiest and most privileged of families.

For most of human history, such deaths were largely inevitable; but now that we know how to prevent or cure the diarrhoea, the pneumonia, and the measles that account for most of these deaths -- not only in prosperous homes but also in the world's most remote, impoverished villages -- what was once tragic but largely unavoidable has become morally unconscionable -- an obscenity -- today. Given this welcome change -- our greatly enhanced capacity to prevent child death and disability -- we must ask ourselves why do so many continue to tolerate this massive, needless loss of life? Should not morality march with changing capacity?

There is nothing inevitable about poverty

This brings me to my second point. I am afraid that these deaths are tolerated largely because they are overwhelmingly the deaths of poor children, whose families and communities traditionally lack the clout to make the world stand up and take notice. The aura of inevitability that has surrounded poverty for so many centuries is perpetuated today by selfishness, indifference, and loss of hope. But there is now nothing inevitable or inescapable about continuation of the worst aspects of poverty on the threshold of the 21st century. Indeed, as the British historian Arnold Toynbee said half a century ago: "Our age is the first since the dawn of history that has dared dream it practical to make the benefits of civilization available to all."

The simple fact is that we have made remarkable progress since Toynbee penned those words. Already three-quarters of humankind -- more than double the proportion of 40 years ago -- now enjoys at least the basics of a life of health, dignity and productivity.

Human progress has been swiftest in the developing world, far swifter than the gains the industrial countries made in life expectancy, infant mortality and nutrition during their peak decades of development. The great unfinished business of the 20th century is overcoming poverty, starting with its worst symptoms -- and causes -- in the lives of young children.

A "shield of protection" for each child

Third, we now have the means to break the cycle that perpetuates poverty from one generation to the next -- and break it at its weakest point. Through immunization and oral rehydration therapy, breastfeeding and growth monitoring, micronutrient supplementation and antibiotics for pneumonia, among other simple and relatively inexpensive interventions, a "shield of protection" can be erected around the first fragile months and years of even the poorest of children. We can give them something close to the healthy start in life historically reserved for only the children of the well-to-do. A start, a good start, has been made. But will we accelerate the momentum in the last years of this century?

It is not merely a matter of enabling children to "get through" the first five, most vulnerable years of their lives; since this is precisely the period of greatest physical, intellectual and psychological development (and because this development cannot be postponed), I am talking about giving children the wherewithal to "outsmart" poverty before it forever robs them of their potential. Those who are given a healthier head start have a better chance to build a decent life -- to learn more and work more productively and contribute more to society -- than those whose bodies and minds are stunted from the outset.

We not only have a moral and ethical obligation to see to it that each and every individual child is given this nurturing head start; it is, from a strictly practical point of view, an investment in future prosperity no nation can afford not to make. The experience of Asia's newly industrializing countries eloquently attests to the high returns that accrue from early, large-scale investment in the health, nutrition and education of each new generation.

A momentum of progress to build on

Fourth, we have a respectable momentum of progress to build on; we are certainly not starting from scratch. The last case of smallpox was reported in 1977 and other scourges such as polio and tetanus are now slated for eradication or elimination by decade's end. Under-five mortality rates have been cut in half in the last 30 years. Today the world average stands at 97 deaths per 1000 live births -- 100 per 1000 for the developing countries. To put this in perspective, seventy years ago child death rates in the cities of the industrialized world were about twice the developing

world's average child death rate today. What we in UNICEF call the Child Survival and Development Revolution -- launched with the help of the Holy See a decade ago -- has already saved more than 20 million young lives, and is now saving the lives of more than 4 million children annually.

In 1990, the world achieved the goal of 80 per cent immunization against the major killer andcrippler infections of childhood -- up from around 10 per cent coverage a decade before, when they were taking the lives of more than 4 million children annually. This largest peacetime collaboration in history has mobilized the social fabric of nations, demonstrating what can be accomplished when national leadership and community participation join in a common effort. Today, more than 100 million babies are being brought in each year for immunizations four or five times before their first birthdays. Three million lives are being saved each year as a result. Oral rehydration therapy is being used in more than a third of all homes in the developing world, preventing a million deaths -- with the potential for rapidly saving an additional two million lives per year.

Keeping the promise of the World Summit for Children

Fifth, the post-Cold War situation greatly favours our efforts. A significant portion of the vast energies and resources that kept a divided and fearful world on war-footing for almost half a century can and must be re-directed now to alleviate the poverty that threatens to divide the world -- and our nations -- anew. It was, I believe, a recognition of these opportunities and dangers that led to the holding of the World Summit for Children and the entry into force of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1990.

At the World Summit, His Eminence Agostino Cardinal Casaroli made a heartfelt plea for God to give us "hearts large enough to embrace children everywhere," and I am convinced that his prayer has begun to be answered. Follow-up has been encouraging, as evidenced by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's recent report to the General Assembly. National Programmes of Action (NPAs) to implement the World Summit goals for the year 2000 have been completed or drafted in over 100 countries accounting for more than 90 per cent of the world's children. Many countries have gone on to translate their NPAs into provincial and municipal action plans -- focussing the power of decentralization and democratization on the challenge of meeting human needs.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Due in part to the Holy See's early ratification -- the fourth in the world -- the number of countries that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the short period of four years has rapidly risen to 153 -- more ratifications than any other

human rights treaty has ever received. Fifteen other countries have signed, indicating their interest in early ratification. Only 22 countries remain on the list of those that have neither ratified nor signed, including the United States, alone among the industrialized nations.

The World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna in June, called for universal ratification of the Convention by the end of 1995. Achieving this goal would have enormous symbolic -- and practical -- significance: it would make the Convention the first law embraced by all humankind and reaffirm the world's new commitment to the smallest and most vulnerable among us.

Common goals, common timetable

Sixth, we have -- as a result of the Convention, the World Summit for Children, the Earth Summit, other critical international gatherings and such intellectual and moral contributions as the Holy Father's groundbreaking Encyclical "Centesimus Annus", and the success of the Universal Child Immunization effort -- broad global consensus on both the need and our capacity to accelerate human-centered, participatory, goal-driven, sustainable development and poverty-alleviation. We have greater agreement than ever on the need to respect each individual's political, civil, social, economic and cultural rights, and on the need to eradicate what we in UNICEF have called the "apartheid of gender". For the first time in world history we can say that humankind has begun to work in a common framework, pursuing common goals for its children. The goals to be achieved between 1990 and the year 2000 include:

- * a 30 per cent reduction in infant and young child mortality;
- * a 50 per cent reduction in maternal deaths;
- * a halving of moderate and severe malnutrition among young children;
- * universal access to basic education, and achievement of primary school education by at least 80 per cent of school-age children;
- * universal access to safe drinking water and to sanitary facilities;
- * improved protection of children in especially difficult circumstances, such as children in armed conflict, orphans, street children, refugees, victims of natural or man-made disasters, child labour, child prostitution and sexual abuse, disabled children, and children in the legal system.

Like runners contemplating their strategy for a big race, many governments around the globe have looked at the goals to be

achieved by the year 2000 and decided to prioritize and pace their efforts. In particular, they have decided that an early sprint to reach the most straightforward and "do-able" targets would be the best strategy for the first half of the race. And so we now have a set of ambitious but feasible mid-decade goals to be achieved by the end of 1995.

In order to reach these goals, we will have to accelerate the pace of the Child Survival and Development Revolution. By the end of 1995 -- in only 25 months! -- we can lower the obscene annual child death toll by an additional two million, and save millions more from lives of disability, malnutrition and frequent illness.

The mid-decade goals for 1995 are as follows:

- * Raising immunization coverage against the six principal vaccine-preventable diseases to 80 per cent or more in all countries;
- * Elimination of neonatal tetanus;
- * Reduction of measles deaths by 95 per cent and of measles cases by 90 per cent;
- * Elimination of polio in selected countries;
- * Elimination of vitamin A deficiency;
- * Universal iodization of salt to end iodine deficiency disorders;
- * Achievement of 80 per cent usage of oral rehydration therapy; in selected countries, 50 per cent of all health facilities and providers to offer correct case management for diarrhoea and pneumonia;
- * Making virtually all major hospitals and maternity facilities 'baby-friendly' by ending free and low-cost supplies of infant formula and following the 'Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding' recommended by UNICEF and WHO;
- * Eradication of dracunculiasis (guinea worm);
- * Universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In addition, three intermediate targets have been set in the areas of nutrition, education, and water and sanitation. These partial or stepping-stone goals are intended to encourage governments to develop the systems needed to achieve the complete goals in these sectors by the year 2000.

If successful, our sprint toward the mid-decade goals would do more for the well-being of children, in a shorter period of time, and at lower cost, than any other undertaking in history. In addition to saving an additional two million young lives, achieving the mid-decade goals would virtually eliminate the single greatest causes of preventable mental retardation and blindness among children. What better gift could we give our children -- the future of all our countries -- in 1995, the year of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations!

Resources

Seventh, this action agenda for the remainder of the 1990s is entirely affordable. We are not talking about impossible sums. The US\$25 billion extra per year that is needed to radically improve the lives of the world's children is about what Western Europe spends on alcohol every three months. Today the developing countries spend only 10 per cent of their budgets on primary health care, nutrition, basic education, clean water and sanitation, and the rich countries assign the same low priority to these key areas of human development by devoting only 10 per cent of their aid budgets to them. These percentages need to be doubled, at the very least!

To those who point to current and potential armed conflicts and the high cost of UN peacekeeping in arguing against giving development funding a higher priority, the answer is clear and straightforward: if we do not invest in human development and poverty alleviation today, starting with children, we will have to pay a much higher price down the line, when disparities and resentments have led to an even larger number of conflicts and a permanent instability throughout the global village.

An ethic of caring

Eighth, if this historic undertaking is to be successful, it will require more than funds, more than the marvelous scientific and technological tools we now have at our disposal. It will take people. Living, breathing, energetic, motivated and caring people and nations joined together for the common good. Whether we are talking about eradicating poverty's worst symptoms in the lives of children or overcoming the increasing problems facing children and youth in the richer nations, what is ultimately needed is a further substantial change in values, the full embrace of an ethic of caring, an appreciation of the sacredness of life, respect for others as equals, tolerance of diversity, and above all, global solidarity. This process of change is well underway already, but needs to be greatly accelerated. Unless we can bring to bear the insights of psychology and the great spiritual traditions on the obstacles preventing the full flowering of these values, there is little hope for sustainable success.

There is, of course, no special UN agency mandated to deal with the deeper psychological, moral and spiritual dimensions of the human dilemma at this crossroads in history. Nor could there be. But I am convinced that the world's great religions and indigenous cultures can make a much larger contribution toward answering the question: "Why is there not more moral outrage at the obscene daily harvest of deaths of our youngest and most vulnerable, caused mainly by abject poverty and gross underdevelopment?" After all, how can we expect to successfully address the far more complex social, civil and economic problems of our times if we do not know how to work together, with relatively little effort and at low cost, for the world's children?

The critical role of religious leadership

Ninth point. The Grand Alliance for Children that has been growing and making unprecedented progress over the past decade could not have made these advances without the consistent, widespread and inspiring support of the religions and religious of the world. This is true of all the great religious traditions and institutions, and I would like to publicly thank the Roman Catholic Church -- its leaders and its faithful the world over -- for the outstanding leadership role they have played. I could not possibly cite all the ways in which Catholics and Catholic institutions have been decisive partners in our efforts for children, particularly since early 1983 when the Holy See threw its full weight in support of the Child Survival Revolution. I think now of the Church's indispensable role in the pioneering Colombian immunization success and in making El Salvador's "days of tranquillity" possible -- when that country's civil war would cease for several days each year so that children "on all sides" could be immunized and cared for. I think also of front-line heroes and martyrs like Sean Devereux, a Salesian alumnus and Cooperator who gave his life for children early this year while working with UNICEF in Somalia. I think of Sister Maria Metildes, grassroots coordinator of the Church's role in making Ceara, one of Brazil's poorest States, into the one with the best indicators for children. I think of the centres for street children in Africa and Latin America that are run or supported by the Catholic Church. I think of the Association of Catholic Hospitals in India, now celebrating its 50th anniversary jubilee. I think of Catholic Relief Services and the worldwide presence of the Church wherever war or natural disaster leaves people in desperate need of assistance.

This commitment to children, as old as Christianity itself, was most eloquently expressed by His Holiness Pope John Paul II on World Youth Day this year, during his visit to the United States. The Holy Father said:

"The child is that delicate center around which the moral ethos of families, and therefore of whole nations, is either built up or shattered. In Rome and on my visits to the church

in the different countries I see so many children. On their smiling faces I read the possibility for every society and every generation to say to them: You are our love, you are our joy, you are our greatest concern! For your sake we will work honestly and hard to build a better world, a true civilization of love."

And His Holiness went on to appeal "to people of good will, to the leaders of the nations, to governments and international agencies" to formally embrace and practically apply the Convention on the Rights of the Child "so that no child on earth will be left without the legal guarantee of his or her fundamental rights."

The need for high-level inter-faith focus on children

This is precisely the kind of vision and leadership that is needed to accelerate human progress in this critical time in history, when a window of opportunity for change has opened. In recent years, we have seen each and every one of the world's religions place greater emphasis on children and youth, and UNICEF has been privileged to be closely associated with many of their worthy initiatives.

This brings me to my tenth and final point, an appeal really: We are aware that important inter-faith reflection has been taking place in Assisi and elsewhere. **Is it not time for the world's great religions to come together more strongly, making children a major and visible focus of inter-faith dialogue and action?** Obviously, each faith and denomination must continue to do the good it is now doing individually for children. But by uniting for children at a high level, the world's religions can show that there is something special, something sacred and urgent about children and their needs. It would say to the world: let us put children first, first in our hearts and first in our actions. Surely there is ample common ground and sufficient good will to explore further avenues of inter-faith cooperation for children. I am convinced that the repercussions of such an initiative would be felt far beyond the sphere of children's lives. At a time when children are paying the highest price as a result of the conflicts, hatreds and divisions that have surfaced with a vengeance in the post-Cold War world, the establishment of new forms of common religious action for children would help restore hope and yes, save precious lives.

In closing, I would like to thank Drs. Arnaldo Farina, Joaquin Ruiz-Gimenez Cortes, and Ihsan Dogramaci -- presidents of the National Committees for UNICEF in Italy, Spain and Turkey, respectively -- for their outstanding participation in this conference and their dedication to the cause of children. And I thank the Vatican once more for organizing this important gathering, which may well be the largest meeting ever held for the child, the future of society.