

The CHILD'S RIGHTS AND SITUATION

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Your Excellencies, Reverend Fathers, Reverend Deacons, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with a trembling heart and the greatest humility I have turned to this task of speaking about the child's rights and situation. I am a most simple lay woman, without any theological education, and therefore I can only speak from my experience of God's providence in my life as a wife and a mother, and from the service I have been rendering to the Oslo Catholic Diocese Family Centre.

INTRODUCTION

In this talk I will first look at what rights children have through civil law, compared to the natural rights children have been given by God, based on what we can read out of human relations and Holy Scripture. Then I will give a survey of the reality children face in our part of Europe. Finally I will try to see how children's natural and Godgiven rights can be fulfilled, and which paths we could follow to welcome children into our lives and societies in an even warmer way.

1. CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The 20th century has often been called The Century of the Child, because one became internationally aware of the child's special vulnerability, and its psychological and physical needs, and one found it necessary to establish a set of common principles to care for this youngest part of humanity in a special way.

Short historical overview

I will give you a very short chronology of the most important international treaties which have children as their main target group: We take notice that the *Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child* was adopted in September 1924 by the League of Nations, on a draft made by the British lady Eglantyne Webb, who inspired the foundation Save the Children. On November 20 1959 the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* was adopted by the United Nation's General Assembly. It was recognized in the World Declaration on Human Rights and in The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and simultaneously in The International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – both adopted by the United Nations in 1966, and put into vigour in 1976. Finally came the *United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted on the 20 November 1989, to which all our Nordic Countries have committed themselves to. (In Norway it was ratified in 1991.) Due to different situations one became more aware of throughout the nineties, the UN has added optional protocols concerning children in armed conflicts, on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. I think it is of some interest to mention here what the *Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child* of 1924, had as its five principles:

1. The child must be given the means requisite for its normal development, both materially and spiritually;
2. The child that is hungry must be fed; the child that is sick must be nursed; the child that is backward must be helped; the delinquent child must be reclaimed; and the orphan and the waif must be sheltered and succored;
3. The child must be the first to receive relief in times of distress;
4. The child must be put in a position to earn a livelihood, and must be protected against every form of exploitation;
5. The child must be brought up in the consciousness that its talents must be devoted to the service of fellow men.

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child

If we then dive into the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the most recent and most widespread convention, we see that it includes a wide range of basic aspects of the child's existence:

All states parties which have adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child commit themselves to protect the child against all forms of discrimination, to give primary consideration to the best interests of the child, to respect the parents' and the families' rights regarding the child and recognize each child's inherent right to life. The child has the right to a name, to acquire a nationality, and as far as possible to know and be cared for by his or her parents. Children have the right to preserve their identity regarding origin, not to be separated from their parents against their will, except when such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child. The child has the right to family reunification. The child has the right to express its views freely and to be heard in all matters affecting the child. The child has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. The Convention states that parents have the primary responsibility for this. States Parties that have adopted the Convention shall take all legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, including sexual abuse. Adopted children, refugee children, disabled children and ill children should all be given special care. The child's right to health care services, to benefit from social security, to necessary conditions of living and to education are especially mentioned. The child's right to rest and leisure and participation in cultural and artistic life should be recognized by all States Parties. He or she also has the right to be protected from the illicit use of drugs, sexual abuse, kidnapping, sale, trafficking or recruitment to armed forces. Children who have infringed penal law should be reintegrated and not put in prison when they are under a minimum age (normally 15) nor condemned to death penalty if they are under 18.

The UN Convention ends with a most important statement, namely stating that nothing in the Convention shall affect provisions which are more conducive to the realization of the rights of the child either in the law of a State party or in international law in force for that State. This opens up for a great degree of individual freedom for each country or organization to continually improve the rights of the child and its conditions of living. In a number of European countries we can register a great effort to achieve a general prohibition against physical punishment of children, and this has

already been implemented in various places, but there still remains some work to be done to obtain sufficiently waterproof juridical definitions in order to prohibit mental punishment of children.

Justice is not enough

As we can observe, a wide range of essential aspects of the child's dignity as a human being and living conditions have been taken into consideration. Nevertheless it is most important that we do not get blinded by conventions and by the efficiency of civil law. When we speak of the rights of the child, we must discern between rights given to the child through the law and the inherent right that the child is endowed with by natural law, on a moral and value based foundation. We have a tendency to believe that civil law is enough to ensure the rights of the citizens, but we should take heed of the most timely admonition Pope John Paul II gave us as early as in his second encyclical letter, *Dives in Misericordia*, given in 1980, where he asks the just question: "Is justice enough?"¹

What did he mean by that? Well, that even if international conventions or programmes are based on principles of implementing more just structures for society, they often suffer from a lack of values or a practical distortion of these. Part of the danger stems from the acceptance of the primacy of things over persons, despite the "humanistic" contents of different declarations.² With regard to the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, we see that the definition of the child itself is lacking on an essential point – it disregards the unborn child, and therefore it lacks articles that protect the life of the child from the moment of conception. We also observe that the child's invaluable dignity is not defined, and hence can be subject to be treated as relative.

Love is necessary

Another important aspect Pope John Paul II points out is that justice alone is not enough "if that deeper power, which is love itself, is not allowed to shape human life in its various dimensions"³. "This does not mean that the value of justice is a lacking concept, but it indicates the need to draw from the powers of the spirit which condition the very order of justice, powers which are still more profound"⁴ than justice itself.

To make it concrete: The UN Convention of the Child's Rights does not mention the concept "love" with one single word! Right enough, children are conceded a long list of most necessary rights, but the right to be received with love, is not worded. Instead of this, the concept of "care" is used, but we all know that this is rather reductionistic: There is an endless difference between care given out of duty, and unconditional, selfless love with deep affection and recognition of the child as a "you".

¹ John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 12, (1980).

² John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 11, (1980).

³ John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 12, (1980).

⁴ John Paul, *Dives in Misericordia*, 12, (1980).

Pope John Paul II pointed out that the reason why our laws are not sufficient, is because many of our human and moral values no longer are respected. This is not only in regard to Christian moral values, but also to purely human moral values and moral culture. This is specially relevant regarding respect for human life from conception unto natural death, respect for the insolubility of marriage and respect for the family's sovereignty and need for stability. Because the truth in human relations disappears, and because we all too often fall back to a purely utilitarian way of thinking, we lose the deep sense for what is holy, for our relationship with God, and hence we see a dehumanization of society, a moral degeneration both on an individual level and in society in general.

If we go back to the Convention of the Child's Rights' Article 7.1, which states that the child has the right to be cared for by his or her parents, we know today that this formulation is not sufficient, and that lobby groups in the Western world are doing everything to redefine the concept of parenthood from being two-sexed to being one-sexed. This happens because we have not affirmed strongly enough the unique position the life-giving relationship between man and woman has, but allowed ourselves permissiveness and experimentation with the most basic structure of our civil society. We have reduced human fertility to a question of technological possibilities and lost sight of the sacral character of the cooperation between man and woman and the Creator.

2. THE CHILD IN THE EYES OF GOD

Let us now make an informal thought experiment and try to elaborate a Divine Convention of the Child by examining God's own view of the child. To be able to find out this, we have to look to Sacred Scripture. What does it say about children? Which of God's words can give us a hint of the child's status in the Kingdom of God?

God wills the child

We can very soon state that the child has a unique position in God's heart. The statements about children and childhood are many and literally filled with a transcendent beauty. It would take me endless time if I were to pick up each of these, so I will restrict myself to a few only. Already in the Book of Genesis we can understand that it is God's will that people are to have children. The child is wanted as a fruit of marriage. The Lord says to the first human beings: "Increase and multiply" (Gen 1, 28). Man and woman are called to take a most special responsibility for receiving and caring for life. In his encyclical letter, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), Pope John Paul II says that this responsibility reaches its highest point when the conjugal union results in new life.⁵ All of us who have experienced the joy of becoming mothers will recognize Eve's excitement when she joyfully exclaims: " I have begotten a man with the help of the Lord" (Gen 4, 1).

Fertility is a blessing

⁵ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 43.

In the Old Testament infertility was considered a punishment, while children were looked upon as a blessing. In Psalm 127 this is expressed this way: “Children are a gift from the Lord: they are a real blessing.” (Ps 127, 3). And in *Psalm 128*, 3-6:

“Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
in your home,
and your sons will be like young olive trees round your table.
A man who obeys the Lord
Will surely be blessed like this.
May the Lord bless you from Zion!
May you see Jerusalem prosper
All the days of your life!
May you live to see your grandchildren!”

A heart for unborn life

Then we have some passages in Scripture that describe God’s love for the unborn child: In Psalm 139, the psalmist expresses a deep awe for the wonders God work when a new life comes into being:

You created every part of me;
You put me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you because you are to be feared;
All you do is strange and wonderful.
I know it with all my heart.
When my bones were being formed,
Carefully put together in my mother’s womb,
When I was growing there in secret,
You knew that I was there –
You saw me before I was born.
The days allotted to me

Had all been recorded in your book,
Before any of them ever began.”

What an unspeakably beautiful expression for God’s allknowing and merciful love for man – all the way down to his embryonic stage. Not a moment of our existence is missed by the Lord’s loving glance; every second of our development happens with his knowledge and in accordance with his divine plan.

In the same category we will mention the introduction to the prophet Jeremiah’s book (Jer 1, 4-5):

“The Lord said to me, ‘I chose you before I gave you life,
and before you were born
I selected you to be a prophet to the nations.’”

Again we can see how God in his own words ensures man that he is willed and recognized by God even before conception, that man is a person predestined to fulfill missions of divine dimensions, and that man through his life can be a messenger to his fellow men of God’s love. We have been planned and willed by God from eternity, and each conceived embryo is part of a divine plan, has a role to play – whether it only lives for a few days, or if it should reach a hundred year long lifetime.

The New Testament

Let us now turn to the New Testament, and take a look at what status the child has in Jesus Christ’s own view.

In this context the most important fact is that God’s Son chose to enter the world as a newborn child, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. The narration of Jesus’ birth shows in all its richness of contrasts how the Most High, the King of the Universe, chose to become the littlest and poorest of men, how God sent His Son as a small child – out of love for humanity, but also to invite us to love Him again – in the Child’s innocent and vulnerable being. God presents Himself in the Child of Bethlehem to show us what His Kingdom is about – to give and to receive love, to consecrate our lives to and for each other. Love was the reason for it all!

Thirty years later Jesus takes a little child in his arms and says: “The greatest in the Kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles himself and becomes like this child.” (Mt 18, 4) And we understand that He himself had fulfilled this criterion with his own entrance into time, but now shows his humility as an example for each and every one of us to follow.

A predilection for the small ones

Christ's many statements about children show with all evidence God's predilection for the small and weak, for the innocent and pure of heart, for humility and recognition of the need of help: The Beatitudes sum up the criteria for blessedness in the Kingdom of God, and we see that a number of them describe the child's intrinsic qualities:

"Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!"

"Happy are those who are humble; they will receive what God has promised!"

"Happy are the pure in heart; they will see God!"

"Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children!"

(Mt 5, 3.5.8.9)

Christ goes as far as to put childish humility as a condition to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. We read in Matthew 18, 1-6: "At that time the disciples came to Jesus, asking, 'Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?' Jesus called a child, made him stand in front of them, and said, 'I assure you that unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. The greatest in the Kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles himself and becomes like this child. And whoever welcomes in my name one such child as this, welcomes me. If anyone should cause one of these little ones to lose his faith in me, it would be better for that person to have a large millstone tied around his neck and be drowned in the deep sea.'"

Jesus uses strong images to emphasize that the child – and all those who are like children – are entitled to the deepest respect: In Mt 18, 10 Jesus says: "See that you don't despise any of these little ones. Their angels in heaven, I tell you, are always in the presence of my Father in heaven." The Church Father St. John Chrysostom holds that with these threats Christ "pulls down the haughtiness of the boastful, for nothing is so hostile to love as pride"⁶. And Christ shows simultaneously which mighty protection God has built around the small and despised.

We have to mention Mt 19, 13-15, which speaks for itself: "Some people brought children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and to pray for them, but the disciples scolded the people. Jesus said: 'Let the children come to me and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.' He placed his hands on them and then went away."

The child proclaims God

In Mt 21, 15-16, we have a rather interesting example of how children, often without knowing, but obviously inspired, will proclaim God. The episode takes place after Jesus had entered Jerusalem riding and the crowds had praised him with enthusiastic shouts: "The chief priests and the teachers of the Law became angry when they saw the wonderful things he was doing and the children

⁶ St. John Chrysostom, *De Matthaeus*, Homily 59, 5.

shouting in the Temple, 'Praise to David's Son!' So they asked Jesus, 'Do you hear what they are saying?' 'Indeed I do,' answered Jesus. 'Haven't you ever read this scripture? 'You have trained children and babies to offer perfect praise.'" He was referring to Psalm 8, 2.

The children obviously repeat what they have heard the crowds were shouting, and this irritates the chief priests enormously, but Jesus corrects the priests and the teachers of the Law, and confirms that the children's spontaneity in fact was a praising of God in accordance with the Scriptures, which in turn indicated the identity of Jesus as the awaited Messiah. The most beautiful example, though, of children being able to prophesize about God is, of course, the moment when Our Lady greets her cousin Elizabeth, and the unborn John the Baptist leaps out of joy while he filled with the Holy Spirit senses the presence of his Lord.

What you did unto...

Finally, I will include the passages where Jesus draws up the picture of the Final Judgment, in Mt 25, 40: "The King will reply, 'I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me!" And of likewise importance Mt 25, 45: "The King will reply, 'I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me.'"

In his description of the Final Judgment, Christ is naturally not speaking only about children – He is thinking of each human life being at its weakest, but the child will also fall into this category: He or she comes naked, hungry and vulnerable to this world and needs a home and loving care. This again confirms what holy mission we parents are being called to. We do not need to travel far away to succor the hungry and poor. We have these least ones in our immediate proximity, in our own homes, and we will have to give an account before God for what we did and what we failed to do for them.

The Divine Convention of the Child

If we now should fulfill our intention to write a Divine Convention of the Child, we could tentatively establish the following paragraphs:

§1: Every child is in God's thoughts and willed by Him even before he/she has come into being in his/her mother's womb; it is therefore entitled to the right to life from conception until natural death.

§2: Every conceived child has a unique role in God's saving plan, no matter what stage of development it has reached, nor whatever genetic, physical or mental resources he/she has been endowed with.

§3: The child is the greatest image of God.

§4: Everybody who receives a child in the name of Jesus, receives Jesus himself.

§5: The child proclaims the truth about God.

§6: Children have the right to respect and protection, because their holiness is so great by their innocence, that their angels in heaven see the face of God.

§7: The children have the right to come to Jesus and to be blessed by him; i.e. they have the right to be introduced to faith in Christ.

§8: The Kingdom of heaven belongs to the children. If we do not become like children, we have no place in the Kingdom of God. The one who makes himself little as a child, is the greatest in Heaven.

§9: The smaller and more vulnerable a child is, the more does it have a right to protection and care.

§ 10: All that we do or fail to do unto even the least of children, we do unto Christ himself.

3 THE SITUATION OF THE CHILD

Our next step is to take a look at the reality children are living under, and we must be aware that reality often is in great contrast to both civilian rights and divine commands.

Good material conditions

I will maintain, though, that generally speaking, children in the Nordic countries live under very good conditions – with regard to material wellbeing, health and possibilities of development. The mothers are entitled to adapted work during pregnancy, and they may have up to one year's leave after birth; some groups of fathers are also entitled to a period of leave, and the children are given a close follow up in the health care system. Children are given free health care until the age of 12. Kindergartens offer a pedagogic environment which is adapted to the children's age and need for playing, the schools also provide to a great degree teaching that has been specially adapted to the child's need for variation between theory, playing and practical exercise. The social welfare systems include a child subsidy, extra subsidies for single parents and for children who need special care, the right to ten days leave to care for ill children under the age of 12, a tax reduction for expenses related to child care up to the age of 6.

But material welfare is not everything.

The right to life is offended

We must state with sorrow that the child's right to life, the most basic of all rights, is threatened daily through different forms of practice legitimized in each country's law system and through attitudes within the population which have occurred because of permissiveness regarding general moral norms. The quick development within the fields of technology and biology has conditioned the law making to the detriment of the ethical and moral reflections on the dignity of the human person.

Unfortunately we have, as a consequence of the sexual liberation, interfered in the most intimate part of the process of conception, and separated sexuality's unifying and procreative means. As Pope Paul VI warned in 1968 in *Humanae Vitae*, the widespread introduction of contraceptives has resulted in a trivialization and permissiveness in sexual morals, causing young people to lose sight of moral law, making married couples more vulnerable to the temptation to infidelity, and by

destabilizing the equal dignity in the relationship between man and woman, opening up for a utilitarian view on each other as objects for self-satisfaction. Ever so often social scientists will discuss the need to regulate the number of childbirths referring to the claimed overpopulation.⁷ The good news of *Humanae Vitae*, proclaiming that woman and man were equally responsible partners in their disposition of their fertility and in the co-operation with the Creator, succumbed in the mentality of uproar of the sixties.

But we have gone still further. The contraceptive mentality has lead us to speak about planned and unplanned children in a scale never seen before, and the planned children give the parents social merit, while the unplanned children often are not wanted. Do we ever have the right to call a child unwanted?

Assisted fertilization – a two-edged sword

The development within biotechnology which has taken place the past 25 years, has brought us to a stage where we interfere in the biological processes of conception. In the beginning it was the desire to help involuntary sterile couples that stimulated the scientists to develop methods of assisted fertilization, but in the eagerness one failed to see what a two-edged sword this became, and that the fulfilling of the parents' dream was paid at a high price by many children. Conception was taken out of the frame of marital intercourse, and third parties were allowed to step in – as assisting health personnel and as sperm and egg donors. One overlooked the fact that the spouses' exclusive participation in the marital act had as one of its purposes to protect the child who might be conceived, and give them an origin that could be identified, a belonging to two named families.

To separate conception from intercourse has further lead to unintended and serious consequences, by a more and more widespread legalization of experimenting with embryos, and by a globalized commercialization of man's fertility. Today we can sort out embryos with unwanted genetic combinations, we can create donor children, provide designer babies according to the parents' dreams, put aside biological parenthood and cut off half or parts of the family tree.

Biotechnology, assisted fertilization and advanced fetus diagnostics are tools that today no longer are employed only for helping children into the world, but perhaps as much to get them out of this world or to make profit. Unfortunately we have reached so far that we can speak of a global market for children, where the hunger for profits of the fertility clinics set the conditions for a trade with human beings which exploits women in developing countries for surrogacy, and lets the child be thrown between different mothers – biological mother, mitochondry mother, surrogate mother, psychological mother, co-mothers or two fathers. Air bridges for embryo supplies over the continents are defended with the parents' happiness the fertility clinics provide, but very few people are aware of the objective realities: Only one third of the fertilization attempts succeed, the so-called surplus embryos are often used for research, and the number of embryos that are discarded or frozen highly overruns the number of children that will be born in the clinics. In this way, the clinics function simultaneously as life givers and executioners.

⁷ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 17, (1968).

The child is instrumentalized

In other words, the child has been transformed into an object for adults' dreams and hunting for status, instead of being received unconditionally for its own sake within the ideal setting God had given man and woman in marriage. The child's needs have been overrun by a mentality of claiming rights that have taken on the characteristics of a mentality of craving. The result is that the child's need to be received with unconditional love – no matter its appearance, capabilities or genetic pool; that its natural wish to know its roots and receive love and care from its biological parents – the mother and the father – as far as it is possible, today is denied by the laws in more and more countries. Paradoxically it is the child herself that reveals the anti-natural practice and the adults' lies, when she in simple innocence asks for its lacking father or mother. Who will listen to the child's question?

Abortion

Then there is the question of abortion, this darkest and bitter chapter in modern history, which is part of the painful experience of an endless number of women, women who often couldn't find any other way out, because neither their closest relatives nor society gave them support when they most needed. It is a deeply tragic witness of how closed human hearts can become. We are all aware of the plague the abortion laws represent: Two children every hour, 44 children every day are the dreading figures of abortions in Norway alone – i.e. more than 16.000 per year. In the Nordic countries the total number by 2007 was 78,700 aborted babies.⁸ This gives us 215 aborted children every day, 9 per hour. And little is said about the long term effects that the mothers have had to cope with in the aftermath. The abortion law is above all a collective failure, because the message to the woman is that society and people close to her are not willing to help neither her nor the child in a difficult situation. For a mind that in the beginning of a pregnancy is especially vulnerable, and that really had needed more care and protection, such a message puts out all hope, and no other way out than death seems possible.

When measures to prevent abortion mainly have concentrated on making contraceptives easily available, instead of encouraging women and men to a responsible use of their sexuality, and instead of giving women experiencing unplanned pregnancies sufficient social and economic security to be able to bring up their conceived children, it is not strange that the numbers of provoked abortions do not decline, and in some countries even rise.

Prenatal diagnostics

Further we see that the technological development within prenatal diagnostics have had the paradoxical and unwanted effect that more and more children with abnormal development are sorted out. This together with a struggle over the definition of disease, has had the result that amniocentesis, ultrasonography and genetic screening have been looked upon as a means to fight disease and by that could reduce suffering.⁹ Disease was presented as an unbearable threat, and

⁸ Source: The Norwegian pro-life organization, Menneskeverd. www.menneskeverd.no

⁹ www.menneskeverd.org/?cat=18.

suffering as an existence devoid of sense. Serious inheritable diseases gave the right to abortion. This has by far had the worst consequences for unborn with Down syndrome, who have been defined as ill, and almost have been declared unwanted – most of them are sorted out during pregnancy. Children with spina bifida run a similar risk. There is no longer room for people with disabilities in our idealized view of the world. This tells us that children with special needs are totally dependent of having parents with unusual perseverance and heroic courage, to be able to get from the state the health care and the welfare subsidies they need to live a worthy life.

The organization of society

If we then turn our eyes to another field, to how society is organized, we soon find out that there is a long way to go before this is done in harmony with the child's needs. Unfortunately, we have created structures of social character and in the building of society that disregard the child's worth in itself. Because materialistic thought for a long time has been allowed to define man as a unit of production and work as the highest benefit, individuals who do not "produce" are regarded as useless members of society, as a burden to the community. Working life schedules, health politics, welfare and tax rules, as well as education schedules are to a great extent made to favour work that gives an income and produces wealth (in a materialistic sense) and to satisfy the need for self-development of adult people, while the formation of man, the transmission of human values and traditions, the caring for and recognition of so-called non-productive individuals (children, housewives, sick and disabled, elderly people, outcasts) have been neglected. As soon as children are one year old, their contact with their parents will decrease drastically, as they are sent to kindergartens or daycare centres in order to make it possible for the parents to work and serve the state. The child's need for love from her parents and for their close follow-up is neglected or hindered, also because of increasingly longer school days.

This panorama over the child's situation presents a number of depressing issues that demand a change.

Causes

The causes of these conditions are several, and they are distributed between different levels of our existence:

The most basic causes are found in the spreading of ideologies which are hostile to man or deny God: Materialism (especially expressed through Marxism) – which denies God's existence and reduces man to organic matter; relativism – which opens up for subjective interpretations of the common moral law, and utilitarianism – which regards man as a means to achieve happiness and pleasure.

This again influences the individual citizen's attitude to himself and to his neighbor. When man no longer is regarded as created in God's image, life is no longer holy and inviolable, and can be treated without respect. When love no longer is the leading principle, then the logics of greed, hatred and death will influence all human relations.

This again influences the codes of law of each country. Where human dignity is not rooted in something outside and greater than man himself, the value of a human life will vary with time, power structures and material conditions. There are especially four changes in law which have affected the situation of the child negatively:

1. The introduction of the right to divorce.
2. The introduction of the right to provoked abortion.
3. The introduction of laws concerning biotechnology without a sufficient ethical basis.
4. The introduction of same-sex marriages.

In addition to this we have health politics that to a great extent have defined the most intimate space between man and woman as a question of biological health.

Through the introduction of the right to divorce, one broke with the prerequisites of the holy covenant between man and woman which God had joined together, and one disregarded the fact that marriage is as much an institution for the sake of the child as for the couple. Marriage is the setting that gives the child the best conditions for a safe upbringing, and that gives the child emotional and material stability in the most vulnerable years of his life. With the right to divorce, the adults break not only the covenant between each other, but also the contract with the child, and we all know something about the price the children pay when mom and dad chose to part with each other and the children's loyalty is torn between the two. This is probably the factor that casts long shadows over the lives of our children. Slowly we are realizing the need to give couples some guiding in the project of choosing the right partner for life, by offering a marriage preparation that enables them to give an informed and free vow of lifelong love, and the possibility of being able to live it out.

The law of abortion on demand disregards completely the child as a natural person with its own rights, and also the father's co-responsibility for the child. The abortion law and the biotechnology law break with the status marriage has as the "sanctuary of life" and as an exclusive relationship between man and woman. Same sex marriage laws, which have just been ratified in some of our Nordic countries go even further and abolish the biological relationship between the child and his parents, and take from the child its natural and basic right to a mother and a father.

4 PLACING THE CHILD IN THE CENTRE

When we now have achieved a slight overview of the child's civil and God-given rights, and of the conditions children are brought up under, I will now draw up some paths to follow to improve the situation of the child. Actually, we find them indicated in Jesus' own words to us, but we are often slow to perceive and to understand the transferring value Christ's words uttered almost 2,000 years ago can have for our present situation.

Welcoming the child in the name of Jesus

The first step is to take to the letter Jesus' invitation to receive the child in His name. We read both in the Gospel of Matthew and in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus says: "Whoever welcomes this child in my name, welcomes me." (Mt 10, 40; Lk 9, 48) It is necessary that we understand the importance of welcoming the child in Jesus' name, says Origen¹⁰, of recognizing Christ as really present in the little child that is conceived and born. As Christians we have a special call to show this inner reality of the child's coming into existence. The child is in its innocence, purity and vulnerability as Christlike as it is possible for a person to be. If we understand that, then we cannot but receive the child with the deepest awe, whenever it may arrive, whatever health condition is his, whichever family situation it is born into. It is Jesus Christ himself we receive!

This would help us spouses to see the marital union in a light of holiness, to discover what awesome co-operation with the Creator a fruitful marital union is, to give value to the struggle and hard work related to bear forth yet another child, even if it costs us nights of sleep and energy we do not think we have – because it is Christ himself we meet in the child!

In the light of the recent times' focus on child abuse, it gives special meaning to look at the child's personal integrity given by its likeness with Christ. The child's total trust in the persons surrounding him, the child's innocence and purity must inspire in us the deepest respect for him. Nobody has the right to abuse of the child's trust, to expose it to impressions or acts – it be in images, words, gestures or touch – that in any way offend or damage this holiness the child unconsciously is the bearer of. The problem of abuse also makes it clear to us how important it is on a long term basis that families give children all the love and moral values they need to relate to others when adults in a balanced, righteous and empathic way, with an eye for Christ in their neighbour.

The child at the centre

The next step has been suggested to us by our dear Pope John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, from 1986. It is as ingenious as it is simple: He points out that it is a basic task for the Church to reveal and put forth in history anew Christ's own example in placing the child in the heart of the Kingdom of God, like He did when He said: "Let the children come to me, and don not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mk 10, 14). In other words: To place the children in the centre!

To place the child at the centre, to place the child and the child's needs as the point of departure for how we organize our society – first of all in its primary community, the family, and then in the collective community – is the path to follow to make the world more humane, to let God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

To put children as the target group of society's structures – what would that mean? It would imply that the child would be guaranteed the right to life from conception, and following this, all other persons who are regarded as small, weak and burdensome – the ill, the poor, the elderly, those who fall out of our social structures. It would imply that embryos, fetuses and children with special needs would be guaranteed by law the right to special care; that parents who had a child diagnosed with

¹⁰ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Book XIII, 18.

any abnormality would get the message: Yes, but we will stand up for the child and for you, no matter! That parents with children with Down's syndrome might hear: Yes, she has that little extra. It is a challenge, but because of that she and you will also get extra assistance.

To place the child at the centre would mean that working life would be organized in such a way that the child would be given as much time as possible and be educated by her primary care-giving persons – the parents! That again would mean that the family would dispose of more time to be a family. It would also affect the tax and welfare systems, changing them so that they would take into consideration the real burden of sustaining a family, and that economy would be ordered according to a principle of reciprocity, instead of being guided by profit. This would mean that love work – or care-giving work, as the state likes to call it – would be valued and incorporated in the BNP.

As Church and as individual believers we are called to realize God's Kingdom on earth. It is actually decisive for our societies to follow Christ's example of placing the child in the heart of God's Kingdom. The child needs its parents' love; it needs a family where it can grow up to learn to become a good citizen. And society needs to be shaped according to the needs of the weakest and most vulnerable to become a good place to live. This does not need to remain a utopian vision! The more we are that want to start building both family and society on the basis of the child's need for love and affection, the quicker we will see a change in people's attitudes, in all human relationships, in the priorities our authorities make in our countries. I will challenge us all to spread this idea. Then we will contribute to promote what Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II called the Civilization of Love.

Strengthening the family

The final measure I would suggest as important to promote the child's conditions of life and strengthen its position in society, is the strengthening of the families. We see that our authorities all too often do not act until the damage is done, until the family has collapsed. The costs for society induced by such a mentality are enormous. On the other hand it is a fact that preventive measures are without comparison much less expensive and has a much better effect. Here in Norway the costs following divorce ascend to thousands of millions of NOK, due to absence from work, mental health, decreased working capacity, double households, increased social payouts, etc. In comparison the Norwegian state grants only 4 million NOK to measures of prevention against the collapse of families.

The most effective way to protect the child and its rights is to care for marriage, recognize the vocation to motherhood and fatherhood, and the parents' status as their child's first educators.

Marriage preparation

The Church has for years now spoken in favour of a systematic marriage preparation. In *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II described how this preparation should be built up in all dioceses. It has taken some time to implement this invitation; in the Catholic Diocese of Oslo the Family Centre was established in its actual form in the summer of 2002, and was able to offer marriage preparation courses from January 2005. I would recommend that similar diocesan offices be established in all the Nordic countries.

Evangelization of the family

Further it is of the highest importance to direct concrete measures of evangelization towards the family, where the dioceses recognize that the family is both a subject and an object of the evangelization. The family is not only the most important arena of social learning, it is also the Domestic Church, the most important transmitter of the Christian faith to new generations, and a primary school for prayer. To pray for families, to teach the families to pray, and to enable the parents to becoming good and loving parents are infinitely good contributions to make the world a better place to live for our children.

Parents: Show God's love!

Finally I would present yet another aspect Pope John Paul II pointed out in *Familiaris Consortio*, which strongly would contribute to change the child's situation in a positive direction. He says that when the spouses experience the joy of becoming parents, we are given a new responsibility from God: To be for the children the visible sign of God's own love. Do we sometimes think about that? To be for the children the visible sign of God's love. I believe that we all can admit that we parents need to be reminded of this quite often, so that we in all daily encounters with our children act as far as possible as we think God would have done. This has much significance for the way we speak to our child and the way we treat our child. It is not about being naïve or overly kind, but about being there for the child when the child needs us. To be for the children the visible sign of God's love means to meet them with patience and magnanimity, willing to help, to meet them with truth, consideration, attention, mercy and trust. What a difference it would make for all children to grow up in such encouraging and at the same time clearly educating, unconditional love! A positive, mutual and reinforcing relationship of love would grow forth – and mirror the Trinity's inner love.

The child evangelizes the parents

And then we will experience the miracle that the child will speak to us about God, evangelize its own parents. I am sure that many parents here have witnessed that God himself has spoken through their children, sometimes in surprising, unexpected ways; other times as an affirmation of what a wonderful dwelling place the child is for the Holy Spirit, or how creative, small theologians children intuitively are able to be. I will finish this speech with two tiny anecdotes to illustrate this: At a certain occasion, when our family within the space of 24 hours had to decide whether it would move abroad to a country far off or not, our fourth son who was not yet five years old spontaneously exclaimed: - But Mummy, then we have to pray the Rosary, so that we can know what God wants us to do! So we did, and the decision was unanimous; we moved abroad and had three blessed years out in the sands of Qatar. On another occasion, when my eldest son was a little more than two years old, he was sitting on his bedside ruminating about the being of God, and he reached the conclusion that God was blue coloured. – Ok, I said, rather sceptical, but how can you know that? – Well, you see, Mummy; we cannot see God, and therefore He must be blue, just like Heaven!

And in such precious moments, when we catch a glimpse of Christ in our own child, when we find God's image having materialized in our own arms, then we may exclaim in awe: - Is it You? My God, is it You?!