



September 20, 2009 The Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me...”—Mark 9:37

Dear Friends;

In our society we hold children as something to be nurtured and for which we care. We invest time, energy and money to make sure our children get the best we can give them. However, in cultures where there are high birthrates and high infant mortality rates children often have a low standing in the cultural hierarchy.

It was this kind of situation in which Jesus lived. In the Greco Roman world a child was one step above the slaves. A father could kill wife or children or sell them into slavery with impunity.

Even in the Jewish world, children were treated as low in social standing. So when Jesus embraces a child and tells the disciples that to embrace such a child is to embrace him would have been shocking. What Jesus is saying is that he is to be identified with the least, the lowliest, the broken and marginalized.

To follow Jesus means to become lowly and like a child in that society, a servant. We value children now because they (like the poor) reveal to us the Jesus who humbled himself to become one with us. In caring for children and the poor we encounter Jesus. To embrace Jesus like this is what he means when we are invited to the cross—sacrificial love.

Out of the 6.6 billion people in the world today, 629 million are children under the age of 5, and 2.2 billion are under the age of 18. The life expectancy of those born (2007) in the industrialized countries is 79 years, in the least developed countries it is 55 years.

UNICEF recently released new figures that show the rate of deaths of children under five years of age continued to decline in 2008. The United Nations data shows a 28 per cent decline in the under-five mortality rate, from 90 deaths per 1000 live births in 1990, to 65 deaths per 1000 live births in 2008. According to these estimates, the absolute number of child deaths in 2008 declined to an estimated 8.8 million from 12.5 million in 1990, the base line year for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

“Compared to 1990, 10,000 fewer children are dying every day,” said UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman. “While progress is being made, it is unacceptable that each year 8.8 million children die before their fifth birthday.”

The children of our world still need our embrace. In sub-Saharan Africa the estimated number of children infected with HIV in 2007 is 1.8 million. There also are 11.6 million children who have been left orphaned by AIDS. Due to ignorance and poverty child marriage is highly prevalent in South Asia—girls as young as ten years old forced to marry men many times their age. It is estimated as many as forty-nine percent are forced into such arranged marriages.

Recently a 12 year-old Yemeni girl forced into a child marriage died along with her baby in giving birth. The younger a girl is when she becomes pregnant the higher the risk for her and her baby. Girls under fifteen are five times more likely to die in child-birth than young women in their 20's.

As Christians we are called by Jesus to not only pray for those in need. We are also invited to embrace them and try to answer the prayer of their needs. I would like to suggest that we begin by educating ourselves. Take a look at the UNICEF website. Also subscribe to a worthy missionary effort such as Maryknoll (*I have a Maryknoll classmate, Fr. Richard Bauer working with children with HIV/AIDS or orphaned by it in Namibia, if you would like to help him I can put you in contact*) or Bread for the World. You can find information by googling their names.

Children are our future. They need our embrace we need theirs.

Peace,

Fr. Ron