Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns’ Update
April 2000

Children’s Rights
One of the thematic areas of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns (OGC) is children’s rights. We believe that every pastoral effort relates directly or indirectly with children, their needs and their rights. The theoretical framework for our work is the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), which the Vatican was the second state to ratify. Many Catholic institutions have fully supported the CRC since its conception, drafting, adoption and its implementation processes. It is also a UN treaty that had reached nearly universal ratification; only the United States and Somalia have not yet ratified it.

Ratification means that the state party to the Convention assumes the responsibility for incorporating the CRC provisions into its national legislation. A committee periodically monitors countries’ implementation of the Convention. Among the UN treaties, the CRC is believed to have achieved important gains in favor of children worldwide; and certainly the notion and awareness of children’s rights is growing. Maryknoll OGC staff members are part of the UNICEF/NGO Working Group on the Rights of the Child that focus on the CRC implementation.

While many prefer to talk about children and youth as two different stages of human life span, there is a growing consensus that children are all persons under 18 years of age, in accordance with the CRC. This is an important provision because special protections can be extended until 18, when adulthood begins.

The Maryknoll OGC follows children’s rights by networking with others through the UN, UNICEF/NGO working groups, coalitions, campaigns, and other NGOs. The OGC’s communication with Maryknollers overseas on children’s issues that may relate with their work is still limited, but our documentation on children’s issues is growing. One hope is to build a thematic list of documents and resources that can facilitate the work of Maryknollers on the “front line.” More specifically, we are working on the following issues or themes:

The Rights of the Girl Child
Since discrimination against girls is a problem around the world, but especially in some of the countries were Maryknollers work, this is an area of particular concern. The OGC is part of the UNICEF/NGO Working Group on Girls and the International Network for Girls (Maryknoll contact persons received information and materials about this network), which introduced and now monitors the implementation of Commitment 14 of the Beijing Platform for Action, the “Girl-Child commitment.” Girls are often invited by the Working Group to speak at the UN in different fora, thus promoting girls’ right to participate and express themselves according to the CRC. Additionally, the Working Group has lobbied for new legislation in African countries to ban female circumcision. The implementation of the rights of girls are closely linked to two other thematic issues of concern: sexual exploitation and the right to education.
Child prostitution and sexual exploitation
Several Maryknollers have worked with children (and women) victims of sexual exploitation, which is an issue of special concern in Asia, but also a widespread problem in Latin America and Africa. In this area OGC networks directly with and supports the work of ECPAT-USA (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes). The OGC also networks with the Coalition against Trafficking in Women and Children, and the National Council of Churches of Christ which coordinates the lobbying of the U.S. Congress on legislation related with sexual trafficking of women and children.

There is a clear link between sexual exploitation and the HIV/AIDS pandemic; the OGC works closely with the Maryknoll AIDS Task Force to provide information and materials for individuals on this issue.

The Right to Education
According to UNICEF, 130 million children of primary school age in developing countries do not attend school and almost two thirds of these children are girls. As education is fundamental for the enforcement of other individual rights and is a condition for social development, we have taken a leadership role in the preparatory process for Copenhagen Plus Five, the UN Special Session that follows up on the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995. We convened a Task Force with the participation of three UNICEF/NGO Working Groups—Rights of the Child, Education, and the Girl Child—and assumed the task of drafting a paper that had the input and signature of 17 NGOs with Consultative Status and was officially published by the UN, as part of the documentation for the preparatory process of Copenhagen Plus Five. In the lobby process, vis-a-vis government representatives, we are promoting the idea of debt cancellation in exchange for education in the poorest countries. We also participate in the UNICEF/NGO Working Group on Education.

Protection of Children from Armed Conflict
This is an area of special concern in relation to Africa, where the most recent armed conflicts are taking place with devastating consequences for children and a widespread use of children as soldiers. UNICEF indicates that around 300,000 children are participating in war as combatants. In the last four years NGOs and the international community have achieved important gains in relation to war and children, like the new treaty on landmines, an issue that is of special concern for Maryknollers in Asia. Also concrete efforts are being made to remove and clean fields of landmines, which have killed and maimed so many innocent victims, created orphans, and eliminated the use of some lands for agricultural purposes.

Another important gain is the recently adopted optional protocol to the CRC, directed to the non-participation of children in war. Maryknoll used its resources to the maximum to campaign and lobby the U.S. Congress in favor of this protocol, which for many years was blocked by the U.S. We are working against the proliferation of small arms that facilitate armed conflicts and children’s participation in them by participating in the U.S. Campaign to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and other networks, and in the UNICEF/NGO Working Group on Children in Armed Conflict.
Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC)
The Arigatou Foundation, a Buddhist organization in Japan, invited the OGC to participate in the GNRC initiative. Maryknollers in many ways have expressed their enthusiasm at participating in this child-focused, interreligious network. We are part of the first GNRC Forum Management Committee and will chair one of the Study Groups at the Forum (May 2000), where six Maryknollers will participate; we aimed for a group of Maryknollers who work for children, with geographical, gender and Maryknoll entities balance. We expect to establish a significant relationship between the GNRC and Maryknoll’s work for children.

A meeting on Children’s Rights in Latin America sponsored by Maryknoll
At the initiative and request of Fr. Pete Byrne (Peru), the OGC is preparing a meeting for 2001 for Maryknollers working on children’s issues, and other Catholic and non-Catholic activists with experience in children’s rights. We want to initiate a reflection, based on our pastoral experiences and challenges, which will foster awareness of the implications of different pastoral ministries for children’s rights, and will enhance our commitment to children and children’s rights as an organization. New initiatives are taking place to connect religious practices and children’s rights, such as the above-mentioned GNRC and a recent world congress on religion and children’s rights held in Israel, among others. It seems that the momentum for this linkage is intensifying 10 years after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which many religious workers are devoted to implementing. The first preparatory meeting for this 2001 meeting was held in Lima last February with participation from members of all three Maryknoll entities and the Affiliate Program.


The extensive study guide for the series was done by the staff at NETWORK in Washington, D.C. In addition, one episode of “The Field Afar (Lima)” deals with the work of Pete Byrne (see http://www.maryknoll.org/MALL/VIDEO/fldvid6.htm).

Maryknollers and Affiliates get a 50 percent discount on all videos.