

**INTERVENTION BY THE HOLY SEE DELEGATION
AT THE II CONFERENCE ON THE COMMERCIAL
EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN**

Yokohama (Japan)
Friday, 21 December 2001

Mr Chairman,

Children have a right to an innocent childhood. Children are by nature lovely, innocent, and trusting of adults, yet some of them are today increasingly robbed of their very childhood. They are preyed upon by media, market forces, and people who exploit them sexually. But children are the very hope and future of society, and must be protected and helped in every respect.

Sexual exploitation of children is a crime so heinous that one is at a loss to express his or her reactions and feelings. Both trafficking in women and children, sex tourism, and child pornography on the internet have increased enormously since the first conference on the commercial exploitation of children in Stockholm in 1996. The combination of an amoral free market and sexual decadence, and poverty and weak family structures explain this shocking truth.

Mr. Chairman, in the view of the Holy See, there can be no tolerance of commercial exploitation of children, either in the name of free expression or free choice. Children are never consenting sexual partners; they are always victims. The Convention on the Rights of the Child underlines this fact: the best interest of the child is always the key. We must be attentive to any attempt to relativize the crimes here committed. Sexual abuse is evil, a criminal act, and punishable. We must gather much more political will to combat these crimes against our weakest, and we must strengthen both international law, instruments of extradition and extra-territoriality.

As a mother of four children between ten and sixteen I am daily concerned about the threats posed by media, internet, and the general sexual decadence of our society. The 'sexualization' of childhood, driven by market forces, contributes to robbing children of their natural innocence. The presentation of sex as something normal at an ever earlier age, also leads to a 'sexualization' of childhood which in turn invites abusers and may even allow them to seek 'normalization' and legitimacy of their crimes.

Mr. Chairman, the combination of poverty and weak family relations often explains why children are involved in 'sex tourism' or become the victims of trafficking. Poverty must and can be combatted

through more development aid. Here both international organizations and local communities must have a say. The shameful sex tourism in many developing countries must be combatted on the supply side as well as on the demand side. The poor family in the developing world can and must be helped, and the clients-exploiters can and must be detected and punished effectively through international legal cooperation. Here promising developments involving extra-territorial legality are important. Both sex tourism and internet child pornography are global phenomena, and must be combatted with truly global political weapons.

But above all the main strategy to fight commercial sex abuse of children is to strengthen the family. As Pope John Paul II recently underlined, "the family is under threat from widespread offences against human dignity, such as the sexual exploitation of women and children" (17th November 2001). Although sexual abuse of children sadly also happens in the family context, as a main rule it is in the family that the child is taught what a natural mother-father-child relationship is. Only in the family can the child have the necessary protection against a predatory society that does not have the best interest of the child in mind. We must now face up to the fact that not only are poor children from failed or poor nations abused, but also children from the very heart of Western society, with its affluence and consumer richness. There is a major moral crisis at hand. The regional meetings at Rabat and Bangkok have clearly pointed out, in their final statements, that child sexual exploitation is also due to "the decline in values". Family break-down and weakening happens, while society becomes more predatory in the area of sexuality. As research shows, child abusers are not only paedophiles, but also adolescents and adults who have a thwarted view of sexuality. The combination of sex and violence in media, entertainment, and the normalization of sexual experimentation easily lead to perversions that involve abuse not only of women, but of children.

Once we see human beings as objects, once we forget that they have been created by God with an unalienable dignity, they can simply be used and abused. Sexual abuse of children is the logical extreme of such a view of the human being. Therefore, we must analyse the root causes of this crime while at the same time we must fight its occurrence in all the various ways suggested in the draft plan of action. We must do so with more vigour and greater political will. Mr. Chairman, my delegation welcomes the great effort made to bring this work forward by the combined effort of UNICEF, the government of Japan, and all the parties present at this conference. The Holy See will do its part, according to its specific nature and competence, to combat the evil of commercial sexual abuse of children, a crime that must never be compromised with or excused. We must look deeply in

our own societies, confronting the lack of sound sexual behaviour, the dominance of a consumerist culture that sees human beings as objects, and the licentiousness of some media which speculate in violence and sexual perversions. We must react as citizens, and as politicians to ensure moral standards in our states and in international society. We must foster, as stated in Dhaka, "the reinforcement of positive cultural, religious and moral values and practices, which protect and promote the rights and the dignity of both girls and boys".

Finally, Mr. Chairman, allow me to make mine the verses of the well-known poet Khalil Gibran: "Your children are not your children, they are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself; they come through you but not from you, and tough they are with you yet they belong not to you".