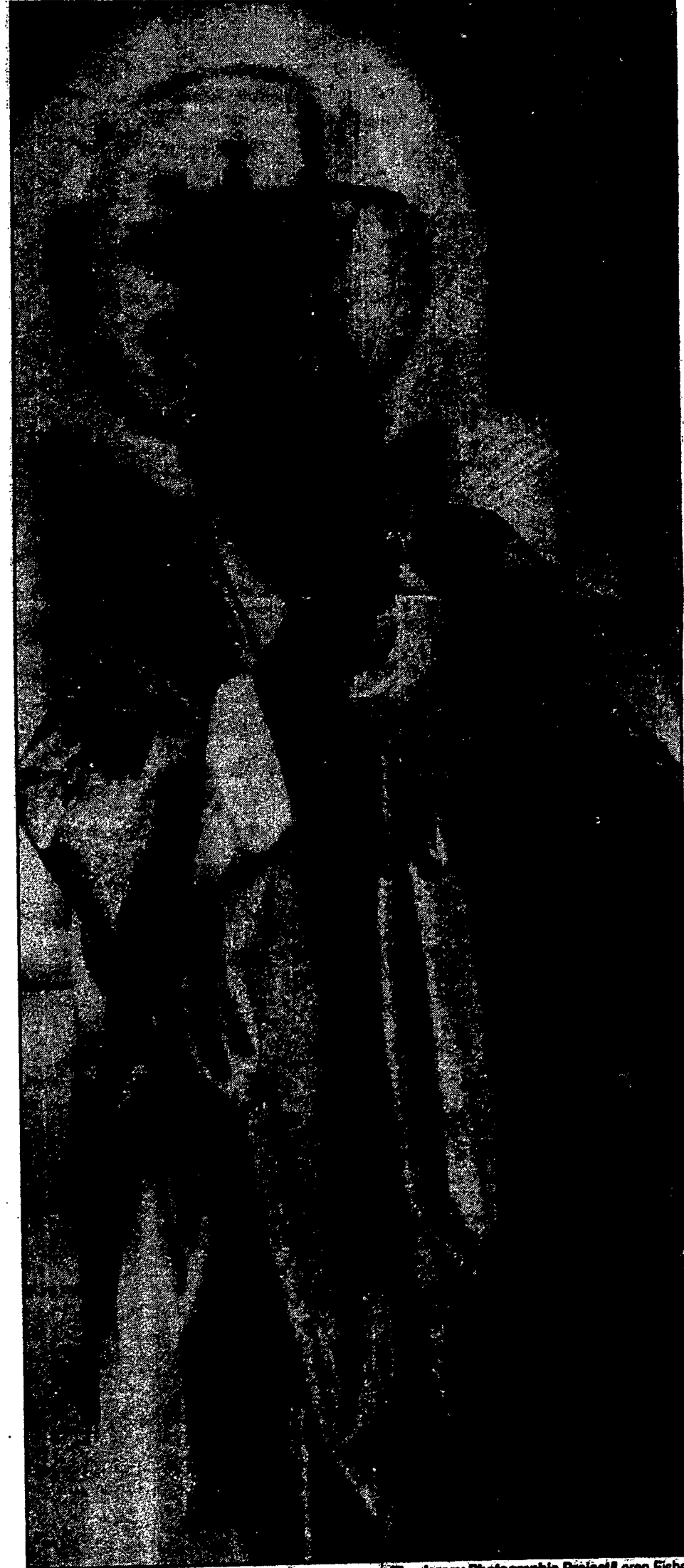


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Let us give children a future of peace Pope calls for concern for young people



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Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Children have a right to grow up surrounded by peace and love, free of abuse and exploitation, Pope John Paul II said in his message for the World Day of Peace.

"Children are not a burden on society; they are not a means of profit or people without rights. Children are precious members of the human family, for they embody its hopes, its expectations and its potential," said the pope's peace day message, released Dec. 12 at the Vatican.

The theme for the Jan. 1, 1996, celebration was: "Let us give children a future of peace."

The papal message was released one day after the U.N. Children's Fund published its annual report on the state of the world's children, providing statistics on the "inhuman sufferings" the pope condemned.

As a result of wars and conflicts over the last 10 years, the UNICEF report said, 2 million children were killed, between 4 million and 5 million were left disabled, 1 million were left orphaned or cannot find their parents and an estimated 10 million have suffered psychological trauma.

"The deliberate killing of a child is one of the most disturbing signs of the breakdown of all respect for human life," the pope said in his message.

In the message, which Vatican ambassadors deliver to heads of states around the world, the pope condemned governments and armed groups that have ignored international agreements to give special protection to children in times of war, leading to "a veritable slaughter" of youngsters.

With the peace message, Pope John Paul "wants to embrace all children who suffer and all healthy and happy children and say to all grown-ups: 'Let us give children a future of peace. They are only children,'" said Cardinal Roger Etcheagaray, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

The cardinal, who often visits world trouble spots on behalf of the pope, said he has shed many tears at the sight of children murdered or maimed in war or toting guns, forced to join the fighting.

"Peace, a gift of God, is in the hands of adults," the cardinal said at a Dec. 12 press conference. "Children never start wars; they don't know how to organize themselves to exploit the weak."

The cardinal said there has been a "horrendous escalation" of wars' impact on civilians, especially children, since the turn of the century.

In World War I, he said, an estimated 10 percent of the victims were civilians. The proportion rose to 50 percent in World War II; 80 percent of the victims of the Vietnam War and 90 percent of

the victims of the Lebanese conflict were civilians, "many of them women and children."

"Children's faces should always be happy and trusting, but at times they are full of sadness and fear. How much have these children already seen and suffered in the course of their short lives!" Pope John Paul said in his message.

In addition to condemning war, exploitation of child workers, forced prostitution, rape and the recruitment of child soldiers, the papal message condemned abuse of children in the home, the breakup of families and the "dismal loneliness" of children left by themselves for hours each day as both parents work.

Children imitate the behavior of the adults around them, the pope said.

"They rapidly learn love and respect for others, but they also quickly absorb the poison of violence and hatred," he said.

Even if they do not grow up under the shadow of war and civil conflict, many children's main contact with the world is through television programs filled with violence or immorality, the pope said.

"It is no wonder if this kind of widespread and pernicious violence also has its effect on their young hearts, changing their natural enthusiasm into disillusionment or cynicism, and their instinctive goodness into indifference or selfishness," the pope said.

If a young child's world is filled with parental arguments, examples of selfishness, violence and disdain for others, he said, they are not experiencing the childhood they have a right to and they will have a difficult time being peacemakers themselves.

Pope John Paul repeated a request he made before the September U.N. conference on women, asking Catholic schools and institutions to give priority to helping girls and young women, especially those growing up under war or extreme poverty.

"I ask them to help girls who have suffered as a result of war and violence, to teach boys to acknowledge and respect the dignity of women and to help all children to rediscover the tenderness of the love of God," he said.

The papal message, in addition to condemning acts of war and exploitation against children, also outlines steps parents and teachers can take to develop the inherent peacemaking potential of children.

The family, the pope said, is the first place children learn to love and respect others, to share and to resolve conflicts peacefully.

Pope John Paul praised school programs that teach children to resolve their own conflicts and asked educators to include in their lessons stories of successful peacemakers and peacemaking, rather than focusing simply on wars and victories in battle.

"Let us give children a future of peace! This is the confident appeal which I make to men and women of good will, and I invite everyone to help children to grow up in an environment of authentic peace. This is their right and it is our duty."

The Jersey Photographic Project/Loren Fisher

Pope John Paul II celebrates Mass at Giants Stadium during his visit to the United States Oct. 4-8, 1995.

Excerpts from the pope's message can be found on page 10