

Responding to unaccompanied refugee and migrant children:

A snapshot of perspectives and practices from ICMC's member bishop conferences

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Executive summary

Children are first and foremost human beings with fundamental rights. They cannot be left voiceless and invisible, and their best interests must be recognized, respected and protected¹.

Today an estimated 535 million children live in countries suffering

from conflict or natural disaster – conditions which have a detrimental effect on their best interests and force many millions of them to take flight, hundreds of thousands even without the protection of their parents².

Aware of this vulnerability and suffering, the Catholic Church and Bishops' Conferences around the world—members of the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC)—act in myriad ways to welcome and support unaccompanied migrant children whatever their journey, location or immigration circumstance. Activities range from child welfare programmes to pursuing best interests determinations (BIDs), family tracing and reunification.

This snapshot is organized in three parts. First, it frames current context of key causes and consequences of international forced displacement with a major focus on children

Brothers and sisters

“It is necessary to take every possible measure to ensure protection and defense to migrant children as well as their integration, into host societies. These, our brothers and sisters, especially if unaccompanied, are exposed to many dangers – dangers that include being taken and sold into slavery, often sexual slavery”.

- Pope Francis

Source: Vatican Radio, *Pope Francis at Angelus: special care for migrant children*, 15 January 2017.

¹ Most Reverend Stephan Heße, Most Reverend Georges Colomb, *Communiqué commun des évêques allemand et français en responsabilité auprès des migrants à l'occasion de la Journée mondiale du migrant et du réfugié 2017*, 11 January 2017.

² UNICEF, Press Release, *Nearly a quarter of the world's children live in conflict or disaster-stricken countries: UNICEF*, 9 December 2016.

unaccompanied or separated from their families. It then presents a field-based perspective of a selection of activities and actions undertaken by ICMC’s member Bishop Conferences worldwide – mainly on best interests determination (BID), detention, and trafficking. Along the way, a series of text boxes and citations will offer examples of effective response and good practice by Church actors and programmes on the ground. Finally, a set of recommendations is provided, addressed to the major stakeholders involved in responding to the phenomenon of unaccompanied children on the move³.

Unaccompanied children “are children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so”.

Source: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Recommended principles to guide actions concerning children on the move and other children affected by migration*, June 2016.

I. Current context

Many countries are now experiencing poverty, war, persecution, climate change, natural disasters, violence, and human rights violations which force people to flee to other countries in hopes first, of immediate safety, and then of a brighter future. In this context, in 2016, 65 million people were forcibly displaced; *among them, 20 million children moved outside their country – 11 million of whom were refugees and asylum-seekers*⁴. Children⁵ are among the most vulnerable, both because they are children and further, children affected by migration.

Churches building awareness together

The starting point to boost action is awareness: in Texas, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference has endorsed a campaign which aims to inform the local population about the living conditions of unaccompanied or separated children in detention centres. The Church helps communities and institutions to welcome and support them at their arrival, offering them health, education, and social services.

Source: Diocese of Atlanta, United States, *Children at Border Inspire Atlantans to Support Texas Church’s Ministry*, 22 July 2014.

Forced migration undermines family unity in countless ways, including the risk that children – either remaining at home or on the move – may be left alone and unprotected.

³ In developing this snapshot, it was determined that a qualitative methodological approach would most suitably meet the objective of fostering awareness and actions toward the phenomenon of unaccompanied children. Articles, publications, and statements on the issue released by the Bishop Conferences around the world from 2014 were collected and screened. Salient information and good practices have been logically presented.

⁴ UNICEF, *Uprooted. The Growing Crisis for Refugee and Migrant Children*, September 2016.

⁵ “A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” – Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.

Often the whole family does not have the possibility to migrate together. As a consequence, in some cases parents compelled to undertake the journey will entrust their children to relatives or neighbours in their country of origin; in other cases, parents aiming to give their children the possibility of safety and a better future, send them to another country where some of their relatives live⁶.

Since 2011, for example, there was a sharp increase in the number of children migrating north – many of them unaccompanied – from Central America, specifically El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. While they were still in their home countries, many experienced violence and coercion perpetrated from local and transnational criminal

A child's voice, and choice

Marta, age 16, was born and raised in El Salvador [...]. She reports having a very happy childhood [...] but now she is separated from everyone she knows in the world, because she had to flee for her life. One day back home, Marta witnessed a fellow student's death as he was shot in the back by the gangs on his way home from school. Then the threats against Marta began. Members of the La Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) gang have repeatedly tried to recruit Marta to assist them in their criminal activities and have threatened to kill her and her family. Marta has been beaten, and threatened with a machete by gang members [...]. Marta's choice was to flee the country, join the criminal gang, or possibly be killed. [...] Marta cries repeatedly out of fear for her family's safety and is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder [...].*

*Name changed to protect child's identity

Source: USCCB, *Testimony of Most Reverend Mark Seitz Bishop of the Diocese of El Paso, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Unaccompanied Children House Committee on Homeland Security, 3 July 2014.*

organizations and gangs. Throughout the region, children face widespread extortion, kidnapping, threats and forcible recruitment into criminal activities⁷. At times even schools become recruitment grounds for criminal people having the specific intention of exploiting children for working, sexual, and other illegal purposes and of stealing remittance money (earnings) that they receive from their parents⁸.

“Organized criminal groups are active in many communities, and the

government is unable to curb their influence because of corruption, lack of political-will or lack of resources. Law enforcement personnel, low-paid and low skilled, are compromised by these criminal elements”⁹.

Among the children, those without parents at home have been especially vulnerable. As illustrated in the story highlighted in the box here, many are left with only two stark

⁶ Österreichische Bischofskonferenz (Bishops Conference of Austria), *Presseerklärungen zur Herbstvollversammlung der Österreichischen Bischofskonferenz*, 9-12 November 2015.

⁷ Most Reverend Dennis M. Schnurr, Archbishop of Cincinnati, Ohio, United States, *Letter released on July 28, 2014*, in *The Catholic Telegraph*, 2014.

⁸ USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), *Mission to Central America: The Flight of Unaccompanied Children to the United States*, November 2013.

⁹ Most Reverend Mark Seitz, in USCCB, *Testimony of Most Reverend Mark Seitz Bishop of the Diocese of El Paso, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops On Unaccompanied Children House Committee on Homeland Security*, 3 July 2014.

options: to stay and become victims of criminal gangs, facing bodily harm or even death, or to undertake a perilous journey to reach their family¹⁰.

Not just in one region but worldwide, such journeys trap more and more children into smuggling and trafficking networks. According to the United Nations, more than 500 different traffic flows were detected between 2012 and 2014—!—with children comprising more than one in four of the victims¹¹. Through deception, coercion, and abuse of the children's vulnerability, unscrupulous smugglers and human traffickers violate their human rights by systematically reducing them into slavery or servitude for bonded or forced labour, prostitution, pornography, and begging. "*These children are disadvantaged by being foreigners and have no means to protect themselves, hence should be looked after*"¹².

For many along the way and in some countries even after arrival, exploitative labour situations compel at-risk and unaccompanied migrant children to work between 10 and 12 hours a day, while living in extremely poor conditions. As far as young girls are concerned, sexual slavery and the risk of rape are sometimes associated with further forms of trafficking, including – particularly in some regions – for early marriage and bride-selling¹³.

Such experiences cause severe pain and multiple grave trauma to children, many of whom are forced to pretend they are adults to take part in illegal activities. Far too often, at the first sign of trouble or when they start to be a burden, criminals abandon the children, dramatically magnifying their fragility¹⁴.

Once they arrive in a different country, migrant children, whether accompanied or not, are commonly susceptible to other forms of rights violations. On the one hand, many have to pay their smugglers for what they owe them for the journey; on the other hand, authorities often fail to provide them with protection and assistance to address their basic needs – or the children are too afraid to come forward for it, even when desperately needed¹⁵.

¹⁰ Episcopal Church Diocese of Iowa, United States, *Let the children come*, in The Des Moines Register, 18 July 2014.

¹¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2016*, 2016.

¹² Joseph Alessandro, in Achiego, R., *Kenya: Protect Child Migrants and Refugee*, in Vatican Radio, 19 January 2017.

¹³ USCCB, *Refuge & Hope in the Time of ISIS: The Urgent Need for Protection, Humanitarian Support, and Durable Solutions in Turkey, Bulgaria, and Greece*, January 2015.

¹⁴ Diocese of Central New York, United States, *A Call to Action in Response to Unaccompanied Children and Immigration Reform*, in Syracuse.com, 22 August 2014.

¹⁵ USCCB, *Mission to Central America: The Flight of Unaccompanied Children to the United States*, November 2013.

Law enforcement authorities apprehend a large number of migrant children on the move or residing without regular immigration status, and put them in detention centres, often for longer than 72 hours; there, they are also separated from their communities. Many see themselves as prisoners; and this perception triggers particular trauma deriving from arbitrary and indefinite detention, which is especially cruel and inappropriate for children¹⁶. In fact, international human rights standards and authorities are emphatic that detention of children on account of their immigration status or that of their parent(s) is *never* in their best interests and is always a violation of their fundamental rights¹⁷. This is further explored in Section 2 of this report.

Addressing the phenomenon of unaccompanied migrant children has become a humanitarian imperative. The violation of the rights of these young people reveals three sources of vulnerability: they are children, they are unaccompanied migrant children, and many are children without the protection to which they are entitled under widely ratified international and regional human rights Conventions.

“While it is right to keep silent when children are asleep, it is never right to stay silent when they are perishing at sea or at risk in hostile camps”.

Source: Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster, United Kingdom, in Caldwell, S., *Cardinal Nichols Welcomes Government U-turn on Child Refugees*, in *Catholic Herald*, 5 May 2016.

¹⁶Diocese of Maryland, United States, *Humanity at heart of border crisis*, in *The Frederick News-Post*, 26 June 2014.

¹⁷ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. Abolishing migrant detention “*does not mean giving up on managing one’s borders, including decisions over who enters a country and who can stay. It means investing in alternative measures to manage migration effectively, which are not as far-reaching and harmful as detention. [...] States should ensure that case management and coaching are an integral part of these alternatives, as well as assurances that basic needs can be met. These factors help ensure the protection of their human dignity and also encourage positive engagement with the authorities*”. Nils Muižnieks, Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, in International Detention Coalition (IDC), “*It’s Time to Invest in Alternatives to Detention*” – *Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner*, 8 February 2017.

Catholic Bishops' Conferences responding

1. Best Interests Determination (BID)

Unaccompanied migrant children “*should be ensured the same rights as all other children, including birth registration, proof of identity, a nationality and access to education, health care, housing, and social protection*”¹⁸.

On the ground, Bishops' Conferences and other Church actors work to bring these principles to life, providing services that meet children's short-term and long-term needs, adopting child-friendly protocols and mechanisms, and guaranteeing non-discriminatory protection.

Implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, practitioners and child welfare professionals trace migrant children's origin, identity and circumstances in order to screen and assess their needs and any specific claim they may have to humanitarian protection. As a matter of fact, some Church actors suggest that, irrespective of how they move, these children should be recognized either as refugees or as beneficiaries of some other form of complementary protection¹⁹.

Article 3, paragraph 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child—ratified by all except one of the current 193 UN member states²⁰—states that “*in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts, administrative*

His own words

“Everywhere I have gone, I have always remembered that the URM [unaccompanied refugee minor] program and my foster home built up a seed in me. URM showed me the best side of living with hope. URM receives minors from different places in the world, and embrace their unique culture. They raise each individual with love, care and wisdom. For the short time we were together, I humbly come to the acceptance that you shaped my inner self. I will live with what you taught me and share it with every heart that I meet in this world.”

A youth's departing words to program staff in Jackson, Mississippi, on completing participation in the program

Source: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *The United States Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program: Guiding Principles and Promising Practices*, 2013.

¹⁸ OHCHR, *Recommended principles to guide actions concerning children on the move and other children affected by migration*, Principle 1, June 2016. See also Article 24, paragraph 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states in turn that “*Every child shall have, without any discrimination as to race, color, sex, language, religion, national or social origin, property or birth, the right to such measures of protection as are required by his status as a minor, [...]*”.

¹⁹ *Declaración conjunta de los obispos de Estados Unidos, México, El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras sobre la crisis de los niños migrantes (Joint Declaration of the Bishops of the United States, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras on the Crisis of Child Migrants)*, 10 June 2014.

²⁰ The sole exception is the United States, which to date has ratified the protocol to the Convention but not the Convention itself.

Best interest Determination (BID) Process

ICMC's experts in child protection, best-interest assessment and best-interest determination (BIA/BID) procedures are involved in a wide range of activities including:

- identifying vulnerable children;
- conducting BIA/BID interviews and preparing reports;
- capacity building and training of partners and UNHCR staff;
- developing BID Standard Operating Procedures and templates;
- organizing and chairing BID panels;
- supervising BID/BIA activities.

Source: ICMC, *2012 Annual Report. Taking stock and looking ahead, 2012.*

*authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration*²¹.

Implementing this procedure often requires personalized psycho-social support that offers these children proper assistance and recovery, (re)building their resilience. In pursuit of their physical and psychological well-being, some programmes place the children in communities, where newcomers are supported by those who are already part of the programme. Since unaccompanied migrant children long not only for safety but also for a sense of belonging, social

cohesion fosters their need for membership and solidarity.

*“They need models to emulate and time [...] to mingle with others”*²². In Kenya, for instance, the Church and its members have organised social programmes through which the local community tries to integrate trafficked and abused children. These peer relationships and conversations enhance the civil society's knowledge about the risks and difficulties that children on the move can experience and give, at the same time, these children the possibility to loudly express themselves²³.

Other programmes are organized by bicultural staff. These staff are particularly effective when they come from the same ethnic group as the unaccompanied migrant children and are already integrated into the society of the “new” country. Their role is to bridge barriers and to reduce miscommunication²⁴.

Best Interests Determination (BID)

A “best interest determination” (BID) describes the formal process with strict procedural safeguards designed to determine the child's best interests for particularly important decisions affecting the child. It should facilitate adequate child participation without discrimination, involve decision-makers with relevant areas of expertise, and balance all relevant factors in order to assess the best option.

Source: UNHCR, *UNHCR Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child, 2008.*

²¹ Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.

²² Joseph Alessandro, in Achiego, R., *Kenya: Protect Child Migrants and Refugee*, in Vatican Radio, 19 January 2017.

²³ Achiego, R., *Kenya: Protect Child Migrants and Refugee*, in Vatican Radio, 19 January 2017.

²⁴ USCCB, *The United States Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program: Guiding Principles and Promising Practices*, 2013.

1.1. Family reunification

Along with other child welfare professionals and actors, Church leaders and programmes are emphatic that “*family reunification should be a central component of implementing the best interest of the child principle*”²⁵. Since abuses and violence can lead to a (further) breakdown in family unity, Bishops’ Conferences work to restore the fundamental values of parenthood and childhood, as they are the building block of society²⁶.

Family Day

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops organizes the *Family Day* during which reunited children have a picnic with their parents, relatives, and other members of their cultural community. This event helps children to reduce anxieties deriving from family separation and community isolation.

Source: USCCB, BRYCS (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services), *Congolese Children and Youth: USCCB Network Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program Experiences and Implications*, 2013.

In the vast majority of cases, the best interests of the child call for (re)joining their parents or other family members rather than being placed in child welfare programmes or shelters administered by the government and attorneys. Normally, family reunification is the best alternative to detention, especially while children are waiting for the completion of migration legal processes. Not only is

family unity a child’s natural and legal right, it boost their sense of well-being and morale, because they can see that they are not forever lost or alone²⁷. Importantly, Catholic and other child welfare professionals verify that the living environment of the children is safe and appropriate.

In some cases, a first step is for children who have family members in the country of destination are helped to go to their relatives’ home simply to visit them. This can lead to family reunification. In addition to reuniting with family members, the children’s sense of belonging may be further conveyed through integration into their particular cultural or faith-based communities which can add balance between social and familial cohesion.

Moreover, Bishops’ Conferences and other Church actors collaborate with authorities and non-government partners not only to find lost family members but also to identify

²⁵ Most Reverend Mark Seitz, in USCCB, *Testimony of Most Reverend Mark Seitz Bishop of the Diocese of El Paso, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops On Unaccompanied Children House Committee on Homeland Security*, 3 July 2014.

²⁶ USCCB, *Demanding Dignity: The Call to End Family Detention*, 2014.

²⁷ Episcopal Church Diocese of Atlanta, United States, *Children at Border Inspire Atlanta to Support Texas Church’s Ministry*, 22 July 2014.

the root and structural causes which can provoke family separation and the phenomenon of unaccompanied migrant children.²⁸

1.2. Education

International law across all of the major international human rights treaties is clear that all children have the right to education, and that this right should be achieved progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity and non-discrimination²⁹.

In this direction, Bishops' Conferences and other Church actors organise educational programmes which are also directed to the development of unaccompanied children's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

Specialized educators and Church workers assist the children with thinking about effective long-term educational goals as well as approaching life with a positive outlook. Thanks to these initiatives, many migrant children tend to understand the value of

education even though they can struggle at times because of their background. At the same time, educators and teachers face many challenges, such as the need for supplementary education services, awareness of cultural norms, and the little amount of time older unaccompanied migrant children have to improve their abilities³⁰.

In addition to traditional school lessons, recreation and leisure activities are organized. Activities range from sports, such as football and basketball, to hair-styling, dance, music, Church choir, cooking, piano, and painting³¹.

1.3. Psychological support and mental health

Success at school

Through *BRYCS Program* many Congolese migrant children in the US have achieved great successes: some students were awarded "*Student of the month*"; a young woman is now attending nursing school, while a young man has obtained a college degree in criminal justice.

Source: USCCB, BRYCS, *Congolese Children and Youth: USCCB Network Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program Experiences and Implications, 2013*.

²⁸Episcopal Church Diocese of Atlanta, United States, *Children at Border Inspire Atlantans to Support Texas Church's Ministry*, 22 July 2014.

²⁹Article 29, paragraph (a) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; see also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW), the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

³⁰USCCB, BRYCS, *Congolese Children and Youth: USCCB Network Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program Experiences and Implications, 2013*.

³¹Ibid.

Unaccompanied migrant children often need individualised assistance with their physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration after traumatic journeys. According to international human rights law, “*such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child*”³².

Since most unaccompanied migrant children have experienced serious trauma either before or during their migration journeys, they have special psychological need. “*Children are the first to suffer, at times suffering torture and other physical violence, in addition to moral and psychological aggression, which almost always leave indelible scars*”³³. Many are affected by problems such as depression, feelings of abandonment, stress, generalized anxiety, and survival guilt deriving from their journey, from their exploitation or – especially young women – from sexual violence.

As a first step in many places, psychological training for educators, priests, and other Church workers is provided so that these social actors can support migrant adults and migrant children, especially those unaccompanied, to heal. This professional activity is combined with counselling services in order to promote psychological recovery³⁴.

A common experience is that unaccompanied migrant children react with different attitudes toward counselling: at first, many are generally reluctant, but as they develop a sense of security and stability they feel the need to share their thoughts and feelings.

Traditional counselling can interconnect with art projects, a form of mental health treatment that helps the children to recover from their psychological wounds through art and drawing³⁵.

Importantly, parents too can be so traumatized by the experience of these separations from their children, and by their children’s vulnerability and suffering, that is difficult for them to address their children’s needs without help. For that reason, many programmes provide the parent(s) with psychological support, among other things fostering the family home as a therapeutic environment for them and for their children. In this

³² Article 39 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.

³³ Pope Francis, in Montagna, D., Bruno, J., *Pope Francis: “Migrant children easily end up at the lowest levels of human degradation”*, in *Aleteia*, 14 October 2016.

³⁴ USCCB, BRYCS, *Congolese Children and Youth: USCCB Network Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program Experiences and Implications*, 2013.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

atmosphere, children can develop a closer relationship with their parents, which is a key factor for both their identity and personal growth³⁶.

2. Detention

“The detention of children because of their or their parents’ migration status constitutes a child rights violation and always contravenes the principle of the best interests of the child”³⁷.

Physical isolation, substandard and deplorable conditions at facilities, and confusion about their rights and the nature, duration and effects of their detention push unaccompanied migrant children to consider themselves as prisoners or criminals. This detrimental environment and excessive length of time spent in detention inflicts anguish and suffering on them; as a consequence, anxiety, uncertainty, frustration and hopelessness attack their childhood and future potential³⁸.

Moreover, *“the low quality and insufficient education received in immigration detention creates future difficulties as children grow into adulthood and are faced with the challenge of adjusting and contributing to a modern society”³⁹.*

In these contexts, Bishops’ Conferences and other Church actors constantly advocate for the release of children from detention. A valuable example is represented by the Australian Campaign *“Bring them here!”* aiming to welcome and support unaccompanied or separated children and to offer them a proper health, educational and social living environment outside shelters⁴⁰.

From shelters to family

Thanks to great cooperation between Bishops’ Conferences of Texas and Arizona, a high number of children have been reunited with their parents or family members and some shelters are now empty.

Source: The Episcopal Diocese of Arizona, *Immigration Crisis Update*, 25 July 2014.

At the same time, many Bishops’ Conferences and Church actors work to verify the conditions of shelters housing unaccompanied migrant children in order to determine

³⁶USCCB, *Refuge & Hope in the Time of ISIS: The Urgent Need for Protection, Humanitarian Support, and Durable Solutions in Turkey, Bulgaria, and Greece*, January 2015.

³⁷OHCHR, *Recommended principles to guide actions concerning children on the move and other children affected by migration*, Principle 4, June 2016. See also Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner, in footnote 18.

³⁸ACBC (the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference), *Catholic Church Supports Call for Release of Children from Detention*, 2014.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰ACBC, *It is Time to Bring Them Here!*, 13 October 2016.

the basic needs of the children and, in response, to collect essential clothing, food, and school and housing equipment⁴¹.

Catholic Bishops and communities also go beyond the provision of basic necessities, visiting and offering the children care and concern typically provided by families⁴².

The high level of Church presence, awareness and response, and practical collaboration with governments is helping to overcome the plight of untold thousands of unaccompanied migrant children, relocating many into families or communities which love them as children and empower them to create a better life.

Even after reunifications, families must not be left behind: Catholic professionals provide home assessment and post-release services to strengthen the familial environment and well-being. Indeed, the best interests of the child derive from a fruitful intersection between child protection, pursuit of family unity as a right and priority, and integration into the new society.

3. Human Trafficking

Millions of children are trafficked for sexual exploitation, pornography production, forced marriage, illegal adoption, forced labour, and to become child soldiers. This violates the essence of a child's human dignity and children's rights of every kind. *"Both when they move with family members and when they do so alone" children "must be protected against exploitation, violence, abuse, and other crime, and against dependence on crime or sexual exploitation to meet their basic needs"*⁴³.

Pope Francis on human trafficking

"One of the most troubling of those open wounds is the trade in human beings, a modern form of slavery, which violates the God-given dignity of so many of our brothers and sisters and constitutes a true crime against humanity [...]. I express my appreciation of your efforts to raise public awareness of the extent of this scourge, which especially affects women and children".

Source: Pope Francis, in Vatican Radio, Pope: Raise awareness about "scourge" of human trafficking, 7 November 2016.

⁴¹The Episcopal Diocese of Arizona, United States, *Migrant Women & Children Situation in Southern Arizona*, 12 June 2014.

⁴²Doyle, A., *Border Crisis is a Test of Texans' Faith*, 25 June 2014.

⁴³OHCHR, *Recommended principles to guide actions concerning children on the move and other children affected by migration*, Principles 3 and 7, June 2016.

A boy trafficked at 4 years old

Joseph was rescued from a trafficking ring when he was 4 years old. Attorneys learned that Joseph was brought to the United States by his traffickers and had false documents from West Africa. Joseph gained access to the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors [URM] program, and due to his young age, his permanency plan included finding a forever family. Joseph's traffickers were prosecuted by the U.S. government and are now in jail. Joseph gained legal status through the special immigrant juvenile visa. The URM program worked diligently with its agency's adoption department, and Joseph was eventually adopted by a family in the United States when he was 7 years old.

Source: USCCB, *The United States Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program: Guiding Principles and Promising Practices*, 2013.

The hidden nature of most human trafficking highlights the complexity of a phenomenon which is difficult even for authorities to identify. Importantly, experience shows that victims of human trafficking often themselves turn to the local Church for assistance, rescue and protection, regardless of their own faith. The Bishops' Conferences and other Church actors respond by assisting victims, including unaccompanied migrant children, and by organising informative meetings, training and specific programmes for the civil society. Awareness is key.

"The role of the Church and faith-based organizations is fundamental as they are able to

share analysis and compare information regarding the situations and contexts in which trafficking is happening; to understand its root causes; to share good practices in fighting, in preventing and in advocating together to fight against this modern slavery"⁴⁴.

Awareness should become an integral part of all the different fields which can be affected by trafficking. In this direction, the Church and its members organize among other things programmes that teach the value of dignity and ethically-minded business in order to discourage the phenomenon of human trafficking⁴⁵.

Many Bishops' Conferences introduce the issue to their congregation and during Catholic events. For example, during the homily they explain what trafficking in persons is, which are the most vulnerable categories of people likely to become victims of this modern slavery, and what the society can do to respond to and prevent this phenomenon⁴⁶.

Solidarity is another core element, as it offers an atmosphere of love and security. Catholic institutions and members worldwide provide victims of human trafficking with

⁴⁴ Father Pier Cibambo, in Bordoni, L., *Caritas Nigeria host Int. Event on Human Trafficking in Africa*, in Vatican Radio, 2 September 2016.

⁴⁵ *Declaración conjunta de los obispos de Estados Unidos, México, El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras sobre la crisis de los niños migrantes (Joint Declaration of the Bishops of the United States, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras on the Crisis of Child Migrants)*, 10 June 2014.

⁴⁶ Zenit, *Nigeria: la Chiesa cattolica contro la tratta delle ragazze povere (Nigeria: the Catholic Church Against Poor Young Women's Trafficking)*, 6 March 2016.

moral and material support. Many offer children not only with clothing and toys, but often also finance their education and their integration into society⁴⁷.

II. Conclusion

The phenomenon of unaccompanied migrant children is dynamic and complex, and it can seriously affect all the aspects of the children's lives. In responding, the priority is always the children's best interests, a universal human right which must be recognized and protected. This response and right can be achieved only through a holistic approach which is based on a human dignity and rights-centred collaboration of all competent stakeholders involved in this reality.

Cooperation is the key strategy, which first needs to raise awareness about this issue, and then guides actors in their broad range of activities so that they can concretely bridge gaps and solve problems. As described in this report, the Catholic Bishops' Conferences and other Church actors worldwide have long been dedicated to this work and these solutions.

Respect for the inherent human dignity of each child – and on-the-ground experience, with untold thousands of unaccompanied migrant children around the world – make clear that unaccompanied migrant children must be, not passive recipients of these actions, but active agents of their own future and well-being. Their voices must be heard and their individual needs must be taken into account. They are both the present and the future: their lives forge the forthcoming society.

Working with the children's mothers and fathers, actors should also work on the ground to support these children. First and most, simply because they are children! "*Whether we are conservative or liberal doesn't matter. Whatever we think about immigration policies doesn't matter. These are children. And we need to take care of them*"⁴⁸.

⁴⁷Episcopal Church Diocese of Atlanta, United States, *Children at Border Inspire Atlantans to Support Texas Church's Ministry*, 22 July 2014.

⁴⁸Episcopal Church Diocese of Atlanta, *Children at Border Inspire Atlantans to Support Texas Church's Ministry*, 22 July 2014.

III. Recommendations

Among the principal recommendations that Catholic Bishops' Conferences make regarding unaccompanied migrant children are the following:

1. Correct and complete information about the phenomenon of unaccompanied migrant children should be provided to all the actors involved. Data should be periodically collected so that States and organizations can monitor the progress and address the remaining gaps.
2. A collaborative approach to the phenomenon constitutes the foundation for action. All the actors should cooperate, sharing successful processes, projects, and initiatives and supporting each other in this operational phase. Solidarity is the basis of a valuable collaboration.
3. Children cannot be treated as victims of circumstances but must actively participate in the creation of their own future. Their opinions, feelings, thoughts, and desires should be taken into account.
4. Children are human persons with fundamental rights and dignity; the best interests of the child must be the cornerstone of all strategies and actions. Depending on their particular circumstances, unaccompanied migrant children in particular must be welcomed and accorded either a refugee status or other complementary forms of protection.
5. Normally, children forge and develop their identities and personalities in a family environment. Therefore, family unity and reunification should be prioritized, and pursued whenever possible—, and with particular vigour as an alternative to detention.
6. Education is one of the child's fundamental rights. States, organizations, and religious communities must work to preserve and enliven that right, including as appropriate by organizing educational programmes and leisure activities for children, and helping to build perspectives for their future, including foremployment.
7. Since so many unaccompanied migrant children have experienced severe trauma, resilience must not be neglected. It is important to shift to more dignified and consistent methods of helping. This concept is closely linked to inclusion: emphasis must be put both on local integration as well as humanitarian supports. In this way, it is possible to

discard the concept that unaccompanied migrant children should automatically be placed in shelters until family reunification.

8. Faith and cultural communities must continue to receive, welcome, support, and assist unaccompanied migrant children who can, consequently, develop a sense of belonging in community as well as in their family.

9. Bishops' Conferences and other Church actors should continue to work with and inform the broader society about the scourge of human trafficking and the negative effect it has not only on children and other victims but also on the society as a whole. Furthermore, States and civil society organizations should join their political and investigative efforts first to rescue, protect and assist trafficked people, including migrant children, then to prosecute traffickers and stop the phenomenon altogether.

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About ICMC

Founded in 1951 by the Holy See, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) is an international organisation of the Catholic Church serving and protecting uprooted people – refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants – regardless of faith, race, ethnicity or nationality. It facilitates a network of Conferences of Catholic Bishops, religious orders, and Catholic organizations, engaged in responding to the needs of refugees and migrants. It advocates for rights-based policies and durable solutions directly and through a worldwide network of member organisations. ICMC is

composed of representatives appointed by the Catholic Bishops' Conferences and Episcopal Assemblies of similar juridical status worldwide.

ICMC has long been advocating for the protection of children on the move in several countries, working with international, regional, and national authorities. Together they promote policies and practices that respect the rights of children, and ensuring that child protection is maximized by engaging the entire child protection system.

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