

CHILDREN: THE NEXT GENERATION

- Topic: Children, the Next Generation? Insights from Ethics and Pastoral Care
- Convener: Mary M. Doyle Roche, College of the Holy Cross
- Moderator: Mary Ann Hinsdale, Boston College
- Presenters: Annemie Dillen, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium
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The convention theme, *Generations*, provided an opportunity to address an emerging area of interest in the theological disciplines—images of children and childhood that shape our policies and practices involving children. This session addressed the need for Christian communities to consider children as a generation in the present and began to tease out the implications for taking the intrinsic dignity of children as children, seriously.

The ethics portion of the program began by considering two narratives taken from current events, the raid on the Yearning for Zion ranch by Texas Child Protective Services which took over four hundred children into state custody, and the raid on a New Bedford, MA factory by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents that left many children behind as their parents were taken to await deportation hearings. Ethical analyses of these cases reveal a profound ambivalence in our society's attitudes toward children's well-being and inattention to the ways in which public policy impacts children. Taking children's dignity seriously demands that our communities make a preferential option for poor children, demanding that all practices and policies account for their concrete impact on children as vulnerable and interdependent members. In this way, all ethical issues become children's issues.

The theological ethics of children and childhood can play an important role in the continued shaping of moral traditions. The presentation covered three potential areas for consideration: casuistry, virtue, and the common good. The casuistry of childhood will need to attend to a wide range of cases in order to distill much needed wisdom about what children need to survive and to flourish. Narrowly considering anecdotal evidence about the children in our experience or children of relative privilege, will not achieve this goal. In the cultivation of virtue, Christians must look to those who care and advocate for children as mentors. Finally, childhood highlights human interdependence in a profound way and can bring insights to conversations about the common good, with its characteristic commitment to rights and responsibilities.

Dillen noted the ambivalence in our rhetorical claims about children and its impact on pastoral practices. Childhood is in many ways, a social construct that is shaped by the wider culture of which Christianity is a part. Biblical and traditional sources refer to children as gifts and represent the promise of a more just and peaceful future. Yet this notion of gift can be distorted when the community forgets that as gifts, children's origins and promise are not determined by humans. Christian communities must avoid the dangers of trying to determine the

future through children. In this way, images of childhood are shaped more by adult desires and less by children's reality.

Parishes can fall under the sway of an instrument view of children's value: the presence of children is a sign of a vibrant religious community. Even in this context, practices that exclude children often go unnoticed, as children are set apart in "child friendly" areas and programs. Children are reduced to pedagogical projects, and educational initiatives operate on unquestioned assumptions based in dominant stage theories in which children are simply "not-yet-adults."

If the Church is to respond faithfully to Jesus' claim, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mk 9:37) the community needs to consider children as vulnerable others and models of faith without romanticizing or essentializing childhood. We are called to care for real children who are not mere objects of our care and catechetical programs, but who are full human subjects. When children are excluded in one way or another, this may hinder the religious experience of the community, and pastoral ministers and theologians may become blinded to a possible way to come to God. This leads us to some challenging questions: Do ministers need to adapt their style of preaching and praying? Could liturgical and catechetical practices include more interaction and bodily engagement? Is pastoral care too verbally and cognitively focused? What place do children have in our social and pastoral ministries (chaplaincies in hospitals, prisons and armed forces)? Habits of welcoming real children that recognize both their vulnerability and agency provide opportunities to encounter God and intergenerationally inclusive Church communities are engaged in authentic mystagogical practice.

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