

REPORT ON THE INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY PROJECT

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This year's Plenary Session of the Academy was devoted to the topic, 'Intergenerational Solidarity, Welfare, and Human Ecology'. Since this was the first Plenary Session to be devoted to the Intergenerational Solidarity project, and since the conclusions of the meeting have already been reported, this account will be brief. The intergenerational project was launched in response to concern about the way that changing relations among the generations were affecting the natural and social environments. For this initial plenary discussion, the speakers and commentators were asked to focus primarily on the challenges posed by the fact that changes in family behavior have placed increasing strain on every society's capacity to provide for the needs of the very young, the frail elderly, and the severely ill or disabled. In so doing, we heeded the Pope's reminder when he first addressed this Academy ten years ago that the very *raison d'être* of social programs 'should be protection of the weakest'.

Our aim was to move well beyond standard debates over the 'welfare crisis'. For, as many of the speakers this week argued, a deeper crisis of meanings and values underlies the welfare crisis. In particular, changes in family behavior are fueling, and being fueled by, changes in *ideas* about dependency, the human person, and family life that have far-reaching implications for the human prospect – for the world's experiments in self-government, for the health of economies, for human rights, and for the future of our social and natural environments.

By lifting up the concept of 'solidarity' we sought to challenge solutions based on conflict models that are grounded in widely held but problematic concepts of man and society. With our reference to 'ecology' we signaled that we are searching for ways to shift probabilities in favor of keeping the human person at the center of concern. Our hope for this plenary conference was modest: to emerge not only with a better understanding of the questions, but with a set of conclusions that will serve as

springboards for continued exploration of this subject in future meetings and study groups.

We began our deliberations with a survey of the treatment of intergenerational solidarity as it appears currently in Catholic social teaching. Then, we heard a number of presentations on demographic and cultural developments that are affecting relations among the generations all over the world in diverse ways. Those presentations were followed by exchanges regarding how these developments are playing out in different contexts, what they may mean for the human prospect, and what men and women of good will might be able to do to chart more favorable courses for the future.

Among our conclusions were that the great transitions of the late twentieth century have jeopardized the care of the very young, the frail elderly, and other dependents – both in welfare states and in countries where government's role in providing social services is minimal or non-existent. No society has been unaffected, and no society has yet fully faced up to the unprecedented challenges posed by these changes. We noted that to the extent that the looming welfare crisis receives public attention, it is typically presented in terms of conflict, rather than solidarity, among the generations. Although a conflict model dominates discussion of the welfare crisis, nearly complete silence reigns about the intergenerational conflicts that fester in the underlying crisis of meanings and values, such as the conflict between the desires of adults and the needs of children (and child-raising families) in cultures that have become increasingly adult-centered. Ironically, the ambition of the world's welfare states to free individuals from much of their dependence on families, and to relieve families from some of their responsibilities for their weaker members, may have succeeded just well enough to put dependents at heightened risk now that the welfare state itself is in crisis.

A recurring theme in the discussions was that one of the most influential ideas in the modern social sciences is showing its flaws: the concept of the human person as radically autonomous, self-determining, and self-sufficient. Thus, before holding another session on the Intergenerational Solidarity project, the Academy will devote its plenary session in 2005 to an exploration of the concepts of the human person that are embedded in Catholic social teaching, economics, social theory, law and politics.