

## A COMMENTARY ON THE PAPER BY H.E.M. CARDINAL ALFONSO LÓPEZ TRUJILLO

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### INTRODUCTION

Your Eminence, Excellencies, distinguished members of the Academy, it is a privilege to be invited to speak to you this morning and an honour to be here with you. In particular, I would like to thank Professor Mary Ann Glendon and Archbishop Sánchez for extending the invitation to me.

The topic of the twelfth plenary session – *Vanishing Youth* – is vitally important. It's certainly a phrase with a variety of meanings which will help you, over the next few days, get to the heart of the concerns surrounding young people today in our world. It's a phrase, too, which is packed with challenges and perhaps even pessimism.

Unlike many of the speakers you will hear, I have no academic expertise on children or young people's issues. So it is with humility that I would like briefly to address this topic from three intertwined perspectives – first, from my professional life as a practising lawyer specialising in human rights issues, second what I believe it means to me from a standpoint of faith and thirdly from what I have learnt over the last 22 years from the joy – and sometimes slightly less than joyful challenges – of struggling to be as good a parent as I can.

There is no doubt that these are difficult times to be young. Young people, at least in the more prosperous regions of the world, have seemingly endless opportunities open to them nowadays. But with these opportunities come new challenges, problems and threats.

These challenges vary, of course, with social, economic, ethnic, religious and other circumstances. In many cases these daily struggles will be more acute than many of us here could ever imagine.

I am sure you will consider in the course of the next few days a range of statistics around health issues, crime, social deprivation, educational failure, withdrawal from religious commitment and the like.

Each of these helps reinforce a picture of young people, uncertain, troubled and in serious difficulties. We hear a great deal about the protection our young people require; about moral relativism; about loss of faith; and about the growing uncertainty of a post-modern world balanced between growing religious fundamentalism on the one hand, and rampant materialism on the other.

I do not disagree with any of this. The world is certainly a dauntingly challenging place for young people. And the pressing issues we all face – issues such as climate change, pollution, reducing energy resources and water supplies, global poverty, trade imbalances, war, famine – look as if they will get worse not better, at least without concerted action by the world.

But there is another side to this picture. We must always have faith in our young people, in their abilities, resourcefulness and awareness – and also in ourselves.

And yes, these are challenging times for our young, but such times have existed before. A social history of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions points to much upheaval and social turbulence. The Industrial Revolution heralded in a way of life that led to the creation of national consciousness and asked society to think beyond family and village life – to extend compassion. Eighteenth century citizens had to think nationally – to find solidarity with the stranger not just those known to them. The idea of kinship, once so intimate was stretched from the immediately familiar and given a new expanse. Today globalisation asks for the same shift of perceptions. The dynamic is similar – but the scale is different – but perhaps no different to the scale which our forefathers had to embrace moving from village to national consciousness. There is a continuum at work here – from family to village to town to nation to world. That challenge to think globally, while an emerging reality for us, is already real for our children.

And faced with these daunting challenges and uncertainties, we must never forget either that young people are generally by their nature cheerful, positive, interested in others, adventurous, generous, courageous, compassionate, diligent and more open-hearted than the rest of us. Not all, and not in equal measure, of course. But in general I think this is a good place to start any consideration of what it might mean to be in solidarity with young people. Not least because it suggests, to me at least, that the more adult among us may find it more of a challenge than we think to reach out to the young and to be of service to them, rather than the other way around.

Yes of course young people, by definition, are relatively inexperienced and immature. They have a lot to learn, and their youthful idealism is not

always tempered or tested. Nevertheless they have a lot to teach us, if we have the patience and humility to listen to them before speaking and advising. Lacking the guile and experience of older people, they can express themselves with a simplicity and truthfulness which can tell us a great deal about them and ourselves even if, on occasions, these qualities can be masked by the language they use.

I would go further and claim that if treated with respect and nurtured in a loving environment, and more often than not even where this has not been the case, young people have the power to help us rediscover our own idealism, energy, generosity of spirit and natural compassion for the suffering and the dispossessed. That's a remarkable gift and one we must make the most of.

There are lessons here for all of us and including the Church. Jesus was forthright on this point. In chapter 10 of Mark's Gospel he proclaims: 'suffer the little children to come unto me'. But later Jesus is more challenging with their older siblings instructing the rich young man to '(g)o and sell what you own and give the money to the poor'. So the Church must both nurture the young but also challenge them to use its teaching as signposts to reach their own conclusions. The Church owes its young members a responsibility to light a way to maturity. Acting as signposts on this path, authoritative Church teachings inform the young conscience. Timothy Radcliffe OP in his book *Sing a New Song* states that: '(t)here is no human love that is not in need of healing, which does not need to be led to maturity and fullness'. But he also recognises that '(a)ll that the teacher can do is to accompany the students in their process of discovery... (and) to introduce us to the humility of learning... (T)he teacher shows him or herself to be someone on the way, the doctor as fellow disciple'.

To stand in solidarity with young people, the Church must do more than prescribe a list of rules by which a life in Christ is best lived. The Church must encourage our young people to listen to their own consciences and to look with a clear and informed eye at the scientific and social reality in which they live. The Second Vatican Council in its Declaration on Religious Freedom in 1965 unequivocally asserts the Catholic's duty to abide by her conscience. As was said in *Gaudium et Spes*: 'In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality'.

Let us acknowledge then at the start of our consideration that we are talking in the next few days about a *relationship*: between us, our Church and our children and young people. And that this relationship is reciprocal. Our solidarity with them is their solidarity with us. Our respect and care for them in their situation is a reflection of their respect for us. Our love for them is mirrored by their love for us. This is a two way street with rights and responsibilities, gifts offered and received, on both sides. In this age of turbulence we need each other. More than that we belong to each other. We are in communion with each other. The purpose of our reflection is how better to articulate that communion of care and love; how better to live it out in the world and in our Church; and how to negotiate some of the major challenges and threats that we face together, young and not so young.

As I said earlier, the term vanishing youth has a variety of meanings. It can mean, almost literally, the demographic changes in the developed world which are seeing rapidly falling birth-rates or the scandalous mortality rates among the young in some parts of the developing world.

But it can also mean, of course how our children are forced to grow up so quickly. Their youth is cruelly curtailed by having to take on, in those countries suffering dreadfully from drought or disease, the responsibilities of adults – or in richer countries by being pressurised to adopt the pre-occupations and problems of older people but without the support they deserve from us.

For, if anything in many cultures – especially in the West – it is us, the adult population who are vanishing – into full-time, all consuming jobs or selfish pursuits of limited value to us or our families. It should be little surprise that our children can be in danger of following our footsteps and we should blame ourselves, not them.

So reform must begin here with us, not there with them. Being a parent is not an easy job. From my own experience, it is a job you never master. But it is absolutely vital not just for the health of our children but the health of our society and world.

We need to emphasise the calling of parenthood, of responsible adulthood, of the caring and nurturing, of time 'spent with' which is the bedrock of every life-giving family and community, both sacred and secular. We must also understand that our children are having to grapple with increasingly difficult moral challenges around the meaning of life, of death and of the preservation not just of health but even youth and cosmetic appearance than faced us when we were young. And I am not sure we can always put our hands on our hearts and say, collectively, that we have helped them a

great deal in even beginning to resolve such dilemmas now. I speak with some passion, and a deepening sense of concern, not only as a Catholic and a mother of four children but also as a human rights lawyer grappling with the complexities of a morally conflicted, and increasingly secular world.

The first thing we need to be clear about, or as clear as we can be, without becoming either judgmental or fundamentalist, is to give young people they respect but above all the time and support they need as the struggle with the moral and practical challenges of modern life. We must always try to find time, difficult as this is for many parents, to talk about these problems, to help them find their solutions. It is absolutely vital we provide them with the space to do exactly that. They want to know what we think and why we do. What – for example in the Church’s teaching, the gospel, personal experience, reasoning, prayer – inspires us to think that way?

At a young age it will be enough to hear what we have to say in answer to those deceptively simple questions on the way home from school. For the most part what we think, if it has any validity – and hopefully it will – is enough. It will be absorbed and assimilated to the degree appropriate for each. Later on of course it will be tested more seriously. Teenagers will want to reflect on what we say, rather than merely take it for granted. They will want to respond, to dispute, to test. They will compare that approach with what others in their age group think. And then the fun begins!

The point though is that we must strive to find time in our increasingly busy days for these conversations to take place. That is what families are for. That means that time – that precious gift of the older to the younger, the prerequisite for solidarity – is carved out, saved from our busy existence and invested in our children. Second, that the conversation is serious, and genuinely two-way. It is open. It allows the other to disagree. It is a relationship of mutual respect aiming at understanding, sustained not by certainty and dogmatic assertion, but by love and listening. Ultimately young people learn, in the sense of truly assimilate to the point of conviction and a living out in conviction, as we did – through lived experience. We cannot insist. We can only offer guidance, with generosity, and a compelling loving faithfulness. Then we have to draw back and have confidence in them to find out for themselves. Yes mistakes will be made – by we parents as well as children. But as the parable of the prodigal son makes abundantly clear, where there is loving forgiveness and acceptance of failure, there is renewal and a return to life.

It may not always be easy. It can, at times, be painful. But turbulence is not just a description of the times in which we live. It is a description of the

maturing process which everyone, but especially the young, must learn to negotiate. They are especially vulnerable. But we should not treat them as victims. Mistakes are the way not only to learn, but also to mature. They are the gateway through which we pass to new life. Our role must be to accompany our young on that journey with acceptance and love. Would we rather our children never put a foot wrong and never learnt? Or that they learn humility? That they begin to understand that life is a learning process. That it is not just about making mistakes, but learning from them. And not just our own mistakes, but others' too.

Again this demands of us that precious gift of time. To accompany is to spend time with. Not like the younger brother in the story of the Prodigal son who stood to one side, and carped because he hadn't made that particular error of judgement so why should he, and why should his father, spend time with the sinner? No. Never a better or more important time to be alongside, in solidarity, than when things have gone wrong.

And things can go terribly wrong. Recently I have had professional experience of two examples of solidarity in action. One which challenges young offenders to face up to the consequences of their delinquency rather than merely punish them. The other which shows the fruit that can be borne of working with seriously disadvantaged children to help them discover their own giftedness.

Restorative Justice in the criminal justice system works to resolve conflict and repair harm done to victims. It is all about repairing the harm that is created when a crime is committed. This can be done in many ways – the most well known example is a victim offender mediation where both parties meet to discuss what happened. It encourages those who have caused harm to acknowledge the impact of what they have done and gives them an opportunity to make reparation. It offers those who have suffered the harm the opportunity to have their harm or loss acknowledged and amends made. Recent UK research published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation into the use of restorative justice conferences which bring together the young offender and their victims suggests that where meetings between victims and offenders are carefully planned and well facilitated, this can have a positive effect on the young offender's insight into his or her offence. And, for the victim, it can help to clarify their feelings about what happened to them.

One young offender told researchers: 'If the victim wasn't there I would have just listened to what the policeman had to say. I don't respect the police whatsoever, so I'd have just said "all right, thanks, bye". But because that guy was there I took a bit more notice of the situation. Instead of say-

ing “yes, whatever, whatever”, I actually listened to what he had to say...It's made me, like I always think now before I do something'.

Another young offender who had quite seriously assaulted a young man told researchers: 'I felt really guilty, speaking about what I'd done to him when I saw him, and how it did affect him and how badly he was injured... Some of the things he couldn't have done because he was too injured just made me feel really, really bad'.

While these schemes are still in their infancy, there does appear to be growing interest in this area and increasing acknowledgement that, particularly in relation to youth offenders, restorative justice can offer a significant way for us to steer young people away from further crime. Although it isn't right for everyone, I believe passionately in the role that restorative justice has to play in teaching young people to face up to the consequences of their actions whilst offering them a way back into society.

And we don't need to wait until young people are involved with the criminal justice system to help them find their true potential. Let me tell you about one other scheme which I have come across over the last few years. Kids Company is an organisation now based in the London Borough of Lambeth which was founded in response to the growing number of children who live in an environment lacking the nurturing essentials: a stable home life, love, and understanding. They help the sort of kids who, if it were situated in Rio rather than London would be called street children. Trained workers and volunteers providing everything from numeracy and literacy to therapeutic work and one-to-one counseling for 500 of the most seriously disturbed children who self refer themselves to the scheme. Kids Company also works in 23 schools in London providing counselling and psychotherapy services for vulnerable children who have poor social/communication skills or low self-esteem.

Camilla, the director of Kids Company says her main function is parenting. It is a sad fact that these kids self-refer to a place where they feel comfortable – not because they will be assessed, monitored, tested, but because they will be *cared for*. For various reasons including drug abuse, alcohol abuse, ignorance and neglect, the families of these children had abandoned them to their own. They had fallen through the safety net provided by social services and school. Some of them had already fallen into petty crime, or been tempted by drugs and yet at Kids Company their latent talents were developed and they bloomed. I was treated to a beautiful performance from a young girl with a wonderful voice who had been excluded from mainstream society and who was given a chance to shine and feel

a real sense of worth when she came to Kids Company. In 2005 Kids Company took the art world by storm when their exhibition of therapeutic artwork by the young people called 'Shrinking Childhoods' was exhibited at the Tate Modern which I was privileged to see.

The most striking thing for me about this organisation was not only the dedication of the staff and the vibrancy of the kids they were working with, but also the fact that, unlike most services, almost all of the kids at Kids Company self-refer. When we hear time and time again that the problem with some of the most disruptive young people is that they won't engage with services, is there something all of us, including our Church, could learn from this model? Something about providing a safe environment in which kids feel accepted, not judged? And where they can explore their both their sense of inadequacy and conflict *and* their giftedness?

The atmosphere at Kids Company wasn't one of pessimism, of fear, of distrust of these young people, but one of hope. The staff really believed that they could help some of these kids and, as a result, I got the impression that some of the kids were beginning to believe in themselves.

What these two examples say is that despite the specific challenges of this particular age of turbulence is we have plenty of reason for confidence and optimism. We have to have faith in our young people – as parents, friends, teachers or pastors. We have to find time for them, to guide them, to care for them, even to let them challenge us. If we do, if we can weld the marvellous idealism and generosity of the young with the wisdom and experience of the extended family, no challenge will be beyond us.