



Vanishing Youth? Solidarity with Children and Young People in an Age of Turbulence



The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences will hold its twelfth Plenary Session at the Vatican from 28 April to 2 May on 'Vanishing Youth? Solidarity with Children and Young People in an Age of Turbulence'. Most of the 34 Academicians, coming from all over the world, will participate, together with invited experts and youthful observers from various regions.

The conference, organised by Professor Pierpaolo Donati of the University of Bologna, will be the second Plenary Session the Academy has devoted to aspects of the topic of intergenerational solidarity. The first Plenary Session on intergenerational solidarity, held in 2004, was titled '[Intergenerational Solidarity, Welfare, and Human Ecology](#)'. Its point of departure was the observation that, everywhere on earth, profound demographic changes are radically transforming the relations between generations. Thus far, humanity is finding it hard to face, or even to recognise, these challenges. In the 1960s and 70s the prevailing idea was that impending overpopulation was threatening the entire planet with hunger and poverty. On that assumption, vast population control campaigns were mobilised and legitimated. Today, after three decades, it is beyond dispute that the problem is quite the opposite: populations in developed and developing countries alike are aging. The combination of low birth rates and greater longevity has grave implications for both young and old, as well as for human rights, the health of economies and the world's experiments in self-government. The 2006 Plenary Session will begin on Friday, April 28, with a General Introduction by Professor Donati. Then, in keeping with the Academy's custom of beginning its study of each new topic with an examination of Catholic social teaching on the question under consideration, there will be a presentation on 'The Gift of Life and our Responsibilities to Children and Young People' by Alfonso Cardinal López Trujillo, President of the

Pontifical Council for the Family. To help situate the issues within their contemporary economic, sociological and demographic contexts, the Academicians will next hear papers by experts in those fields. Economist-Academicians Kenneth Arrow and Partha Dasgupta will speak on 'The Responsibility of Parents to Children in a Developed Economy'. Professor John O'Neill of York University, Toronto, will provide a sociological perspective in his paper titled, 'The Circle and the Line: Kinship, Vanishment and Globalization Narratives in a Rich/Poor World'. Concluding the first day will be a discussion of 'Demographic Trends of Youth in the World' by Rector Gérard-François Dumont, Professor at the University of Paris-Sorbonne. On Saturday, April 29, and Monday, May 1, the Academicians will hear a series of six regional reports on the actual situations of children and young people in Asia, Africa, East and West Europe, and Latin and North America. Saturday's program will begin with the Asian report by Academician Professor Mina Ramirez, followed by the African report by Academician Professor Paulus Zulu, the East European report by Professor Lubomír Mlcoch of Charles University, Prague, and the West European report by Academician Professor José Raga. The regional reports will continue on Monday, May 1, with papers on Latin America by Professor Mariano Grondona of Buenos Aires, and on North America by Academician Kevin Ryan, Professor Emeritus of Boston University.

Following guidelines developed by Professor Donati, each regional reporter will discuss his or her country's situation with respect to:

1. the birth rate and the prevailing attitudes towards babies and child-raising families;
2. the impact of artificial human reproduction technologies on the culture of childhood;
3. material needs of children and young people (health conditions, food, shelter, etc.);
4. psychological needs of children and young people (safe environment, love and human fulfilment, etc.);
5. relational needs of children and young people (the structures of families and the primary networks in which children live);
6. educational needs of children and young people;
7. influence of the media on children and young people;
8. the state of religious formation and education of children and young people;
9. the socialisation patterns in families (stable, broken, reconstituted), foster care, primary care services, schools and other settings;
10. the major difficulties in the transition to later stages of the life cycle (higher education, work, facilities to establish a family);
11. children's rights (child as citizen);
12. social expenses devoted to children vis-à-vis other generations (esp. the elderly);
13. voluntary associations dealing with issues affecting children and young people;
14. role of local communities in providing care to children and child-raising families;
15. the influence of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity.

After the regional reports, the conference will turn, in the afternoon of May 1, to a reflection and evaluation of 'The Rights of Children and Minors in International Charters' by Academician

Professor Ombretta Fumagalli Carulli. The participants will consider the extent to which the multiplication of supranational declarations, recommendations, and charters of rights in favour of minors is indicative of real progress in children's welfare, or the extent to which it is a sign of increased problems and shortcomings. In keeping with Academy's mandate to provide the Church with elements that may be useful in the development of her social teachings, the reports on the regional and international situations will be followed by two presentations on the implications of the conference material for the social magisterium. These reflections assume particular significance owing to the fact that there has been relatively little direct discussion of the situations of young persons in the Church's social doctrine up to the present time. Academician Msgr. Michel Schooyans' paper on 'Implications for the Role of the Catholic Church and Catholic Organisations Worldwide', to be delivered in the afternoon of May 1, has been rendered especially timely in view of Pope [Benedict XVI](#)'s emphasis on the charitable activities of the Church in his first encyclical, [*Deus caritas est*](#), issued in January 2006, where he writes: 'Building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew' (pr. 28). This important discussion will continue on the final day of the conference, Tuesday, May 2, with the reflections of former Academician, now Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, on 'Implications for the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church'. The conference will end on Tuesday afternoon with three rounds of evaluation of the proceedings aimed at drawing conclusions: reflections on the six regional reports from 6 young persons, one from each region, who have been invited to attend the Plenary Session as observers; concluding observations by the conference coordinator Professor Donati and Academy President Mary Ann Glendon, and general discussion among the members.

Mary Ann Glendon

Pierpaolo Donati