



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič  
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations  
and Other International Organizations in Geneva  
at the 35<sup>th</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council  
**“Panel discussion on unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents and  
human rights”**

Geneva, 9 June 2017

Mr. President,

The Holy See Delegation welcomes the attention given to unaccompanied migrant children during the current session of the Human Rights Council and wishes to thank the panelists for their presentations.

In his Message for the 2017 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis highlighted the hardships and dangers faced by migrant children. Because of the precarious situation in which they find themselves, children are very vulnerable, especially when they are unaccompanied, as they are “invisible and voiceless, hidden from the world’s eyes.”

Too often, migrant children easily end up at the lowest levels of human degradation, with their hope and future destroyed. They have no access to education and health care and they face the great risk of vulnerability to human traffickers, sexual predators and other unscrupulous persons who wish to cause harm to children and adolescents. This is an insult to human dignity, and the entire international community should make every effort to respond to such suffering and deprivation of fundamental human rights that are enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

During the last session of the Human Rights Council, the Holy See hosted a side event, together with the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) and *Caritas Internationalis*, to draw attention to the reasons why so many children are on the move without the protection of their parents and other family members and what is needed to respond to such a dramatic escalation of unaccompanied children on the move.

The Holy See reiterates its strong appeal to protect the dignity and fundamental rights of every person and to implement, without reserve, humanitarian law, principles and policies in response to people on the move, especially unaccompanied

children: they must be considered children first and foremost, and their best interest must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them.

Mr. President,

To respect children is to respect all humanity, as they are our future and hope. Children should not be criminalized or subject to punitive measures because of their own migration status or that of their parents. The practice of detaining migrant children should not be an option, and the best interests of the child should always prevail. Indeed, even a brief period of detention can have life-long consequences on a child's development. The grave error of the detention model is that it considers the children as sole, isolated subjects responsible for the situations in which they find themselves and over which they have little, if any, control. This model wrongly absolves the international community at large from responsibilities that it regularly fails to fulfill.

While the protection of fundamental human rights and the dignity of every person is vital and essential, it is not enough. Wars, violence, human rights violations, corruption, abject poverty, environmental disasters are all causes of this humanitarian emergency of unaccompanied children on the move. A far-sighted approach is urgently needed to tackle the tragic and intolerable situations that drive such a drastic increase in the number of children who abandon their lands of birth and search alone for refuge and hope for the future.

The possibility of authentic integral human development should be guaranteed for all children. In this regard, the Holy See urges that our considerations today be directly linked to the hundreds of millions of children who are living in appalling conditions in the countries of their birth. Even while we are engaged in discussion and debate today, any number of these children will have joined the already huge odyssey of children on the move – simply in search of safety, peace, and of a fair chance in life.

Mr. President,

Unaccompanied children on the move are the dramatic evidence of existing inequalities and failing systems. As the consultations for the shaping of the Global Compact on Migration are in progress, how can we ensure that the rights of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents are duly protected and promoted?

Thank you, Mr. President.