

International Congress of the World Catholic Association for Communication (SIGNIS)

Thailand

Opening Speech

I am thankful and honored by the invitation of Mr. Ricardo Yañez, on behalf of the Secretary General. I greet the members of the table (nominate) and each participant present. I express my great joy to be here with you all in Chiang Mai, Thailand, to attend the International Congress of the World Catholic Association for Communication (SIGNIS). I am also thankful for the kind and hospitable reception of the Thai people, who with its culture, respect for nature and spirituality, impressed me from the first moment I arrived in the country.

In fact, we're all in this Congress because we feel within us, a strong call for spreading the good news of Jesus to the world. The good news, transformed into concrete actions, is light and hope in winning the peace in families and nations. Building Peace begins in the hearts of people with the foundations of Love, which is rooted in pregnancy and early childhood, and is transformed into Fraternity and social co-responsibility.

Peace is a collective achievement. It happens when we promote people, cultural and ethical values, attitudes and practices for the common good, which we learn from our Master Jesus: "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full." (John 10,10)

Currently, television, radio and computer are progressively more present at homes. As we know, the excessive time of the family spent using these equipments reduces the time for key activities to child development, besides it can increase social problems such as obesity, early eroticism, family stress, violence and premature alcohol addiction. It is necessary to prepare families to deal with these issues so the children can assemble values that can neutralize the malefic effects.

Fortunately, some researches show that in the last decade there were an increased number of reports on education, health and rights with a focus on children and adolescents. But the quality of information is still limited.

I hope that the Catholic media, besides following the moral and ethical values of our Church, can be like Her, master teaching the families and communities, specially in the area of health, education and human rights. So we can form wise people in the Christian and other religions communities who will protect children and adolescents. We must do our best to influence legislators to make laws and governments implement public policies that will bring full quality of education for children, as absolute priority.

The people followed Jesus because He had words of hope. So the Media is called to announce positive experiences and paths that lead nations to be further just and fraternal.

As disciples and missionaries called to evangelize, we know that the driving force of social transformation is in the practice of the greatest of all commandments of God's Law – Love - expressed in fraternal solidarity, capable of moving mountains. "You must love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself" means working for social inclusion, the fruit of Justice; it means having no prejudices, applying our best gifts in favor of the Full Life with priority for those who need it most. Joining efforts to achieve goals, serving with humbleness and mercy without losing one's own identity. All this path needs social communication to enlighten, encourage, strengthen and democratize our Mission of Faith and Life. The world needs this Light and this Salt to expand the Human Rights to all people of all nations. We believe that social transformation requires putting most of those efforts into the integral development of children. This development begins when the child is still in the sacred womb of his mother. Children, when well cared for, are seeds of Peace and Hope. There is no human being more perfect, fairer, unbiased, and more sympathetic than the child.

Aptly Jesus said "In truth I tell you, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 18, 3) "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Luke 18,16).

Today, I will share with you a true story of love and divine inspiration, a dream that came true. Like what happened with the disciples on their way to the village of Emmaus (Luke 24, 13-35) "Jesus himself came up and walked by their side". The disciples had recognized him at the breaking of bread," the life symbol". In another passage, when the boat in the Sea of Galilee seemed overcome by the violent waves, Jesus was there to calm the wind! (Mark 4:35-41).

With joy I'll tell you what "I saw and witnessed" over 26 years, since the founding of the Children's Pastoral. Then, I will present three cases to illustrate how different methods of communication can reinforce the message about the children's rights and influence cultural change and people's behavior.

What was a seed that began in the city of Florestópolis, in the state of Paraná, became the Social Action Agency of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil, present today in 42,000 poor communities and in 7,000 parishes from all the dioceses of Brazil.

By virtue of fraternal solidarity, a network of 260 thousand volunteers, of whom 92% are women, permanently takes part in the construction of a better, fairer and more fraternal world in service of Life and Hope. Each volunteer devotes an

average of 24 hours per month to this transforming Mission to educate mothers and poor families, to share the bread of brotherhood and produce knowledge for social transformation.

The aim of the Pastoral da Criança is to reduce the causes of malnutrition and child mortality, promoting the integral development of children from conception to six years old. Early childhood is a critical phase for health, education, the establishment of cultural values, cultivation of faith and citizenship, with profound repercussions throughout life.

A little history:
I am the 13th child of 14 siblings, five of which are religious. Three nuns and two Franciscan priests. One of them, Dom Paulo Evaristo, Cardinal Arns, Archbishop Emeritus of São Paulo, has been known for his advocacy of human rights, especially during the twenty-year dictatorship in Brazil.

In May 1982, after returning from a meeting of the United Nations (UN) in Geneva, Don Paulo called me at night. At that meeting, James Grant, then Executive Director of Unicef, spoke a lot to him about the ORAL SERUM, considered the greatest medical advance of the last century. This Serum can save from death millions of children from dehydration due to diarrhea, a major cause of infant mortality in Brazil and in the world. James Grandt convinced Don Paul to motivate the Catholic Church to teach mothers to prepare and administer oral serum. It could save thousands of Lives.

Widow for five years, on a historic night, I was gathered with my five children aged between nine and nineteen, when I received a call from my brother Don Paul. He told me what had happened and asked me to think about that. How to bring the Church's proposal to reality and help reduce death of children? I was happy with the new challenge. It was what I wanted most! Educate mothers and families to take better care of their children.

I believe that God, somehow, had prepared me for this mission. Based on my experience as a pediatrician and sanitarian medical doctor and having worked many years in the management of maternal and child public health services, I understood that, in addition to providing better access to and quality of public services, what most poor mothers lacked was knowledge and fraternal solidarity to put into practice some simple and basic actions that can save children from malnutrition and death. Actions like, for example, providing education on food and nutrition to pregnant women and children, on breastfeeding, vaccines, oral rehydration, nutritional surveillance. and part from that, knowledge about signs and symptoms of some respiratory diseases and how to prevent them.

At that moment, it came to my mind the method that Jesus used to satisfy the

hunger of 5,000 men, besides women and children. It was night and they were hungry. The disciples said to Jesus that it would be better they went home. But Jesus commended them: "Give them something to eat yourselves." The Apostle Philip said to Jesus that there was no money to buy bread for so many people. Andrew, the brother of Simon, pointed out a boy with two fish and five loaves. And Jesus told the people to sit in groups of fifty to one hundred people (in small communities). I thought to myself, what is the cause that drives millions of children to die from causes easily preventable? Or what causes the children to become violent and criminal when they become teenagers?

Then, I remembered the beginning of my career, when I dared to want to reduce infant mortality and malnutrition. It came to my mind thousands of mothers who replaced their breast milk for powder milk diluted in dirty water. Others, who would not vaccinate their children unless there was free food given out at the Health Center. Other mothers would clean the nose of all the children with the same cloth or beat their children and humiliate them when they peed in the bed. And even sadder than that, when the father would come home drunk. On hearing the baby crying of hunger and for love, he would beat and shake his child still so small. It is known that, according to the results of WHO survey, which publication I followed in 1994, abused children before one year of age have a significant tendency to violence, and many become criminals before reaching 25 years of age.

What should the Church, which is all of us, do?

Then I became sure to follow the methodology of Jesus: organizing people in small communities, identifying leaders, families with pregnant women and children under six years of age. To the leaders, who were willing to work voluntarily in this mission to save lives, a training program would be given in the spirit of faith and life, and they would receive technical and scientific knowledge on basic health, nutrition, education and citizenship.

The leaders would be followed up in their works not to lose the heart. They would have the task of sharing with the families fraternal solidarity, LOVE and their knowledge about the care of pregnant women and children for these to be healthy and happy. As Jesus commanded that the disciples should check if everyone was full, we would have to implement an information system with some easily understood indicators, even by the illiterate or less educated leaders. At that point, I was already seeing before me many baskets of wisdom and love learned from the people.

I felt that there was the community methodology, as this could be developed on a large scale by dioceses, parishes and communities. Not only to save children's lives, but to build a more just and fraternal world. It would be the Mission of the Good Shepherd, who is aware of all the sheep, but gives priority to those most in need. The poor and the excluded.

Later that wonderful night, I drew on paper, a poor community, where I identified

families with pregnant women and children under six years old and community leaders, both Catholic and from other faiths and cultures, to carry out actions in an ecumenical manner, for Jesus came so "that they may have life and have it to the full." (John 10,10).

Since the first experiment, the Pastoral da Criança cultivated the methodology of Jesus, which is widely applied: in Brazil, in more than 40,000 communities of about 7,000 parishes from all 272 dioceses and Prelatures. It is gradually spreading to other nineteen countries, where **you are needed, communicators of the Good News of Jesus.**

To better organize the sharing of information and fraternal solidarity between mothers and neighboring families, the actions are based on three strategies education and communication: individual, group and mass. The Pastoral da Criança makes simultaneous use of three methods of communication to reinforce the message, motivate and promote behavioral changes.

Education and individual communication are made through the **Monthly Home Visit to the families** with pregnant women and children. Leaders follow up the neighboring families in the poorest communities in both urban and rural areas, in indigenous communities and maroons in the riverine areas of the Amazon. They cross rivers and seas, climb up and down steep hills, walk miles to hear the cries of mothers and families, to educate them and strengthen peace, faith and knowledge. They exchange ideas about health and education of children and pregnant women; they teach and learn at the same time. With great tenderness and trust, they strengthen the social fabric of the communities, which leads to social inclusion.

Driven by the Global Campaign sponsored by the United Nations (UN) in 1999 with the theme "**A life without violence is our right**", the Pastoral da Criança entered a permanent action to prevent violence with the slogan "**Peace begins at home**". It used as a communication strategy, the distribution of six million pamphlets bearing the "10 commandments for peace in the family," discussed in schools and communities from north to south of the country.

The visits, among many other things, serve to promote Breastfeeding, a school of dialogue and sharing, especially when given as exclusive food until six months and preferably continued up to more than a year old, for more than two years, supplemented by other healthy foods. Suction adjust muscles and bones to form a good diction, better breathing and healthier dental arch. The affection of the mother stroking the baby's head improves the connection of neurons. The psychomotor child suckling at the breast is more advanced. It is so much so that the child sits, walks and talks earlier and learns better at school. It is and essential factor for the emotional development and protection of the babies'

health, for life. Solidarity emerges as a result of hours of direct contact with the mother. During the home visits, the education of the women and their families raise self-esteem, encourages self-care and child care. With this education of families social inclusion is promoted.

Education and group communication are held every month in thousands of communities. **It is the Life Celebration Day**. It is a time dedicated to the strengthening of faith and friendship between the families. Besides the nutritional surveillance, there are toys and games with the children and guidance on citizenship. On this day the mothers share practices of adequate use of regional foods of low cost and high nutritional value such as fruit, green leaves, seeds and stems, which often are not valued by families.

Another opportunity for group formation is the **Monthly Evaluation and Feedback Meeting** of community leaders. The main purpose of this meeting is to discuss and provide solutions to the problems encountered.

These actions are part of the information system of the Pastoral da Criança , for us to monitor efforts and results through the Indicators. Malnutrition was controlled. The 50% rate of malnourished at the beginning is now at 3.1%. Infant mortality was reduced dramatically and is now at 13 per thousand in communities with the Children's Pastoral implemented. It was the base to win entities such as the Department of Health, UNICEF, HSBC and other Companies. They provide us support to the training program and to all primary health care, nutrition, education and citizenship activities. THE COST OF CHILD PER MONTH is less than A DOLLAR.

Regarding education and mass communication, I will present three concrete experiences of how communication is an instrument of defense of the children's rights.

(video and audio materials)

- a. Printed Materials (Video Presentation)
- b. Radio Programs (Description of the purpose, scope)
- c. Campaigns (video campaigns)

In December this year I will complete 50 years of work as a medical doctor and before 2002, I confess I had never heard of any program of UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), or any other body of the United Nations (UN), which stimulated spirituality as a component of the person's development. As one of the members of Brazil's delegation in the Annual General Assembly of 2002, which brought together 186 countries, dedicated to the summit goals for children, I was pleased to hear about the final decision on the integral development of the

child that includes his/her "physical, social, mental, spiritual and cognitive development." This was a great advance and will further the training and communication process that we perform in the Pastoral da Criança . In this case, the person is seen in a complete and integrated manner into his/her personal relationship with the neighbor, the environment and with God.

I am convinced that the solution for most of the social problems is related to the immediate reduction of social inequalities, the elimination of corruption, the promotion of social justice, access to health and quality education, mutual financial and technical support between the nations, for the preservation and restoration of the environment. As remarked in the recent document by Pope Benedict XVI, "Caritas in Veritate" - Charity in Truth, "nature is a gift from God and must be used responsibly." The world is awakening to the signs of global warming, which is manifested in more intense and frequent natural disasters. The great economic crisis demonstrated the interrelationship between the countries. Not to succumb, it calls for solidarity among nations. It is solidarity and brotherhood that the world needs most to survive and find the path of Peace.

Closing Words

Since its foundation, the Children's Pastoral has been investing in training volunteers and in monitoring children and pregnant women, family and community. They are currently 1.816.261 children, 94,987 pregnant women in 1,407,743 families. The community methodology and results, as well as the role of the Pastoral da Criança in promoting public policies with its presence in the Health Councils, in the Rights of the Child and Adolescent and other councils has led to profound changes in the country, improving social and economic indicators. The results of volunteer work with the mystical love to God and to the neighbor, in line with our mother earth, that all must feed, our brothers, the fruits and flowers, our rivers, lakes, oceans, forests and animals. All this shows us how the organized society can be the protagonist of that transformation. In that spirit, in strengthening the ties that bind the community, we can find solutions to serious social problems that affect poor families.

Like the birds, caring for their young to make a nest high in the trees and the mountains, away from predators, threats and dangers, and closer to God, we should take care of our children as a sacred asset, to promote respect to their rights and protect them.

Thank you!

May God be with you!!

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