



A Family for Every Child: Catholic Care for Children



**UISG Catholic Care
for Children International**

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Foreword

Sister Patricia Murray, IBVM

Executive Secretary, International Union of Superiors General

As we negotiate multiple crises—the Covid pandemic, environmental catastrophes, wars and conflicts, individual and institutional abuses—we often fail to notice small initiatives, the mustard seeds of change that are already growing among us. These signs of newness often begin in unexpected and demanding places. Catholic Care for Children is one such seed of change that is making enormous contributions as it develops and expands within and across continents. From small beginnings in Africa, Catholic Sisters are making a significant impact within the care reform sector in ways that are helping to ensure that children have every opportunity to grow up in safe, nurturing families or family-like environments.

Animated by the Gospel, Catholic Sisters for centuries have cared for children and vulnerable adults. For a multiplicity of reasons, often the absence of family support and/or resources, children and other vulnerable persons have been placed in institutions by family members and by government and church officials. This practice started at a time when the ministries of Catholic Sisters were largely confined to institutions. At that time, Sisters lived a monastic life with little contact with life outside the convent. These institutions were attached to convents where living was frugal and resources were often minimal. The Sisters were left to cope as best they could without the support of social welfare systems and government policies. Few had the education and training needed to deal with the young people who were resident in their institutions. In some cases, these approaches left much to be desired, as they mirrored

the mores of the day, when it was thought that children had no rights and when discipline was often enforced in a demanding way. We know to our shame the different kinds of abuses that children suffered in some institutions. And while we must also acknowledge the warmth and loving care provided by so many Sisters and lay personnel who have ministered in institutional settings, we have come to understand that a child needs the nurture of a family that cannot be found in an institution, no matter how good the institution may be.

Today, many Sisters see clearly the flaws within systems that favor institutional approaches to care. No matter how much love and support a child receives in an institution, it is no substitute for a family or family-like support system. Pope Francis continually speaks about the dignity of the human person and the dignity of each child. He speaks about the need to promote a culture of care that prioritizes human dignity at every level of society. He reminds us that “it is important to promote ‘a culture of faces,’” which places the dignity of the person at the center, a respect for his or her story, especially for those who are wounded and marginalized. How true this is for many children and their families. As the Pope reminds us, “No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed...”¹ Families need encouragement and support to sustain love and nurture.

These words of Pope Francis point to the work of Catholic Care for Children, a Sister-led movement to ensure a family for every child. Begun in Zambia, Uganda, and Kenya and now promoted by the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) at the international level, Catholic Care for Children International (CCCI) sees the importance of first educating the members of religious congregations and then the general public to read the signs of the times about the necessity for care reform. The second step to be taken involves a movement from an institutional approach to family- and community-based approaches to care for children and other vulnerable persons. These present Sisters worldwide with opportunities to reflect on their practice within the care sector, especially for institutes operating care homes.

As CCCI reaches out to other Sisters and their colleagues in countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, it does so animated by the Gospel imperative to care for the vulnerable and by the principles of Catholic social teaching emphasizing human dignity; informed by the social sciences about what makes for healthy children and families; and cognizant of new and emerging legal frameworks favoring family care for children. CCCI is inspired by the courageous leadership and best practices of Sisters and their colleagues in Africa.

Placing children and their families at the center of our care means that pastoral initiatives must focus on strengthening and protecting the family so that no family is forced to place a child in an institution because of poverty. It ensures that, in situations of grave or immediate need, a child is placed in an institutional setting for the shortest possible time. This is the work of domestic and societal peacebuilding—the shalom of ensuring fullness of life for each person and for all. This Hebrew word, meaning uninjured and safe, whole and sound,² carries the vision that we in the CCCI movement desire for each child in our care and protection. May we each take the steps necessary to strengthen and build the supports needed by families and extended families so that they too can provide the nurturing environment essential to each child in their midst.

1 Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* [The Joy of Love], March 19, 2016, no. 315, Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html.

2 “The Meaning of Shalom in the Bible,” New International Version, <https://www.thenivbible.com/blog/meaning-shalom-bible>.



Care Reform and Catholic Care for Children

Kathleen Mahoney, PhD

Senior Program Officer, Global Development, GHR Foundation

The world is waking up to the importance of reforming care of children and vulnerable adults with increasing attentiveness to that which promotes human flourishing. The trend marks a turn away from institutional approaches to care in favor of family- and community-based care.

The decades-long global trend away from institutional care of children and vulnerable adults is fueled by social sciences that clearly demonstrate that growing up in a safe, nurturing family is foundational for healthy psychosocial development across the life span. The social sciences are also clear about the risks associated with institutional care:

- Regardless of circumstances, separation from family is traumatic for a child.
- Outside of family care, a child is more likely to be abused, neglected, or trafficked.
- Young children in residential care, especially those under the age of three, are more susceptible to psychosocial challenges or physical and cognitive delays.
- Incidences of homelessness, crime, and suicide are higher among young people who leave residential care after significant stays.

Informed by the social sciences, emerging legal frameworks are clearly moving toward family- and community-based approaches to care of children and vulnerable persons. Most notably, we point to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which the Holy See is a signatory. It clearly asserts the child's right to a family: "...the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding...." ¹

The sensibilities that inform the UNCRC are echoed by Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia*: "Children, once born, begin to receive, along with nourishment and care, the spiritual gift of knowing with certainty that they are loved. This love is shown to them through the gift of their personal name, the sharing of language, looks of love and the brightness of a smile. In this way, they learn that the beauty of human relationships touches our soul, seeks our freedom, accepts the differences of others, recognizes and respects them as a partner in dialogue... Such is love, and it contains a spark of God's love."²

It is clear: it is best for children to grow up in safe, nurturing families. However, upwards of 8 million children are living outside of family care, deprived of the nurture of a safe and loving family. Far too many are living in large institutions. These children are often called "orphans." Yet this is a misnomer, for about 80% of children in residential care have a living parent. Often it is poverty, disability, a health challenge, or lack of access to basic services that leads to family separation and propels children into residential care, depriving them of the nurture they need and deserve.

Catholic Realities

Among Catholics, care is inspired by the Scriptures and shaped by Catholic social teaching. There are many inspiring examples of care provided by Catholics and under Catholic auspices. In fact, the Catholic community is the world's largest provider of care and social welfare.

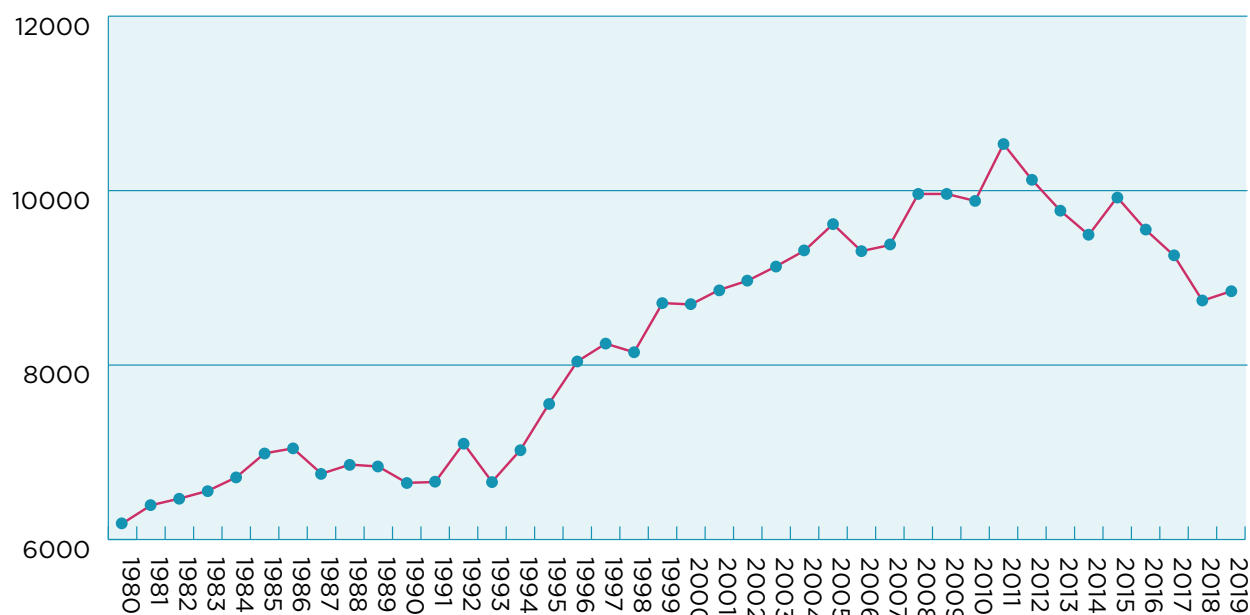
One measure of Catholic care, albeit imperfect, is the number of Catholic-sponsored care institutions. We learn from the *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae* (2019) that there are more than 105,000 Catholic-sponsored social welfare institutions, including "total care" institutions: 9,374 orphanages and 15,429 homes for the elderly, infirmed, and those with disabilities. There are also 10,723 nurseries.

Here we draw attention to the number of Catholic-sponsored orphanages (more aptly called child care institutions). According to the *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae*, between 1980 and 2011 the number of Catholic-sponsored orphanages grew from 6,185 to 10,524, an increase accelerated as the impacts of HIV/AIDS became more acute. Since 2011, the number has declined by over 1,000. While we do not know what is driving the decline, it is hoped that it signals fewer children in institutional care.

1 *Preamble to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

2 Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* [The Joy of Love], March 19, 2016, no. 172, Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html.

Number of Catholic Orphanages, 1980 - 2019*



**Data adjusted for overcount in Kenya in several years.*

Catholic Care for Children

There are myriad examples of inspiring and exemplary care of children and the vulnerable provided by Catholics and under Catholic auspices. Family strengthening is preventing separation of children from their parents and siblings, while children who have been separated are being reunited with their families. Those with disabilities are supported in families and communities.

In recent years, congregations of religious women and men have come together to advance care reform in a more concerted and collaborative way. Under the aegis of their respective national conferences of religious, religious women and men in Uganda, Kenya, and Zambia are reading and responding to the signs of the times. They have asked and are answering profound questions:

How shall we express our charisms of care today:

- In light of what the social sciences tell us about the importance of family nurture?
- In light of emerging legal frameworks favoring family care?
- In the light of our faith?

Working together as founding members of the Catholic Care for Children movement, religious women and men in Uganda, Kenya, and Zambia are agents of care reform. They have come together to give expression to their respective charisms of care for children in new ways, transitioning away from institutional approaches for the care of children toward family- and community-based approaches.

Core Beliefs and Principles

In 2020, representatives of Catholic Care for Children developed a charter expressing their core beliefs and principles pertaining to children's needs and rights to safe, nurturing families.

- If families are in distress, provide support to prevent separation of children from their families.
- If separation occurs, see that children are reunited with families or placed in a family-like environment.
- If emergency care is necessary, ensure that the care is of the highest quality and shortest duration possible.
- Large-scale residential care should always be a last resort.

Promising results have already been realized. With growing resolve, Sisters and their colleagues are working together to reform care. They have built their own capacity for family- and community-based approaches to care through skill-building and training in social work. They have worked closely with local and national officials to ensure compliance with legal frameworks. They have advocated for family care in local communities and in national forums. The number of children in Catholic-sponsored institutions has decreased; more children are in families. Indeed, as religious are finding new ways to express a charism of care, they are emerging as champions of care reform in ways that are improving outcomes for children and their families.

The Light of the World Nursery was set up by the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary on the outskirts of João Pessoa in northeast Brazil. It provides a safe, loving, and nurturing crèche and kindergarten environment for children ages three months to seven years who are often from very poor homes. The Light of the World Nursery works with their parents (many of whom are parenting alone) to help them toward creating more stable homes.

In the city of Kisumu, on the shores of Lake Victoria in Kenya, the Franciscan Missionaries of Saint Joseph work with children who live on the streets of the city due to difficult home conditions. The Franciscan Missionaries provide temporary accommodation, counseling, and support on the pathway to reuniting the children with their families. After reconciliation and reintegration, project staff continue to follow up and support the family.

During the COVID-19 lockdown and school closures in the Kannagi-Nagar area of Chennai, India, the Salesian Sisters ensured that over 400 vulnerable children continued to receive education in the evenings, through what would have been after-school classes. Child protection committees set up by the Sisters in the area ensured that no child was forced into labor during the lockdown, despite their parents' dire financial straits.

In Lusaka, Zambia, the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary set up the only school in the country for children who are deaf and blind. Working to overcome stigma, the project also provides a home-based care service for children, involving parents and the wider community in caring for the children.

Examples courtesy of Miseen Cara



Every Child Deserves a Loving Family

Sister Paula Jordão, FMVD

Formation Programs Coordinator, International Union of Superiors General

As we walk through the Scriptures, under the guidance of the Church, we discover the immense love God has for each person and especially for children. We can also learn the immeasurable role that family has in the revelation of God's love and the development of each human life to its fullest, as it had in the life of Jesus himself.

Looking at Children Through the Eyes of God

The need to care for the most vulnerable ones

God has a preference for the most vulnerable and little ones. It can be seen throughout the Bible and especially in the many words and gestures of Jesus. He identifies himself with the ones in need and asks us to look after them with joyful generosity. In doing so, we welcome him into our lives (cf. Mt 25:34-40), loving the ones God loves first. This task cannot be deferred if we want to gratefully serve the Lord, thanking him for all he has done for us (cf. Sg 116:12), allowing our lives to be transformed in love: "Let us love, then, because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). Catholic social teaching also confirms us on this path, telling us in one of its principles that we are to care for the poorest and most helpless members of society.

Without a doubt, children are part of those least brothers and sisters of Christ. For this reason, accompanied by the Holy Spirit, we must learn to look at them through the eyes of Jesus.

Mark 9:34-37 and Mark 10:13-16 are two important passages that shed an intense light on this reality. These two passages are placed on Jesus' journey up to Jerusalem and contain a countless amount of wisdom. Here, we will only pencil in some insights on how Jesus turns upside down the vision of his culture in relationship with children and highlight his invitation to serve these little ones in a new and radical way.

Jesus embraces and blesses children

In a society that did not value children as important, both passages show Jesus embracing them and revealing how they are at the center of God's attention. To the contrary, the behavior of the disciples—who scolded the ones who were bringing children to Jesus—hints that they consider these little ones not to be good enough for the attention of the Master (cf. Mk 10:13). Mirroring the common public opinion, the disciples thought of children as being at the bottom of the ladder, with no voice, ignored, and marginalized in the social arena. But to their surprise, as usual, Jesus shocked them with his unexpected words and far-reaching gestures: "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them," and "he embraced them, laid his hands on them and gave them his blessing" (Mk 10:14,16).

Jesus wants children to come to him, and he does not allow anyone to prevent it from happening. He desires to embrace, lay his hands upon, and bless children. It is important to note that children are the only ones whom Jesus blesses in the gospel of Mark. Such reality reveals how special children are in the heart of God: they are the extraordinary heirs of the Kingdom (cf. Mk 10:14). Moreover, we are told that in welcoming a child, we are welcoming Jesus himself and the one who sent him: the Father (cf. Mk 9:37).

The word "welcome" is repeated five times in these passages. "To welcome" means to be hospitable, to make a person feel at ease, to receive, to give acceptance, to offer care, to commit with. So we cannot but underline how central and undeniable hospitality of children is in Jesus' teaching. To welcome children and to receive them is to welcome and to receive the Kingdom. Both realities are linked and cannot be separated. If we recall the parable of the hidden and found treasure, we can say that children are the treasure that comes with the field of the Kingdom of God (cf. Mt 13:4): "Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him" (Psalm 127:3). They are God's treasure entrusted by Jesus to the disciples and to us, who are called to serve the little ones with loving care (cf. Mk 9:35).

From these passages and many others (cf. Mk 5:21-24, 35-43; 7:24-30; 9:14-29), we can affirm undeniably that Jesus is a friend of children. He places them amid the scene of life because they can never be forgotten or set aside.

Prayer and reflection

- Read Matthew 25:34-40, Mark 9:34-37 and Mark 10:13-16, prayerfully asking God to look at children through his eyes.
- How is God inviting you to look at children?

Family Love Expresses God's Care

Across Scripture, God shows his love to his people and each person through human loving bonds. In particular, many are the invitations to contemplate God's face in the expressions of parental and family relationships.

In Deuteronomy 1:31, God is portrayed as one who carries a child. In the passage of Hosea 11:1-4, God is sketched with features of a parent teaching a child to walk, holding a child by the arm, lifting a child lovingly, and bending down to feed the child. God looks after his children with human strings of love.

The words in Isaiah 49:15 witness to the fact that God loves each one of us even more than a mother can ever love her child. In the beautiful Psalm 103:13 we read: "As tenderly as a father treats his children, so the Lord treats those who fear him."



Human love, and especially family love, is not only a symbol of God but also the most extraordinary way God chooses to extend his love to each person: "God sets the lonely in families" (Psalm 68:6). Therefore, to help each child to be embraced by true love, we need to foster it in all its forms. Primarily and in a greater manner, the emphasis must be put on encouraging, recreating, enhancing, and nurturing family love, where each child can come to the awareness of the marvelous care with which we have been created and come to his or her fullest development: "You must see what great love the Father has lavished on us by letting us be called God's children—which is what we are!" (1 Jn 3:1).

Prayer and reflection

- Recall and revisit your own experience of God's love through the experience of human and family love.

Catholic social teaching and its relevance to care for children and vulnerable persons

Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of our faith. Its roots are in the prophets in the Bible, who announced God's special love for the poor and called God's people to a covenant of love and justice. It is a teaching founded on the life and words of Jesus Christ, who came "to bring good news to the poor, liberty to captives..., recovery of sight to the blind" (Lk 4:18-19) and who identified himself with "the least of these," the hungry and the stranger (cf. Mt 25:44-45). Catholic social teaching is built on a commitment to the poor.

Catholic social teaching is based on and inseparable from our understanding of human life and human dignity. Every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family.

Every person, from the moment of conception to natural death, has inherent dignity and a right to life consistent with that dignity.

Our tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize society and relationships affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. The family is the central social institution and must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. Catholic tradition teaches that human beings grow and achieve fulfillment in community. We believe children have rights. They have rights to a family and to participate in society.

Prayer and reflection

- What is stirring in my heart?
- How do I and how does my religious congregation value Catholic social teaching and incorporate it in the ministry of care for children?

Every Child Deserves a Caring Family

Family: Its irreplaceable role and challenges

Already from the first pages of the Scriptures, we are presented with the reality of family as the vital set-up for children to flourish. In the early pages of the book of Genesis, we read: “God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying to them, ‘Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth.’” (Gen 1:27-28). Right from the beginning of creation, God has placed children within a family. Each child coming into this world is naturally placed in the hands of a mother and father. In God’s desire, the family is the right environment for children.

However, at the same time, also from the first chapters of the Bible, we envision how a family is faced with many challenges and tempted by human malice. Experience shows us the many factors that can make families inappropriate for children or lead to separation: death of a mother at delivery, unwanted pregnancies, young mothers who abandon their children, mentally ill parents, domestic violence, wars, migration, exploitation, illnesses, parental death, neglect, extreme poverty, etc. Families cannot be taken for granted. Many efforts and conditions have to be met and mastered for family reality to achieve this identity: the image and likeness of God, a truly loving and suitable place for children to grow (cf. Gen 1:27,4:7).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) tells us: “The fecundity of conjugal love cannot be reduced solely to the protection of children, but must extend to their moral education and their spiritual formation. The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute. The right and the duty of parents to educate their children are primordial and inalienable” (CCC 2221). Furthermore, the responsibility of the children’s education belongs first of all to their parents: They are called to fulfill this mission through the creation of a home “where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity and disinterested service are the rule” (CCC 2221). The family environment is where children can grow into their completest development as they are looked after with care and affection, learning to be loved and to love, realizing what it means to be a person, achieving all

the skills that human life requires, receiving their first formative ideas about truth and goodness, and learning their rights and responsibilities in society.

Family is a vital cell of society and essential for the personal growth of every child. Marriage and family are the central social institutions that must be supported and strengthened and never undermined. Moreover, Catholic social teaching affirms that every person, and therefore every child, has the right to his or her own family.

God became one of us in a family

When God became one of us, sharing our vulnerability, he also chose to be born of a woman (cf. Gal 4:4) in the milieu of a loving family with a mother and a father, within a more extended family (cf. Mt 1:18-25; Mk 6:3). The presence of Mary and Joseph was fundamental: they offered the appropriate safe space for Jesus to grow. They provided him with protection, the warmth of a home, healthy relationships, guidance for life, initiation into the Jewish faith, and all the surroundings that the God-incarnate child needed to grow in wisdom and stature (cf. Lk 2:52).

In every aspect of his existence, Jesus shows us God's ways to have life to the full (cf. Jn 10:10), for only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of each human being take on light (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 22). The Son of God needed and chose a family in which to be incarnate and to fully mature, revealing to us with his own life how vital the environment of a loving family is for every child to grow into maturity.

Prayer and reflection

- How important it is that each person can experience true family love within the biblical context?

Conclusion

The Bible and Catholic social teaching lead us to the undeniable conclusion that family and parental bonds make the best milieu in which to look after each child and are fundamental in revealing God's care. We are certain that each family, if it is a caring one, is the most appropriate environment for children to thrive. Family care exceeds institutional care, which should only be a short-time resource when the family or any other family-like alternatives are not possible or suitable at a given moment.

Prayer and reflection

- After reading these lines, what caught your attention?
- What steps can you take in your mission and ministry to provide family-loving care to the children who lack it?



In the Best Interest of Children: Safe and Nurturing Families

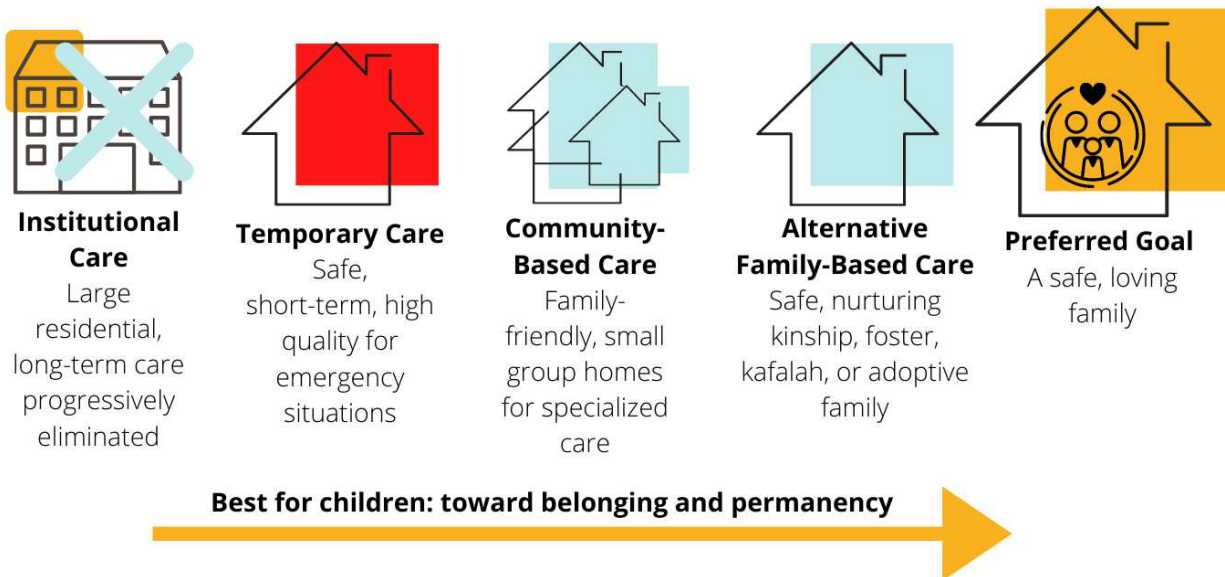
Kathleen A. Mahoney, PhD

Senior Program Officer, Global Development, GHR Foundation

Across the globe there is a trend in care: a move away from institutional care for children in favor of family- and community-based approaches. This trend is fueled by decades of research that clearly demonstrate the importance of family nurture for a child's healthy development over the life span. Research also documents the undesirable effects of family separation and institutionalization upon children. Thus the best place for a child to grow up is in a safe, nurturing family.

Families provide more than physical care. They provide love, attention, and attachments upon which relationships are built over the course of a lifetime. If an alternative to family is needed, it should be family-like and community-based. Emergency care may be needed, but institutional care should always be a last resort.

A Continuum of Care for Children



Children need families. Family is the locus of love, care, encouragement, motivation, and support. Within a family, a child can receive individual attention: a held hand, an embrace. Through play, active listening, and mimicry, a child learns the basics of engagement and communication. Part and parcel of healthy family life, these simple actions have significant impacts. The quality of family life, especially parent-child bonds, affects a child's holistic development and sets an early life trajectory.

Strong bonds—healthy attachments—between a child and parent are paramount. Early experiences play a major role in setting a course for life. Among the lengthiest longitudinal studies of human development, the British National Birth Cohort Study started following 14,000 babies in 1946; participants are now in their 70s. It has shown that parents are the most significant influence for a child's cognitive development and a child's educational and occupational outcomes. Other studies have demonstrated that children who have nurturing parents, who speak with them often and listen attentively, perform better and realize higher achievement. The connection between a caring adult and a child is so significant that any deprivation of such a connection can have negative consequences.

Of course, family life is not a panacea. Families sometimes struggle, and many face complex challenges. Not all families can provide the basics for their children. Not all families are safe places for children. Parental addiction, illness, or death can unravel the fabric of family life. A child with a disability can strain some families, especially if community support and resources are thin.

For some children, an alternative is needed, be it adoption, foster care, kinship care, or specialized care. Among alternatives for children, large residential facilities should always be a last resort, temporary at best, used only if other alternatives are not available. That is because long-term institutional care deprives a child of the individual nurture that is foundational for

healthy development, often separates a child from community and cultures, and increases other risk factors.

The younger the child, the greater the risks associated with institutional care. During a child's early weeks, months, and years of life, the brain is still developing. This is a narrow window of time for cognitive, social, emotional, and language development, capacities which are built through sustained and frequent interactions with caring adults. Without sustained individual nurture, children in institutional care are at great risk for cognitive and physical delays.

While in institutional care, children are at higher risk of neglect and abuse. Significant numbers experience mental health issues, including trauma, isolation, and depression. In some cases, children have been trafficked out of orphanages for forced labor or sex. As adults, those who grew up in residential care are at higher risk for homeless, incarceration, and suicide, and they have more difficulty in forming healthy social relationships.

Summary: The Importance of Family

The social sciences are clear about the importance of a family for a child's well-being and healthy development. A safe, nurturing family is the optimal place where a child connects with caring adults who are responsive to individual needs, nurture individual gifts, and address specific needs. Bonds with family, especially parents, make a child feel loved and secure. This environment helps a child to learn, be creative, problem solve—the basics for healthy development in years to come. Depriving a child of family nurture, especially a disruption of parental-child bonds, can have long-lasting negative implications.

Given the importance of a safe, nurturing family or family-like environment for a child, the trend toward family- and community-based care warrants support. If a family is in distress, take steps to strengthen the family to keep children with those who know and love them. If a child is separated from a family, look for a long-term solution that will provide the child with a sense of belonging, safety, and permanency. Of course, when safe to do so, reunite a child with his or her family.

A child is a precious gift. A safe, nurturing family provides the child with a sense of belonging and permanency critical to healthy development. It is not just food, clothing, and shelter. A child needs a hand to hold, a person to encourage and support him or her in realizing potential. This is a family's role, place, and strength. Families do struggle at times, some mightily. Yet with support and inherent resilience, they are often resilient enough. It is best for a child to grow up in a safe, nurturing family.



International Frameworks Guiding Care for Children

Sister Jean Quinn, DW

Executive Director, UNANIMA International

“The child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.”

Preamble to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The family is the fundamental social unit of all modern societies. It is the base from which we learn to communicate, empathize, compromise, and adapt within vital structures. However, many families in our global home suffer from painful and traumatic experiences such as homelessness, violence, poverty, and hunger. Many experience these situations simultaneously, which leads to the separation of children from loving parents and caregivers. These children can end up institutionalized, in foster care systems, or in other alternative childcare scenarios, but none of these options is a sustainable replacement for the family unit.

Given the adverse impacts of institutionalization on children’s developmental outcomes and well-being, it is essential that all of us work toward reducing the number of children in alternative care and reunite children with their families when possible. An estimated 2.7 million children up to 17 years could be living in institutional care globally. *The Lancet* in 2020 uses 2015 data and estimates the number of institutionalized children worldwide to be around 5.4 million.

Ending institutionalization is a human rights priority. Thus, the work of Catholic Care for Children is guided by the following four very important international frameworks specifically relating to children.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important agreement by countries that have promised to protect children's rights. It also explains who children are, all their rights, and the responsibilities of governments. All the rights are connected, they are equally important, and they cannot be taken away from children. The document on the Rights of the Child is comprehensive and internationally binding. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history: the Holy See joined 149 states in ratifying the UNCRC. Below are the four general principles of the convention:

- That all rights guaranteed by the convention must be available to all children without discrimination of any kind (Article 2)
- That the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (Article 3)
- That every child has the right to life, survival, and development (Article 6)
- That the child's views must be considered and taken into account in all matters affecting her or him (Article 12)

The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children

The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children emerged from a recognition of significant gaps in the implementation of the UNCRC for millions of children worldwide who are either without or at risk of losing parental care. The international community has therefore come together and developed these Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.

The guidelines provide a framework for ensuring that governments need to fulfill children's rights to quality care in families of origin and in alternative care. They outline the need for relevant policy and practice with respect to two basic principles: **necessity and appropriateness**.

At the heart of **necessity** is the need to support children so they can remain with and be cared for by their families. Removing a child (including children with disabilities) from his or her family should be a last resort, and before any such decision is taken, a rigorous participatory assessment is required.

Concerning **appropriateness**, the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children define a range of suitable alternative care options. Each child in need of alternative care has specific requirements with respect to the need of the care. These needs include short- or long-term care and keeping siblings together. The care option chosen has to be tailored to the individual needs of the child. The suitability of the placement should be regularly reviewed to assess the necessity of providing alternative care and the viability of potential reunification with the family. The guidelines emphasize the importance of promoting parental care and preventing

family separation. The spirit of the guidelines is deeply rooted in the work of the Catholic Care for Children movement.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are another important framework for the work of Catholic Care for Children. The goals outlined in the SDGs cannot be achieved without realization of children's rights. They are universal in scope, and their call to leave no one behind puts the world's most vulnerable, including children, at the top of the agenda. All the goals are inextricably linked to human rights, and to the human rights of children specifically.

A critical part of meeting the targets in the SDGs is focusing on the family. The importance of the family is reflected in many national public policies. In 2010, former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon stated that "the very achievement of development goals depends on how families are empowered to contribute to the achievement of those goals. Therefore, policies focusing on improving the well-being of families and children are certain to benefit development." Additionally, in 2009 the UN Permanent Observer from the Holy See highlighted the importance of parental and familial care for children before the UN General Assembly Third Committee. Despite these sentiments, global disaggregated data on families is lacking. This prompted Ban Ki-Moon, in 2014, to call on governments and relevant stakeholders to support data collection and research on family and children's issues.

UNCRC annual resolution

Each year, the UN General Assembly adopts a resolution on the Rights of the Child that focuses on different topics. In 2019, the UN resolution for the first time centered on children without parents. The Resolution on the Rights of the Child Focusing on Children Without Parental Care (A/RES/74/133) calls for governments to recognize the rights of children who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care. It acknowledges that children without parental care are more likely to experience human rights violations than are other children, and it provides recommendations regarding alternative care for children.

The resolution recommends that governments adequately prepare young people in alternative care for integration into society and independent living when they age out of the system. It also emphasizes the importance of including youth in decision-making processes that are relevant to them. This resolution urges states to strengthen child welfare and child protection systems, improve care and reform efforts, and prevent the unnecessary separation of children from their parents. This resolution builds on the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children and relevant regional conventions such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

Assessing Policies Based on International Standards

The following points can be considered when assessing national and congregational policies in light of international standards.

What aspects of the international framework of care are reflected in the care sector of my country's or religious congregation's ministry on care for children. Do the national policies of my country and religious congregation:

- Realize children as rights holders and realize their rights to grow up in families?
- Realize the removal of a child from the family should be an action of necessity and last resort?
- Ensure the availability of suitable alternative care options appropriate to the individual needs of children requiring care and protection?
- Include a clear national and congregational plan for the deinstitutionalization of the care system and the development of family-based and other appropriate alternative care options?
- Realize that poverty alone is never the primary justification for children being removed from their family and placed in alternative care?
- Promote and support the development and implementation of a range of appropriate family support services as preventive measures to ensure children can be cared for within their families?
- Have appropriate procedures, guidance, and standards to ensure effective enforcement and oversight?



Safeguarding and Protecting Children Without a Family

Claudia Giampietro

Safeguarding Officer, International Union of Superiors General

Safeguarding and protecting children without a family is a key priority for religious institutes worldwide. In their ministries, religious men and women are adapting to the necessity to provide alternative care options and are facing challenges as they consider different cultural backgrounds, legal systems, and the need to update their policies and protocols according to the magisterium of the Church, while always promoting the best interest of the child.

Scenarios

I would like to offer two kinds of scenarios where religious institutes operate:

1. The first scenario involves a girl who meets her parents for a short time and then is separated from them for several reasons. She is taken to a residential structure managed by a religious institute, where she needs to adapt to life according to the routine of an institute, uprooted from her cultural context. Besides the difficulties in adapting to a different culture, perhaps she does not know what it means to be loved, and this makes her vulnerable and at risk of becoming victim of abuse. In fact, according to scientific studies, one of the risk factors for abuse is the lack of a family-like environment for children.

Furthermore, the religious managing the residential structure or working in it are at risk for the lack of protection of both the adolescent and the religious.

2. The second case study is a three-year old girl who is temporarily entrusted to the care of religious women working in a foster home attached to the generalate of their congregation. The girl's father passed away, and her mother has been convicted of minor offenses but will be able at some point to take back her daughter. Do religious women working in the foster home have enough awareness and preparation in safeguarding to deal with such situations? How will social workers collaborating with the religious congregation know that the family is a safe place for the child when she is brought back to her mother?

A Safe Journey for Children

The scenarios raise numerous questions on the safe journey of children from institutions to families or family-like environments, highlighting the emerging need for religious men and women worldwide to establish networks to share best practices:

- Monitoring and evaluating the status of children and adolescents under the care of the religious institute in foster homes, residential structures, or educational centers where the members of the institutes work. This phase should include the support of external experts.
- Analyzing the child protection policies of religious institutes to determine if the policies are updated and in line with those established by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, leading an accurate study on the interaction of international, national, and regional normative sources and canon law provisions would be appropriate.
- Sending periodic reports to an independent body set up by the congregation that could analyze a shared database of different provinces/units of the congregation and evaluate the activities organized to raise awareness about safeguarding and protection (events, seminars, formation programs on childhood and adolescence).
- Preparing members in safeguarding so that they are updated on the most recent phenomena concerning childhood and adolescence, such as bullying, cyberbullying, and body shaming.
- Achieving at all levels within religious institutes a better understanding of the etiology of child sexual abuse and exploitation.
- Leading a global investigation on the causes and consequences of child sexual abuse and exploitation in realities in which religious could be identified as possible victims (in their own childhood/adolescence), perpetrators, or witnesses who did not reveal crimes committed by others. It would be a complex historical analysis that should consider the difficulty of researching elements that are mostly archived in minds and hearts – not documented in medical or legal records.
- Taking care of the mental health of members of religious communities, given that the numerous activities of ministry lead to states of vulnerability even among more resilient members.

Conclusions

Through periodic trainings in safeguarding and protection, members of religious institutes worldwide are showing great commitment to implement care reform in the structures where they work. With the possibility to provide this formation in multiple languages and in different regions of the world, new groups of Safeguarding Dialogue Circles are being set up to connect religious institutes and support their work in the local areas where they operate. In this way, religious can make sure that children are in safe environments where they feel protected. As Pope Francis said, this is a process of conversion that “urgently requires renewed formation of all those who have educational responsibilities and who work in environments with minors, in the Church, in society, and in the family. Only in this way, with a systematic action of preemptive alliance, will it be possible to eradicate the culture of death that every form of abuse, whether sexual, of conscience or of power, brings with it.”¹

¹ Message of the Holy Father Francis to the Participants in the Conference “Promoting Child Safeguarding in the time of Covid-19 and Beyond, Nov. 4, 2021, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/20211021-messaggio-child-safeguarding.html>.



Charism of Care and Responding to the Need of Care and Protection of Children

Sister Niluka Perera, RGS

Coordinator, Catholic Care for Children International, International Union of Superiors General

We Are Called to Respond

Christian tradition has a history of men and women who have responded to the divine call to make a difference through forming communities of love, compassion, and justice for all. The saints, including founders and foundresses of religious congregations and many others, identified the signs of their times and addressed the challenges of their eras through envisioning a world where human beings could enjoy their God-given dignity and worth in human community. They intended to create tangible solutions that shaped and formed religious and civic communities for their times.

Walking the same path, we are called to commit to find more effective solutions to today's most difficult challenges. We are called to respond. In 2015, at the opening of the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis asked consecrated persons to "wake the world," to witness to the world that there is another way of being, acting, and living.

Charism and Society

Catholic social tradition reminds us to read the signs of the times and respond to the call from God in the particular realities of the time. The Spirit offers particular gifts, or charisms, to be lived in response to the calls of God and the needs of society. The Spirit entered into humanity to name where we need to change and to show us a new way. The Spirit, at the source of all charisms, is creative and transformative. Religious founders and foundresses witnessed that charisms are not static throughout time. By following in their footsteps, we are called to make our charisms relevant to the needs and the cries of the world.

Responding to the Cries of Children and the Vulnerable

“Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17)

History shows us how religious have responded to the cries of children and the vulnerable as their charisms demanded. Many religious congregations responded to thousands of children who needed care and protection through institutionalization, which was the known, accepted, and demanded method of care in their time, and for some, it continues to be the appropriate method for today.

Spirit-led creativity asks us to be open to the realities of the world as the challenges and complexities of problems today demand lasting and sustainable solutions. Across the world, millions of children are at risk of losing care from their family. Many are left particularly vulnerable from parental care which is so poor that it compromises their development.

All of these children need support to stay with their families in healthy, happy, and safe surroundings—in other words, a caring family environment. However, considering the fundamental role played by the family in children’s development, it is clear that many families struggle to meet their children’s physical and emotional needs and are subjected to social, economic, and environmental forces that are seemingly beyond their control. Although international laws related to children ensure the child’s rights to a family and demand governments and all other stakeholders to find every possible means to guarantee a family for every child, there are many instances where families and communities are not a safe place for children, who may experience violence and abuse at the hands of their family members, relatives, and neighbors.

“The planet is withering because humans have accepted a context that is much too small. We can no longer decide only what is best for a corporation (congregation) or a culture but we must move to a larger context, to the planetary level. Our decisions will affect thousands of future generations. We are the Universe as a whole reflecting on itself in this particular place.”

Brian Swimme, The Powers of the Universe

We need to pause and reflect. What is the Spirit calling us to do? What will be our response to the cries of children who need care and protection? Will closing down institutions bring about solutions? Will construction of more orphanages be the answer?

A Wake-up Call

We are called to dream big in order to find a better, more sustainable future for the children in our care and for those who are vulnerable to the loss of parental care in our time. We can explore the situation of children who need care and protection from a theological perspective that includes the reflection/action process of seeing, judging, and acting. This process can be extremely helpful in viewing the issue from a broader perspective and in making the charism of care relevant to the context of today. The process takes us deeply into the problem through:

1. Observing the signs of the times.
2. Reviewing what we see through the lens of social analysis and faith.
3. Seeking faith-filled and meaningful ways of responding to what we have reflected upon.

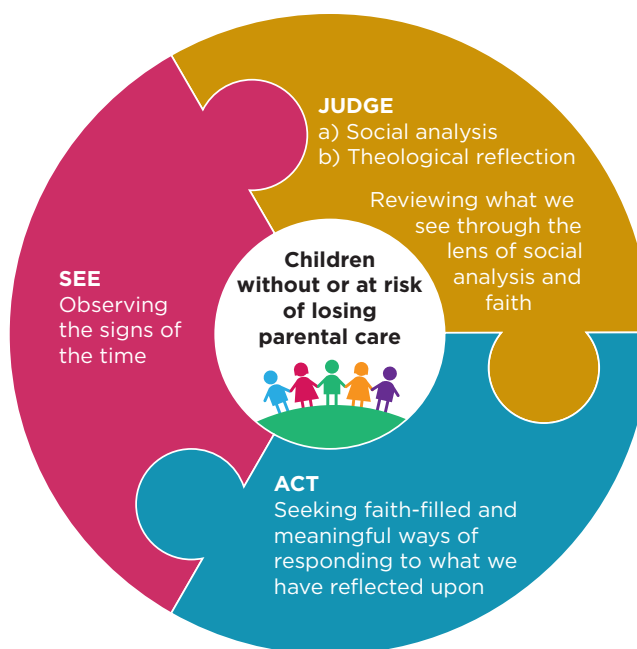
See

Experience and see the lived reality of children. Millions of children in the world are without parental care or are vulnerable to the loss of parental care. It is estimated that 80% of children in orphanages have a parent or family member who could care for them if provided with support structures. Poverty is a primary reason for children being placed in residential institutions. Studies have proved the negative impact of long-term residential care on the lives of children: on physical and brain growth and attachment, and on language, cognitive, emotional, and social development. The severity of the effects increases with the size of the institution and the length of stay.

What have we seen and experienced from the reality of the stories of children who have lived in institutional care and from the care givers?

Judge

Social analysis invites us to examine a more complete picture of the social situations which contribute to children who are without or are at risk of losing parental care. Why do children live in institutional settings? What are the deeper systemic and structural aspects that create impact and contribute to separating children from their families and threatening their security, well-being, and development? We need to analyze the social factors that contribute to the social problem.



Theological reflection invites us to explore the experience and its deeper analysis in dialogue with our religious tradition and faith. From this conversation, we gain new insights and meaning. What does Scripture and Catholic social teaching demand from us? How did the first Christian community look after the widows and orphans? If our founders and foundresses were alive today, what would be their response to children who need care and protection today?

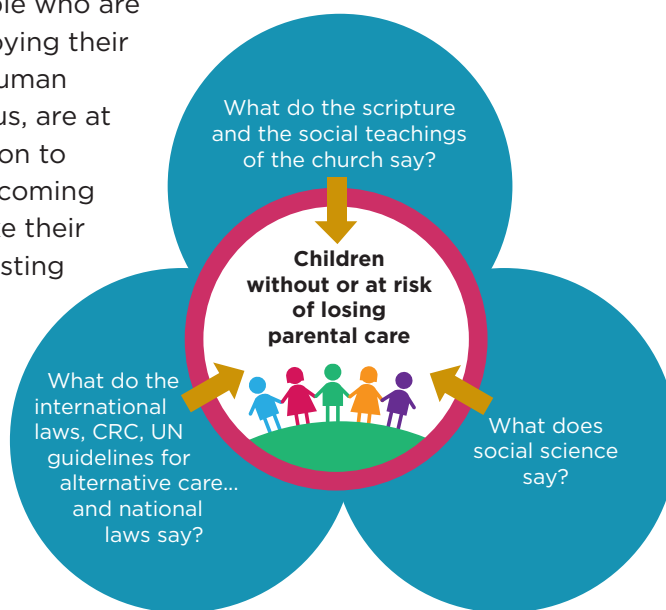
Act

We are invited to take action to help children who are without or are at risk of losing parental care. There are many reasons for children to be placed in institutional care. When we follow the reflection process, our response to the issues of children who are without or at risk of losing parental care goes beyond treating the symptoms of the problem to the roots of the problem. Action must be taken to:

- Change the situation.
- Address the root causes which contribute to children who are without or are at risk of losing parental care.

What Is Being Revealed? What Is Being Moved? What Is Being Asked?

Become a seer! “The seer sees something that does not yet exist; knows something is seeking to exist; and acts to making something exist in a new way,” says Sister Ilia Delio. Her words are applicable to all of us, especially people who are passionate, dedicated, and committed to bringing about changes in the lives of people who are excluded from society and deprived of enjoying their God-given dignity and right to live as full human beings. Religious, especially women religious, are at the forefront in providing care and protection to children. Religious around the globe are becoming seers: they are dreaming and acting to make their dream a reality—to bring sustainable and lasting change in the lives of children who are entrusted to their care. They are ready to ask more deeply why children are without or are at risk of losing parental care and to find how to do more to bring forth positive and holistic development of children. Scripture, social sciences, and international law all say the best environment in which to raise a child is a healthy, loving family. A family provides the love, nurturance, stability, protection, and care that are integral to the healthy development of a child.



Pillars of Catholic Care for Children (CCC)

There is a growing movement among international and national policymakers, mission agencies, non-governmental organizations, and faith-based organizations to recognize that every child deserves a family and to strive to ensure that children are cared for within families.

Policies, practices, and support for children are shifting from dependence on residential care toward family-based care. More and more residential care providers are transitioning their models of care to supporting children within families, both through reintegrating children back into their original families or supporting alternative family-based care.

Catholic Care for Children International strives to support women religious in reading the signs of the times and providing the best care possible for children. Catholic Care for Children International invites religious to be part of this movement, which is a Sister-led, charism-driven movement committed to care reform. Come join us to find a family for every child. Together let us remove the obstacles that prevent children from enjoying the love, care, and protection of their biological families. Let us together find other healthy, positive alternatives for children who do not have biological families, ensuring their right to be in a family. This is the time. We are the people called to bring this hope to children.



UISG Catholic Care for Children International

CATHOLIC CARE FOR CHILDREN

Catholic Care for Children is a sister-led, charism-driven movement to ensure children grow up in safe, loving families.

Through the International **Union of Superiors General**, national associations of religious, and other appropriate groups, **CCC** is building capacity to express a charism of care for children in today's world, to reduce recourse to institutional care, and to encourage family- and community-based care for children.

Catholic Care for Children is animated by the charism of care expressed by religious women and men whose leadership and service have often embodied the best of the Christian mandate to care for those in need.

Our pillars

Catholic Care for Children is:

Rooted in touchstones of the Catholic faith, especially

- Biblical mandates to care for children and other vulnerable persons and
- Principles of Catholic social teaching, especially those emphasizing the dignity of each person, a preferential option for the poor, and the right of each person to participate fully in family and community

Informed by social sciences that are clear about the

- Importance of nurturing family bonds for wholistic, healthy development across life span and
- Risks associated with separation from family care, especially in institutional settings

Aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that spells out

- The child's right to a family and
- Guidelines for alternative care of children who are separated from their families.

Grounded in these pillars. Catholic Care for Children is committed to a **continuum of care** pertaining to the **best interests of the child**:

- If families are in distress, provide support to prevent separation of children.
- If separation occurs, see that children are re-united with families or placed in permanent familylike settings.
- If alternative residential care is necessary, ensure care is of the highest quality and shortest duration possible.

Catholic Care for Children is respectful of national legal frameworks and local cultures, and contributes to sustainable development. It recognizes the importance of collaboration and welcomes partnerships within church communities and beyond to realize the best possible outcomes for children and their families.

*Catholic Care for Children International, Catholic Care for Children Kenya,
Catholic Care for Children Uganda, and Catholic Care for Children Zambia*

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