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QUESTION OF A CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Written statement submitted by the International Movement ATD
Fourth World, a non-governmental organization in consultative
status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication,
which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council
resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[4 March 1988]

Message from Father Joseph Wresinski, Founder of the International Movement
ATD Fourth World

Father Joseph Wresinski died on 14 February 1988 following surgery. Born in 1917 at Angers, to a Polish father and Spanish mother who had emigrated to France, Joseph Wresinski grew up in a very poor home, where all the children did their part to help the family survive. The entire course of his life led him to become an ardent defender of the most disadvantaged. He founded the Movement ATD Fourth World in 1957.

He gave a name and recognition to a forgotten people. He trained men and women volunteers, teaching them to dare to give the best of themselves for families throughout the world living in abject poverty, ignorance, hunger and total neglect. He brought together people from all walks of life who, ignoring their differences, undertook to assist the very poor.

Before he was hospitalized Father Joseph had been eager to address a message of friendship and trust to all defenders of human rights. He shared our desire to seek out all those parents who wish to guarantee their children a future that is not one of poverty. He also wished to accompany us in our difficult task of building a society that will enable every child - including even the poorest - to grow up in an atmosphere of trust and respect for all his fundamental rights.

MESSAGE
from Father Joseph

My friends,

In my heart I keep the memory of the mother whose child was burned to death in the old trailer where the family lived. In my heart too is the other mother who, hardly three years ago, spoke to me as she looked at her dead child.
"Yes, I accept to offer my child for all the suffering we bear and as a sign that we blame nobody, that we have no hate in our hearts".

Still haunted by the memory of these mothers, I learned from the radio and the newspapers about this other mother, ready to give her yet to be born child to somebody who would take him as their own child. She wanted to give him away because, as she said,
"I will never be able to offer him the chance of making something of his life, to give him what he has a right to as a child. My husband has been unemployed for three years. I don't have a job myself. We can't keep up with the rent and we don't have enough to eat. We can't be sure that they'll let us stay where we live now. This baby, what can he expect from his father and mother?"

What hurt me even more than the despairing cry of this mother were the questions to which she was submitted.
*"Why do you keep the baby?
Why don't you terminate your pregnancy?"*
"Because I believe in God" was her answer. It was then that the tone of the questions suddenly changed. Just as it always does when questioning the very poor who are always reproached for burdening the world with children whom nobody needs.
"In your situation, is it really wise to have another child?" The questions become more underhand and the pressure stronger.
*"You can't just give away children.
The law doesn't provide for that.
It would be better to abandon your baby.
In the last resort, you could always leave it at a church door..."*

What humiliation for this woman.
How her husband is shamed !
Why are people so unkind to the poor?
Why do they want to hurt them?
Haven't we learned enough from history, from past wars, conflicts and revolutions?
Do we no longer hear the cries of those who are tortured, the innocent behind bars, victims of cowardice and lies?
I tremble
I am shaken by grief and sorrow
because I see so much unjustified and useless suffering inflicted on human beings, rich and poor alike.

Will we never learn that each child is a gift?
A gift made to the world and to each one of us.
That to meet a child, any child,
is always an occasion given to us for rejoicing,
a new dance the child teaches us,
so that we can join in the circle of joy and hope.

What struck me, and what I am sure also struck you, my friends,
is that child who is born into the world
and who cannot be welcomed, even by his mother.
This child is the symbol of all the children of misery.
Why should there not be, amongst these children,
a Mozart, a Beethoven, a future Nobel Peace Prize,
capable of humility, capable of changing men's hearts?
Isn't it true, after all, that all children are Mozarts?

Children remain what we value most in the world.
They are the hope of the world.
As such, children have the right to a home, to a family,
to brothers and sisters.
Children have the right to eat but also the right to education,
the right to all opportunities of developing their minds and hearts.
They have the right to love the God who is revealed to them.
They have the right to love the world in which every person
is an active participant.
They have the right to be able to judge good from evil,
right from wrong, truth from falsehood.
They have the right to love justice and to involve themselves, tomorrow,
in making it prevail in the world.

This is precisely where this woman questions us.
*"Do I have the right to bring into the world
a child who will be without rights?"*
That is what she wanted to tell us in the name of all the mothers
whose children are born into misery!
She reminds us that each and every person must have a place in the heart of humanity,
must be able to undertake a unique task as a member of mankind.
Then the joy of being human would explode everywhere,
the joy of loving and of hoping.

Yes, each child should be a chance,
an invitation to the dance.
My heart weeps from so much humiliation
inflicted on the poorest people.
On the poor whose only crime is to bring children into the world.
Children whom society condemns to be unwanted,
condemns to live in misery, to be homeless and hungry, as their parents were.
Children condemned to be useless and despised.

This mother, who doesn't want her child to die,
who gives him up so that he can live,
reminds me of another mother called Mary, whose child was unwelcome,
as are all the children of misery.
A child whose mother wanted him to live, in spite of everything,
in order to give him to the world.
A child who lived misery to the end in order to conquer it.
A child who compels humanity, throughout the ages,
to welcome all children in hope.

Father Joseph