Columns



In this June 16, 2018, photo, boys dressed in Air Force uniforms stand during celebrations to mark the Day of the African Child in Harare, Zimbabwe. Day of the African Child is celebrated on June 16 every year to commemorate the 1976 uprising in Soweto, South Africa. (AP/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi)



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This year when the Day of the African Child came around on June 16, it was like I was hearing it for the first time. As I listened to the radio early in the morning, the presenters were talking about the Day of the African Child. This drew my attention and for a good part of the morning, my mind was trying to figure out what this day signified, and I found myself saying: "There we go again. What is it about the African child?" and my curiosity was aroused. Aware that in Africa, as on any other continent, the social status varies from individual to individual, why single out the African child and not talk about the global child?

This made me want to know more about the Day of the African Child. I found that this day began to be celebrated in 1991 — initiated by the Organization of African Unity (now the African Unity, or AU) — in remembrance of the June 16, 1976, Black student uprising in Soweto, South Africa. The AU's Agenda 2040 lists 10 aspirations, including:

- providing an effective continental framework for advancing children's rights;
- ensuring that an effective child-friendly national legislative, policy and institutional framework is in place in all member states;
- that every child's birth and other vital statistics are registered; and
- that every child survives and has a healthy childhood.

This year's theme was: "Eliminating Harmful Practices Affecting Children: Progress on Policy & Practice since 2013."

Where there is a child, there is a family that serves as the basic social unit and is a springboard for the child into his or her global status. It is the first school where the children experience many things — among them love, joy, values and norms, as well as challenges that lead to wisdom as children navigate life. The world over, we have families that are well-off and those that are struggling, especially in Africa.

This day, with questions about the African child ringing in my mind, I went to Mass. I could not stop thinking about it. No sooner had I arrived back home at our gate, then my questions started getting answered. I saw someone at the front door of our house and learned it was a 16-year-old girl waiting for us.

This was unusually early, since other days she comes later. At this, it dawned on me, surely this is an African child, in reality. It was like God was pointing out to me what the African child is going through.

The girl's mother is living with HIV/AIDS and is very frail. Her father passed on some years ago, so the mother is the sole breadwinner despite her situation. The child has four siblings; the elder sister left home in search of a better life, never to return. As if that were not enough, they have no home — just a rented house — and they have to rely on well-wishers for their daily bread. The list of this child's needs is endless, not to mention that this morning she had not gone to school in order to deliver a message for her mother.

This morning, she needed some money so the mother could repay a neighbor for money she had borrowed for transportation to the hospital. This neighbor had been to their house demanding payment and was not kind to the girl's mother. She had insulted her in front of the children. The girl also needed something to eat. My heart went out to her. I was saddened by her reality. At this, the concept of the Day of the African Child began to make sense to me. The childhood of this child has been eroded. She is more a parent than a child who needs to be taken care of herself.

This is the story of so many children living in sub-Saharan Africa, especially those living in informal settlements like this child. Despite many families in Africa rising from lower to middle and upper-middle class, many still live in very challenging circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic added more burdens to the already existing bad economic situation, with many people losing jobs and businesses closing.

Family as the basic social unit implies that the encounters that a family goes through affect the development and well-being of the child. We have met families living in abject poverty. Most of the children from these families struggle a lot when growing up, compared to their contemporaries from more privileged families. They grow up lacking most of the freedoms that others enjoy, including good health due to lack of access to quality health care, and literacy, since many of these children sometimes miss school — like the girl I know — and in worse situations, some drop out of school. Likewise, they lack a good standard of living so they are unable to buy what they need for a comfortable life. The purchasing power of these families is quite low.

Saddest about children in these contexts is the fact that they are expected to compete with their contemporaries from more stable backgrounds — including sitting for the same national exams, opportunities to go to second and third levels of education, and in the job market. They are expected to perform as well as the more

privileged children. This seems to put a lot of strain on the child, to the point where many of them feel worthless.

The question that comes to my mind then is: Which African child are we talking about? The children of 1976 in South Africa lived in a very violent world that claimed some of their lives. Today's African children from less privileged backgrounds are on the brink of being deprived of a future, unless the governments and people of goodwill intervene and help them secure it.

However, at a deep level we are talking about every African child. Why? As God told Cain that he was his brother's keeper, we are our brothers' and sisters' keeper. Even if 99% of the African children were comfortable, the 1% who are not OK would cancel the notion that every African child is doing well. Abraham knew this better when he pleaded with God for Sodom (Genesis 18: 23-33). This implies that, if the plight of one family member affects the rest of them, the same applies to society. When part of it is suffering, then the society is ill.

This year I have been reminded of my responsibility for the children in our society in a very personal way. I invite all of us to take the challenge. It is time to do something more tangible for the African child. Let us join hands and observe this day — perhaps every day.

Let us be cognizant of the fact that, while praying for the African child is good, it is better to accompany the child with an action that can positively change their lives — then their well-being will be our answered prayer.