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Vatican
Pope Francis speaks as a boy holds a rosary during a meeting with children from Italy's Catho

Pope Francis speaks as a boy holds a rosary during a meeting with children from Italy's Catholic Action at the Vatican Dec. 18, 2021. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Among the most vulnerable victims of the COVID-19 pandemic are children and adolescents, whose suffering and distress represent a kind of "parallel pandemic" that must be addressed, the Vatican said in two new documents.

The first document, produced jointly by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and the Vatican's COVID-19 Commission, is a five-page executive summary on the situation minors are facing worldwide and how governments, communities and the church can respond.

The second document, produced by the Pontifical Academy for Life, is a six-page note focusing on the pandemic's impact on children's education and other fundamental needs often provided by school and parish programs. That document made an urgent and clear call to reopen schools as fully as possible and safeguard

and support family relationships.

Both documents were presented during a news conference at the academy's headquarters Dec. 22.

The executive summary, "Children and COVID-19: The Pandemic's Most Vulnerable Victims," underlines several dire statistics concerning the rising number of children affected by poverty, food insecurity, violence and exploitation, and setbacks in education worldwide.

Of particular concern, it said, are the millions of children now left without parents and caregivers because of the pandemic.

The Imperial College London estimated that as of Nov. 30, at a minimum, 5,328,500 children worldwide have lost one or both parents or custodial or co-residing grandparents. That would be one child losing a parent or caregiver every 12 seconds, the summary said.

The overwhelming majority of newly orphaned children — nearly 2 million — are in India. The United States is in third place with a minimum of 137,500 children estimated to have been orphaned since the start of the pandemic.

"Governments, civil society organizations and the church must come together to alleviate the escalating suffering of the most vulnerable children among us," it said, emphasizing that responses be "holistic" and cover "the full spectrum of children's needs" during and after the pandemic.

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The Vatican's calls for action by governments included: the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines; strengthening systems that promote family-based care for children; increased budget spending on child protection, psychosocial support and positive parenting training; and helping children affected by trauma as schools reopen.

It asked dioceses and parishes to do more to be ready to intervene quickly as soon as families are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly by knowing beforehand which families are most at risk and in need.

The church must continue to ensure family-based care for children left parentless and redouble efforts to find them families, it said. Parishes can help address rising violence against children by creating safe spaces, peer support groups and programs to help parents and minors in need, it added.

The life academy's six-page document focused on the "Pandemic and challenges for education: Children and adolescents dealing with COVID-19." It is the third document issued by the papal academy focusing on those who have been impacted most and require increased care and protection during the pandemic, such as elderly, disabled and marginalized people.

It said minors have been experiencing a "parallel pandemic" during the global crisis, and "even if its effects are not immediately evident, all over the world the psychosocial stress that children are subjected to as a result of the pandemic has resulted in distress and illnesses that have widely differing consequences based on age and social and environmental conditions," it said.

While adolescents have shown admirable resilience, sensitivity and a trust for science over the past two years, it said there still were many "fragile and problematic areas" requiring increased attention and efforts by adults to help children who have irretrievably lost critical formative experiences because of the pandemic.

Schools needed to reopen as fully as possible, it said, as closures and distance learning should be only a last resort. The school environment provides many of the social, psychological and formative supports children need and too many minors lack the tools and connectivity to keep up with online learning.

Families need attention because of the risks of increased domestic violence and parental stress or limitations that could leave kids isolated or without needed support, it said.

The pandemic also has proved stressful for some parishes and church-based organizations, which have suspended their usual educational activities, it said. There needs to be "a dutiful and urgent rethinking of the pastoral care of the younger generations" and how the pandemic offers an opportunity to grow in the faith.

"Let the children know Jesus, healer of souls and bodies, let them go to him with their questions, their resilience and their own journey of faith," the report continued. "The pandemic has reminded everyone of the need to face the authentic and

heartfelt questions of young people that are their response to a sudden and collective evil. Addressing the answers to these questions as part of the initiation into the faith is an opportunity not to be missed."