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A cyclist passes a mural created by street artists depicting child labor in London June 8, 2016

A cyclist passes a mural created by street artists depicting child labor in London June 8, 2016. (CNS photo/Shanshan Chen, Reuters)

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May 17, 2022

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VATICAN CITY — Poverty and inequality, which are major factors in child labor exploitation, must be addressed, Pope Francis said in a written message.

"Sadly, too many small hands are busy plowing fields, working in mines, traveling great distances to draw water and doing work that prevents them from attending school, to say nothing of the crime of child prostitution, which is robbing millions of children of the joy of their youth and their God given dignity," the pope wrote in a message to a global conference against child labor.

"Since poverty is, in fact, the chief factor that exposes children to labor exploitation, I am confident that your deliberations will not fail to address the structural causes of global poverty and the scandalous inequality that continues to exist among the members of the human family," the pope told conference participants.

Pope Francis' message was addressed to Guy Ryder, director-general of the International Labor Organization, on the occasion of the fifth Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labor being held May 15-20 in Durban, South Africa. Archbishop Peter B. Wells, apostolic nuncio of South Africa, read the pope's message to the assembly May 16.

Sending his "warm greetings and prayerful good wishes" to those attending the conference, the pope said he hoped the conference would raise awareness and promote a commitment to combating the problem of child labor.

"While significant progress has been made in eliminating the scourge of child labor from society, this tragedy has been worsened by the impact of the global health crisis and the spread of extreme poverty in many parts of our world where the lack of decent work opportunities for adults and adolescents, migration and humanitarian emergencies condemn millions of young girls and boys to a life of economic and cultural impoverishment," he wrote.

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Pope Francis wrote that he hoped the conference would lead to greater commitment from relevant leaders and international and national organizations in "working to find appropriate and effective ways of protecting the dignity and rights of children, especially through the promotion of social protection systems and access to education on the part of all."

"The way we relate to children, the extent to which we respect their innate human dignity and fundamental rights, expresses what kind of adults we are and want to be and what kind of society we want to build," he wrote.

The Vatican is committed to working in ways that help the international community persevere in its efforts to fight child labor exploitation "so that children will be able to enjoy the beauty of this stage of life, while also cultivating dreams for a bright future," the pope wrote.

The World Day Against Child Labor will be marked June 12 and have the theme "Universal Social Protection to End Child Labor."

A report released by the International Labor Organization and UNICEF in 2021 estimated some 160 million children -- almost one in 10 -- worldwide were caught up in forced child labor, an increase of 8.4 million children over the previous four years.

The report said it found "a significant rise in the number of children aged 5 to 11 years in child labor, who now account for just over half of the total global figure." The number of children aged 5 to 17 years who were involved in work that is hazardous to their health, safety or morals had "risen by 6.5 million to 79 million since 2016."