



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE HOLY CHILDHOOD ASSOCIATION

Dear Missionary Children,¹ In the first half of the 19th century, Europe experienced a great missionary expansion and the Church, realizing the missionary potential of children, began to ask children to take an active part in proclaiming the Gospel to their peers. On 9 May 1843, Bishop Charles de Forbin-Janson of Nancy, keen to support the activities of Catholics in China, suggested to the children of Paris that they help their contemporaries by reciting a Hail Mary every day and offering a coin every month. It was not long before this missionary initiative that provided material and spiritual support crossed the frontiers of France and spread to other countries. On 30 September 1919 my venerable Predecessor Benedict XV wrote: "We warmly recommend to all the faithful the Society of the Holy Childhood which has the objective of guaranteeing baptism to non-Christian children. We recommend that all Christian children join this society, so that through it they may learn to help with the evangelization of their neighbour and, already at their age, understand the great value of the faith" (*Maximum illud*). This year the Feast of the Epiphany has a special importance because the Society of the Holy Childhood, present in 110 countries, observes the 160th year of its existence. It offers children in all the dioceses of the world a programme that consists of prayer, sacrifice and concrete acts of solidarity: in this way they can become evangelizers of their peers.² Dear young missionaries, I know with what great care and generosity you live this apostolic activity. In so many ways you try to share the lot of the children who are forced to work as children and you help relieve the distress of the children who are in need. You show solidarity for the troubles and tragedies of children involved in the wars of adults and who are often victims of the violence of adults. Pray every day that the gift of faith which you have received may be granted to the millions of your small friends who do not yet know Jesus. You rightly believe that whoever meets Jesus and accepts his Gospel receives a rich store of spiritual gifts: the divine life of grace, the love which makes brothers and sisters, dedication to others, forgiveness given and received, willingness to welcome and to be welcomed, the hope that lifts our hearts to eternal life, peace as a gift and a duty. In this Christmas season, in many local Churches, the children of the Holy Childhood Society, go from house to house dressed as Magi or shepherds to proclaim the glad tidings of Christmas. This is the delightful custom of the "Star Singers" which the Society began in German-speaking countries and that later spread to many other countries: boys and girls knock at the door, sing Christmas carols, recite their prayers and explain to families the projects of solidarity to be funded. In this way little ones evangelize even grown-ups.³ This work of evangelization and solidarity - as you well know - is not limited to just a few weeks of the Christmas season, but continues throughout life. This is why I encourage you to respond generously to the many requests for help that come from poor countries. How many children in Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Oceania pray and work for the same ideal! A global solidarity fund has been created and is growing thanks to the gifts from everywhere in the world. It finances small and big projects that help young children. There are lovely stories of children who by their

long-distance adoption of small friends, became sellers of stars or stamp-collectors. They have given a toy or an expensive game to free their peers who are forced to be in the army. They have pledged themselves to save in many ways in order to fund catechetical textbooks or to build schools in mission areas. There are many other examples. Missionary children with their contributions fund more than 3,000 projects. Is this not a true miracle of the vast and silent love of God that makes a mark on the world? Dear missionary children, you must all take part in this miracle! And those who possess nothing can make the gift of their prayer and the suffering of their poverty.⁴ Dear boys and girls, missionary activity helps you to grow in faith and makes you joyful disciples of Jesus. Showing solidarity to those who are less fortunate opens your heart to humanity's great needs. You can recognize the face of Jesus in poor and needy children. This is what such missionaries as Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci, Charles de Foucauld, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta and others did in every part of the world. I warmly hope that your pastors, your bishops and priests, and your catechists, spiritual guides, your parents and teachers will take to heart the Society of the Missionary Childhood. From the very beginning, it has borne heroic missionary fruit and has written beautiful pages in the history of the Church. The first Chinese children, saved by the "missionary children" became teachers, catechists, doctors and priests. The gift of Baptism was transformed into light for them and for their families. Among the children helped by the offerings and prayers of other children are the martyr Paul Tchen and the first Archbishop of Peking, Cardinal Tien Kenhsin. Subsequently, with the passage of time, the vocation to total consecration to evangelization grew in the hearts of many girls and boys. How can we forget little Thérèse of Lisieux who, at the age of seven, on 12 May 1882 enrolled in the Society of the Holy Childhood and at the age of 14 had already decided to give herself to Jesus for the salvation of the world? Today this spiritual fruitfulness continues in the Church. Let us pray that a greater number of children put at the service of the Gospel not just one period of their lives, but their whole existence. Likewise, we ask God to multiply everywhere the charitable activity of the Missionary Childhood.⁵ The needs of children the world over are so many and complex that no box for saving coins, no gesture of solidarity however great, would ever be enough to relieve them. God's help is needed. Dear missionary children, by enrolling in the Society of the Holy Childhood, you take as your first pledge the promise to say a daily Hail Mary. Indeed, you know that the success of the mission depends, above all, on prayer, and for this reason you turn to Our Lady, Star of Evangelization.

For 160 years, you have been calling on her in the name of children around the world. I urge you to persevere in this loving practice with greater faithfulness in the "Year of the Rosary". Once in a while the older ones among you should recite a whole decade or even five decades of the Rosary. The Missionary Rosary links us with the missions: the white is for Europe, so that it can regain the evangelizing fervour that give rise to so many Churches; the yellow decade is for Asia, which is exploding with life and youth; the green decade is for Africa, tried by suffering but ready for the proclamation; the red decade is for America, the promise of new missionary forces; the blue decade is for the continent of Oceania, which awaits a more grass-roots spread of the Gospel.

Dear missionary children, may Our Lady accompany you in your generosity! To her I entrust you with your relatives and the Christian communities you belong to. I bless you all with affection. *From the Vatican, 6 January 2003, Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord.* **JOHN PAUL II**