The experience of working with socially displaced children, who live and work on the streets, is one that engenders a kind of indignation at the thwarting of their capabilities and at the impact not only on their own lives but also on the human community who are denied the gifts of children who never reach their potential. This author thus began to examine what Catholic social teaching actually says about such children. This examination of the treatment of justice for children in Catholic social teaching was given further impetus on reading a devastating conclusion from the Report by the Commission of Investigation into clerical child abuse in the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, known as The Murphy Report. The report concluded: ‘the welfare of children which should have been the first priority, was not even a factor to be considered’.

Lack of concern for the welfare of the child is a recurring bleak motif in the Murphy Report. Why was the welfare of children not even a factor to be considered? Aware of the danger of resorting to mono-causal explanations in the face of the complexity of the crimes and scandals of child abuse, it is nonetheless interesting to consider why the principles of justice enshrined in Catholic social teaching were not the principles guiding the response of church authorities to children and adult survivors of child abuse.

Before examining the visibility of children in Catholic social teaching, the absence of serious consideration of children as subjects or as moral agents in modern philosophical discourse about justice must be noted. In John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, the seminal text on justice in twentieth century liberal philosophy, there is no significant discussion of children in his conclusions about a just society. Rawls, influenced by the cognitive-development theories of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, considers children in terms of their moral development and their capacity to acquire a sense of justice, but not explicitly as subjects of justice. Amartya Sen, in *Development as Freedom*, discusses children more extensively in the context of his examination of the basic conditions of participatory freedom. In *The Idea of Justice*, Sen raises the question of the relationship between parental duties to their own children and a theory of justice that extends to the recognition that ‘other children may have similarly large and important interests at stake as one’s own children’. Children are barely visible in most contractarian accounts of justice, as are the poor, thus moving towards invisibility those who are both child and poor.

Many key commentaries on Catholic social teaching contain no index reference to childhood or children. There are many fine Church statements on children, especially in relation to education, religious education and, most often, children are discussed in documents on marriage and family. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* asserts that ‘The Church’s social doctrine constantly points out the need to respect the dignity of children’. In order to test the veracity of this assertion about the visibility of children in Catholic social teaching,
this essay examines the frequency and nature of references to children in Catholic social teaching. The focus will be on pontifical and conciliar documents beginning with *Rerum Novarum* (1891), as these are the documents which serve as an impetus for the development of local episcopal social teaching and the texts with which the broader area of Catholic social thought critically engages.

*RERUM NOVARUM (1891)*

This encyclical, promulgated by Pope Leo XIII, is recognized as the first major encyclical to address the social question and the conditions of workers. ‘Its impact’, as Donal Dorr observes, ‘came not so much from its content as from the fact that by issuing an encyclical on this topic, the pope was seen to be coming to the defence of the poor.’ Children are first referred to in the encyclical in relation to the right of the worker – a male head of a family – to ownership of property ‘which he can transmit to his children by inheritance’. Children are first referred to in the encyclical in relation to the right of the worker – a male head of a family – to ownership of property ‘which he can transmit to his children by inheritance’. (*13*) *Rerum Novarum* understands the family ‘no less than a State’ as a ‘true society’ governed by the authority of the father, with rights and duties prior to those of the community. (13) The encyclical reflects a concern with what it calls the ‘pernicious error’ of civil government intrusion in family and household, except in cases of ‘extreme necessity’ where intervention in the form of public aid is justified on the basis that ‘each family is a part of the commonwealth’. This, however, is the limit of the ‘rulers of the commonwealth’ for ‘paternal authority can be neither abolished nor absorbed by the State’ and particular concern is expressed about socialist state supervision which ‘acts against natural justice and destroys the structure of the home’. (14)

In *Rerum Novarum*, the child is not only discussed in relation to the family and ‘paternal authority’; the child worker of the Industrial Revolution – some of whom worked up to sixteen hours a day – is specifically described as subject to ‘the cruelty of men of greed, who use human beings as mere instruments for money-making’. (42) The document appeals that ‘great care should be taken not to place them in workshops and factories until their bodies are sufficiently developed’ for ‘too early an experience of life’s hard toil blights the young promise of a child’s faculties, and render[s] any true education impossible’. (42) *Rerum Novarum* does not appeal for the elimination of child labor from the factories and mines, but there is advocacy on behalf of these children who were treated merely as adjuncts to machines. There is recognition of the destructive impact of forcing a child too early into the workforce with the resulting blighting of the potential of the child, and there is an implicit acknowledgment of the importance of education. However, it must be noted that over twenty years prior to the publication of *Rerum Novarum*, Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler (1811–77), who Leo called ‘our great predecessor in addressing the social question’, had argued for the prohibition of child labour in the factories. Von Kettler’s thinking on social justice developed from an emphasis on personal charity as a response to the plight of the industrial workers in the Rhineland to one of giving priority to supporting the key aims of the labour movement. This shift of emphasis was influenced by his experience as Bishop of Mainz and found expression in his writings and sermons. He recognized the need for legislation to protect workers, including children. ‘Religion in its great love for children cannot but support the demand for the prohibition of child-labour in the factories’. While *Rerum Novarum* does not go as far as calling for the total abolition of child labour there is palpable ethical indignation at the abuse of children who were, in fact, creating unprecedented industrial wealth.
The pontificate of Leo XIII was followed by that of Pius X (1903–14). Although Pope Pius X did not produce anything akin to *Rerum Novarum*, his social writings have been described as an attempt to solve ‘the problem of the tension between the egalitarian and hierarchical conceptions of society present in Leo XIII’s writings by opting firmly for hierarchy and traditionalism’.\(^{15}\) It was the crisis of modernism that was Pius’s main focus, resulting in a contraction of Catholic intellectual work on social justice in this period. Pope Benedict XV, who was Pius X’s successor, sought to moderate the excesses of the anti-modernist crusade, but did not depart from Pius’s social teaching. His pontificate, spanning the years 1914–22, was dominated by the First World War and its aftermath. Thus the ‘crisis’ of modernism and the brutalities of war resulted in a contraction of Catholic intellectual work on social justice and no development from the contribution of *Rerum Novarum* on matters of socio-economic justice.

*Quadragesimo Anno* (1931)

To mark the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Pius XI issued *Quadragesimo Anno*. This document marks the first use of the term ‘social justice’ in an official church document.\(^ {58}\)\(^{16}\) Pius XI acknowledges the development of ‘a new branch of law’ focused on the protection of workers’ rights, ‘with special concern for women and children’, and suggests that credit must be given to *Rerum Novarum* ‘for whatever improvement has been achieved in the workers’ condition’. (28) The encyclical advocates for a ‘wage sufficient to support him [the male head of household] and his family’. (71)\(^ {17}\) It argues that ‘to abuse the years of childhood and the limited strength of women is grossly wrong’, creating an equivalence between childhood and limited female strength. Pius, like Leo XIII, would not accept making women wage earners as the solution to the economic exploitation of women and children: ‘Mothers, concentrating on household duties, should work primarily in the home or in its immediate vicinity’ for fear they should neglect their duties ‘especially the training of children’. (71)

*Quadragesimo Anno* develops the concern about social state supervision raised in *Rerum Novarum*, addressing what it describes as ‘a new socialist activity’ devoted to training children in particular in socialism in order ‘to produce true socialists who would shape human society in the tenets of Socialism’. (121) Although there is no extensive discussion of children in this social encyclical, it nonetheless repudiates the reduction of children to wage earners and recognizes such child labour as an abuse of the years of childhood.\(^ {18}\)

*Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963)

*Mater et Magistra* marks the 70th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* and notes its impact on the conditions of industrial workers. It recalls Leo’s condemnation of the exploitation of workers, particularly of the inhuman working conditions to which women and children were sometimes subjected. (13) In addressing the question of the role of the State, Pope John XXIII does not address the issue of state intrusion into the family, but emphasizes that the raison d’être of the State is the realization of the common good and this includes the duty to protect the rights of all its people, particularly those of ‘its weaker members, the workers, women and children’. (20) The next reference to children in this document comes towards the end of an extensive section on population growth and economic development (185–199). *Mater et Magistra* highlights the
essential link between human dignity and the transmission of life in the context of marriage, as part of a caution against birth control being used as a solution to economic underdevelopment. The encyclical also addresses the rights and obligations of parents towards the younger generation by securing for their children a sound cultural and religious formation. The final reference to ‘young people’ in this encyclical stresses the importance of their grasping and practicing the see-judge-act methodology that translates the principles of Catholic Social Teaching into action. The greatest contribution of this encyclical to justice for children may not be in any of its specific references to children but rather through its acknowledgement that more is required of the State and its nuanced acceptance of the necessity of state intervention for the common good in areas such as housing, healthcare and education.

*Pacem in Terris*, issued by John XXIII between the first and second sessions of Vatican II, marks the first systematic treatment of human rights in official Catholic social teaching. It is the first papal encyclical to be addressed not just to Catholics, but also to ‘all men and women of goodwill’. *Pacem in Terris* places human dignity at the heart of Catholic social teaching. The encyclical stresses the social and structural mediation of that dignity, so that dignity becomes increasingly associated with human rights. There are two indirect references to children in this encyclical: the first reference notes that the education of children ‘is a right which belongs primarily to the parents’; the second, in the context of a discussion of economic rights, stresses the right of the worker to a family wage. This very significant document in terms of the development of Catholic discourse about human rights makes no mention of the rights of the child.

*Gaudium et Spes* (1965)

In the context of a discussion of the communitarian dimension of humanity, this document of the Second Vatican Council emphasizes a practical reverence for other human beings that binds us to ‘a special obligation … to make ourselves the neighbour of every person without exception’, including a child born outside of marriage ‘wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit’. The selling of women and children is one of the ‘infamies’ listed which poison human society and dishonor the Creator. Reflecting on the ‘nobility of marriage’* Gaudium et Spes* refers to children as ‘the ultimate crown of marriage’; they ‘contribute in their own way to making their parents holy’ and ‘will stand by them’ in hardship and the loneliness of old age. The family is presented as ‘a kind of school of deeper humanity’ in which the ‘active presence’ of the father is ‘highly beneficial’ in the formation of children and the care of the mother at home essential for the younger children. There is special praise for parents of larger – even if relatively so – families and there is also reference to children ‘which the future may bring’. There is just one reference to children without families: ‘Children too who unhappily lack the blessing of a family should be protected by prudent legislation and various undertakings and assisted by the help they need’. The presentation of the family as a school of deeper humanity – albeit in a gender-essentialist way, with ‘active presence’ attributed to the father and ‘care’ to the mother – emphasizes the collaborative and intergenerational nature of the family unit which enables members ‘to grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social life’. This is why the family is understood as the foundation of society. The difficulty with much of the presentation of the family in Catholic social teaching is that there is little reference to what happens when children are at risk within the family and insufficient attention to justice within the family.
POPULORUM PROGRESSIO (1967)

In this document, Pope Paul VI offers a new perspective on development, with particular focus on authentic, integral development ‘which cannot be restricted to economic growth alone’. (14) Development is ‘the name for peace’ for ‘extreme disparity between nations in economic, social and educational levels provokes jealousy and discord, often putting peace in jeopardy’. (76) The question of social justice moves beyond capital and labour, beyond class relations within nations, to the disparity between rich and poor nations. Social justice takes on an international dimension. The section that discusses aid to developing nations states that no one can be unaware of the ‘countless children who are undernourished, the many children who die at an early age and the many more whose physical and mental growth is stunted’. (45) The existence of poverty and underdevelopment, of stunting and death of children due to hunger, leads Paul VI to issue a ‘final appeal’ to every individual and nation who share responsibility for these problems: ‘Can countless innocent children be saved? Can countless destitute families obtain more human living conditions?’ (80) This appeal expresses the ethical indignation that is at the root of the promulgation of documents of Catholic social teaching but which rarely finds expression in such an impassioned call to action.

LABOREM EXERCENS (1981)

Written by Pope John Paul II to mark the ninetieth anniversary of Rerum Novarum, this social encyclical offers a profound philosophical and theological reflection on the nature of human work and the dignity of the worker. It is extraordinary, however, in the light of the explicit mention of the issue of child labour in Rerum Novarum, and the awareness of the persistence of child labour in the twentieth century, that there is no reference to child labour, working children or exploited children in Laborem Exercens. The only reference to children is through its discussion of women, work and motherhood: the lack of proper recognition of the work of women, including child rearing (9), and the need for a societal re-evaluation of the mother’s love (19).


John Paul II’s 1987 encyclical on social concern has a chronologically expansive anthropology and its three references to children integrate the child as a full member of the human community. The first is distinct in that it mentions the child not just as the object of special concern due to weakness and vulnerability but as a real and unique human person: ‘… to face squarely the reality of innumerable multitudes of people – children, adults and the elderly – in other words, real and unique human persons, who are suffering under the intolerable burden of poverty’. (13) This reference to ‘real and unique human persons’ personalizes what can become undifferentiated and depersonalized discussions of hunger, injustice and poverty. The second reference gives the child specific mention, but as part of the wider human community: ‘The tragedy of these multitudes is reflected in the hopeless faces of men, women and children who can no longer find a home in a divided and inhospitable world’. (24) The third reference to children is located in a discussion of ‘true development’, defined as development which meets the specific needs of the human being, man or woman, child, adult or old person; such development implies ‘a lively awareness of the value of the rights of all and of each person’. (33)
Marking the centenary of *Rerum Novarum*, *Centesimus Annus* reaffirms a commitment to the rights of workers and specifically mentions the right of children (and women) ‘to be treated differently with regard to the type and duration of work’. (7) It also recalls Leo XIII’s affirmation of the right of the worker – a male head of family – to a living wage. John Paul continues by highlighting the continuance of employment injustice, with specific reference to that experienced by children (8). He comments that such violations of elementary employment justice are all the more striking because of the existence of international declarations and conventions on the subject.

The later references to children in this encyclical are in relation to the family, founded on marriage, as ‘an environment in which children can be born and develop their potentialities’. (39) There is a caution about the dangers of the commodification of children and of anti-child bearing campaigns (39). In a discussion of the role of the State, particularly in societies transiting to democracy after the experience of totalitarian regimes, a correct foundation for democracy necessitates explicit recognition of human rights:

> Among the most important of these rights, mention must be made of the right to life, an integral part of which is the right of the child to develop in the mother’s womb from the moment of conception; the right to live in a united family and in a moral environment conducive to the growth of the child’s personality … (47)

This emphasis on the primacy of the right to life is developed in *Evangelium Vitae*.

*EVANGELIUM VITAE* (1995)

This contains the most extensive discussion of the child within Catholic social teaching, although it is not universally accepted as part of the corpus of such teaching. This encyclical, written by John Paul II, is cited forty-nine times in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. In this encyclical, the child is more than barely visible and highest visibility is given to the unborn child.

The first reference to the child is found in the Introduction where a theological identification is drawn between the joy at the birth of the Messiah child and the joy ‘at every child born into the world’. (1) John Paul II, repeats ‘with the same forcefulness’ *Gaudium et Spes*’ condemnation of ‘whatever is opposed to life itself’, ‘whatever violates the integrity of the human person’ and ‘whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children’. (3) *Evangelium Vitae* addresses the erosion of social responsibility which results in the lack of solidarity towards the weakest members of society, including children (8). The lack of distributive justice – causing poverty and hunger ‘for millions of human beings, especially children – is denounced, through a series of forceful rhetorical questions, as forms of violence against human life’. (10) A positive definition of the child as ‘representing an openness to the richness of life’ is contextualized, not in a discussion of the child in him or herself, but in a critique of adversarial and consumerist attitudes towards procreation (23). There are two references to abandoned children and the solidarity of families willing to accept abandoned or troubled children and teenagers (26, 93). Particular encouragement is given to ‘adoption-at-a-distance preferable in cases where the only reason for giving up the child is the extreme poverty of the child’s family’. This type of adoption gives parents the help needed to support and raise their children, ‘without their being uprooted from their natural environment.’ (93)
While the encyclical stresses that ‘every child born’ is an image of God and an icon of Christ, it enfolds the unborn child in a mantle of theological dignity not bestowed upon the child who is born and suffering. ‘Today there exists a great multitude of weak and defenceless human beings, unborn children in particular, whose fundamental right to life is being trampled upon.’(5) The phrase ‘unborn children in particular’ highlights the prime focus of this document in terms of its reflection on violence towards children. The reference from the Book of Exodus (1:16) to Pharaoh ordering the killing of all newborn Hebrew males is the biblical allusion used to highlight the anti-birth policy being encouraged in poorer nations and the linking of economic aid to birth control programmes (16). The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah (Ex.1:15) – unnamed in the encyclical – who refused to obey the brutal command of Pharaoh because they ‘feared God’ are later offered as examples of conscientious objection and resistance to unjust laws. (73) The encyclical critiques a tyrannical state which disposes of the weakest and most defenseless from the unborn child to the elderly and which gives legal recognition to abortion, infanticide and euthanasia (20).

There is more extensive use of biblical references to children when dealing with abortion than with any other issue of violence or injustice towards children. There are more Christological links made between the unborn child and the birth of the Messiah than with any other aspect of the suffering of children. It is not the intention in this essay to undermine the position of this encyclical on the life issues of abortion, euthanasia and the death penalty, its caution against embryonic stem cell research, nor its championing of seriously disabled children, but rather to highlight the disparity between the theological dignity and high visibility given to the unborn child, in comparison with the less developed analysis of the other forms of violence against the lives of children.

The treatment of children in Evangelium Vitae is indicative of a kind of hyper-natalism in Catholic social teaching which does not defend the lives of born – hungry, impoverished, exploited, abandoned – children with the same zeal as the defence of the unborn child. As we are challenged to a consistent ethic of life, we are also challenged to a consistent ethic of justice for children, born and unborn.

In the Analytical Index to the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church there is a category entitled ‘Child-Children-Son-Daughter’. This refers not only to citations in the Compendium that deal with chronological childhood but also to sections that use terms such as ‘God’s children’ to refer to human beings more generally. The first reference to children cites John Paul II’s apostolic letter at the end of the Jubilee Year 2000, where he questions how we can remain indifferent to the challenges of the new millennium, including the contempt for the fundamental human rights of so many people, especially children (5).24 The vast majority of the references to children in the Compendium are found in the fifth chapter, ‘The Family, the Vital Cell of Society’. 25 The family is presented as the place where children learn ‘their first and most important lessons of practical wisdom’. (210) It is the cradle of the life of the child who is a gift to society (212). Children are mentioned in discussions of the purpose of marriage, the choice of the number of children as belonging to the spouses alone (234), the right and duty of parents to educate their children (239, 240, 241), adoption, divorce, the rights of the unborn, and ethically unacceptable reproductive technologies (235).

In this chapter on the family there are two sections (244–245) on the dignity and rights of children. The assertion being challenged in this essay that the ‘Church’s social doctrine
constantly points out the need to respect the dignity of children’ is found here. (244) The discussion of the dignity and rights of children begins with a citation from Familiaris Consortio: ‘In the family, which is a community of persons, special attention must be devoted to the children by developing a profound esteem for their personal dignity, and a great respect and generous concern for their rights.’ The rights of all children deserve respect ‘but it becomes all the more urgent the smaller the child is and the more it is in need of everything, when it is sick, suffering or handicapped.’ The Compendium continues by noting the imperative that the rights of children be legally protected within judicial systems and that public recognition be given to the social value of childhood, with primacy attributed to the first right of the child, that is, ‘to be born into a real family’, a right ‘that today is subject to new violations because of developments in genetic technology’. The references supporting this discussion of the rights of the child are drawn from two 1979 addresses by John Paul II, the first to the General Assembly of the United Nations and the second to the Committee of European Journalists for the Rights of the Child. In the address to the journalists, John Paul defines the ‘real family’ alluded to in section 244 of the Compendium: ‘for it is essential that he [the child] should benefit from the beginning from the joint contribution of the father and the mother, united in an indissoluble marriage.’ The Compendium mentions the first right of the child to be born into a ‘real family’ in the context of concerns about violations of this right due to developments in genetic technology, but the address by John Paul raises this ‘first right of the child’ in the context of remarks on the right to life from conception and the right to be raised by parents who are married.

The next section (245) describes the social situation of a ‘vast number of the world’s children’ as ‘far from satisfactory … despite the existence of a specific international juridical instrument for protecting their rights’. The 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child is referenced in the notes for this section, together with a reminder that this Convention has been ratified by the Holy See. This section contains the most extensive list of specific injustices experienced by a majority of the world’s children: lack of health care; inadequate food supply; lack of basic education; inadequate housing; human trafficking; child labour; ‘street children’; child marriage; and the use of children in armed conflicts. It is interesting that none of the six references to hunger in the Compendium specifically mention child hunger, undernutrition or stunting.

The issue of child labour is discussed in the sixth chapter ‘Human Work’, where the intolerable forms of such labour are described as ‘a kind of violence that is less obvious than others but it is not for this reason any less terrible’. It is acknowledged that more than a century after the promulgation of Rerum Novarum ‘the blight of child labour has not yet been overcome’. The conditions of many workers, including children – especially in developing countries – are ‘so inhumane that they are an offence to their dignity and compromise their health’. The two sections dealing with child labour reflect an understanding of the complexity of the issue; exploitative and violent work conditions for child workers – ‘conditions of veritable slavery’ – are condemned, while recognizing that ‘in certain countries the contribution made by child labour to family income and the national economy is indispensable’. Exploitative child labour is described as a serious violation of human dignity which every person, ‘no matter how small or how seemingly unimportant in utilitarian terms’ is endowed.

There are two references to child soldiers in the Compendium. Child soldiers are cited as one of the examples of the painful reality of violations that contradict ‘the solemn proclamation of human rights’. In the chapter on ‘The Promotion of Peace’, section 512 condemns the use of children and adolescents as soldiers in armed conflict, something that is prevalent despite a ban on such recruitment. It notes that this forced participation in combat not only deprives the child of education and ‘a normal childhood’ but ‘they are also trained to kill’, which
constitutes ‘an intolerable crime’ against children. Priority must be given to the education and rehabilitation of these child soldiers.

Specific mention is made in section 245 of ‘the use of children for commerce in pornographic material’ and of paedophilia. ‘These are criminal acts that must be effectively fought with adequate preventative and penal measures by the determined action of the different authorities involved’.35 This last reference to paedophilia acknowledges that it is criminal but this statement could have been developed to reaffirm the commitment of the Church to deal with it as such.

What is most striking about the sections of the Compendium where serious problems of injustice towards children are mentioned is the very ‘thin’ referencing from the documents of Catholic social teaching. The sections on the dignity and rights of children, and those referring to specific issues such as child labour and child soldiers, depend for their references not on the major documents of Catholic social teaching but on messages and addresses to the United Nations and World Peace Day messages of Pope John Paul II. This ‘thin’ referencing is indicative of the paucity of explicit references to children in the major documents of Catholic social teaching. While all these documents, including papal addresses to secular agencies, are important examples of Catholic social teaching broadly conceived, it is clear that encyclicals and exhortations have a particular auctoritas – recognized often beyond ecclesial boundaries by people of good will – and these documents serve as an impetus for the generation of social teaching at the level of local churches.

CARITAS IN VERITATE (2009)

This very fine social encyclical examines the relationship between love and justice, revisits the notion of integral human development, and reflects on an economy of communion, i.e., profit-making for the common good. There is only one section that refers to children in the context of a discussion about the link between poverty and unemployment and the importance of work that makes it possible for families to provide for their children ‘without children themselves being forced into labour’. (63) The same section continues with a reference to the ‘pressing need for a renewed solidarity’, especially in relationships between developing and heavily industrialized countries, with specific reference to our responsibility to future generations ‘particularly the many young people in the poorer nations’.

The fact that there is only a single reference to children in this encyclical is problematic: firstly, in the light of the fact that injustice against children particularly, but not exclusively, children who are poor, has been, perhaps, the most serious ethical challenge facing the contemporary Church; secondly, the centrality of children in the modest aims of the eight Millennium Development Goals would seem to make mention of these an imperative in a social encyclical for our times.36 Yet there is no significant treatment of children in this major social encyclical.

EVANGELII GAUDIUM (2013)

Pope Francis says clearly that ‘this Exhortation is not a social document’ and recommends the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (184), but the exhortation does touch on areas of social ethics and contributes thus to Catholic social teaching. Pope Francis endorses the concept of the preferential option for the poor in his reflection on ‘the special place of the poor in God’s people’, the special place in God’s heart for the poor, their consistent presence in the
entire history of redemption, God’s incarnation in poverty, and the reminder in Matthew 25: 5ff. that mercy towards them is the key to heaven (197). It is in the context of this affirmation of the theological foundations of the option for the poor that the exhortation mentions children of poor families, reminding Christians that the Saviour was born into such conditions, that he was the child of ‘ordinary workers and worked with his own hands to earn his bread’. (197) Specific reference is then made to human trafficking, enslavement of human beings, rings of prostitution, and to children used for begging (198). There is reference to children in the discussion of the family as ‘the place where parents pass on the faith to their children’. (66, 70) The ‘steadfast faith’ of mothers caring for sick children is offered as an exemplar of ‘the theological life present in the piety of Christian peoples, especially their poor’. (125) This exhortation, in line with Evangelium Vitae, identifies unborn children as ‘the most defenceless and innocent among us’. Challenging the presentation of the Church’s defence of unborn human life as ‘obscurantist and conservative’, Francis reminds us of the close link between the defence of unborn life and ‘the defence each and every human right’. (213)

Francis states: ‘In justice, I must say first that the contribution of the Church in today’s world is enormous’. (76) He then alludes to ‘the pain and shame we feel at the sins of some members of the Church, and at our own’ but continues by stating that this ‘must never make us forget how many Christians are giving their lives in love’, including devoting themselves to the education of children and young people (76). This legitimate reminder of the extensive good work engaged in by Christians is overshadowed by too brief an allusion to the pain and shame caused by the damage done, particularly to children, by members of the Church. In many ways, this is a missed opportunity to make a stronger acknowledgement of not just the ‘sins of some members of the Church’ but of the broader sinfulness that resulted in responses to child abuse that both compounded the suffering of victims and brought shame on the institutional church.

CONCLUSION

Donal Dorr outlines ten weaknesses of Catholic Social Teaching, including ‘its failure to provide an adequate treatment of the issue of justice for women’.37 One could add to this list of weaknesses, the failure to provide an adequate treatment of the issue of justice for children.38 While it is true that the principles of Catholic social teaching – principles such as human dignity founded on the belief that each person is imago Dei – refer to all human beings irrespective of age or gender, there is a danger inherent in all universalist ethical discourses that the application of principles excludes specific categories of persons – particularly marginal, minority or vulnerable groups – if they do not have particular mention or representation in the discourse. This survey of the major documents of modern Catholic social teaching highlights the paucity of references to children and an imbalance between the consideration given to unborn and born children.

The lack of explicit documentary citation of the dignity and rights of the child in Catholic social teaching could, perhaps, have been one factor – in a complex multi-causal scandal – that contributed to the often shameful responses to the crimes of child abuse, most exemplified in the words of the Murphy Report: ‘no concern for the welfare of the child’.39 Children have become a new measure of justice for the church ad intra, a measure that will determine our credibility to speak on matters of justice for children, born and unborn, in a world where poor children continue to suffer from having too much to bear and from being given too little to develop properly.
Many Church agencies are involved in frontline advocacy for and delivery of services to some of the world’s most vulnerable and damaged children, including those affected by hunger, traumatised by war, living and working on the streets, and exploited by the sex trade. This experience could be harvested to develop a more explicit and coherent treatment of the issue of justice for children, and to ensure that the child is no longer barely visible within the corpus of Catholic social teaching.

Notes

1 Report by Commission of Investigation into Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin (2009), (Conclusion 1.113): http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PB09000504

2 ‘The welfare of children and justice for victims was subordinated to the priorities of maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal, the protection of the reputation of the church and the preservations of its assets.’ (Murphy Report 1.15). ‘There was little or no concern for the welfare of the abused child or the welfare of other children who might come into contact with the priest’ (Murphy Report: 1.35).


5 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 32–33. Sen also discusses child labour, the divisiveness of this issue among South Asian economists, and the frequent congruence of child labour with slavery (p. 115). He also examines the relationship between child survival and the agency of women, particularly the importance of the empowerment of women through education and literacy.


8 The documents of Catholic social teaching generally use the term ‘children’ in three ways: (i) chronological childhood; (ii) all human persons as children of God; (iii) persons as ‘children of the church’.

9 It is customary to regard Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* as the initial document of modern Catholic social teaching; however, such a designation is not to suggest that no social teaching existed in the modern period before 1891. Michael Schuck reminds us that papal social teaching predates *Rerum Novarum* and also that Catholic social thought – expressed in the work of academics, activists and clergy between the years 1840 and 1890 – was the impetus for the promulgation of Leo’s encyclical on capital and labour. See Michael Schuck, *That They Be One: The Social Teaching of the Papal Encyclicals 1740–1989* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991).


11 References from *Rerum Novarum* and from all papal and conciliar documents cited in this essay are from the Vatican Website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html

12 See Phyllis Deane, *The First Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). ‘While women and girls and pauper children could be put to work for 12 to 16 hours a day in cotton mills at bare subsistence wages and while the sons of hand-loom weavers were prepared to adopt their father’s trade and to work longer and longer hours for a smaller and smaller return, the cotton industry could always command more labour that it needed and wages stayed pitifully low’ (p. 97). Deane also notes that the early textile factories took ‘batches of pauper children form the age of five upwards’ (p. 137).


14 See Misner, *The Social Teaching of Wilhelm Emmanuel Von Ketteler*. The quotation is from Von Ketteler’s 1869 sermon addressed to 10,000 workers.

To each, therefore, must be given his own share of goods, and the distribution of created goods, which, as every discerning person knows, is labouring today under the gravest evils due to the huge disparity between the few exceedingly rich and the unnumbered propertyless, must be effectively called back to and brought into conformity with the norms of the common good, that is, social justice.’ (Quadragesimo Anno, 58).


There is no discussion in this essay of the work of Pope Pius XII as he did not write a major social encyclical. His main contribution to Catholic social teaching during his pontificate (1939–58) is to be found in his Christmas Messages of 1941–1945 where the question of civil and political rights is addressed. Pius made several references to issues related to children in his documents and speeches on education, family, medical ethics and morality. One that is often cited is his 1952 radio address ‘De Conscientia Christiana in Iuvenibus Recte Efformanda’, 44, Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 1952, pp. 270–78.


The Declaration of the Rights of the Child was adopted by UN General Assembly Resolution 1386 (XIV) of 10 December 1959.

Child labour is defined by the International Labor Organization as ‘work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development’. International Labour Organization, http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/child-labour/lang–en/index.htm

In the Introduction to Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations, ed. Kenneth R. Himes, assoc. eds., Lisa Sowel Cahill, Charles E. Curran, David Hollenbach & Thomas Shannon (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), the editors state that they did not include a commentary on John Paul II’s Evangelium Vitae only because they had already examined four of his other encyclicals and they wanted to ‘reflect a list of the popes who have been significant for modern Catholic social teaching’. (p. 5) Interestingly the only reference in the Index of this book to children is to child labour (pp. 138, 159).

See Gaudium et Spes, 27.


Ibid.


John Paul II, Address to the Committee of European Journalists for the Rights of the Child (13 January 1979).

Compendium, no. 557, p. 467.


Dorr, Option for the Poor and for the Earth, pp. 440–69 (here p. 460).

Dorr, even in the excellent updated version of his important book on Catholic social teaching, Option for the Poor and for the Earth, has no reference to children in the index.

Report by Commission of Investigation into Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin (2009), (Conclusion 1.113): http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PB09000504