SUBMISSION FOR THE TRAINING ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

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A) Introduction

In contributing to the construction of a new Europe, the European Churches are facing the challenge to meet the spiritual needs of European citizens. Within this perspective, children should be regarded as individuals with particular rights and spiritual needs that have to be met by European churches through specific practices and actions that refer to children as members of the church and as European citizens and that acknowledge, protect and promote their rights.

B) Theological approach to the rights of children

A theological approach to the rights of children can provide an understanding of children's rights in the light of a Christian perspective that is developed around two main notions related to Christian ethos: the notion of the "image of God" and the notion of "otherness".

Children as "image of God"

 "Childhood" is a central concept in our relationship with God since we, Christians, refer to God as our Father and perceive ourselves as images of Him. This self-perception of us, as "children of God" and as an image of our Creator, who created and constantly renovates the world, constitutes the basic element of Christian anthropology and, as such, it is reflected in the way children, are seen in the framework of a human rights' theology and, consequently, in the way they are treated within churches.

Children are similarly images of their Creator who deserve the right to be respected and to participate in a constantly developing world. They are not just "adults-to-be" or parts of their families, rather, they are socially-active human beings affected by public problems like poverty, discrimination and violence, who seek to construct meaningful human relations and who "share a command to love one another creatively and inclusively in the image of an ultimately all-loving creator" (Wall, 2007).

In this sense, the manifestation of children's rights aims towards the transformation of our dispirited world in a more loving, just and inclusive way, reflecting the incarnation of God's transforming love that leads to a reconstruction of a more loving and inclusive society. When children's rights for protection and provision of welfare are respected, they are enabled to participate as images of their Creator in the fully cycle of social development.

The notion of "otherness"

Children, as the images of a Creator, who exists as a Triadic community characterised by love and reciprocation, have an innate tendency from the beginning of their life to construct networks of interpersonal and social relations ("embodied relationality", Wall, 2008), through which they form their personal meaning of life and their unique perception of themselves and others. This process results in the development of the two-fold concept of "otherness" that refers to the realisation of one's uniqueness and diversity in relation to others, as well as to the realisation of other's uniqueness and diversity in relation to self. In this sense, otherness makes every child different from everyone else but, simultaneously, interdependent with others.

The "embodied relationality", deriving from the characteristics of the Triadic community, and the active contribution of "otherness" in the formation of social relationships form the meaning and underline the importance of children's rights within a theological perspective. Every child enters the world asserting "a different other" that deserves to be loved, protected and accepted "in their greatest possible otherness" (Wall, 2008).

In addition, throughout their development children are becoming gradually more responsible to accept and protect the "otherness" of others. In a continuously socially developing world children are called upon to go beyond their primal emotional relationships with their care-givers and reach people outside their family borders. This requires a sense of "self-transforming responsibility" (Wall, 2008) to others that is obtained in childhood and lasts for a life time. What makes childhood a crucial period in broadening the network of relationships with others is the fact that children extend their relationships based on their experience of relating with the "significant others" (Hamacheck, 1992) in their life, whoever these are.

In this sense, the challenge for European churches is to acknowledge and admit the purpose and the meaning of children's rights in protecting and supporting children's "otherness" as well as in promoting children's capacity to expand the diversity and inclusiveness in their relationship with others. To achieve this, churches have to gain a place in children's heart

and mind as a "significant other" in their life by treating them as full members and participants in the common life of Christian communities.

Child abuse and its effects on Children's Spirituality

Child abuse in all its forms (physical, emotional, mental) is a fundamental mistreatment of children's rights that takes place in interpersonal relations with children. Spirituality, having its natural source in childhood, (Nye, 2009) is, also, primarily developed along with the child's initial basic relations. It is through interpersonal relations within the community of the church that children construct their relationship with God. Children tend to project the quality of their relationship with the persons in church to their relationship with God.

When a child enters an interpersonal relationship, it participates in it in a holistic way: physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. Thus, if a child is experiencing positive relationships in church it is the whole of his/her existence that develops. In the same way, child abuse experienced by children through their interpersonal relations affects equally their physical, mental, social and spiritual development.

The relational character of spirituality, as well as of child abuse, stresses the immense responsibility of the people in church dealing with children to create safe and fruitful relationships with them which reflect the loving relationship between God and with His creatures.

C) Legal approach to rights of children

The ecumenical Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly of the UN in 1948 was a crucial step towards the protection of human rights as a component of the international legal status. However, it was only in 1989 that considerable attention was given to children's rights, as a special vulnerable group of individuals, with the Convention on Children's Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly. In addition, there are many international legal instruments concerning the rights of children in Europe produced by different European Institutions e.g. European Union's and the Council of Europe's directives and recommendations. Here is a basic list of recent documents related to children's rights produced by the UN, the EU and the Council of Europe, which can also be found on line.

A. **The United Nations**

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989)
- World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children (1990)

B. **The European Union**
- Communication "Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child" (2006),
- EU Guidelines on the Rights of the Child (2007),
- EU Guidelines on Children in Armed Conflicts,
- Communication "A Special Place for Children in EU External Action" (2008),
- Council Conclusions on children in development and humanitarian settings (2008),
- Commission Staff Working Document on combating child labour (2010),

- [Council conclusions on child labour](#) (2010)
- Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating the sexual abuse, sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, repealing Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA (2010)

C. Council of Europe

- [Recommendation Rec (2002)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on education for democratic citizenship](#)
- Resolution 1193 (1999) on Second-chance schools – or how to combat unemployment and exclusion by means of education and training
- Recommendation 1346 (1997) on human rights education
- [Recommendation 1346 (1997) of the Parliamentary Assembly Human rights Education](#)
- [Recommendation 1849 (2008) for the promotion of a culture of democracy and human rights through teacher education](#)

Children's rights included in these instruments can be grouped according to three main concepts: **protection, equality in the provision of well-being and participation**. Special reference is also given in the UNCRC to the spiritual rights of children. In the table below the articles of the UNCRC related to the spiritual needs of children are listed according to the above mentioned trends.

Concept	Article number	Article Content
Protection	2	States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's religion
	14	States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion
	20	A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment [...]due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's [...] religious [...] background
	32	States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be [...]harmful to the child's [...] spiritual, moral or social development
Participation	14	Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect [...]freedoms of others
	30	In those States in which religious [...] minorities or persons exist [....], a child belonging to such a minority shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, [...] to profess and practise his or her own religion.
	17	States Parties [...] shall ensure that the child has access

		to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her [...] spiritual and moral well-being.
Provision of well being	**29**	States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms [...]; (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values [...]; (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;

Despite universal agreements on the importance of children's rights, these are not universally implemented, and both state organisations and international institutions play a crucial role in ensuring that the rights of children are respected and upheld.

D) Best practices (protection, equality and participation)

European churches are challenged, not only to coordinate with state institutions within member states in order to contribute to the provision of children's rights in different countries, but to respect and to meet these rights, in their own space, understanding spirituality as a basic and stable trait that influences everything that is done **with** and **for** children within churches. Undertaking this obligation, different churches in Europe initiate different activities and best practices. Some of them are presented in the table below according to the three concepts mentioned above.

Concept	Activities
Protection	Manifestation of a clear and sound declaration that children's rights are respected within church
	Training of parents on Christian parental roles (Parents' school)
	Training of priests and people involved in catechism on children's rights within churches
Participation	Participation of children in the liturgical part of churches life
	Participation of children in the pastoral life of church
Provision of well being	Coordination with educational authorities in order to contribute in the provision of a human rights education

	for children
	Provision of extra individual tutorials for children with learning difficulties in order to reduce school dropouts
	Provision of basic life resources (e.g. food and accommodation) for single parent families or for deprived children
	Coordination with social work authorities in order to help migrant children be socially included and avoid social isolation
	Provision of counselling services for parents and children

Most importantly, the role of churches in relation to children is to promote religious communities in which every child is valued and all children are given the opportunity to grow up as competent and confident citizens, healthy in every dimension of their existence, with a secure sense of belonging and with a belief that they can make a difference in the world.

E) Proposals for action in support of rights of children

Despite the acknowledgment of the churches' crucial role in promoting and respecting children's rights and the different practices mentioned above, there is still much to be done on behalf of the European churches. Based on a human rights theology and the ecclesiastical tradition, churches are called upon to care for children within their space and beyond. To achieve this, churches need to have an action plan to support the rights of children on parish level. This action plan should include actions referring to children, parents and people of the church teaching children. Below there is a proposed list of activities that can be initiated by churches in order to protect and support children's rights.

1. **Including children as full members and participants in the common life of church**

Spirituality is an innate trend in children's personality that allows children to be regarded as full members and participants in the common life of church from the beginning of their life. Thus, children must be given their own space in all dimensions of the church's life: the liturgy, the catechism and pastoral care. Children should be given the chance in their parish, and broadly in their church, to *actively participate* in all the activities that are included in the church's life, but most significantly, to have a voice on issues that concern their life in church. The below mentioned activities can promote active participation of children in church:

- *Children's committees* which can represent children in the church committees and ensure their participation in decision making
- *Debates* on issues related to children's life in church and beyond
- *Regular children's meetings* with clergy on issues related to their life in church,
- *Working Groups* of children that decide on and participate in different activities of their parish,
- *Leading* younger children in church activities

- *Publication* of a newsletter by the children

2. Supporting the formation of loving and safe families

In order to support the formation of loving and safe families, churches can initiate:
- *counselling services* for parents and children, provided on a regular basis by suitably educated family counsellors in different parishes, can enhance the support of parents and children facing problems in their family life.
- *training activities* for parents to enhance the skills and knowledge needed to develop, support and sustain loving homes.
- *working groups*, according to the different activities in their parish to promote parent's participation **with** their children in the parish's life. Active participation of parents together with their children should be initiated in a democratic process, that is to say, with respect to dignity and diversity of every family as well as to the child's bond with parents. Parents and their children should have the chance to <u>choose together</u>, through completing a handout presenting the activities of the parish, in which area of church's life they feel like participating.
- *parents' and children's circles* can provide them with the opportunity to talk about and share their experience of working together in and for the church. Circles' meetings should be led by adequately trained facilitators.

In this way, church becomes the "meeting point" for children and their parents. Throughout counselling, training and participation parents can be prompted and supported in recognising and appreciating their children's abilities, in attending the spiritual development of their children and in re-creating healthy parent-child relations.

3. Promoting quality of religious education within church

To achieve this goal, churches should focus on quality training of the persons that undertake the role of catechism in different parishes.

- Suitable *training programmes-workshops* should be planned and applied for people teaching **in** and **for** the church. The thematic areas included in the training should be related to issues of developmental and counselling psychology, theology, and teaching methodologies. Participants, after finishing their training, should be able to respect each child's differences and capacities to learn, recognising the needs of those children with special needs and with special gifts, and to teach children to understand, respect and celebrate diversity within church.
- *Production of suitable educational material* (booklets, manuals, worksheets etc.) to be used for the purposes of religious education within church. A formation of a committee composed by theologians, educational professionals and psychologists could enable the production of suitable material that would include the theological, educational and psychological dimension of religious education provided by the church.

In this task churches can be assisted by schools and other training institutes in their area in order to ensure the provision of adequate training and educational resources.

4. **Promoting physically and emotionally safe environments**

Churches should form physically and emotionally safe environments encompassing children in a holistic way. Any approach aiming at the protection and upholding of children's rights in church should refer, not only to the development of children's spirituality, but to all dimensions of their development: physical, mental and social development. This can be achieved through

- *safe indoor and outdoor games or game-like activities* children should be given the chance to physically exercise, practice healthy conflict resolution, challenge their prejudices, eliminate discrimination and gain positive images that respect the dignity of every human being. In addition, it is very important that children talk about the group dynamics in their games with their suitably trained young leaders.
- *cultural activities* where children can have the chance to meet the tradition of their community and to develop alternative and creative ways of expressing themselves as members of the church referring to the broader community.

5. **Enhancing research initiatives**

Research projects initiated by the church, in coordination with academic institutions or NGO's, can give a clearer idea on the needs of children regarding their rights and their expectations from church. Research can be seen by churches as another means of "giving voice" to children and can provide churches with valuable evidence for the assessment and renewal of their approaches regarding the protection and promotion of children's rights.

F) Questions which relate to the topic during the training

Some questions which are important to stimulate further discussion on children's rights.

- How can churches persuade the broader society that they respect and promote children's rights?
- How can the participation of children in the life of the parish be enhanced?
- What is the theological approach to bullying and child abuse?
- How does church support children who have been bullied or abused?
- In what ways is the church contributing to the prevention of bullying and child abuse?

G) Resource material for the training on rights of children

Pestalozzi Programme of Council of Europe:
http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/pestalozzi/default_en.asp

European Charter for Democratic Schools without Violence
http://www.see-edc.info/contenido/english/database/products/european-charter-for-democratic-schools-without-violence.html

Exploring Children's rights
www.coe.int/edc

Children's spirituality: Christian Perspective
http://childspirituality.org/

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