

## **Biblical Reflection: Juvenile Justice**

### **En Español**

*Excerpted from the Washington Office Juvenile Justice Guide.*

Children are given tremendous importance throughout the Bible, Christian tradition and practice. They symbolize the agents and measures of faith. They are the objects of God's struggle for justice, peace and love in the world. Youth are even called to strive toward God's aim. Yet they, like all of us, encounter violence and crime in both the biblical and modern world.

Early in the Hebrew Bible, the fate of children is tied to the actions, consequences and training adults enact (Deuteronomy 4:10, 6:7, 32:46). In fact, nations are judged by this (Deuteronomy 12:25,28). Biblical narratives tell of the victimization of youth or of their nurture and maturing into responsible adults.

The status of youth engaged in the juvenile justice system is virtually equivalent to that of the orphan in the Hebrew Bible. Like the orphan, youth "in the system" may be unaccompanied, unheard, not treated fairly or not well regarded by society and its systems.

God loves children and calls us to love them too (Psalms 10:12-18). In times of trouble, a kinsman-redeemer rescued the disenfranchised, including the orphan. Such interventions reflected deep love and prevailed over the troubles of social prejudice and mistreatment. They were even undertaken by non-relatives. Similar courses of action are needed today as youth face situations with schools, neighborhoods, the law, courts, and the brunt of public policy. Adults must stand with them.

In our advocacy for youth:

- **We are called to care because God cares.** "In you [God] the orphan finds mercy," declares the prophet Hosea (14:3). "You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry" (Exodus 22:22-23). Other related verses are Psalms 146:5-9, Jeremiah 7:5-7, 22:3, Ezekiel 22:6-7, Zechariah 7:8-9 and Malachi 3:5.
- **Our treatment, systems and relationships must be fair and exercise both love and justice.** Chastisement comes when people "have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy" (Jeremiah 5:28).
- **We are to defend the orphan.** "Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). This is a repeated theme throughout prophetic writings and it is Job's claim (Job 29:7-17).

Even with their profound capacity, youth must not be viewed as "little" adults. In the New Testament, Jesus exercises and demands the highest standards for the welfare and safety of children (Matthew 19:13-15, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 18:15-16). He tells us to enter the kingdom of God as "children." Like Jesus, we are called to welcome youth and maintain deep respect and care for them.