

UN envoy and Pope Francis meet on enhancing cooperation to protect children from violence

23 March 2017 – The United Nations envoy advocating an end to violence against children has met with His Holiness Pope Francis to discuss greater cooperation on protecting children from sexual and other forms of violence.

“Accelerating progress in children’s protection from violence needs to be at the heart of the actions of every nation, every faith and every person,” said Marta Santos Pais, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on Violence against Children, during a private meeting with the Pope this past weekend in Vatican City.

The also meeting provided an opportunity to enhance collaboration on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and she noted that in a world free from fear and from violence, “everyone counts and everybody is needed.”

The meeting was meant to strengthen cooperation between the office of Ms. Santos Pais and the Holy See, which has permanent observer status at the UN, alongside 193 Member States.

The Pontiff reiterated his call for a ‘zero tolerance’ policy and reaffirmed the high priority given by the Holy See to protecting the rights of all girls and boys who are victims of violence, neglect, maltreatment, abuse and exploitation.

“This is a plague, a hidden scream that should be heard by all of us,” highlighted Pope Francis, further recognizing the need to “take all necessary measures to protect in every way the lives of our children, so that such crimes may never be repeated.”

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Ms. Santos and the Pontiff also discussed the perils endured by children on the move who are exposed to constant incidents of violence especially when traveling unaccompanied or separated from their families, and who often lack the support of a nurturing and protective environment and in many cases end-up locked behind bars.



Marta Santos Pais, Special Representative of the Secretary-General chats with Pope Francis in her private audience at the Apostolic Palace. Photo: L’Osservatore Romano

Pope Francis and Ms. Santos Pais also discussed the growing risk of the

criminalization of children living in socially excluded and poor communities, who lack support to develop to their full potential and who often become an easy target for armed gangs and organized crime networks. Victims of marginalization and exploitation, these children are at high risk of deprivation of liberty, where they may be exposed to incidents of neglect, abuse and ill treatment.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include a target, 16.2, that calls for an end to “abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.” As this is a top UN priority, this meeting provided a significant opportunity to identify ways of enhancing collaboration and supporting implementation of the 2030 Agenda targets on violence against children.

Pope Francis and Ms. Santos Pais reaffirmed the importance of continuing to foster the cooperation between the UN and the Holy See in the promotion of children’s rights and protection from violence, and in process of implementation of the 2030 Agenda.