Magnifica Humanitas: A Theological Reference for the Recognition of Sublime Dignity and the Effective Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Groups

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There are evils in our societies that go beyond words. Among these harmful evils is, inter alia, the involvement of children in armed conflicts, with all its physical, psychosocial and spiritual consequences. Society often regards child soldiers with a degree of mistrust and a stigmatising attitude. For its part, the Church, in its Declaration Dignitas infinita, has always recognised that "*the dignity of every human being can be understood as 'infinite*'" and that, consequently, no human being should be excluded from human fraternity. (Cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, 183.) This means that, notwithstanding the harm caused, human dignity is never lost. The pastoral implication is that we must regard the child soldier not as a "problem to be solved", but as a "brother to be helped back to his feet".

Replacing a birth name with a war name (Kadogo in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lionceaux in Yemen or Ye-Aung in Myanmar) is the first manifestation of this wound and constitutes a real deprivation of the identity of the child who has become a soldier. Such deprivation of identity turns the child-as-person into a child-as-function (or child-as-object). This raises several questions: how does changing the names of children associated with armed forces or armed groups (CAAFAG) amount to a denial of their dignity? How can a child whose soul has been corrupted and who is rejected by society be reintegrated into society without being stigmatised? How can we restore what has been taken from the child, going beyond a purely technical process of reintegration? In the face of the failure of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), how can the theology of dignity developed by Pope Leo XIV contribute to the reintegration of the child soldier?

Our hypothesis is twofold: it is grounded, on the one hand, in international law and, on the other, in theology. Our approach is interdisciplinary, bringing together insights from law (the Paris Principles and United Nations reports), theology (the Encyclical Magnifica Humanitas) and pastoral ministry (field experience in Central Africa). To this end, our text, intended as a reference for pastoral action, is structured in three parts. First, we lay out the theological and legal foundations of protection. We then present DDR as a strategy for reparation before examining its failures. Finally, we propose a protocol based on two strategies: "killing the Kadogo" and the four-action protocol.

I. THEOLOGICAL AND LEGAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE PROTECTION AND REINTEGRATION OF CAAFAG

The Paris Principles define a child soldier as "*any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity. This includes, but is not limited to, boys and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes."* [1]Upon recruitment, the child not only undergoes brainwashing but also learns how to handle weapons. More fundamentally, however, the child acquires a new identity, embodied in the replacement of their birth or baptismal name

[1] UNICEF, *The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, February 2007, § 2.1.

with a war name, such as *Little Chilli*, *Rambo* or *Cobra*. Changing the child's name destroys their identity and contradicts the theology of dignity, which affirms the dignity of every human being as created in the image and likeness of the Triune God. It is also an unlawful act, as international law makes clear: "The child has the right to a name (...) States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognised by law without unlawful interference."

1. The Child's Dignity Endures: Restoring Dignity

Replacing a child soldier's original name with an assumed name or identification number destroys their history and personhood, leaving them identifiable only by their function. As a result, the child loses their bearings and becomes vulnerable to manipulation at will. This inevitably affects their life during and after armed conflict.

These conflicts steal childhood, instrumentalise the body and jeopardise the child's future: for days and weeks, the child exchanges their schoolbag, school, books and education for a rifle, ammunition, cartridges and night guard duties. Two consequences emerge when children leave these armed conflicts. On the one hand, the child emerges wounded and becomes a ticking time bomb. On the other, the child faces rejection by society, which sees them as a potential danger and social threat.

In response to these consequences, the Church reaffirms the child's humanity and defends the inalienability of human dignity.[2] Indeed, neither sin nor wrongdoing can take away that dignity. The Church's theological teaching invites us to recognise in every creature, in every human being, this magnifica humanitas, this sublime humanity, because each person is the very image of God. (Cf. Gen 1:27). This dignity is ontological and precedes a person's actions. Its source lies in creation. In this regard, Pope Leo XIV writes: *"No sin, failure, humiliation or exclusion can diminish the profound value of a human life that God has willed and called into being."* [3] Changing a child's name means altering and severing their relationship with God. Such actions call for reparation. For Father Charles, himself a former child soldier, the aim is "*to promote the principle of reparation*. Reparation for the violation of human rights, reparation for the human dignity trampled upon in these children, and reparation as accountability for those who recruit children during conflicts far beyond the children's own will". [4]

In keeping with this theological perspective, certain international organisations, particularly the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UNICEF, criticise the practice of replacing a child's name. They reject the expression "child soldiers", replacing it with "*Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*" (CAAFAG). Under the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court (ICC), recruiting children under the age of 15 constitutes "*a war crime*". Under Article 3 of International Labour Organization (ILO)

[2] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, no. 1.

[3] Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas* (on artificial intelligence), 15 May 2026, no. 52.

[4] This testimony, taken from an interview with Father Charles Mbikoyo Andrew, highlights three levels of reparation which we consider fundamental:

a) Legal reparation: for violations of the child's human rights (Convention on the Rights of the Child, Optional Protocol).

b) Anthropological and theological reparation: for the dignity that has been trampled upon. According to *Magnifica Humanitas*, the dignity of CAAFAG is never lost, but must be restored.

c) Reparation through accountability: Directed towards those who recruit children.

Convention no. 182, it constitutes one of the "*worst forms of child labour*" and may therefore give rise to sanctions as a form of reparation.

2. Not a "Kadogo", but a "Son of ...": Giving the Child Back Their Name

Several countries around the world are being shaken by armed conflicts with disastrous consequences (Yemen, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, etc.). Children are recruited for direct roles (combatants) or indirect roles (cooks, spies, sexual slaves, etc.). Each child is assigned an assumed name. This change of name is the first act of dehumanisation and deprives the child of both identity and innocence. An intrinsic link then develops between the child, their behaviour and the name they bear. For example, a child who adopts the name *Cobra* will try to behave and act like a cobra, and so forth.

Such assumed names have psychological (loss of identity), sociological (severing of family and cultural ties) and legal consequences (absence of civil registration records at the time of demobilisation). For this reason, from a theological perspective, the Church has always affirmed the sacred character of the name. A name bears an indelible character. It refers not only to our own, authentic identity (family and culture), but also, and above all, reveals our mission (cf. Mt 1:21; Mt 16:18; Lk 10:20; Rev 7:3, etc.). The Christian name given at baptism, for example, connects the child to their patron saint and, through that saint, to God.

Indeed, changing or replacing a child's name with another is an act of outright *sacrilege*. Neither actions committed, experiences endured nor participation in armed conflict should in any way alter this sacredness of the name. Far from encouraging evil, the Church has always called people to responsibility and conversion (cf. Lk 5:31–32).

In the face of these dehumanising practices of name substitution, society has a duty to restore to each child their name and sublime humanity, recognising the noble designation "son of ..." rather than assigning a grandiose name.

In short, no war and no identification number can erase the name of God within the child. The child needs to be seen through the eyes of God, who calls them by name. Thus, while international law seeks to protect the child through the strategy of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), the Church undertakes the mission of protecting the image of God which has been obscured in these children.

II. THE DDR PROCESS: A STRATEGY FOR REPARATION

The three letters of DDR stand for the three stages of the process. Disarmament involves the seizure and destruction of the weapons of parties to a conflict and the replacement of military uniforms with civilian clothes. Demobilisation, the longest phase, enables the transition to civilian life. It includes physical measures (healthcare, deworming), psychological measures (support, learning through play, storytelling and religious contributions), and educational measures (literacy and vocational training). Reintegration marks the return to the family community. This process provides for awareness-raising policies in which children are presented not as perpetrators but as victims of a conflict-ridden world order. Stigmatisation by society or by the child's community may drive them back into armed groups.

1. The Failure of DDR in Figures, a Cause of Recidivism among CAAFAG

The final stage of DDR is the most complex, since it must take place under conditions conducive to health, self-respect and dignity. Despite the efforts made and the progress achieved by UNICEF and its partners in supporting and protecting children, large numbers of minors continue to be involved in armed conflicts. According to UNICEF's official website, in 2022 the organisation and its partners provided reintegration or protection support to more than 12,460 children. Nevertheless, despite the progress achieved, UNICEF deplores the fact that tens of thousands of children are still directly or indirectly involved in armed conflicts.

The failure of DDR has several causes: difficulties in providing care; lack of schools in certain areas; absence of a clear legal framework; poverty, which drives the child, sometimes encouraged by their family, to return to arms as the only means of survival; and the lack of lasting peace. Some failures arise when a child, rather than participating in an armed conflict, joins a criminal group and continues to engage in violence within society, spreading fear and anxiety. This has given rise to a new phenomenon known as "bébé noir" or "kuluna" in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo. [5]

The persistence of armed conflicts worldwide increases the number of CAAFAG and sometimes makes the DDR process difficult, if not ineffective, with a consequent risk of returning to violence.

2. The New Threat: Digital Recruitment of Children and the Denial of *Magnifica Humanitas*

Although the recruitment of children into armed groups violates their rights, advances in new technologies have changed recruitment methods. Recruitment has shifted from traditional direct (voluntary enlistment) or involuntary (abduction by force) methods towards online and digital forms of recruitment. One might say that child-soldier recruitment has moved from the bush to the city and entered the child's bedroom through TikTok, Telegram, WhatsApp and similar platforms.

New technologies, with the mobile phone at the forefront, treat the human subject, especially the child, not as an end in themselves but merely as a means that can be used to achieve certain objectives and serve the logic of the world order. The child's learning time, freedom and capacity for thought are obscured by the digital device. The child becomes a mere object of surveillance, subject to manipulation and compelled to live at the pace imposed by technology. [6]

This is the context for the message of Magnifica Humanitas: the child, and the human being more broadly, must not be reduced to a mere instrument and thereby deprived of personhood. Theological reflection proposes repairing not only what is external, but also,

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[5] Today, the phenomenon of the "bébés noirs" in the Republic of the Congo, the "kuluna" in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the "microbes" in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and elsewhere, gangs of young offenders armed with machetes, threatens the safety of local populations. These children kill readily, displaying unimaginable brutality and cruelty. Many studies have concluded that former child soldiers are undoubtedly among them.

[6] According to a United Nations publication dated 11 August 2025, social media have become a new gateway for armed groups and criminal organisations in Colombia. Against a soundtrack of cumbia and corridos, videos seek to entice adolescents. A similar situation has occurred in the war in Sudan since 2023, where both sides use children as "influencers" and propaganda agents on social media. The aim is to recruit even more of these underage "soldiers". (Cf. Jeune Afrique, publication of 27 February 2026.)

and above all, what is internal. This entails prayer, renunciation of "digital violence" and psycho-spiritual accompaniment. The Church promotes a theology of dignity and reconciliation: reconciliation with oneself, with others (society, community, family, etc.) and with God.

III. TOWARDS SUBLIME DIGNITY AND EFFECTIVE REINTEGRATION OF CAAFAG: THEOLOGY IN ACTION

Faced with the situation of CAAFAG, whose *Magnifica Humanitas* has been profaned, wounded and denied, what is the Church's position? In other words, how does the Church seek to reintegrate the child whose soul has been wounded, whose mind has been overtaken by the digital world and whose body bears the marks of war, without stigmatising the child or abandoning them to an environment that has become hostile and rejects them?

1. "Killing the Kadogo", Observing a "Digital Fast" and Reviving "Hope"

As we have stressed above, human dignity is inalienable. Whenever a child loses their fundamental sense of direction, this causes suffering to the Church. To help children who are victims of armed conflict, we propose three practical paths:

- *Killing the Kadogo*: this is an invitation to parish communities, families and all people of goodwill to remove the labels and prejudices attached to children who have become soldiers. Killing the Kadogo means restoring the child's true face, identity and life. It means helping the child to be reconciled with themselves and rediscover the path towards their own humanity.
- Observing the "*rite of the digital fast*" (Cf. Magnifica Humanitas, §§ 159–160): the mobile phone is not bad in itself. It is its use that can be problematic. Observing a digital fast means teaching child victims to use social media as responsibly as possible. The child who has become a soldier must be taught what a phone is for: calling, communicating and learning, not hating, killing or spying. A phone can become *toxic*. The rite of the digital fast is an invitation attributed to Pope Leo XIV to *collaboration among educators, parents and chaplaincy services.* In the Holy Father's perspective, an "alliance" must be formed around the child, since neither schools nor parents can, on their own, contribute adequately to the child's future.

- *Reviving hope:* A child who has become a soldier arouses fear and mistrust in others, in the community and even in their own family. The Church proposes a theology of welcome and hope. To welcome means to accept the other person and regard them as a brother or sister rather than a monster. This involves careful catechesis, visits, conversations and inclusion in parish youth groups. Welcome must be accompanied by comforting words that open up new and positive horizons: forgiveness, repentance, unconditional love and a new beginning in life (cf. Mk 10:14; Lk 15:11–32). In this respect, the Church's spiritual role is undeniable and provides a solid point of reference and a source of healing.

2. A FOUR-ACTION PROTOCOL FOR REBUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND PROMOTING THE REINTEGRATION OF CAAFAG

In view of the failure of DDR and the risk that a child suffering the consequences of war may return to violence, we propose a four-action protocol:

➢ *Recognising magnifica humanitas in the child:*

This first action, inspired by Pope Leo XIV's Encyclical (§§ 22 and 66), calls for five practical steps:

- Calling the child by name: this upholds ontological dignity and promotes the right to identity;
- Assigning the child unpaid work: teaching them to nurture life and foster growth. This may take the form of gardening, cleaning the church and similar activities.
- Introducing the child to prayer: this means inviting them to contemplate the wonders of God, his mercy and his forgiveness. Such initiation makes it possible to make amends for harm caused and to forgive those who drew the child into the conflict (cf. Jn 8:11). As attributed to the Holy Father, *"Where human beings risk losing their way, prayer reminds us that we are held in God's care."* (§§42)
- Introducing play: recreational activities (games, theatre and humour) encourage laughter and contribute to mental health. They help reawaken our humanity and provide a means of forgetting and overcoming the traumas suffered and experienced.
- Providing pastoral care through closeness: Concrete actions to care for the faithful, through a simple, repeatable gesture that is both spiritual and educational, help a wounded person regain the capacity to live, believe and make plans for the future.

➢ *Restoring dignity to a disarmed soul, a desecrated body and a stolen future:*

- The disarmed soul: the child who has become a soldier experiences trauma. The consequences of war affect the child's conscience. The child needs reassuring, positive and protective words that affirm their worth in everyday life;
- The desecrated body: the body is not just another object (Cf. 1 Cor 6:19). Sadly, this body has been desecrated, defiled and degraded. Its restoration involves prayers for deliverance, purification and other practices.
- The stolen future: armed conflicts obstruct the right to education and, consequently, the child's ability to build a future. From the perspective of international law, the fundamental rights of the child must be promoted. Catechesis and Church-run vocational training institutions (such as those associated with Don Bosco) are also sources of hope and self-reconstruction (Cf. Jer 29:11).

➢ *Promoting fruitful dignity through action: from a "problem to be managed" to a "gift". »*

The process of healing, spiritual conversion and reintegration transforms the child from a "problem to be managed" into a "gift" to society and the Church. Such a child can become a companion, reconciler, reader and guide for other children. [7] In this perspective, Father Blaise

[7] Among the best-known examples, we may mention Father Charles Mbikoyo Andrew (South Sudan): abducted by rebels as an adolescent while already studying at a minor seminary, he was forced to become a child soldier. After months in captivity, he managed to escape with other companions. He eventually resumed his studies and was ordained a priest in 2007. Another example is Father Ejike Innocent Onyenagubo (Nigeria): He fought as a child soldier during the Nigerian Civil War (the Biafran War) between 1967 and 1970. Faced with the horrors of the conflict, he promised God that, if he survived, he would devote his life to him. He became a Catholic priest.

reveals one of the strategies adopted: “We have created youth awareness-raising groups run by young people themselves.”

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Father Charles, for his part, shared his own experience with us: *“I am often invited to talk with demobilized children. Every time I share my own experience with them, it inspires two things in them: self-confidence and hope for change.”*

History shows that some of these children have become members of religious communities and priests (the Cenacolo Community in Lourdes is given as an example). Pope Leo XIV sums up the fruitfulness of this action in three verbs: Contemplate, Unite and Support (cf. § 51). In this specific case, the task is to contemplate the *magnifica humanitas* of the child who has been made new; to reunite the child with their family and community for effective reintegration; and, faced with what happens to our neighbour, to transform the inevitable economic, cultural and technological bonds into paths of sharing, cooperation and mutual care, learning to *“think and act in terms of community”*. As Father Blaise confided to us: *“In many cases, we benefit from the solidarity of Christian families in achieving certain goals. These are, for the most part, exemplary families with good reputations, formed in apostolic groups, who can readily communicate with others. They visit these children's families of origin or foster families to raise awareness and prepare them to welcome the children. This creates very fruitful cooperation and exchange between the two families”.*[9]

- Creating spaces for listening and advocacy for the rights of former CAAFAG: whatever solutions may be devised to address their situation, one principal cause must be taken into account: wars. As long as wars persist throughout the world, human rights will continue to be trampled upon and violated from one day to the next. This is why we must work for peace and for the effective implementation of legal standards that protect human rights.

  In an interview, Father Charles Mbikoyo Andrew, addressing the Church, said: *“May the Church continue to assume its role as an artisan of peace. May it seek peace in the world. For when there is peace, there will be no more child soldiers. In addition to the actions it already carries out, the Church is called to sympathize more with these children and to form leaders who can come to their aid.”*[10]

  Pope Francis, of revered memory, aptly summed up the urgency of listening. Addressing children throughout the world on the occasion of the First World Children's Day in Rome, he said: *“Do not forget those among*

[8] This testimony illustrates in concrete terms the principle of fruitful dignity developed by Pope Leo XIV: the scar becomes an opportunity, a gift. The former CAAFAG is no longer a “case to be managed”, but a peacemaker and an agent of prevention in their community. The child embodies the call of Magnifica Humanitas to make vulnerable people protagonists rather than mere beneficiaries. Interview reference: Interviewee: Father Blaise MBIKOYEZU, priest and former director of the Centre Juvenat Center in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haut-Uele Province, Dungu Territory, town of Dungu. Date and time: 2 September 2026, 9.00 p.m. (Rome time) / 8.00 p.m. (DRC time). Medium: Interview conducted via WhatsApp (video call). Duration: 20 minutes. Language of interview: French

[9] Father Blaise's testimony illustrates the third action of our protocol: Promoting fruitful dignity through alliance. It gives concrete expression to two principles of Magnifica Humanitas: the principle of solidarity (no. 85): “Dignity is realised in communion”, and that of the family as the first place where magnifica humanitas is protected (no. 79). The strategy of “model families”, trained in apostolic groups (the Legion of Mary, basic ecclesial communities, etc.), shows that reintegration cannot be the work of one priest or NGO alone. It requires a networked Church in which families help other families to heal.

[10] From a theological standpoint, this statement by Father Charles Mbikoyo Andrew is an invitation to move from Magnifica Humanitas (the theory of dignity) to concrete action (the pursuit of peace as a vaccine against the phenomenon of child soldiers).

you who, still so young, are victims of war and violence, those who are forced to become soldiers or to flee as refugees separated from their parents, those who cannot go to school, those who fall victim to criminal gangs, all those children whose childhood is being cruelly stolen today. Listen to them. Truly listen to them".

Listening brings joy and stimulates our spirit and creative intelligence.

Conclusion

At the end of this reflection, it is clear that the place of CAAFAG in societies marked by armed conflicts of every kind remains a matter of serious concern. We have sought to show that replacing a child's name with another is, legally, an unlawful act (cf. Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 7–8) and, theologically, a source of alienation, since it infringes the dignity and the inalienable respect owed to every human being.

The DDR process alone is insufficient to restore the child's dignity and enable, or at least facilitate, their social and professional reintegration. Drawing on the Church's theology and Pope Leo XIV's Encyclical Magnifica Humanitas, we have proposed an alternative to the DDR process, which we call "inner DDR": a four-action protocol.

We therefore have two distinct but complementary approaches. While international law (on which external DDR is based) disarms the child's hand, theological reflection (on which inner DDR is based) disarms the heart. True social reintegration is not limited to disarmament (removing the rifle from the child's hands); rather, it requires opening a path of hope in the child's wounded heart, so that scars and suffering, once healed, may become a source of grace, a *gift*. It is, then, from the standpoint of safeguarding human dignity that Pope Leo XIV's writing should be understood.