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## 'A Question of Conscience' Overview: UD International Conference Focuses on Children's Rights

University of Dayton

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## NEWS RELEASE

### 'A QUESTION OF CONSCIENCE' OVERVIEW: UD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE FOCUSES ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

DAYTON, Ohio — The worst problems of society become even more heinous when they involve children, say organizers of an international conference on children's rights, and a group of distinguished scholars from North America, Latin America and Europe will shed light on some of the ongoing crimes against children and possible solutions at the University of Dayton gathering.

"A Question of Conscience: Making a Better Life for All Children" will be held March 2 and 3 at UD, where a major award will be presented to Bruce Harris, who works daily to defend and improve the lot of street children in Latin America. The conference is the first event in the University's Global Leadership Series for 2001, and is part of UD's sesquicentennial celebration.

From the murder of street kids in Latin America to the enforced or coerced prostitution of teens from Eastern Europe, scholars will examine the worldwide experiences of children not protected by law or custom. They will address advances and shortcomings of children's rights since a world summit on the child 10 years ago and the debate in the U.S. about ratifying the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child.

"We will call attention to the real tragedies around the world," said Mark Ensalaco, organizer of the conference and director of the human rights program at UD. "But we're not doing it to be dramatic or to shock, although some people will be shocked. We want to collaborate and examine the situations, offer a frank assessment of what the current state is and devise ways to confront the problems."

The real benefits may not come until later, he said. "We hope to create a synergy, that people will find ways to work together in the future. It's the consequences we don't anticipate that will be the most beneficial."

The University became the first in the country to offer an undergraduate degree program in human rights when it instituted an undergraduate major concentration and a minor in human rights studies in December 1998. UD is also an organizer and a founding member of the International Human Rights Education Consortium.

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With the exception of the March 3 luncheon, all conference events are free and open to the public and will be held in the Kennedy Union ballroom on campus.

The conference will begin at 7:30 p.m. Friday, March 2, with the presentation of the Monsignor Oscar Romero Award for Leadership in Service to Human Rights to Bruce Harris, executive director of Casa Alianza, which has programs to help homeless and abandoned children in Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua. He'll talk about his work at Casa Alianza in "Innocence Lost: The Plight of Central America's Street Children."

The evening's program will also include remarks by the Rev. Cecilio deLora, who will talk about the life and work of Oscar Romero, the Roman Catholic archbishop of San Salvador who was assassinated in 1980 for speaking in defense of the poor of El Salvador and publicly denouncing the state-supported death squads in the country.

Joseph Mettimano, deputy director of public policy and advocacy with the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, will open the conference at 9 a.m. Saturday, March 3. For more than five years he has planned and managed the fund's national advocacy, awareness-raising and lobbying activities in support of halting child sexual exploitation, furthering child rights issues, banning land mines and eliminating hazardous and exploitative child labor practices. He has also chaired the Washington working group on the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

Scholars will present their papers in three sessions. "Protecting Children's Rights Ten Years After the World Summit" will begin following Mettimano's opening address. Papers concerning "Children in a Dangerous World" will be presented at 10:30 a.m. and will include information on child farm workers in the U.S., the murder of street children in Buenos Aires, child soldiers in Africa and human trafficking in post-Communist Europe. Scholars addressing the "U.S. Convention on the Rights of the Child" will begin at 2 p.m.

Brother Raymond L. Fitz, S.M., president of UD, will address "Protecting Children: Social Justice and Community Building" at the 12:30 p.m. luncheon on March 3. Attendance is by reservation only by calling (937) 229-2765 by Feb. 27. Cost is \$8.

Fitz serves on the executive committee and school readiness committee of Montgomery County's Family and Children First Council, which is working to create a seamless human-services system. In the 1990s, following several highly publicized deaths of children from abuse, Fitz spent 18 months working with Montgomery County elected officials, professionals and citizens to improve the region's child-protection system.

Ensalaco will wind up the conference with closing remarks at 4 p.m. "The mission of the human rights committee at UD involves teaching and public programing, but it's also policy oriented," he said. "We want to advance the debate that leads to the implementation of policies. We hope the participants and those who attend will leave campus with a clearer sense of what action they can take in the future. Those in the community can go out and get involved."