

Millions of Elians

Regardless of what you think about the politics of the Elian Gonzales custody battle, one thing is certain: The little Cuban boy who was rescued near the shores of South Florida last November isn't lacking for attention. His relatives in Miami showered him with affection for months, his father and grandmothers came from Cuba to win him back, and sympathetic Americans who watched his painful saga on television are hoping that this cute 6-year-old will be able to forget the trauma he endured from intrusive government agents when he was seized on April 22.

Elian came to this country as a nameless refugee. Now he is a celebrity who will most likely be offered book deals and talk show appearances for the rest of his life. Some Cuban Catholics who believe the child is a Messiah figure will watch closely to see whether he will topple Fidel Castro's communist regime when he grows up.

Maybe he will. Or maybe he will become a Latin pop star like Ricky Martin. Whatever happens to Elian, everyone will be watching.

What grieves me is that there are millions of Elians in the world today who have never had their faces broadcast on network television. No one knows their stories. And no one is arguing about who can claim custody of them.

Unlike Elian, they cannot sail to the United States. They don't have loving relatives in Miami or anywhere else. They don't know their parents, nor have they ever enjoyed a decent meal or slept in a warm bed. Most of them live in cardboard boxes or on sidewalks. Most of them are sick. Many won't live past age 12.

In mid-April, when Elian's case was front-page news every day, I noticed two reports buried on page 18 of The Orlando

Sentinel. One story explained that millions of homeless children sleep on the streets in Pakistan, where kids as young as 7 make 50 cents a day working in small shops to help feed their siblings. That nation's horrendous problem with street children was underscored a few months ago when a deranged man admitted to poisoning more than 100 homeless kids. To hide his deeds he dissolved their bodies in acid.

Another story told of the problem of restaveks, or discarded children, in Haiti. Humanitarian groups only now are realizing the severity of the problem of child slavery in that country, where an estimated 300,000 unwanted boys and girls are used as "human mules" and as sex slaves after they have been given to wealthier families by their poor parents.

Their faces have never been aired on the evening news. But Charisma is giving them a chance to speak to you this month. I know their stories aren't as romantic or as politically charged as Elian's. But they need us to fight as aggressively as Elian's family did—until these helpless kids can find love, safety and a chance to hear that Jesus cares.

My wife and I are praying about adopting one of these orphans, even though we don't have enough room in our house. After you read Andy Butcher's excellent report, "Listen to the Children Crying" (page 50), please take a long look at the young faces in this article. Then ask the Lord how you can show His compassion to the most vulnerable kids on the planet. By J. Lee Grady