

World Congress

Child Dignity in the Digital World

Address: Pope Francis

6 October 2017

Your Eminences,
President of the Senate, Madame Minister,
Your Excellencies, Father Rector,
Distinguished Ambassadors and Civil Authorities,
Dear Professors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank the Rector of the Gregorian University, Father Nuno da Silva Gonçalves, and the young lady representative of the youth for their kind and informative words of introduction to our meeting. I am grateful to all of you for being here this morning and informing me of the results of your work. Above all, I thank you for sharing your concerns and your commitment to confront together, for the sake of young people worldwide, a grave new problem felt in our time. A problem that had not yet been studied and discussed by a broad spectrum of experts from various fields and areas of responsibility as you have done in these days: the problem of the effective protection of the dignity of minors in the digital world.

The acknowledgment and defense of the dignity of the human person is the origin and basis of every right social and political order, and the Church has recognized the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) as “a true milestone on the path of moral progress of humanity” (cf. JOHN PAUL II, Addresses to the United Nations Organization, 1979 and 1995). So too, in the knowledge that children are among those most in need of care and protection, the Holy See received the Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1959) and adhered to the relative Convention (1990) and its two optional protocols (2001). The dignity and rights of children must be protected by legal systems as priceless goods for the entire human family (cf. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Nos. 244-245).

While completely and firmly agreed on these principles, we must work together on their basis. We need to do this decisively and with genuine passion, considering with tender affection all those children who come into this world every day and in every place. They need our respect, but also our care and affection, so that they can grow and achieve all their rich potential.

Scripture tells us that man and woman are created by God in his own image. Could any more forceful statement be made about our human dignity? The Gospel speaks to us of the affection with which Jesus welcomes children; he takes them in his arms and blesses

them (cf. Mk 10:16), because “it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Mt 19:14). Jesus’ harshest words are reserved for those who give scandal to the little ones: “It were better for them to have a great millstone fastened around their neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Mt 18:6). It follows that we must work to protect the dignity of minors, gently yet firmly, opposing with all our might the throwaway culture nowadays that is everywhere apparent, to the detriment especially of the weak and the most vulnerable, such as minors.

We are living in a new world that, when we were young, we could hardly have imagined. We define it by two simple words as a “digital world”, but it is the fruit of extraordinary achievements of science and technology. In a few decades, it has changed the way we live and communicate. Even now, it is in some sense changing our very way of thinking and of being, and profoundly influencing the perception of our possibilities and our identity.

If, on the one hand, we are filled with real wonder and admiration at the new and impressive horizons opening up before us, on the other, we can sense a certain concern and even apprehension when we consider how quickly this development has taken place, the new and unforeseen problems it sets before us, and the negative consequences it entails. Those consequences are seldom willed, and yet are quite real. We rightly wonder if we are capable of guiding the processes we ourselves have set in motion, whether they might be escaping our grasp, and whether we are doing enough to keep them in check.

This is the great existential question facing humanity today, in light of a global crisis at once environmental, social, economic, political, moral and spiritual.

As representatives of various scientific disciplines and the fields of digital communications, law and political life, you have come together precisely because you realize the gravity of these challenges linked to scientific and technical progress. With great foresight, you have concentrated on what is probably the most crucial challenge for the future of the human family: the protection of young people’s dignity, their healthy development, their joy and their hope.

We know that minors are presently more than a quarter of the over 3 billion users of the internet; this means that over 800 million minors are navigating the internet. We know that within two years, in India alone, over 500 million persons will have access to the internet, and that half of these will be minors. What do they find on the net? And how are they regarded by those who exercise various kinds of influence over the net?

We have to keep our eyes open and not hide from an unpleasant truth that we would rather not see. For that matter, surely we have realized sufficiently in recent years that concealing the reality of sexual abuse is a grave error and the source of many other evils? So let us face reality, as you have done in these days. We encounter extremely troubling things on the net, including the spread of ever more extreme pornography, since habitual use raises the threshold of stimulation; the increasing phenomenon of sexting between

young men and women who use the social media; and the growth of online bullying, a true form of moral and physical attack on the dignity of other young people. To this can be added sextortion; the solicitation of minors for sexual purposes, now widely reported in the news; to say nothing of the grave and appalling crimes of online trafficking in persons, prostitution, and even the commissioning and live viewing of acts of rape and violence against minors in other parts of the world. The net has its dark side (the “dark net”), where evil finds ever new, effective and pervasive ways to act and to expand. The spread of printed pornography in the past was a relatively small phenomenon compared to the proliferation of pornography on the net. You have addressed this clearly, based on solid research and documentation, and for this we are grateful.

Faced with these facts, we are naturally alarmed. But, regrettably, we also remain bewildered. As you know well, and are teaching us, what is distinctive about the net is precisely that it is worldwide; it covers the planet, breaking down every barrier, becoming ever more pervasive, reaching everywhere and to every kind of user, including children, due to mobile devices that are becoming smaller and easier to use. As a result, today no one in the world, or any single national authority, feels capable of monitoring and adequately controlling the extent and the growth of these phenomena, themselves interconnected and linked to other grave problems associated with the net, such as illicit trafficking, economic and financial crimes, and international terrorism. From an educational standpoint too, we feel bewildered, because the speed of its growth has left the older generation on the sidelines, rendering extremely difficult, if not impossible, intergenerational dialogue and a serene transmission of rules and wisdom acquired by years of life and experience.

But we must not let ourselves be overcome by fear, which is always a poor counsellor. Nor let ourselves be paralyzed by the sense of powerlessness that overwhelms us before the difficulty of the task before us. Rather, we are called to join forces, realizing that we need one another in order to seek and find the right means and approaches needed for effective responses. We must be confident that “we can broaden our vision. We have the freedom needed to limit and direct technology; we can put it at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral” (Laudato Si’, 112).

For such a mobilization to be effective, I encourage you to oppose firmly certain potentially mistaken approaches. I will limit myself to indicating three of these.

The first is to underestimate the harm done to minors by these phenomena. The difficulty of countering them can lead us to be tempted to say: “Really, the situation is not so bad as all that...” But the progress of neurobiology, psychology and psychiatry have brought to light the profound impact of violent and sexual images on the impressionable minds of children, the psychological problems that emerge as they grow older, the dependent behaviours and situations, and genuine enslavement that result from a steady diet of

provocative or violent images. These problems will surely have a serious and life-long effect on today's children.

Here I would add an observation. We rightly insist on the gravity of these problems for minors. But we can also underestimate or overlook the extent that they are also problems for adults. Determining the age of minority and majority is important for legal systems, but it is insufficient for dealing with other issues. The spread of ever more extreme pornography and other improper uses of the net not only causes disorders, dependencies and grave harm among adults, but also has a real impact on the way we view love and relations between the sexes. We would be seriously deluding ourselves were we to think that a society where an abnormal consumption of internet sex is rampant among adults could be capable of effectively protecting minors.

The second mistaken approach would be to think that automatic technical solutions, filters devised by ever more refined algorithms in order to identify and block the spread of abusive and harmful images, are sufficient to deal with these problems. Certainly, such measures are necessary. Certainly, businesses that provide millions of people with social media and increasingly powerful, speedy and pervasive software should invest in this area a fair portion of their great profits. But there is also an urgent need, as part of the process of technological growth itself, for all those involved to acknowledge and address the ethical concerns that this growth raises, in all its breadth and its various consequences. Here we find ourselves having to reckon with a third potentially mistaken approach, which consists in an ideological and mythical vision of the net as a realm of unlimited freedom. Quite rightly, your meeting includes representatives of lawmakers and law enforcement agencies whose task is to provide for and to protect the common good and the good of individual persons. The net has opened a vast new forum for free expression and the exchange of ideas and information. This is certainly beneficial, but, as we have seen, it has also offered new means for engaging in heinous illicit activities, and, in the area with which we are concerned, for the abuse of minors and offences against their dignity, for the corruption of their minds and violence against their bodies. This has nothing to do with the exercise of freedom; it has to do with crimes that need to be fought with intelligence and determination, through a broader cooperation among governments and law enforcement agencies on the global level, even as the net itself is now global.

You have been discussing all these matters and, in the "Declaration" you presented me, you have pointed out a variety of different ways to promote concrete cooperation among all concerned parties working to combat the great challenge of defending the dignity of minors in the digital world. I firmly and enthusiastically support the commitments that you have undertaken.

These include raising awareness of the gravity of the problems, enacting suitable legislation, overseeing developments in technology, identifying victims and prosecuting those guilty of crimes. They include assisting minors who have been affected and providing for their rehabilitation, assisting educators and families, and finding creative ways of

training young people in the proper use of the internet in ways healthy for themselves and for other minors. They also include fostering greater sensitivity and providing moral formation, as well as continuing scientific research in all the fields associated with this challenge.

Very appropriately, you have expressed the hope that religious leaders and communities of believers can also share in this common effort, drawing on their experience, their authority and their resources for education and for moral and spiritual formation. In effect, only the light and the strength that come from God can enable us to face these new challenges. As for the Catholic Church, I would assure you of her commitment and her readiness to help. As all of us know, in recent years the Church has come to acknowledge her own failures in providing for the protection of children: extremely grave facts have come to light, for which we have to accept our responsibility before God, before the victims and before public opinion. For this very reason, as a result of these painful experiences and the skills gained in the process of conversion and purification, the Church today feels especially bound to work strenuously and with foresight for the protection of minors and their dignity, not only within her own ranks, but in society as a whole and throughout the world. She does not attempt to do this alone – for that is clearly not enough – but by offering her own effective and ready cooperation to all those individuals and groups in society that are committed to the same end. In this sense, the Church adheres to the goal of putting an end to “the abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children” set by the United Nations in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Target 16.2).

On many occasions, and in many different countries, I gaze into the eyes of children, poor and rich, healthy and ill, joyful and suffering. To see children looking us in the eye is an experience we have all had. It touches our hearts and requires us to examine our consciences. What are we doing to ensure that those children can continue smiling at us, with clear eyes and faces filled with trust and hope? What are we doing to make sure that they are not robbed of this light, to ensure that those eyes will not be not darkened and corrupted by what they will find on the internet, which will soon be so integral and important a part of their daily lives?

Let us work together, then, so that we will always have the right, the courage and the joy to be able to look into the eyes of the children of our world.

Francis

From the Vatican, 6 October 2017