



Annual Child Protection Briefing



This Pope "Gets" Digital

Fall 2017

On October 3, 2017, Pope Francis addressed the Congress on "Child Dignity in the Digital World". We in the Safe Environment Office have at times struggled to frame the challenges that can arise when anyone goes online, but when it comes to children, the stakes go so much higher. Leave it to the Holy Father in Rome and his always eloquent turns of phrase to aid us in our efforts.



For those of us reading this now, we can readily agree about the inherent dignity of children and place genuine value on our many efforts over the past decade or more to make the world a safer place for them. And thankfully, our churches here in the Archdiocese as well as others have indeed become "Safer Spaces". But one detail often gets overlooked during trainings that are focused on our churches and schools, and the leader of the Roman Catholic Church pulled no punches: *"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."*

With that mission statement in mind, Pope Francis laid out the great new challenge of protecting and nurturing children in the 21st century...the internet. All parents, teachers, administrators, catechists, and the list goes on, are fully aware that this outrageously useful tool has another, very dangerous edge to it. And ironically, we are all faced with a problem not dissimilar to that which faced all of those brand new Safe Environment Programs right after 2001. How do we confront a challenge that we know little about and have never confronted

before? How do we face "the problem of the effective protection of the dignity of minors in the digital world." Pope Francis preaches:

"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."

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"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. 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. 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."

So How Do We Start?

The leader of the Roman Catholic Church certainly has a way of painting a very, VERY large picture of a challenge! However, as often happens when something seems utterly overwhelming, an astoundingly tiny word can shift attitudes all the way from helpless to determined: “*BUT,*” says Francis, “*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. 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.*”

Here in New York, the Safe Environment Program has always recognized that the real force for change is all of you. The ones who are with the kids every day. The ones who went to trainings when they would rather be elsewhere. The ones who so fervently wish none of this was necessary. The ones who actually, manually, made our churches and schools and programs safer for everyone. The ones who, just like Pope Francis, “Get it!”

It has been a challenge that we have confronted together, and now we need to do it again, not only for ourselves as we are hardly immune to the vagaries of the internet, but especially for our kids.

“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: We encounter extremely troubling things on the net.”

Our Pope goes on to exhort those in attendance to act. He fully realizes that no one person can do all that needs to be done, but gratefully acknowledges that our combined efforts have the potential to yield a harvest far

greater that we can hope for if only we stay resolved in our efforts to love and respect each and every person. We can make the internet more secure, and we can make our children more safe by “*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.*”

Surely some of these advisements seem entirely outsized to a part-time volunteer or even many professional staffers, but not all. And in these suggestions, all of us can find ways to further fulfill our vocations to ministry with the children in our direct care as well as those we may never even meet but for whom we are called to care for every bit as much.

Here in the Archdiocese, Safe Environment is perceived and implemented as a ministry. Our children AND our very many staff deserve no less. When you have questions, please feel free to call us. We will work with you to come up with new ideas and find answers. We will do everything in our power to update trainings, revise policies, incorporate best practices, and educate not just the Roman Catholics of the Archdiocese, but anyone we can reach. But as grandiose as that may sound, we are humbly aware that without all of you, very little would ever be accomplished.

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All quotes in this article were taken from the Address of His Holiness Pope Francis To the Participants in the Congress on “Child Dignity in the Digital World” given in Clementine Hall (Sala Clementina), Vatican City, 6 October 2017.

The complete transcript for His Holiness’ speech can be found at :

https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco_20171006_congresso-childdignity-digitalworld.html