Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Congress on “Child Dignity In The Digital World”

Your Majesty,

Your Highness,
Distinguished Authorities and Religious Leaders,
Your Eminences, Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank His Highness Sheikh Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Father Federico Lombardi for their kind words of greeting and introduction to this meeting.

The issues that you will be addressing in these days are of immense importance. Many of you have been dealing with these issues with determination and farsightedness for some time. When, two years ago, I received the participants in the Congress on “Child Dignity in the Digital World”, I urged you to join forces in order to address more effectively the protection of the dignity of children in the digital world. In effect, this complex problem calls for cooperation on the part of all: experts in science and technology, entrepreneurs and economists, legislators, politicians and security agents, educators and psychologists, and, not least, religious and moral leaders (cf. *Address to the Participants in the Congress on “Child Dignity in the Digital World”*, 6 October 2017). I am pleased to know that you have continued on this path, along with new initiatives, including particularly the interreligious conference held in Abu Dhabi a year ago, taken up by our meeting today.

In recent decades, from painful and tragic experience, the Catholic Church has become profoundly aware of the gravity and effects of the sexual abuse of minors, the suffering it causes, and the urgent need to heal wounds, combat such crimes and establish effective means of prevention. For this reason, the Church senses the duty to approach these issues with a long-term vision.

We are in fact confronting critical challenges that threaten the future of the human family due to the astonishing development of technology in the information and communications media. Doubtless, the development of new technologies in the digital world provides great opportunities for minors, for their education and for their personal growth. It allows for a wider sharing of knowledge, promotes economic development and offers new possibilities in a number of areas, including that of health care. New technologies open up new horizons, particularly for those minors living in situations of poverty and distant from the urban centres of more industrialized countries.

The challenge before us, then, is to ensure that minors have safe access to these technologies, while at the same time ensuring their healthy and serene development and protecting them from unacceptable criminal violence or grave harm to the integrity of their body and spirit.

Tragically, the use of digital technology to organize, commission and engage in child abuse at a distance, cutting across national borders, is outstripping the efforts and resources of the institutions and security agencies charged with combating such abuse; as a result, it becomes quite difficult to fight these horrific crimes effectively. The spread of images of abuse or the exploitation of minors is increasing exponentially, involving ever more serious and violent forms of abuse and ever younger children.

The dramatic growth of pornography in the digital world is, in itself, most serious, the fruit of a general loss of the sense of human dignity; frequently it is linked to human trafficking. What makes this phenomenon even more disturbing is the fact that this material is widely accessible even to minors via the internet, especially through mobile devices. The majority of scientific studies have highlighted the profound impact of pornography on the thinking and behaviour of children. It will surely have lifelong effects on them, in the form of grave addiction, violent behaviour and deeply troubled emotional and sexual relationships.

A greater awareness of the enormity and gravity of these phenomena is urgently required. Indeed, one feature of today’s technological development is that it is always one step ahead of us, for frequently we first see its most attractive and positive aspects (which indeed are many), but only realize their negative effects once they are widespread and very hard to remedy. I would say this to you, who are scholars and researchers: you find yourselves before an essential challenge! Since these problems are vast and complex, a clear understanding of their nature and extent is needed. We cannot deceive ourselves into thinking that we can address these issues on the basis of shallow and superficial knowledge. Laying the foundations for greater protection of the dignity of minors should be one of the most noble aims of your scientific research.

The role of the communications media is no less important. There is a need to increase throughout society an awareness of the risks inherent in an unchecked development of technology. We have not yet understood – and often do not want to understand – the gravity of this issue in its totality and future consequences. This cannot come about without close cooperation with the media, that is, with you, communications workers, for you have the ability to influence society and public opinion.

You have rightly chosen as the theme of this meeting: “From Concept to Action”. Indeed, it is not enough to understand; we must act. The moral condemnation of the harm inflicted on minors through the misuse of new digital technologies needs urgently to be translated into concrete initiatives. The longer we wait, the more entrenched and insurmountable this evil becomes. This concern has been raised by those who – like many of you – have generously dedicated their lives to this battle in direct contact with this crime and its victims, whether as educators, law enforcement and security agents, and many others.

A crucial aspect of the problem concerns the tension – which ultimately becomes a conflict – between the idea of the digital world as a realm of unlimited freedom of expression and communication, and the need for a responsible use of technologies and consequently a recognition of their limits.

The protection of complete freedom of expression is linked to the protection of privacy through increasingly sophisticated forms of message encryption, which would make any control extremely difficult, if not impossible. A fitting balance must be found between the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression and the interests of society, so as to ensure that digital media are not used to perpetrate criminal activities against minors. For the sake of advancing the development of the internet and its many benefits, companies that provide services have long considered themselves mere suppliers of technological platforms, neither legally nor morally responsible for the way they are used. The potential of digital technology is enormous, yet the possible negative impact of its abuse in the area of human trafficking, the planning of terrorist activities, the spread of hatred and extremism, the manipulation of information and – we must emphasize – in the area of child abuse, is equally significant. Public opinion and lawmakers are finally coming to realize this. How can we help them take suitable measures to prevent abuse? Allow me to emphasize two things.

First. Freedom and the protection of privacy are valuable goods that need to be balanced with the common good of society. Authorities must be able to act effectively, using appropriate legislative and executive measures that fully respect the rule of law and due process, in order to counter criminal activities that harm the life and dignity of minors.

Second. Large companies are key players in the astonishing development of the digital world; they easily cut across national borders, are at the cutting edge of technological advances, and have accumulated enormous profits. It is now clear that they cannot consider themselves completely

unaccountable vis-à-vis the services they provide for their customers. So I make an urgent appeal to them to assume their responsibility towards minors, their integrity and their future. It will not be possible to guarantee the safety of minors in the digital world without the full involvement of companies in this sector and without a full awareness of the moral and social repercussions of their management and functioning. Such companies are bound not only to respect the law, but also to be concerned with the direction taken by the technological and social developments which they produce and promote, since such developments are far ahead of the laws that would seek to regulate them.

Although these challenges are difficult to meet, there are a number of areas of action. I will limit myself to a few examples.

Initiatives such as the “Safety by Design” legislation sponsored by a Commission of the Australian government are valuable because they ensure that the digital industry is proactive and consistent in its approach to customer safety starting from the development of online products and services. In this way, responsibility for overall safety is explicitly acknowledged to be incumbent upon not only the consumer, but also on those who manufacture, develop and supply such products and services.

In some countries too, legislators are committed to ensuring that companies providing internet navigation on mobile devices are obliged to verify the age of their customers, in order to prevent minors from accessing pornographic sites. This is to be encouraged. Indeed, minors today for the most part use cell phones, and the filters used for PCs have remained ineffective. Reliable studies tell us that the average age of first access to pornography is currently eleven, and tends to keep lowering. This is in no way acceptable.

While parents are primarily responsible for raising their children, it must be acknowledged that, for all their good will, it is increasingly difficult for them to control their children’s use of electronic devices. Therefore, the industry must cooperate with parents in their educational responsibilities. Consequently, the identification of a user’s age should not be considered a violation of the right to privacy, but an essential requirement for the effective protection of minors.

The possibilities offered by technology are constantly growing. Today there is much talk about the applications of *artificial intelligence*. The identification and elimination of illegal and harmful images from circulation on the net by the use of increasingly refined algorithms, represents a very significant area of research. Scientists and those working in the digital world should continue to promote such research, engaging in a noble competition to combat the wrongful use of newly available technology. I therefore appeal to computer engineers to feel personally responsible for building the future. It is their task to undertake, with our support, an ethical development of algorithms, and in this way, to help create a new ethics for our time.

The development of technology and the digital world involve huge economic interests. The influence that these interests tend to have on the conduct of companies cannot be overlooked. There is a need to ensure that investors and managers remain accountable, so that the good of minors and society is not sacrificed to profit. We have seen how society has grown more sensitive to the areas of environmental care and respect for the dignity of labour. A similar concern for the effective protection of minors and the fight against pornography should become increasingly felt in the finance and the economy of the digital world. The safe and sound growth of our young is a noble goal worth pursuing; it has far greater value than mere economic profit gained at the risk of harming young people.

In a world like ours, where boundaries between countries are continually blurred by the developments in digital technology, our efforts should emerge as a global movement associated with the deepest commitment of the human family and international institutions to protecting the dignity of minors and every human person. This demanding task sets before us new and challenging questions. How can we defend the dignity of persons, including minors, in this digital age, when the life and identity of an individual is inextricably linked to his or her online data, which new forms of power are constantly seeking to possess? How can we formulate shared principles and demands in the globalized digital world? These are challenging questions that call us to cooperate with all those working with patience and intelligence for this goal at the level of international relations and regulations.

Man’s creativity and intelligence are astonishing, but they must be positively directed to the integral good of the person from birth and throughout life. Every educator and every parent is well aware of this, and needs to be helped and supported in this task by the shared commitment born of a new alliance between all institutions and centres of education.

A contribution to this can be made not only by sound ethical reasoning, but also by a religious vision and inspiration, which has universal scope because it places respect for human dignity within the framework of the grandeur and sanctity of God, the Creator and Saviour. In this regard, I am gratified by the presence of a number of distinguished religious leaders who, in a spirit of solidarity and cooperation, have readily taken up the task of addressing these problems. I greet them with great respect and I thank them most heartily. We ought to be as one in the effort to protect minors in the digital world, now and in the future. For in this way, we bear witness to God’s love for each person, beginning with the smallest and the most vulnerable, so as to foster in everyone, in every part of the world and in every religious confession, concern, care and awareness. We must ban from the face of the earth violence and every form of abuse against children. Let us look into their eyes: they are your sons and daughters; we must love them as God’s masterpieces and children. They have the right to a good life. We have the duty to do everything possible to ensure that right. Thank you.

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