

# Child Dignity in the Digital World

Welcoming remarks by Hans Zollner SJ

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Draft

Dear friends and colleagues!

If you ever wondered what a very happy and truly excited German Jesuit psychologist looks like,  
this is it!

Finally, we are all in the same room.

The vision was to bring together some of the most qualified people on the planet  
from academia,  
from governments,  
from organizations and companies,  
from churches and religions.

In the steering committee, we looked for those who can both contribute and listen,  
those who have both knowledge and passion,  
who are experts in their own fields yet interested in seeing the whole picture.

And you all came!

The meetings with the steering committee were not only productive; they were also  
a joy.

It was a privilege to work with very dedicated, creative and determined people:

Baroness Joanna Shields

Professor Ernesto Caffo

Dr Ernie Allen

Ms Maud de Boer-Buquicchio

Dr Thomas Gauly and

Fr Federico Lombardi

We have been helped greatly by many who are here, and I'd like to mention at least Dr. Monica Fucci and the members of our Congress secretariat and CCP team.

A united effort made this unique and diverse event possible.

I want to especially welcome anyone who might feel a bit out of place meeting in a Catholic environment.

I am grateful we can gather -

across beliefs and borders -

over disciplines and despite diversity

drawn together by one of the most powerful principles human beings hold in common:

The dignity of the child.

Without cherishing this value,

the human race would already be extinct.

This is a biological fact!

All of us here, we needed intense care and affection for years.

Your mother, your father, your older sister, your grandmother.

We had to turn our eyes towards someone hoping they would help us survive.

Someone was around who whispered words of affection into our tiny ears.

In infancy, we have no choice but to trust and seek attachment,

and no one emerges from this phase without some wounds.

While most of us get hurt in a way that ultimately helps us grow up,

some are truly disabled, deeply wounded, even mutilated, by the people they have trusted most.

In this room of experts, there are also memories of victims we have met and stories we have heard.

- The 17-year-old whose boyfriend persuades her to film themselves while having sex; later on, after she decides to end the relationship, he takes

revenge and posts the video online; the girl is so ashamed when her family and friends find out that she commits suicide;

- The fourteen-year-old persuaded to send nude images of herself to the boy she has a crush on, only to find out later that her classmates have seen them.
- The infant being raped in the Philippines because pedophiles in Britain or Denmark have ordered and paid for it on the darknet or in the pedophile rings that are quite numerous and include all kinds of people.
- The 10-year-old boy who encounters extreme pornography online, content that frightens him, that he doesn't understand, and that may affect how he views life, love and other human beings forever.
- The sexually abused and photographed 7-year-old who will have to grow up knowing that these photos of her abuse will stay on the Internet forever.

How can we stop these terror attacks on the heart of the child?

Let us try to give our best answer to this question right now.

All of us have spent many years thinking about this and working to the best of our capacities so that children may be safer.

But probably most of us have been very focused on our immediate fields, constrained by the need to publish and to get funds – and with very little time to look around, connect with others, also those beyond our specializations, and to work on joint projects.

So we are here first to listen, then to talk to each other and, finally, to come up with proposals for feasible steps and, maybe, more than that.

All of us have much to say about this topic, from different perspectives.

Many have shared their desire to present on their research or offered to show their films or other projects.

By Thursday we will have learnt about more examples, more projects, more initiatives, more research.

The one conviction I have today,  
and that I am quite sure will remain intact,  
is that there is not one single medicine that will fix it all.

There is not one line or one institution or one approach that can solve the problem. Instead it is a combination of threads that weave this safety net.

- A culture that promotes the dignity of the child and the integrity of the body of the child.
- Those who care for victims, giving space and time to talk, cry or scream.
- The screening of potential perpetrators who seek contact with children in schools, sports, church, orphanages.
- The filters and algorithms of the internet providers.
- The services that offer children who feel insecure someone safe to talk to.
- The legal frameworks that strike the right balance between protection and personal integrity.
- Law enforcement that has many tools, but also needs more trained personnel.
- The journalists bringing public attention to a topic that many – e.g. literally all parents of children whom I know – talk about, but nobody seems to know what to do about it, in the small and in the big decisions.

I deeply believe we each need each other to move forward.

Certainly, the Church I belong to has needed and continues to need the outside world, secular experts, the media, and the general public --an engagement which pushes us forward!

It is this experience that has brought about the CCP, the Centre for Child Protection of this University, a centre established almost six years ago in collaboration with a German university clinic for youth psychiatry and with the Archdiocese of Munich. Already then a quite unusual combination, successfully working together in educating safeguarding personnel worldwide. With e-learning courses, research in unexplored areas and an interdisciplinary residential formation programme we contribute to the formation of a new generation of personnel in academic, educational, social, and spiritual responsibilities on all continents. Safeguarding is our commitment – and we want to partner with others, because the stakes are too high to have only 'one player in the field.

And I also hear this echo from governments,  
from the sports industry, from the educational system, from Internet providers.  
That the problem is too big.  
Someone needs to fix it.  
“If only *they* would.”

By Thursday,  
I hope we will have the elements for a detailed action plan that will creatively engage  
all the ideas in the declaration we present to the pope.

One element will certainly be that we will promote research around this issue, and so  
we will present a call for papers at the end of the conference.

We will have collected the best possible ideas for further research and for further  
funding.

And then we will be able to approach foundations, sponsors and governments and  
say:

“This is not just my opinion.

This is not just my project.

This is the state of the art knowhow collected by the best brains and warmest hearts  
in this field,

In the whole world.”

Dear friends and colleagues,

If not us, then who?

So let us rise to the challenge these coming days.

One of the great things about seeing each other face to face, about sitting in one  
room, spending time in listening, in discussing is that  
it is easier to be both blunt and kind.

We can ask each other the tough questions,  
and still see the kindness in one another’s eyes.

I certainly hope that we challenge each other,  
in the sessions, in the afternoon working groups and during breaks and social  
activities.

And as we think of these children whose stories live in our hearts,  
the reason we travelled here,  
the reason we go to work in the morning -  
we are in a space dedicated to a God  
who chose to come into this world  
as the most vulnerable of children – incarnation and representation of the dignity of  
children.

Thank you, all of you,  
for being here and for following us live on the screens.