

Respecting and protecting the dignity of children: a priority for the Society of Jesus

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In our most recent General Congregation 36, held a year ago here in Rome, the General Congregation, the supreme governing body of the Society of Jesus, instructed me, as Superior General “to continue. . . to promote, within the communities and ministries of the Society, a consistent culture of protection and safety for minors.” (*Matters Entrusted to Fr. General*, GC 36). The text is brief, but it is very significant. It is the expression of the Jesuit commitment to respecting and protecting the dignity of children.

This commitment is not new. It has its roots in St. Ignatius himself. In the formula for the profession of final vows in the Society, after the Jesuit promises “perpetual poverty, chastity and obedience,” he then vows “*special care for the instruction of children.*” (*Constitutions*, 527). No other ministry—for example, teaching, preaching, giving the Spiritual Exercises, serving the poor—is mentioned in the formula; only “the instruction of children.” In the next number in the *Constitutions*, St. Ignatius explains why this phrase is included in the vow formula, giving two reasons.

The first reason has to do with St. Ignatius’ recognition of the precious dignity of children. He writes: “the promise about the children is placed in the vow . . . because of the outstanding service which is given through it to God our Lord *by aiding souls which belong to him.*” This is an amazing phrase. For St. Ignatius, children are “souls which belong to God.” In other words, for St. Ignatius, children, who are often regarded as the most marginal and insignificant of human beings, both in the sixteenth century as in ours, are, in fact, God’s treasured possessions who merit respect and service. Pope Francis expresses the same conviction when he writes: “A child is a human being of *immense worth* and may never be used for one’s own benefit.” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 170). Of course, we know that both St. Ignatius and Pope Francis learnt this attitude from Jesus himself, who graciously welcomed children and became “indignant” when the disciples tried to keep them away from him, in their mistaken belief that children were unimportant and unworthy of the Lord’s attention. (cf. Mk. 10: 13-16).

The second reason St. Ignatius gives is very realistic. He recognizes that it is very easy to forget and neglect care for children. He writes: “the promise about the children is placed in the vow . . . because it *is in greater danger of being allowed to fall into oblivion and dropped* than other more conspicuous services . . .” (*Constitutions*, 528). In other words, the promise reflects St. Ignatius’ concern that the Society not forget those who are most easily forgotten because of their apparent unimportance to the rest of human society.

In our time, we are called in a particularly urgent way to recover and strengthen St. Ignatius’ foundational attitudes of respecting and protecting the dignity of children. We live in a world where the dignity of children is forgotten and violated. Children are victims of poverty, war, trafficking, forced displacement, terrorism; children are forced to serve as soldiers, child laborers, sex-workers, drug mules. We in the Church cannot escape our share of responsibility for grave disrespect for the dignity of children, as we confront the painful reality of sexual abuse of children perpetrated by priests, religious, and other pastoral ministers.

The Society of Jesus seeks today to deepen and strengthen its practical and effective commitment to the protection of children. My predecessor, Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, asked all provinces, communities and ministries to ensure the existence of three essential elements for safeguarding children. First, good, just and compassionate protocols for handling allegations of abuse of minors. Second, guidelines and

policies for ethical pastoral conduct, which aim at promoting, among both Jesuits and our partners in mission, respect for boundaries and clear accountability. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, ongoing training and formation programs to ensure that the protocols and policies do not remain unread documents, but are appropriated and practiced. All these aim at creating a “consistent **culture** of protection and safety for minors” (GC 36): a culture, that is to say, a normal, habitual way of living, relating, working, serving in which those whom we serve, particularly children, always feel respected, safe, and loved.

As you know, any safeguarding program must undergo constant renewal to ensure its adequacy. That is why I am particularly grateful to the Center for Child Protection of the Gregorian University for organizing this congress. The digital world is one of the great emerging realities of our time. The Internet and social media have changed the way human beings think, react, communicate and interact. This is not just a question of technology, but of a new world in which people live. This digital ecosystem has made possible the spread of information and the globalization of solidarity; but it has also given rise to greater divisions, the spread of viral hatred and fake news. The dark corners of the internet are also places where children are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

As you confront and analyze the realities of child abuse in the digital world and as you study more effective means of ensuring the safety of children, I request that you help us, the Society of Jesus, the Church, and society at large. We all have much to learn from this Congress. I pray that all the presentations and discussions of these coming days open our minds and hearts and result in real changes in our institutions and communities. The children of our world deserve the respect and the best protection we can give them.

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