

**Child Dignity in the Digital World**  
**World Congress**  
**October 3-6, 2017**  
**Words of H.E. Card. Pietro Parolin,**  
**Secretary of State**

Dear President of the Senate,  
Your Eminences, Excellencies,  
Dear Father General, Ambassadors, Father Rector, Academic Authorities  
and Professors,  
Dear Friends,

I thank you for inviting me to speak at the opening of this important Congress, thus allowing me to convey the greetings and appreciation of His Holiness Pope Francis and of the Holy See for this initiative. It is an event that is hosted and organized, along with other laudable events, by a prestigious Pontifical University. I greet the distinguished persons and institutions who are participating in this initiative, and I express my gratitude to all those who have contributed concretely to the organization and planning of this Congress.

Above all, I wish to express my appreciation for having chosen the topic that will be discussed: *the dignity of the child in the digital world*.

The majority of you, who have worked for a long time in this field, are well aware that the sexual abuse of minors constitutes a vast and widespread phenomenon. Over the past few decades, this tragic reality has come powerfully to the fore in the Catholic Church and extremely grave facts have emerged. The Church has become increasingly aware of the harm experienced by the victims, of their suffering and of the need to listen to them, in order to work on various fronts; these include: a wide range of

interventions which must be carried out in order to heal wounds, restore justice, prevent crimes and form educators and persons who deal with minors, with a view to spreading and consolidating a new culture of child protection – a real *safeguarding* – that effectively guarantees they can grow up in a healthy and safe environment. This is a task requiring deep human care, competence and tenacity; experience tells us that where this commitment is consistent and continuous, the fruits that will come of it are positive and encouraging. The Church's effort in this sense, even when society in general has not yet developed the necessary awareness, must continue, must be expanded and deepened, with clarity and firmness, so that the dignity and rights of minors may be protected and defended with much greater attentiveness and effectiveness than was done in the past. In this venue, we want to share the experience we have acquired, so that it may prove useful for an ever greater good, thanks to collaboration with all of you.

The world into which human persons are today born and raised is characterized, ever more deeply and pervasively, by the development and ubiquity of new communications technologies and new instruments for their use. Handheld phones and tablets and other devices have come to be part of the daily life of an ever greater number of people; these users are ever younger, so much so that we can speak of the young generations as “digital natives.” This has spread to every part of the world, reaching even areas where economic and social development are as yet inadequate and uneven. The phenomenon is now global and so we speak of a “digital world.”

We now realize that, supported by ever greater evidence, the scourge of offenses against the dignity of minors, as with so many other dramatic

problems in today's world, spreads through and aligns itself within the new parameters of the digital world. This plague meanders and infiltrates along a labyrinth of paths and through deep, hidden layers of reality. The digital world is not, in fact, a separate part of the world: it is an integral part of the unique reality of the world. Minors who grow up in it are exposed to new risks, or rather, to old risks manifested in new ways; and the culture of the protection of minors that we want to spread must be sufficiently able to address today's problems.

Looking at our contemporary world, Pope Francis continually reminds us that the forms of abuse and violence against minors proliferate in an interwoven manner: the traffic of minors and of human persons generally, the phenomenon of child soldiers, the absence of even the most elementary education, the fact that small children are the first victims of hunger and extreme poverty. On the day dedicated by the Church to the memory of the Holy Innocents, Pope Francis wrote: "We need the courage to respond to this reality, to arise and take it firmly in hand (cf. *Mt 2:20*)... [We need] the courage to guard this joy from the new Herods of our time, who devour the innocence of our children. An innocence stolen from them by the oppression of illegal slave labour, prostitution and exploitation. An innocence shattered by wars and forced migration, with the great loss that this entails. Thousands of our children have fallen into the hands of gangs, criminal organizations and merchants of death, who only devour and exploit their neediness" (*Letter to Bishops*, 28 December 2016). In all these situations, the horrendous reality of sexual abuse is nearly always present, as a common aspect and consequence of multifaceted and widespread violence that ignores all respect, not only for the body, but more so for the soul, for the profound vulnerability and dignity of every child, of every young boy and girl of whatever nation.

And so we recognize the challenges, but realize too that even though we have learned a great deal with respect to this phenomenon, it remains important to understand it ever better, and, more than anything, to continue to make our understanding of the phenomenon accessible to all those who promote the protection of the rights of minors. Only in this way can we effectively fight the battle to protect minors in our digitalized world. The phenomena we observe reach levels of shocking gravity; their dimensions and the speed with which they spread surpass our imagination.

Here then is the second reason for my appreciation of the method employed by this Congress: calling together representatives from the various fields of scientific research as well as those who are actively committed to the protection of minors; representatives of leading companies in technological development and communications characteristic of the digital world; those responsible for the common good of human society; legislators, politicians, and law enforcement agencies called upon to combat crimes and abuses; religious leaders and leaders of civil society organizations committed to working for minors.

Like some of the other speakers, I too want to insist on a distinguishing characteristic of this assembly, one that makes it new and even unique, namely: establishing a dialogue between the many competent and meritorious people who have made their own the cause of defending the dignity of minors in the digital world. They are doing this by channelling their energies towards a shared commitment in order to overcome the sense of disorientation and powerlessness when faced with such a markedly difficult challenge, and to help us to intervene creatively. Once this basic strategic territory has been identified, we must work to regain control of the development of the digital world, so that it may be at

the service of the dignity of minors, and thus of the whole human race of tomorrow. For the minors of today *are* the entirety of tomorrow's human race.

Following the research and understanding of these problems there must come a commitment and a far-seeing, courageous endeavour on the part of all of us here present; there must also be an appeal for the cooperation of every person in a position of responsibility, in the various countries and sectors of society.

Perhaps I may be permitted to offer some further reflections, which I propose for your consideration.

The demographic development of humanity is particularly rapid in many countries where economic and social progress is still lacking or uneven. Hundreds of millions of children and young people are growing up in a digital world within a context that is still largely undeveloped. Their parents and teachers may not, perhaps, be culturally equipped to accompany them and help them to grow up in this world, whereas their political leaders will often not know where to begin in order to protect them.

We have a responsibility to these children too, as do the companies that promote and drive the development of the digital world. *With its international, global and interdisciplinary perspective, this Congress must take responsibility for those minors at the world's "peripheries", of which Pope Francis continually speaks: peripheries that are in geographic areas of greater economic poverty, but that are also found within wealthy societies where there is considerable human and spiritual poverty, loneliness and a loss of the meaning of life. It is not by chance that it is minors in all these*

peripheries who are the preferred target of networks of exploitation and of organized online violence on a global scale.

Both in society and in the Church, there has always been insistence on the primary responsibility of the family and of the school in guaranteeing minors a sound education so essential to the protection and promotion of their dignity. This still very much applies today and every effort must be made so that parents and educators may be increasingly able to undertake their duties, even in the face of risks and challenges from the digital world. There is, however, no doubt that in the modern context their ability to influence the formation of young generations is proportionately far less than in the past, and is often frustrated and overtaken by the continual wave of messages and images that come to even the smallest children through countless open avenues provided by the new media. For this reason too, responsibility towards young generations must be shared fully by all the sectors of society that you represent.

Finally, we find ourselves hosted here by an institution which depends on the Catholic Church and which is thus particularly attentive to the *moral and religious dimensions of the life and development of the human person*. I hope that your work may be able also to integrate these perspectives into the shared work of reflection and commitment, and that from them you may draw vigour, inspiration and motivation.

For the rest, all of us surely agree on what is affirmed in the second principle of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child, namely, that every child should have the means “to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity”. Moreover, as John Paul II affirmed in 1990, on the occasion of the World Summit for Children, we stress “the

need to do much more to safeguard the well-being of the world's children, to enunciate the rights of the child and to protect those rights through cultural and legislative actions imbued with respect for human life as a value in itself, independently of sex, ethnic origin, social or cultural status, or political or religious conviction" (*Letter to J. Pérez de Cuellar, 22 September 1990. The Holy See adhered to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990*).

The minors of whom we speak and whose dignity we wish to defend and promote are human persons, and the value of each of them is unique and unrepeatable. Each of them must be taken seriously and protected in this ever more digitalized world, so that they may be able to fulfil the purpose of their life, their destiny, their coming into the world. The destiny and the life of each of them is supremely important, precious in the sight of human beings and in the sight of God. According to Scripture, every human being is created "in the image and likeness" of God. According to the New Testament, the Son of God came among us as a vulnerable child, and in needy circumstances, assuming both the fragility and the hope for a future that are intrinsic to an infant. To disparage infancy and to abuse children is for the Christian, therefore, not only a crime, but also – as Pope Francis has stated – sacrilege, a profanation of that which is sacred, of the presence of God in every human being.

The forces that drive the technical and economic development of the world seem unstoppable and, as we know, are perhaps often determined and driven by economic and even very powerful political interests, which we must not allow ourselves to be dominated by. The power of sexual desire that dwells in the depth of the human mind and heart is great and wonderful when it advances the path of humanity; but it can also be

corrupted and perverted, to become a source of suffering and unspeakable abuse: and so it must be elevated and directed. The sense of moral responsibility in the sight of humanity and in the sight of God, the reflection on the correct use of freedom in the building and orientation of a new world and in learning how to live in it, are thus absolutely necessary and fundamental for our common future.

You have come together here to address one of today's most important and urgent issues for the journey of humanity. I hope that the living sense of the beauty and the mystery of human persons, of the greatness of their vocation to life, and thus of the duty to protect them in their dignity and their growth, may inspire your work and bear concrete and effective fruit.