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Centre for Child Protection



Child Dignity
in the Digital World

World Congress
October 3-6, 2017

Fr. Hans Zollner - Interview by Rome Reports about the Congress "Child Dignity in the Digital World"

(To be published on 31.May as Commentary to the Communiqué of the Congress)

QUESTION: *How was the idea of this Congress born?*

ANSWER: First of all, we need to realize that the internet is a very precious instrument for communication, for connecting people; but the internet has brought also many, many risks, and one of the major risks is the abuse of minors on the internet by the dissemination of sexual images and videos, and the use and abuse of this instrument in social media also by young people themselves.

So one of the growing phenomena that we realize, and that has nowadays reached a really terrible number, is what is called "sexting," so that young people take images of themselves, either naked, or in sexual action, and then they post it on Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms. So once this is out there, these images are downloadable, and people can save them on their gadgets, so on their computers or smartphones or tablets.

So you're never sure when such an image will appear, and where will it appear, and who is looking at it. So many victims of this kind of abuse are terribly frightened, and are unsure how to deal with this because they don't know what has happened to the image, and who will use it. So this is sexting.

Then "sextortion" is something that is connected with a sort of taking revenge or trying to get money out of people who have posted or have taken sexual images of themselves, or have allowed them to be taken. Now, you have a growing number not only of the images that are posted but also a major problem is that those who posted, or the images of those who are posted, are younger and younger in age.

Many people say we don't know about the effect of the internet and don't be too critical about it, and it helps also that people grow more sexually mature, and so on...; but from all that we know from science and from psychology and from sociology, , the younger people are, and the more they are flooded by this kind of images, or the more they are also victims of images of themselves that are posted, the more they will be disturbed as they grow up.

A major problem is certainly also that you have exploitation, sex exploitation, and trafficking through the internet. So you can buy, in one part of the world, images and film of the rape of young children and even babies that is taking place another part of the world. Unfortunately this is increasing with lots of these kinds of crimes being committed. Many people are shocked about it and very few people have any idea of what can be done so that we can avoid this kind of abuse.

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And that's why we at the Pontifical Gregorian University and our Centre for Child Protection, have thought of inviting experts from different sectors, from internet companies to software providers, especially from social media companies, like Facebook and Twitter and so forth; the law enforcement that tries to prevent that kind of abuse and tries to punish those who disseminate these images; the world of science, psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists who have been working in this field for many years and who have been researching the consequences of people who have been abused, and the profile of online abusers—and in the end, people who can bring this together in a way of engaging NGOs and the Church, working together so that we can discuss and possibly work out what can be the means and measures so that young people are protected online as well as in families, in schools, in public, in whatever sports organization, and whatever church activities. Whatever young people are involved in, we need to work together so they are safe, also online.

Q: This problem sometimes is part of the family, and also the schools. But they need support...

A: Now there are several initiatives, there are many ideas, there are some programs that seem to work, face-to-face programs, educational programs. There are online programs; there are internet filters. The problem is that all this has to converge, because one initiative in itself may not bring about the changes that are necessary so that young people, in the face of all the threats that we see them exposed to, can be really safe and can grow up in an environment that protects their integrity and their identity. So in schools we need to develop educational programs about the appropriate use of internet. This is not about condemning the internet as a whole—no, certainly!—but to find out where are the limits, for example, of what is privacy and what is a violation of privacy, and the right of integrity of a person. So there is a whole discourse, a whole debate, on where are the limits, and how do we define legally, the limits of my personal free expression, and where does this free expression violate the rights of other people.

For example. We know that in the UK, some years ago, there were pedophile journals, printed journals, that were circulated, and they would have maybe ten thousand copies a year or so. Nowadays the same journal has an internet website, and you have 200,000 clicks a month on that website. Some people will be there just because they are curious. But you see that the internet has also a very high risk factor for abusive behaviour and addictive behaviour. So we see that many areas, from psychology, from society at large, from education, need to come together so that people are helped so that they use this valuable instrument we call the internet in the best way possible, and that they do not harm themselves and do not harm others.

Q: Who are the partners of this Congress?

A: The Centre for Child Protection of the Pontifical Gregorian University is glad that we can work together with an initiative led by the UK government, called "We Protect". For a few years they have brought together government representatives, ministers for internet security. And we are glad that Baroness Joanna Shields, the internet minister of the UK government, forms part of our steering committee for this Congress, which is called "Child Dignity in the Digital World." She brings her own expertise, her own competence, because she has worked, before she went into politics, in internet companies. She has founded We Protect, and we are glad that we can have also this input from the



Child Dignity in the Digital World

World Congress
October 3-6, 2017

government side, which includes about 40-45 governments at the moment. We also work with Telefono Azzuro, which is an Italian NGO, a help line that was established 30 years ago by Professor Ernesto Caffo, the president and founder of this organisation that helps young people in difficulties by offering a free helpline where they can phone and they can talk about their needs.

We are working together with a number of other initiatives, and NGOs; we have invited partners, representatives from law enforcement, from NGOs, from governments, from the Church. We have the support of the Holy See, from those who are involved directly or indirectly with our work at the Centre for Child Protection. And we are happy that we can offer a platform where people come together so that they discuss what each and every one can contribute, so that we develop a plan that is not there at the moment, but we can focus and channel initiatives that have been out there for many years, by different partners and different sectors, but that need to be brought together; and we hope that we can offer this also through one special moment during the Congress that will be called a forum, where we give the opportunity to NGOs that have been working for many years in this field, to explain what they have done, and what they intend to do in the future, so that young people are safer.

Q: Is this a Congress only for experts?

A: It is a Congress that is meant to bring together people who are experts in their different fields; but we will also have, for example, the participation of young people, who will give their input, how they live the digital world: what they see as the threats, and the challenges, and the possibilities of the internet. So these digital natives, the millennials, whatever you call them, they will be present, and they will voice their concerns, or they will tell us, "Don't look there, because this is... you can't cope with that, but look here, this is where you should get involved". So we will also have that kind of input.

Q: Will Pope Francis participate in this Congress?

A: We asked Pope Francis to participate, or better that we be received by him in an audience at the end of the Congress, and without any further ado, he said he was willing to do so. And now on 6th of October, at the end of the Congress, an audience is scheduled. On this occasion a Declaration will be presented to him. It will be a "Declaration on Child Dignity in the Digital World" on behalf of all the participants and all the different players that will be present at the Congress, what they intend to do so that we protect young people better now and in the future.

Q: So this is not an idea of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors named by Pope Francis?

A: No, this is an initiative of the Centre for Child Protection of the Pontifical Gregorian University. Of course we have invited some members of the Commission, who are also members of our scientific advisory board of the Centre for Child Protection. So there is some overlap, but the initiative is on the side of the CCP, the Centre for Child Protection, because we are working with different kinds of partners for five and a half years - since the Centre was established - in promoting education for church leaders, for church personnel, and beyond the Church, those who work with young people.



Child Dignity in the Digital World

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At the moment we have about 30 partner countries; and about 50 partner institutions, among them universities, seminaries, faculties, formation centres for initial and ongoing formation in different professional capacities—so in the field of psychology, education, theology, philosophy, etc.; people who are involved in work with young people.

And we realize that face-to-face interaction is necessary, and the education of people in how you detect that a young person has possibly been sexually abused, how you address that with the person, the victim; how you deal with perpetrators, and what you can do to create safe space. But this space, now, also has to be the space in which many young people, and many people in the world—in fact, all of us, to some extent—live now: this is the virtual world, the world that is offered through and by the internet. So there needs to be more attention to the safety and to the proper use of the internet so that young people can grow up in safety. And the Church that has had to deal with issues of sexual abuse of minors over last 30-40 years has taken it very seriously. We have started many initiatives in different countries and we are really trying to take up our responsibility in this field. And one of these initiatives is the Centre for Child Protection, that has now developed into a major player at least in the dialogue with other institutions that work for the same goal: that is, safety for young people.

Q: Have you already thought about the possible solutions, and do you think that with this Congress you will find solutions to the problem?

A: Now you have different kinds of solutions, in different levels, so to say. One level is a technical, technological level, so that you try to develop programs that impede the abuse of young peoples' images or videos. There is much that is on the way and that has been developed. It is not as effective as it should be, and the internet providers know that. That's not their fault, in the first place, because young people are very smart in dealing with this and going around filters.

Another level is that you address issues of education with families, with parents. What do you do, how do you talk about sexuality with your children, how are teachers formed, and informed, about what could they do about helping young people so that they don't sell their souls and sell their bodies; so that they do the best possible so that they are not harmed and they don't harm others.

And then there's the government level that needs to establish, probably, supranational law systems that don't exist at the moment, at least they are not as effective as they should be. Yes, Interpol works together with different nations, the United Nations has certainly means and measures to appeal to nations to work together so that young people are protected. But we need more efficient means and measures and that includes also law enforcement. Will there be immediate outcomes to this Congress? One of the effects will be that people will become more aware of this issue, and that it is talked about. So awareness will rise, sensitivity about this will rise, considerably we think, because the major events will also be broadcast live, and will be streamed online: the inauguration, the forum and the papal audience. But certainly we hope that there will be a long-range effect in terms of scientific work that will be done and is necessary. There will be more coherent and cohesive collaboration between the key players in the field. And we hope that families, and schools, and all those who work with young people, in their development, in their growth, will be more aware that action is needed, and proper education is key to that.