

FAITH VATICAN DISPATCH

How can we protect children from abuse online? A congress in Rome will seek solutions

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A pioneering international congress on the risks and challenges to children in the digital world and how to protect them from online sexual abuse will be hosted by the Jesuit-run Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, from Oct. 3 to 6.

"Child Dignity in the Digital World" is the first congress of its kind and "opens a whole new scenario," said Hans Zollner, S.J., the president of the child protection center at the Gregorian, at a press briefing in the Vatican.

Today children make up over a quarter of the 3.2 billion internet users worldwide. This generation of over 800 million young users is vulnerable to new forms of harm and abuse, including trolling, cyberbullying, sexual extortion, sexting and grooming for sexual exploitation.

"Child Dignity in the Digital World" is the first congress of its kind.

It will open on Oct. 3 with welcome addresses from the Gregorian's new rector, Nuno da Silva Gonçalves, S.J., and the superior general of the Society of Jesus, Father Arturo Sosa Abascal. Keynote addresses will be delivered by the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, and Baroness Joanna Shields, a British-American who served as the United Kingdom's minister for internet and security and is the founder of WePROTECT, UK.

"The congress provides an outstanding opportunity to exchange knowledge and good practice on risks and prevention as children navigate this new digital world," Father Zollner said. It offers a platform for sharing and discussion between all the major entities involved in this field, including top experts from the world of science, international organizations and N.G.O.s, as well as the world of business, law enforcement and religion. "It is a very dangerous zone for children today, and we all have to work together to protect them," he added.

Hosted by the Centre for Child Protection of the Gregorian University, in partnership with WePROTECT Global Alliance, the congress brings together more than 140 internationally recognized representatives from academia, business, politics, civil society and religion.

Professor Ernesto Caffo, the scientific coordinator of the congress, said its aim is "to substantially expand the body of knowledge on these complex issues and generate true global dialogue." In 1987 Mr. Caffo founded Telefono Azzurro, an Italian non-profit organization committed to the prevention of child abuse and neglect, which has become a national reference point for at-risk children and adolescents.

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Facebook's head of global safety, Dr. Antigone Davis, will be one of the more than 30 speakers addressing the conference. She will give a paper on "How the World's Largest Social Media Site Is Confronting These Challenges and How We Can Empower Kids to Recognize and Respond to These Threats."

Representatives of many international organizations, including the United Nations, Unicef and Interpol, will be in attendance. Among them are Maud de Boer-Buquicchio from the Netherlands, the U.N. special rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children as well as president of the European Federation for Missing and Exploited Children, and Dr.

Susan Bissell, the director of the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, who was previously Unicef's child protection section chief.

There are at least 12 speakers from the United States, including many from the health care sector, including Dr. Sharon Cooper, a developmental and forensic pediatrician from the University of North Carolina who has evaluated and treated child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation for more than 40 years. Her talk is entitled: "The Harm to Children in Online Child Sexual Exploitation. Why Children Don't Tell? How Can We Intervene Sooner and More Effectively?" Dr. Elizabeth Letourneau, a professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the director of the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse, will speak on "Preventing Online Offending. What Have We Learned About Clinical Interventions with Youth and Adult Sex Offending Behaviors?"

Apart from listening to the more than 30 formal talks, the 140 participants, who come from all continents, will also join interdisciplinary working groups dedicated to building concrete proposals that can be presented to governments.

The congress will close on Friday, Oct. 6, when its final document will be presented to Pope Francis at a private audience for participants in the Vatican. The pope, who gave his support to the congress from the beginning, will address the congress then.

The entire congress can be followed on YouTube and streaming. More information can be found at www.childdignity2017.org

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