



Statement of H.E. Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, Apostolic Nuncio
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations
and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 54th Regular Session of the Human Rights Council
Panel Discussion on Cyberbullying against children

Geneva, 27 September 2023

Mr. President,

Cyberbullying has emerged as an increasingly serious problem in the digital age and was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, the statistics are particularly unsettling. According to some estimates, one in four children worldwide are victims of cyberbullying. Worse still, in some parts of the world, approximately 50% of the children who receive medical or psychosocial support to deal with this phenomenon report having attempted suicide. In order to combat this growing scourge, in 2018 Pope Francis called for the creation of an International Observatory for Cyberbullying Prevention, so as to contribute to the prevention of cyberbullying through education and sensibilisation, while also providing support for victims.

While bullying is not a new reality, its prevalence and severity have increased online. Cyberbullying destroys relationships and undermines our human interconnectedness, by attacking or diminishing the identity of others. Cyberbullying exploits the capacities of the internet to connect its users but, paradoxically, often reduces human relationships and personal connections to superficial interactions. The result can be damaging and even dangerous to our mental health.

As Pope Francis has said, too often “Bullying is a phenomenon of self-compensation, self-assessment, not of finding myself, but of decreasing the other to feel better.”¹ In order to address this distorted approach to human relationships, it is necessary to be aware that the other person is a valuable member of the one human family, my brother or sister. “Our life becomes more human insofar as its nature becomes less individual and more personal; we see this authentic path of becoming more human in one who moves from being an *individual* who perceives the other as a rival, to a *person* who recognizes others as travelling companions.”² The fight against cyberbullying starts here.

In this regard, the Holy See reiterates the fundamental role of parents and caregivers in protecting children from online risk and of transmitting authentic human values. While States have the responsibility of providing legal and social frameworks that adequately promote the rights of children to be free from discrimination on- and offline, parents are uniquely capable of knowing the intellectual and emotional maturity of their children and providing the necessary support and direction to protect them from harm. This, however, implies that parents and caregivers should be given the necessary tools and formation to be able to recognize the risks associated with new technologies.

¹ Pope Francis, Video Message for the first online bullying conference organized by WeZum, Scholas International Youth Observatory, 21 June 2019

² Pope Francis, Message for the 53rd World Communications Day, 24 January 2019.

That is why, in order to effectively combat cyberbullying, it is necessary to adopt strategies that include education and awareness-raising campaigns aimed at both children and parents.

Mr. President,

While focusing on prevention and accountability, it is also essential to provide support and counselling to victims of cyberbullying. The emotional and psychological toll on children subjected to online harassment can be severe and the Holy See encourages all stakeholders to ensure that adequate resources and services are available to help these children and their families cope with the aftermath of such incidents.

Thank you, Mr. President.