Righteousness and Truth: Framing Dignity of Persons and Digital Discipleship as Religious Educational Forms of Response to Cyberbullying

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Abstract: In the shadows of the current tensions that frames our digital spaces, this paper explores how teaching for the practice of dignity of persons and digital discipleship can be act as an effective religious educational response to cyberbullying. Imploring a theoretical approach with a practical theological analysis drawn out of Catholic church teachings and discourse on the dignity of persons and discipleship, this paper offers an understanding of digital discipleship and dignity of persons specifically formed for responding to attacks on human dignity like that of cyberbullying through the use of the practical pedagogical method of ‘see, judge, and act.’

Keywords: Catholic; cyberbullying; discipleship; dignity of persons; religious education

1. Introduction

Although it has gained widespread attention in the media and some educational communities outside the walls of the Catholic church, it appears that little attention, if any at all, is given to the complex issue of cyberbullying within faith formation programs or religious educational\footnote{As a clarifying note, when referring to religious education (RE), this article is specifically referencing RE as defined as an educational approach for the Christian formation of believers. This article’s referencing of RE, moreover, is rooted in the faith formation models found within the walls of Catholic education and through the lens of American Catholicism.} settings. As a Catholic religious educator, I cannot recall one instance where cyberbullying was part of any catechetical or faith formation leaders’ workshops or in any other formal religious education teacher training. Therefore, when I encountered an incident of cyberbullying that happened between some of the theology students that I was teaching at a Catholic high school, I felt woefully unprepared in knowing how to respond as a religious educator to the cyberbullying that was happening right in front of me. Additionally, although the issue was finally resolved, I could not stop pondering, “Why isn’t cyberbullying treated, or addressed as a religious educational issue?” Religious education is not isolated from the digital world; to outset cyberbullying as not a religious educational would be to do so in error. Truly, when it comes to responding to cyberbullying within and of the religious educational setting, there is lots of work left to do.

Cyberbullying is an attack on the dignity of persons. As such, it is one of the most challenging issues of our digital age. As seen from a Christian perspective, cyberbullying can diminish a person’s ability to recognize and appreciate his/her individual dignity as a person made in the image and called to grow in the likeness of God. Religious educators can help those who have been bullied to renew their sense of themselves as persons with a God-given dignity who are worthy of respect. They can also help the Church recognize and respond to cyberbullying as a form of violence that hinders personal and spiritual development.

In engaging cyberbullying as a religious educational issue, this paper will first explore the dignity of persons as found in the Catholic tradition and how cyberbullying attacks the dignity of persons. It will then build upon this analysis of human dignity in discussing discipleship and how religious educators can educate to form good digital disciples who can...
address pressing social crises like that of cyberbullying as they travel along interconnected digital landscapes. As a means for outlining a practical religious educational approach for responding to cyberbullying, this paper, furthermore, will draw its insights from Vatican II’s Gaudium et Spes as well as from a theological analysis of discipleship. As each will serve as the foundations for a subsequent discourse on digital discipleship in the age of social media and infinite digital frontiers.

2. Cyberbullying

Defining “cyberbullying” is not as easy as it might seem as “to date, a universal definition has not been agreed upon.” To counter this, the ordinary meaning of “bullying” (involving power imbalance, repetition, intention, and aggression) needs “revising/redefining to tailor [its] meaning to the cyber environment” if we are to “develop a satisfactory response to the phenomenon.” That is, to define “cyberbullying” adequately involves more than inserting the act of bullying into the context of the virtual world. Additionally, before delving into the details of cyberbullying, it should be noted that cyberbullying can either happen directly or indirectly. Direct cyberbullying involves aiming “electronic communications directly at the victim;” communication that is within the private sphere rather than being posted openly in a public forum (e.g., text messaging or trolling). In indirect cyberbullying, the electronic communication is posted openly to an online forum (e.g., Twitter posts aimed at specific group or person). It involves sharing ideas with others in an attempt to harm the intended target (Langos 2012, p. 285). Thus, cyberbullying can occur in multiple forms, through multiple venues. In sum, cyberbullying is the act of directly or indirectly harassing, intimidating, or terrorizing another person (Fanek 2006, pp. 39–43) through one, or sometimes more, technological venues (i.e., cellphone, computer, etc.). Additionally, the “purpose of these actions seems to be to spread rumors, secrets, insults, and even death threats” in an attempt to “harass, manipulate, and harm” the chosen victims of cyberbullying. Even though traditional bullying and cyberbullying are similar, the latter differs greatly from the former because it has limitless boundaries (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel 2011, p. 191).

Another unique characteristic of cyberbullying is the lack of an “eyewitness” or “bystander.” In the traditional setting of a schoolyard or boardroom episode of bullying, there is often a witness to the event. Within the realm of cyberbullying, however, there is a lack of an immediate audience to the bully’s virtual harassment (in real time), reducing the likelihood of someone confronting the bully in regard to his or her unacceptable behavior. Without the system of a schoolyard or boardroom “checks and balances,” (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel 2011, p. 191) cyberbullies enjoy free reign to cause great emotional harm as there is no immediate or real-time voice directing them to recognize that their behavior is harmful. Although a cyberbully might encounter immediate direct messages or texts that declares what was said was wrong or harmful to the direct human target, cyberbullies can act and then immediately remove themselves from the encounter. All it takes is a simple click of a button or the closing of a laptop and the cyberbully has removed themselves from the possibilities of seeing the harm that they have caused. Additionally, they can do so with such ease that even those who are sitting beside them remain unaware of the torment committed by the cyberbully sitting next to them.

In addition to anonymity and the lack of “checks and balances,” cyberbullying entertains an “infinite audience” (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel 2011, p. 191). Just a few years ago, a young person who encountered bullying could go home and escape the terror of the bully with the certainty that outside of just a few witnesses, no other persons would know what happened. This is not the case with present day cyberbullying. This change is depicted throughout weekly television shows and films. Just ten years ago when teens and children on popular television shows came home from a hard day at school, the audience would see their embarrassing moments become less and less significant by the end of the day or school week. Today, teens who make mistakes or have embarrassing days that are caught on camera and then showed on social media sites by cyberbullies must live with the harsh
reality that what was caught on camera or shared online will be infinitely shared across a plethora of social media platforms or cellphone screens. Not only is there an infinite audience within cyberspace waiting to “get a laugh” at their expense, but also that once that content is placed in cyberspace for the world to see, there is no stopping it from being captured and shared again and again. Contrary, when one is bullied in physical spaces, unless the incident is recorded and virtually shared, what was said or done to the other person does not go beyond close friends and eyewitnesses. In the digital age, however, the number of people who can interact with or join in on the bullying reaches out far beyond the immediate sphere of eyewitnesses. Once a cyberbullying incident is passed along the digital highway there is no stopping it. Even if someone has requested that misinformation or videoed bullying be removed from social media platforms, it is near impossible to stop it from being posted or shared a million times more as it could be saved and uploaded over and over again for all the world to see.

The “virtual world presents a cyberbully with limitless opportunities in which to flaunt their power over a perceived weaker victim” (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel 2011, p. 191). Essentially, in cyberbullying the “victim could feel powerless in defending him or herself against the online actions” of a bully who has achieved “greater online expertise” (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel 2011, p. 191). This, of course, is in addition to the power that the bully has over his or her victim outside the virtual context as well. One of the imbalances of power most often see arise out of cyberbullying is “cancel culture.” Not only do today’s cyberbullying victims have to contend with the power that their bullies place over them and flaunt for clout, the power exercised comes with the grave danger that they may lose their jobs, friends, or even family as part of the consequence of being canceled by their bully. The power that cyberbullies now have is limitless as the last thing that their victims wish to see is their virtual worlds, and physical ones for that matter, crumble as a result of being canceled by unrelenting cyberbullies.

At times, it seems that cyberbullying has reached a point that it just can no longer be contained. It is impossible, for example, to go through a weekly news cycle and not hear of someone being cancelled or bullied by their peers to the extent that they have a mental breakdown or, in worst case scenarios, are found dead by suicide. This is especially true among young people. According to research conducted by Sameer Hindjua and Justin Patchin of the Cyberbullying Research Center, since 2002, the point at which they began studying cyberbullying trends, cyberbullying has steadily increased from 18.8% to 36.5%, as something 12–17 years old have encountered at least once within their lifetimes (Hindjua and Patchin 2019). In a Pew Research study surveying US teenager, 59% reported that they have personally experienced at least one of the six forms of “online abusive behaviors: 1. Offensive name calling; 2. Spreading of false rumors; 3. Receiving explicit images that they did not ask for; 4. Constant asking of where they are, what they are doing by someone other than a parent; 5. Physical threats; and 6. Having explicit images of them shared without their consent” (Anderson 2018). A study highlighted in the journal of Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking revealed that encounters with cyberbullying has also substantially increased across the lifespan of men and women across the globe. This longitudinal study of close to 23,000 New Zealanders revealed that young adults between the ages of 18–25 years old experiences the “highest levels of cyberbullying, with 40.5% reporting that they have been a victim of cyberbullying.” In adults that were 26–35 years old, 24% reported being cyberbullied along with 15.1% of 36–45 years old. Interestingly, cyberbullying was also reported among those aged 46–55 to be at 15% and 6.5% for those who were over the age of 66 (Wang et al. 2019). Although one might read these numbers as not being high among adults or to be just a fraction of the greater population, when one takes into account the various age ranges in conversation with the harsh realities that are scattered along the digital way, one cannot help but to ponder how many adults do not report cyberbullying out of the simple reality that it has, as mentioned before, become common place.
Yet, at the darkest points of the digital spaces light still shines. For every cyberbully you encounter, you also see dozens more of strangers standing up for one another and building supportive communities around victims of digital taunting. As this paper moves onward it will look at how returning to a Catholic understanding of dignity of persons can frame a religious educational response to cyberbullying. In other words, this paper will show that by forming others in better understanding the dignity of persons and the responsibilities of digital discipleship, religious education (as expressed within the classroom and other formation programs) has an opportunity to re-direct digital participants away from cyberbullying and towards living a digital life ordered towards the good: reflecting Christ in all digital spaces encountered.

3. The Dignity of Persons

Many find it difficult to understand or recognize “what the big deal” is when a person’s human dignity is attacked; especially when words are the “weapon of choice.” From an early age, many of our parents, teachers, and other mentors tell us that “harmful words mean nothing.” Mothers around the world, for example, can be overheard on playgrounds instructing their children to “ignore the words” because, as the cliché says, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” However, in reality, words do hurt. Words, unlike broken bones, remain with a person for years and for some, a lifetime. Hurtful words can be repeated over and over again in a person’s mind, in some cases for the rest of their lives. In such instance, the emotional wounds they inflict are repeated again and again and never have a chance to heal. Moreover, for many bullying victims, it is impossible not to accept hurtful words as truth. These words can be just as detrimental to someone’s personhood as a violent physical attack against them. Thus, cyberbullying’s attack upon the dignity of the human person can and should not be discredited as being ‘not that big of a deal.’

The art of “common courtesy,” according to moral theologian J. Brian Benestad, is evidence that men and women have an “innate sense of the dignity of the human person.” The innate sense of the dignity of persons is what moves us to extend “good manners” towards perfect strangers or even those whom we do not like or agree with (Benestad 2011, p. 35). Historically, recognizing the dignity of the human has long served as the foundation for directing humanity’s understanding of how men and women should be treated. In ancient Greece and Rome, for example, the Stoic thinkers promoted “an idea of dignity which was inherited in the individual and abstracted from particular characteristics or social roles.” This “idea,” was also present in the early Church communities. Early Christian groups taught that because man and woman are “made for covenant community with God and are honored by the fact that in Jesus, God had taken our humanity into His life,” that each person is owed equal respect from all other persons (Meilaender 2009, p. 88). The idea was then incorporated into and promulgated in the Church’s teaching as the dignity of persons.

Moving forward to today, the Church’s teaching on the dignity of persons, although at times amplified in response to the current world, remains the same. Specifically, “every person, created in the image and likeness of God, is unique and has an intrinsic and inalienable dignity,” the Catholic church’s mission to “promote human life always and everywhere” affirms that every human life is “sacred and inviolable” (Directory for Catechesis, #379-380). Human dignity entails the responsibility to “respect the body of every person, especially the suffering,” the bullied (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #988-1091). The “equal dignity or worth of an individual person has, in our [human history], been grounded not in any particular characteristics but in the belief that every person is equidistant from Eternity” (Meilaender 2009, p. 6). An important Catholic document that affirmed the Church’s teaching on human dignity for the contemporary world is Gaudium et Spes (GS), the Second Vatican Council Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.
Gaudium et Spes: Human Dignity for the Contemporary World

Of all of the decrees promulgated during Vatican II, GS (1965), “received the most attention,” (Tanner 2005, p. xi) and rightly so; GS awoke a sleeping Church and pressed it to respond to the increasingly complex challenges of our contemporary world. At the time of GS’s development, the world was experiencing great transitions politically, socially, and economically. Wars had raged within and through a large number of nations (e.g., Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union) and the damage left behind “traumatized” people in all parts of the globe. In the United States, “racism was rampant,” and “Civil Rights struggles against racism and political structures based on it were being waged both violently and non-violently” (Lawler et al. 2014, p. 13). One can imagine how these conflicts and ongoing human crises negatively affected how humans related or treated each other. In response, Pope John XXIII persuaded the Church to issue a constitution on how the Church relates to the modern world. The spirit and teachings of GS provided a path to dialogue between the Church and the modern world; GS pressed the world to look introspectively at how the dignity and worth of persons are or are not recognized in all areas of global societies.

Drawn out of a historical and historically and contextual perspective, GS opens with the question of “what is man?” In answering, GS affirms to the contemporary world that the “dignity of the human persons rests firmly on the fundamental reality that man was created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1: 26) and that the human person “is called to communion with God” (Pope Paul VI 1965, para. 19).” Indeed, GS goes on to address the contemporary social and moral issues that have and continues to impact how human beings are treated by each other and other social structures. Thus discourse, nonetheless, invites the Church and the world to come into conversation with each other as partners in seeking responses to attacks upon human dignity. Out of this conversation, GS asserts that “what is good or right facilitates human dignity; what is bad or wrong frustrates it” (Lawler et al. 2014, p. 73). “From the perspective of GS, the things that are good in the world facilitate our development as persons of dignity and enable us to enter more fully into covenantal relationship with God and, correspondingly, into life-giving relationships with others. In contrast, the negative aspects of the world frustrate our development and can have a detrimental impact on our ability to be open to God and to be in mutually life-giving relationships with others” (Hunt 2019, p. 100).

Although at the time of Vatican II, the virtual world was nothing more than an unchartered sea of technological imagination, GS’s discourse on the effects that social actions/inaction can have upon human dignity offers sound insights for better understanding the effects cyberbullying has upon the dignity of others. Cyberbullying’s negative toll on its victims and social communities frustrates human dignity; cyberbullying is an affront to human dignity. All persons are equal in dignity as each exists within the same God-created earthly sphere. It does not matter where one lives, whose family one was born into, or what one looks like, all human persons deserve to be treated with equal dignity as all human persons were created by God to live in a shared space and directed to enter, as stated before, into a covenant with God and with one another. On the one hand, the foundation of human dignity, that is, that we are created in the likeness and image of God, is, in the words of Benestad, “indestructible.” Nothing that the human person does can destroy it. Even men and women who commit the “worst of sins” and suffer great “spiritual and physical punishment” for what they have freely chosen to do, “retain their human dignity” (Benestad 2011, p. 38). On the other hand, individual human dignity can be “facilitated” or confirmed through virtual reverent acts of discipleship and citizenry, as will be discussed later in this paper.

Pope John Paul II’s Encyclical Letter, Evangelium Vitae (EV) (25 March 1995) reaffirmed the Church’s teaching on the dignity of persons in proclaiming that every human life holds immense value. In his encyclical, Saint Pope John Paul II also outlined “threats against the dignity of the human person” (Fagan 2005, p. 50). EV’s premise that the misuse of human freedom greatly harms the dignity of the human person provides a starting point for engaging the issue of cyberbullying. To be more specific, Saint Pope John Paul II reminds
the faithful that without a focus upon Truth in the exercise of freedom, “the person ends up by no longer taking as the sole and indisputable point of reference for his own choices the truth about good and evil, but only his subjective and changeable opinion or, indeed, his selfish interest and whim” (Pope John Paul II 1995).

The continuous freedom shared by participants in the digital world is abused to the extent that people often feel as though they can post “whatever they want, whenever they want,” without consequence. Cyberbullies, taking the freedom to participate to an extreme level, place a higher value on their own freedom to contribute to the digital world than they do on the responsibility they have to treat others with dignity and to seek to express what is morally true. As evident through their actions, cyberbullies are not concerned with doing what is morally right nor mirroring authentic righteousness and truth. “Goodness,” or righteousness, is “moral excellence, generosity, willingness to look beyond oneself to the needs of others, a transformation from self to others” (Mutisya 2010). Contrarily, cyberbullies ignore their responsibility to go beyond their own subjective outlook and transform themselves to be a person for others. Instead, cyberbullies act with their own interests in mind; that is, cyberbullies choose to act based upon what feels good rather than act in accordance with what is morally good. As a result, their interactions with others become personal attacks that harm others, damage or destroy relationships, and diminish society. When a person is cyberbullied, the bully “is not merely calling another human being ‘names,’ but rather they are desecrating a person.” To turn away and ignore cyberbullying, is “to deny a human person’s dignity” (Amodeo 2011). Great “tragedy occurs” when the dignity of the human person “is denied or otherwise ignored” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 1996).

With the introduction of new technologies and social media platforms, how humans converse and interact with one another has greatly changed. Instead of communicating with each other physically present, young people today choose to connect virtually more often than they do in any other way. These digital relationships often fail to connect young people to one another in a healthy way. Conversation without the touch, sound, and sight of other people can give rise to misunderstandings. In communication-based solely on the written word, the recipient’s understanding of the intended message cannot be informed by the sender’s gestures, posture, the tone of voice, or facial expression. As humans become less likely to connect through physical presence with one another, they lose their ability to feel or empathize with those with whom they are engaged in conversation. Moreover, as they become more absorbed in their own subjective inner world as they sit in front of a computer screen, without the physical presence of the other it becomes easy for them to lose touch with a sense of what is morally right. Consequently, they are more likely to fail to treat all people with the dignity and respect that they deserve. They then become more likely to engage in cyberbullying and less likely to object to, or even notice acts of cyberbullying by others.

To better understand the importance of each individual, all people, beginning at a young age, must be taught a “disposition to care” (James 2014, pp. 4–5) and shown how to empathize with others. If religious educators use cyberbullying as an example of the violation of the dignity of human personhood, they can create opportunities to discuss fears arising from experiences of cyberbullying that their young and adult students are reluctant to bring up. They could also raise students’ awareness of what constitutes cyberbullying and help them develop a deeper sense of why it is morally problematic. In an intentional process of Christian moral education, young people engaged in discussions about the dignity of persons can learn to relate this teaching to their own experiences in the digital world, including those concerning cyberbullying. For a more robust understanding, these educational issues should also be explored. For now, however, it can be noted that religious educators, in answering their call to instruct and show how to respect the dignity of persons, must be fully aware of the effects of the digital world and cyberbullying upon those whom they teach, if they wish to remain relevant.
By framing participation in the digital world as a matter of digital discipleship, the importance of why righteousness and truth are needed in the digital world will naturally arise. That is, by teaching all who they encounter in religious educational settings how to treat others with dignity in online environments, religious education can help many digital natives and immigrants to live out righteousness and truth throughout all aspects of their lives, not just their digital lives. A religious educational approach to digital discipleship, however, must be reclaimed out of an analysis of what it means to be a Christian disciple.

4. Digital Discipleship

The “call to discipleship” is not, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “an offer man makes to Christ.” To walk as a disciple is to “obediently accept Christ’s will for us” (Bonhoeffer 1995, p. 63). However, to look upon discipleship through a too broad or narrow of a lens, often causes them to misunderstand or even not see discipleship’s true meaning. Those, for example, who approach discipleship too broadly often erroneously view it as meaning everything from living life as a Christians as directed by scripture and doctrine, to engaging in a conversation about Christ while sharing a meal with each other over Zoom or Facetime on a Saturday afternoon. As this section develops, however, its exploration of discipleship will work to offer religious educators and the people who they accompany a map for re-imagining how discipleship in digital spaces, digital discipleship, can promote and protect virtual dignity of persons, the foremost antagonist to cyberbullying.

4.1. Discipleship

In contrast to citizenship, Christian discipleship, as defined by John Coleman, “takes on a narrative form.” That is, Christian life models itself after:

1. The decisive dispositions of Jesus (e.g., surrender to God, gratitude)
2. Crucial paradigmatic actions in Jesus’ life (the cross, foot washing, prayer)
3. Utopian teachings related to the realm of God (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount) (Coleman 1994, p. 24).

Coleman cautions, however, that discipleship must never “entail a mere mechanical imitation of the historical Jesus.” According to Coleman, discipleship must be approached as a “metanoramtive ethic.” That is, Christians should distinguish between the “norm,” or living “the Way,” (or the practice of imitating one’s life after the life/actions of Jesus Christ) and the application of discipleship to a completely “new context.” Accordingly, discipleship today, as proposed by Coleman, “means to read the signs of the times, that is, reading in present events significant analogies for which the character, life, and teachings of Jesus serve as model, as well as the future directionality of discipleship where the reign of God stands as paradigm for every human community” (Coleman 1994, p. 24). Indeed, the “essence of discipleship is, is to “counter-culturally realign one’s values in accordance with the words and deeds of Jesus” (Boys 1989, p. 115). A disciple is someone who, after engaging in spiritual/theological reflection, models their actions and words after Jesus, even if that means going against societal expectations of what you should be doing in order to fit in (Hunt 2019, p. 96).

The “disciple stage,” in the words of Sherry Weddell, “is where [Christians] start to bear fruit because their priorities change within.” It is at this point that believers turn from being evangelized to, receivers of the Good News, to being the evangelizers or those who bear the Good News to others. Once a Christian believer makes this turn, they “are eager to serve.” Additionally, as disciples mature, “they realize that they have been anointed and sent by Christ on a mission” to share the Good News with others through their response to a vocational call to do so (Weddell 2017, chp. 1). In Evangelii Gaudium, Pope Francis teaches that “anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries’, but rather that we are always ‘missionary
disciples’” (Pope Francis 2013, para. 120). The form of discipleship that takes hold as believers mature in their faith is one that eagerly takes on the challenge to not only share the Good News with others but to also combat challenges that get in the way of others’ of hearing or accepting it as Truth. That is, issues like that of cyberbullying are combated by disciples as it is these forms of oppression that hinder the Gospel message from reaching those who are in need of hearing it most. Additionally, in the digital world, the digital desolate, like those who are cyberbullied and those who bully them, are who Christian disciples seek to connect to Christ’s living message of faith, hope and love. For it is out of these virtues that the digitally oppressed will be freed.

4.2. Digital Discipleship

Discipleship is not limited to physical reality, but it extends to the virtual world as well. Specifically, a commitment to digital discipleship can provide a framework for responding like Jesus to the ever-changing virtual world. Digital discipleship, however, has not always been understood as an extension of discipleship, as rooted in a deep theological understanding of what it is, in digital spheres. Instead, the term has most often been used in the last twenty-years to describe the use of digital technologies in religious education or faith formation programs. The Digital Disciple Network (DDN), for example, was a Catholic organization founded to explore and provide digital tools for the use in evangelization rather than exploring the act of discipleship in digital spaces. Digital discipleship, according to DDN, is not about how discipleship takes form in digital spaces, but rather how digital technologies can be used by disciples as evangelization tools. However, when one takes into account the theological expressions and understandings of discipleship, it is difficult to reduce digital discipleship to being just the use of digital tools in tandem with discipleship. The act of digital discipleship is far more theologically complex than this ideal. Digital discipleship is the act of discipleship in digital spaces. Digital discipleship is the act of spreading the Good News and combatting the hindrances that interfere with the work of Christ’s disciples, as defined above, in the virtual world. Additionally, to lessen it to anything else is to ignore the rooted mission of our call to discipleship in digital spaces.

Although often “unorganized and spontaneous,” there are ample opportunities to engage as a digital disciple online both on “social networking sites and Christian discussion forums” (Smith 2015, pp. 55–70). The comment section on a local or national news’ opinion section related to religion is an excellent example of digital discipleship at work. Take for example the archived popular news stories covering the travels of Pope Francis. It’s impossible to go through a comment section that has covered the travels of the Pope, or what he may have said on a plane to the Vatican news correspondents, without seeing a conversation brewing among individuals about faith and doctrine in online forums. Article after article posted online highlighting the Pope’s trips, places he visited, what he said, are all followed by heated discussions of what will happen next within and outside of the walls of the Catholic Church or whether or not change will ever come. Many of these debates include conversations about discipleship in which Christian disciples witness to their faith. For example, after a NY Times opinion piece, Francis the Perfect 19th Century Pope by Maureen Dowd, comments include points of not just admiration for the pope and Dowd, but insights on how one lives as a disciple of Christ. In the words of one commenter, KMW, “we must get out of our easy chairs and give a hand [in the name of the Church]” (Dowd 2015).

The engagement that follows articles like the one noted above, however, is more than a “spontaneous” action of digital discipleship. Rather, the participatory action of digital discipleship that online forums, social media interactions and even texting provides pathways for Christians to interact with one another in a way that invites them to become

2 The DDN organization was recently absorbed by the newly formed Procedo Project in 2020. For more information about the Procedo Project’s understanding and approach to Digital Discipleship, visit theprocedoproject.org.
part of digital evangelization. “If it were not for a community of disciples” access to Jesus would be impassable. Discipleship, as the above examination alludes to, is a “community endeavor.” To model our lives after Jesus requires that “we become a part of the community” (Gula 1989, p. 197). Thus, digital discipleship and effective evangelization within and sprung out of digital spaces is found in community and one’s healthy participation in it. With this in mind, digital discipleship requires that not only disciples enter digital spaces, but that they become a part of the conversations that inhabit digital communities, to “get off one’s easy chair” and offer God and his church “a hand” in spreading the Good News and combating the things, like cyberbullying, that get in the way of that work. Digital discipleship, moreover, rests in a communal participation of Christians willing to arise out of the digital shadows, unafraid to combat the cyberbullying that also may or will be directed towards them.

Cyberbullying’s attack upon the dignity of persons and creation of unhealthy relationships prevents discipleship from properly rooting itself into the digital lives of Christians. To ignore cyberbullying’s detrimental effect upon communities is to diminish what good discipleship can potentially offer digital communities. For this reason, cyberbullying, as stated before, is a religious educational issue. Yet, the question remains: how can religious educators provide communities a proper understanding of the dignity of persons that guides how one should behave online? How might religious education form good digital disciples?

5. A Proposed Religious Educational Response to Cyberbullying

As the above discourse shows, because cyberbullying involves a direct attack on the dignity of persons and disrupts digital discipleship, it is a religious educational issue. It is for this reason that religious education must make a concerted effort to include real life issues in its lessons when teaching people about and how to practice dignity of persons and live as disciples along the ‘digital way.’ As this paper concludes, it will outline practical religious educational responses for accompanying and empowering people to be who God calls them to be when they inhabit or visit complex digital spaces and how doing so can diminish the effects and presence of cyberbullying.

5.1. Teaching for the Practice of Human Dignity

Young people, in the words of Warren Kidd and Gerry Czerniawski, “can be one of the most demanding and critical of audiences.” For a teacher to grab the attention and motivate youth to engage with what they are being presented, the teacher must find ways to “sparkle in the classroom” (Czerniawski and Kidd 2011, pp. 2–13). This too also applies to adults as it is, at times, incredibly difficult to capture the attention of others in a way that their imaginations are sparked. In relation to teaching about human dignity this is especially true. Truly, a lesson on human dignity that fails to capture the interest and imagination of others will most likely be dismissed by them as “not worth my time.” Moreover, because most people inhabit a culture of never-ending entertainment, lessons on human dignity need to contain some element of entertainment (i.e., video, web streaming, storytelling, faith sharing). That is not to say that exploring human dignity through the writings and teachings of the early Church Fathers, Catholic theologians (ancient and contemporary), and other Vatican documents, should be cast aside in favor of glossy videos made by entertaining Christian YouTube of TikTok stars. Both youth and adult learners should dynamically explore primary texts which outline the fundamental truths of human dignity, but once a general review of these texts is done, they should be led in applying these teachings to what is happening outside the walls of the Church, including digital spaces. Moreover, how the teachings of the Church are presented plays a crucial role in how they will be received by those who are being taught about them. With this in mind, a good curriculum on human dignity should include the following:

- An exploration of where the idea of human dignity comes from
- Room for reflecting upon human dignity and its place in our daily lives and world
- Practical exercises in learning about human dignity
- An exploration of a response to the question, so what?

To incorporate the above into religious educational approaches, as well as to create new ones, does not require one to develop a curriculum entirely from scratch. Some religious education pedagogies do contain one or more of the elements of a good curriculum as these are noted above as reflection and practical exercises can be incorporated into a curriculum on human dignity if there is an openness to exploration in a religious educational setting. One such pedagogical approach that not only can help youth and adults connect to the complex issue of cyberbullying but also to how responding to it through recognizing the dignity of others is the practical theological method of ‘see, judge, act.’ As will be explored, this pedagogical method is one that can be used in both teaching for the practice of human dignity and digital discipleship.

5.2. Teaching for the Practice of Digital Discipleship

For some, teaching digital discipleship in the religious educational setting may seem to be either out of place or misaligned with what religious education should focus upon. However, upon close examination of the history and teachings of the Church, there can be no denying that the Church has been preparing its members for digital discipleship since the earliest days of the formation of the Church. In the Gospel of Matthew (28:18), Jesus instructs his apostles “to go forth and make disciples of all nations.” The instruction to form discipleship truly has no geographical or digital boundaries and so from the earliest days of Christ’s ministry we have been challenged to carry on his ministry to all parts of the physical, and now digital, world in which we inhabit. Thus, an essential form of Christ’s ministry in responding to those who have been outcast or enslaved to cyberbullying is to form good digital disciples to carry out the mission and ministry of Christ in the virtual world. In relation to responding to cyberbullying out of the religious educational context and through the formation of digital discipleship, there are, as this section will explore, effective religious education pedagogies that can and should be employed.

Effective religious education is, according to Marc Cardaronella, more than “teaching about the Faith.” That is, the goal of the religious educator is to be “a catalyst for action.” As Cardaronella explains, “learning about God should move you to live in harmony with him and bear fruit for him by your actions” (Cardaronella 2020). The religious educational context must, in the words of Mike Carotta, not just teach about discipleship, but for discipleship. As a method for teaching for discipleship, Carotta notes that one must first begin by offering a “holding environment, “a place where [believers] can do the difficult and intimate work of examining their beliefs, actions, ambitions, attitudes, and values” (Carotta 2015, p. 48). A holding environment should be a place to explore Church teachings in light of what is happening both inside the walls of the Church and outside of it. Teens are more apt to open up about issues like cyberbullying when they are given the opportunity to explore and examine freely what is happening in their daily lives. Once an environment of trust has been established, the next steps in teaching for discipleship, according to Michael Carotta, are as follows:

- **Name the Challenge**—whether it be a moral dilemma, a teaching of Christ, a doctrine of the Church, or a spiritual exercise, “the challenge” up for examination must first be stated clearly;
- **Regulate the Heat**—to keep the conversation open and moving forward, sometimes an opposing viewpoint needs to be introduced to provide perspective and prompt dialogue; emotions also need to be controlled to keep the dialogue open;
- **Protect All the Voices**—every participant needs to know they can contribute to the conversation without being “marginalized, minimalized, or categorized” and they must be offered the opportunity to do so.
- **Create Rules of Engagement**—have the group come up with rules for engagement, how do they wish to pursue dialogue;
- Use Powerful Questions—ask open-ended questions, and make it clear that everyone has “the experience to respond”;
- Hold Steady—no matter which direction the conversation goes, remain clear about the teachings of Christ and his Church;
- Appreciate Failure—use examples of your failures or the failures of others or have the young adults examine theirs, “failure encourages people to be reflective learners;”
- Write Out Reflections—asking young adults to write down and reflect upon what they wrote allows them to “capture and bring visible thoughts and sentiments that have no form or expression;”
- Watch the Pace—observe and adjust; be present in the moment while “observing if things are moving too fast or too slow” and if they are, make changes;
- Practice Good Sonar—watch nonverbals, listen for the question beneath the surface, uses these cues as a measure of where God is leading the conversation;
- Affirm and Resist—affirm when young adults are getting it right, showing they understand the teachings, but resist when they pose something contrary and off track;
- Tell Stories—have “Go-To Stories” on hand to help grab the attention of young adults and foster examination;
- Use Silence—“silence helps bring forward a [young adult’s] response from within, stay quiet and let them have a moment to “understand, to feel;”
- Aim at Awakenings—the end goal should be focused on helping young adults to see and then act differently, help them uncover an “Ah-ha” moment (Carotta 2015).

In a perfect religious educational setting, all of the above would flow naturally; people would be engaged, and the dialogue would develop organically. However, no religious educational setting is perfect, especially when it comes to teaching people who hail from all corners of economic, racial, or social backgrounds. Thus, it is not always possible to use Carotta’s entire framework for teaching for discipleship as some parts may not be needed or relative to the group who you are teaching. Instead, after examining the group with which you are working and the participant’s openness in examining and understanding of the named challenge, it is better to choose which components would work best in guiding the people who are present in examining how to apply Church teaching to their everyday lives. Although each of the above components could be extensively examined, for brevity, this paper will examine just two in detail: Name the Challenge and Protect All Voices as it these two that specifically aid in developing digital disciples who are empowered to respond to cyberbullying effectively.

First, in examining and then naming the challenges, many will encounter that practicing the teachings of Christ is an essential part of their formation as disciples. In Naming the Frame: Why Christians Need the Bigger Picture, Johnathan Ingleby asks readers to ponder why they think [the faithful] have not acquired the tools that they need to explore our “complex and confusing world.” In his search for the answer, Ingleby proposes that to respond to the world around us, we must name what is happening beyond the walls of the Church and study it (Ingleby 2011, p. xiv). By naming the challenge, the religious educational context provides a foundation for connecting both with participants’ lives and the world. Moreover, participants should be challenged to name not what they are interested in, but that to which they think they should be responding. They should also be invited to address the named issue within their own lives. In doing so, people who are provided the opportunity to name the challenge in this way are more likely to be motivated to create meaningful responses to issues like cyberbullying. However, in most religious educational contexts, there is not a consistent effort to explore what is happening outside the walls of the Church by naming cyberbullying and exploring its negative effect on human dignity, however, a foundation is laid for the religious educational context to form good digital disciples.

In practice, naming the challenge can also help Christians and others to better examine cyberbullying as an issue worthy of attention. For many, for example, cyberbullying is often dismissed as it is seen as something that is not worthy any thought. Scrolling through social
media, for example, one can easily find continually harassment between people, but very little is said in relation to the harassment or consequences that one might assume because of it. Pressing Christians to name the challenge, or to encourage them to stop mindlessly scrolling through their social media feeds in an effort to really see what is going on, can offer thoughtful opportunities for them to think about the harmful nature of cyberbullying. One way that this kind of approach that can assist others in seeing cyberbullying more clearly is the reflective model of see, judge, act, an approach that will be further examined in the next section.

The second component, protect all voices, is not only valuable in as far as it offers everyone the opportunity to speak freely, but it also can be used to encourage the protection of voices in the digital sphere as well. For many to have confidence that what they say, and share will not be dismissed they need to be reminded that their voice will be protected. Digital participants should never feel judged or outcast for something that they say or for a question that they ask, even if what they say comes across as being offensive. Therefore, that all voices are protected, people should also not be allowed to use hate speech or engage in bullying through what they say. That is, although they should be given the opportunity to speak freely, they must also be reminded that with that freedom comes a great responsibility to speak in a manner that respects all persons whom they are speaking to. The religious educational context must always be an open space for learning, for an exchange of ideas and dialogue if it is to achieve its goal of preparing disciples. In relation to cyberbullying, by encouraging the practice of protecting voices within the Church, what youth and adults experience within the religious educational context should provide them with an example of the importance of protecting the dignity of persons and living as digital disciples. As participants grow accustomed to protecting all voices, they will more likely be influenced to do the same outside the walls of the Church, even within the virtual world.²³

In practice, as mentioned above, one pedagogical method that can be used to frame this exploration or teaching for digital discipleship is ‘see, judge, act’.

5.3. See—Judge—Act: A Pedagogical Method for Responding to Cyberbullying

Drawn out of the work of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn and the young Christian Worker movement (YCW),⁴ ‘see, judge, act’ is a reflective method for exploring experiences like that of cyberbullying in conversation with theological understandings and teachings like that of the dignity of persons. Moreover, in using this method religious educators can also create opportunities for the formation of digital disciples in as far as participants are challenged to not only learn about teachings like dignity of persons but to act in response to it and the issues that hinder its place in our digital culture. It is for this reason that as this paper concludes we will turn our attention in looking at how the ‘see, judge, act’ method can be used as a practical religious approach in responding to cyberbullying through the lens of human dignity and digital discipleship.

Out of the conversations created by the ‘see, judge, act’ method, the circular movement through the reflective process presses one to also consider how these insights will or have moved them to form a meaningful response to what they have encountered. Specifically, this method first asks participants to respond to a question or “react to a difficulty in their lives.” Then, as the participant processes the reality placed in front of them, they are connected to or asked to find the deeper reasons why they responded to the question in the manner that they did or why they think that what they are seeing is happening in the context and manner that it is (Mealey et al. 2017, p. 1957). In exploring cyberbullying in

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²³ Although much more detail could be provided here by way of outlining a plethora of cyberbullying examples, this article aims to only add a broad understanding of possibilities that await in teaching digital discipleship and citizenry for use in examination of and responding to cyberbullying. An important point to also note is that this broad approach was completed with keen attention to outlining frameworks out of which religious educators can build their own detailed responses to digital crisis like that of cyberbullying in conversation with the specific contexts in which they are engaged.

⁴ For more information on the history and development of the young Christian Worker movement (YCW) see Mary Irene Zotti’s The Young Christian Workers. U.S. Catholic Historian 9, no. 4 (1990): 387–400.
a religious educational context, the young or adult students could be asked about when they encountered someone being cyberbullied and how they responded or they could be invited to offer their own thoughts or insights as to where they see cyberbullying and why they think it is an ongoing issue encountered by many who visit digital spaces. Once the participants have formed an image of what is happening, or when it is clear that they fully ‘see’ cyberbullying for what it is and how it impacts others, the conversation then transitions into judgment.

In this phase, participants are challenged to make critical connections between church teaching, doctrine, Scripture, social teaching etc. to that of the issue in which they are exploring (Mealey et al. 2017, p. 1958). For instance, the moderator of the session will invite participants to consider the church’s teaching on the dignity of persons, asking perhaps how cyberbullying deteriorates our understanding of the dignity of persons or how the teaching might illuminate the destructive nature of our encountering cyberbullying online. Any religious educational approach to teaching others about human dignity should also include a secular explanation of the importance of treating ‘the other’ with dignity. Not all Christians are dedicated to the Faith and its teachings. Religious education, including those exploring human dignity, should take into account the life situations and beliefs of all those who are likely to be involved in them. This is not to say that secular teachings on human dignity should be primarily explored or offered as the alternative. Rather, religious educational curriculums on human dignity should include some mention of how church teaching on human dignity relates to understanding of human dignity or the worth of the human person found in secular society. Out of this discourse, the issue of cyberbullying in relation to dignity of persons has the opportunity to not only become clearer, but it also presses participants to move onward in thinking about how they should or are being called to respond as a community of believers, as digital disciples, to cyberbullying.

In the call to act, participants are invited to form how they will respond to what they have encountered or will encounter again. In other words, participants are invited to “propose and implement a solution or solutions to the problems which have been identified and analyzed” (Mealey et al. 2017, p. 1958). In relation to exploring cyberbullying in conversation with the church’s teaching on the dignity of persons, religious educators can help participants think about how their encountering cyberbullying can be responded to through their recognition of the importance of empowering the dignity of others. It is at this point that digital discipleship begins to take form. As participants looks for ways to respond to cyberbullying and the invitation to practice the dignity of persons, they must consider discipleship and how they can move it onward to digital spaces. It is at this point that religious educators should circle back to ‘seeing and judging’ discipleship. In exploring questions of what it means to be a disciple in the digital age in conversation with the church teachings on discipleship, religious educators can help deepen the formation of meaningful action in digital spaces as well as encourage participants to think about how their digital discipleship can collaborate with their practicing of dignity of persons in responding to cyberbullying as they encounter it.

In practice, using the ‘see, judge, act’ method for the teaching of human dignity and digital discipleship as an approach in exploring how to religiously respond to cyberbullying can take on a variety of forms. In youth oriented religious educational settings, for example, the method can be formed to assist small groups of young people to think about their own responsibilities in placing into practice the dignity of persons. Moreover, small groups guided in reflecting upon what has been encountered or what has even been done by participants while texting or interacting on social media can also be used as an opportunity to challenge them to think about how their own human dignity and how treating others like they would also want to be treated in digital spaces is a call from God to act as Christ in digital spaces, to be digital disciples for others. For adults, this method could also be used as an opportunity to challenge them to create a monthly or weekly journal that captures how they responded to others in digital spaces or reacted to cyberbullying. Through the process of working through questions and responses, adults can be guided in thinking
more deeply about how mindlessly scrolling through scandalous postings or social media wars neglect the dignity of persons. Although a seemingly simplistic activity, taking an account of one’s daily digital encounters and then taking a moment to reflect on whether or not they reflect dignity of persons or hinder challenges others to dive into how they are treating others with dignity. All in all, it is lessons like these that not only teach dignity of persons, but also challenge believers to answer the question: “how am I living this teaching in my everyday life?” It is through these encounters that transformative learning takes hold and issues like cyberbullying have the potential to be diminished among our digital communities.

6. Conclusions

Being good digital disciples and practitioners of human dignity is more than evanglizing within and to the digital world. Digital disciples and practitioners of human dignity look around the digital world for moments when a person’s dignity is attacked and respond accordingly. Digital disciples and practitioners of human dignity look for opportunities to not only preach the word of God but for ways to apply God’s word to everyday issues. For religious education to have a positive impact on the promotion of dignity and to minimalize cyberbullying, it must stay focused on forming believers into digital disciple. Although at times it may seem that cyberbullying can never be overcome, the potential impact that well-formed digital disciples and practitioners of human dignity can have upon cyberbullying suggests otherwise. Efforts to curb cyberbullying via religious education begins with revelatory curricula that uses methods like that of ‘see, judge, act’ that, when taught properly, prompt the practice of digital discipleship. Given the tumultuous world that house digital landscapes and their ongoing impact and/or influence on lived experience, religious education and other theological fields can no longer stand by as mere spectators of cyberbullying.

Building upon the teachings of the Catholic Church on the dignity of persons and discipleship, this paper explored cyberbullying as a religious educational issue. Specifically, this paper offered how the Catholic Church’s teaching on human dignity in conversation with contemporary discourse on dignity of persons can act as a bridge for connecting discipleship and the practice of dignity of persons to the digital world. Moreover, by exploring human dignity and discipleship, the above provided a pathway to understanding what it means to be good digital disciples as well as how doing so can teach and empower believers to combat cyberbullying.

All in all, with strong religious educational approaches grounded in understanding what it truly means to treat others as created in the image of God, cyberbullying stands little chance in continually placing the digital lives of others into places of peril. There is much work left to do, however, and the approaches as outlined above are just the beginning. May our conversations and work continue.

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