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Dignity and Safety in a Digital Age: Facing a New Challenge for Families.

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My subject is protecting children's dignity online. The best way for them to achieve this is to limit how much of themselves they put onto it. I am affirming what many already parents already suspect: no matter how many friends you have on Facebook, Facebook is not your friend. Years ago, when I realized my son needed to quit Tumblr, I wrote him a letter: "You've been eating air, and it has not fed you well. The status it gave you did not make you feel loved. The followers did not make you secure. The reblogs did not make you feel befriended." He wasn't happy with me, but he didn't say I was wrong. Eventually, I apologized to him for not seeing the Internet coming. Not just because of pornography and the way it reduces the person on the other side of the screen. But also because of the way it reduces the person on this side.

An example: in high school, he got into a romantic relationship that ended badly. In his bitterness, he found himself drawn toward the misogyny and warped masculinity of the Reddit red-pill community and the misandry and warped femininity of the Tumblrinas. The former assured him that his worst suspicions about women were true, and the latter seemed to confirm it. Rather than broadening his world, social media trapped him in a tiny echo chamber, one that encouraged the very tribalism that Christ came to abolish.

The first line of the first Psalm affirms, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers." Before the rise of social media, I had never heard the imperative, "Kill yourself." Today, it's a standard online response, one of memegenerator's top 100 – out of 78,000. Most people don't really mean it, and most people don't take the advice – though more and more do. But it surely says something about the medium that it has rendered such an expression commonplace. The seat of scoffers, indeed. What chance does dignity have in such an arena?

I write for a weekly newspaper in San Diego, California. A few months ago, I sought an interview with Julianne Kissinger, a locally based Instagram model with 5 million followers. These days, she mostly poses in lingerie, and accompanies her photos with teasing captions like, "Who wishes they were coming home to me like this?" But she didn't start that way. Most of her initial Instagram posts were pictures of her daughter. After a while, she posted a few pictures of herself in workout gear. The Internet noticed. Then a few sexy selfies. The Internet applauded. Eventually, professional photographers got involved. Today, you can subscribe to her private Snapchat for \$20 a month. Kissinger's Internet life began as a form of self-expression. It developed into a form of self-curation. It concluded as a form of self-commodification: the person as brand.

Kissinger's manager had me email my questions. I asked about the development of her sexy online persona, about how she keeps her Internet life separate from her real life. Questions about the person and not the brand. A few days later, her manager replied: "Pick someone else. These questions are too invasive and she's uncomfortable."

Most people don't go as far as Kissinger. But if you've spent much time on Instagram, you know that what it calls sharing often amounts to advertising, and the product being hawked is the self. Not the real self, of course; but the version deemed most likely to attract attention and approval.

The solution here is simple but difficult: help children to build a social life in reality. A simple step: gather the family for dinner, ban tech at table, and take turns asking each other questions. An obvious difficulty: the online self may not be real, but it can still command fierce devotion. Our family drove to Kansas City to visit my wife's brother and his family. Less than an hour after our arrival, five of our children were sitting in the living room, and every one of them was staring at his individual smartphone. The dopamine hit of the text message and the swaddling security provided by the digital remove from reality had won. A good response to this devotion is to examine it together: why does this stuff matter to you? Does it make you happier or sadder? What's your evidence?

In closing, I would suggest that there is a reason why you cannot confess and receive absolution over Skype, why it does not provide, to use the words of Archbishop John Foley, "the sacramental context of a personal encounter" even though it might seem like it. The great trick of the Internet is to fool people into confusing an online presence with a life. And there is no dignity in living a lie.