***The Virtus Program reminds us of the advantages and risks of technology.***

***Office for the Protection of Children & Young People***

Be close to our children, Lord, surround them with Your favor as with a shield (Psalm 5:11-12).

Anoint our children with Your favor and protection, letting them rest safely between Your shoulders (Deuteronomy 33:12).

During a Google Hangout with a group of disabled youth in 2015, Pope Francis admitted “ I’m a disaster when it comes to machines. I don’t know how to work a computer.’ Regardless of his personal use of technology, the Pope has offered guidance as use of technology has increased. Extoling the value of technology during the Catholic Church’s World Communications Day, the Pope described the internet as a “gift from God” in that it offers us an opportunity to connect with people of differing cultures, and religions allowing us to ‘create a sense of the unity of the human family.’ However, Pope Francis cautions us as well, noting the value technology has to draw us closer in community there is a downside. Pope Francis cautions “it is not technology which determines whether or not communication is authentic, but rather the human heart and our capacity to use wisely the means at our disposal.”(2016). With these words, the Pope reminds us to be wise and vigilant, to use technology to our advantage always mindful of the potential risks.

Facilitating the Virtus Program I am reminded of the advantages and dangers the internet poses to children and youth. When my children were young the rage was ‘Club Penguin.” Participants purchased an on-line penguin avatar, named the penguin and interacted on an online site with other penguins; all of whom were owned by my children’s friends. As the penguins ‘friended’ each other, specific log-on information was shared, and they would arrange a time and Club Penguin site at which to meet. Innocent fun, until penguins started ‘visiting’ the site and we were unable to trace the owner. See where this is headed? If only I knew than what I know now, some difficult, uncomfortable situations could have been avoided.

A frequent question from parents attending the Virtus class: What do we do to keep our children safe online? How do we monitor our children’s on-line footprint? There is an answer:

**NETSMARTZ: A RESOURCE FOR PARENTS**

The Center for Missing and Exploited Children hosts a Cyber Tipline, in existence since 1998. NetSmartz offers online safety education for young children, tweens, teens and PARENTS! The site hosts pages with age-appropriate information on topics such as cyber bullying, sextortion, sexting, sending inappropriate photos. Each topic has a Tip Sheet for Parents. I urge you to visit the website, along with your child.