



TOWARDS A SAFER CHURCH

Brendan Daly explains the purpose of a culture of safeguarding in the Church.

REPORTS OF ABUSE of minors in the Catholic Church continue to emerge from all over the world, but it also needs to be recognised and acknowledged that the reporting of abuse is evolving. We are learning about how power and ministry are being abused (Code of Canon Law, canons 1378, 1395 §3), and hearing complaints relating to the abuse of women, other forms of abuse such as financial abuse of Church finances and financial exploitation of the elderly and vulnerable. Pope John Paul II showed foresight in 2002 when he stated that "this time of trial will bring about the purification of the entire Catholic community, a purification that is urgently needed."

DANGER OF CLERICALISM

Pope Francis considered that clericalism – the attitude toward clergy and religious characterised by excessive deference resulting in an assumption of moral superiority – created a sense of entitlement and special treatment. Abusive clergy and religious take advantage of this culture which assumes those in authority in the Church do not have to be accountable and transparent. Consequently, abusive clergy are not always held to account for their actions and decisions. The culture of clericalism needs

to change because if the canon law on abuse and safeguarding exists within a culture of clericalism it will be a "dead letter".

Protection of minors and vulnerable people is a sacred duty. After listening to victims' experiences of abuse and its impact, personal conversion and the conversion of the institution are moral and spiritual necessities. Hearing victims both with our ears and our hearts needs to result in accountability and actions leading to healing for everyone. The Church is the Body of Christ, meaning that when one member suffers, all suffer in some way.

ONGOING PROCESS OF CONVERSION

Pope Francis introduced us to the concept of conversational justice in his teaching. Throughout his pontificate he challenged the Church towards a continuous conversion away from evil and towards healing for the wounded. The Church has a moral and spiritual obligation to heal the wounds inflicted by sexual abuse that has been perpetrated, enabled, mishandled or covered up by anyone holding authority in the Church. All members of the Church are called to be involved in a process of conversational justice that emphasises truth, justice, reparation and

institutional reform. There needs to be reparation to victims and to God.

SAFEGUARDING PART OF PROCESS

Safeguarding refers to actions taken to ensure practices are in place to protect the health, well-being and human rights of children and adults in the Church. These actions protect all persons within the Church from abuse, harm and neglect. Elements of safeguarding include, but are not limited to, recruitment, risk management, complaint handling and acceptable use of online applications. Church leadership must establish who is responsible for each of these elements and the lines of accountability which are tracked and reviewed. Therefore, safeguarding must be part of the Church's governance, culture and leadership.

Some people ask: "Why does safeguarding concern me? I never abused anybody and I think what's happened is terrible." But Jesus taught that we should "love our neighbour as ourselves", which means we need to be responsible for harm caused to others even when we haven't ourselves caused that harm. We could easily rewrite the story of the Good Samaritan in today's terms so that the man beaten up by robbers is an abuse victim and the cleric walks by on the other side.

In 2018 Pope Francis wrote an important Letter to the People of God in which he said everyone in the Church needed to be involved in safeguarding to stop abuse and to ensure that it does not happen again. Prevention of abuse and ensuring that abuse never happens again is the responsibility of everyone. A Church culture must be created to prevent abuse and the possibility of abuse being covered up and perpetuated. Pope Leo has reinforced this by reminding everyone that "the Church is our spiritual home, as such every parish and pastoral activity is meant to be a space in which we glorify God and care for others, especially children and the vulnerable."

SAFEGUARDING REFERS TO ACTIONS TAKEN TO ENSURE PRACTICES ARE IN PLACE TO PROTECT THE HEALTH, WELL-BEING AND HUMAN RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS IN THE CHURCH.

Reparation should not be seen as a legal burden but a spiritual way of life. Facing abuse is not a bargaining point to get it out of the way. The prophet Isaiah said we should seek justice and defend the oppressed. The fruit for the Church in doing this is to purify itself. Safeguarding embodies the Church's mission to live and preach the Gospel – a sacred responsibility. The values of responsibility, accountability and integrity, truth, justice and institutional reform should lead to personal conversion and the conversion of the institution of the Church.

PRINCIPLES OF SAFEGUARDING

The principles of safeguarding mean that our approaches to abuse should be victim-centred. We should prioritise listening to victims, avoid retraumatising them, and focus on their safety while respecting their choices and seeking to meet their expressed needs. We will also need to practise mandatory reporting, to stop abusers and prevent more victims. We should protect complainants and their families and friends from harassment and ensure their privacy. And we should ensure the well-being of the accused. These principles – listening, reporting, protecting, healing – should be non-negotiable.

STANDARDS FOR SAFEGUARDING

To practise these principles we will need to implement five standards:

First: Creating a safer Church – with reviews of policies; careful recruitment of staff, seminarians and novices; comprehensive formation; training for handling digital information and use of social media; codes of conduct; ongoing formation for everyone; communicating the safeguarding message to the Church community and society in general.

Second: Caring for victims – listening to them and their experiences with both ears and hearts; providing spiritual care; protecting their privacy and data; communicating frequently with victims concerning the processing of their cases; having structures and officials in place to receive complaints; having competent canonical advocates and support people giving them information and help.

Third: Handling complaints effectively and in a timely manner.

Fourth: Leading with integrity; showing care for all; publicising detailed annual reports; promoting the good, proactive things that are being done.

Fifth: Conducting external audits of procedures and processes as we do with financial accounts.

Pope Leo said in June 2025 concerning inappropriate clergy behaviours: "They cannot be swept under the carpet. They must be addressed with a sense of mercy and true justice towards victims and the accused." And in a message to the National Safeguarding Conference in the Philippines on 23 October 2025, Pope Leo renewed his appeal "that there can be no tolerance for any form of abuse in the Church." A Church that is perceived to be unsafe and a haven of abuse cannot preach the Gospel effectively. The evil of abuse stands in complete contradiction to the Gospel and everything Jesus taught about love of God and others. A safe Church, on the other hand, is a credible Church. ✨

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