

**Safeguarding of Minors and Vulnerable Adults:
A Protection, Healing, and Reconciliation Project of the Church**

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Learning from Sexual Abuse Cases in the Past

We are aware and admit that there have been thousands of children in the Church and around the world suffering from the sexual abuse committed by Catholic priests and religious in the past years. Not only were in the USA, European countries, Australia, and African countries, but also Asia, in our own countries. In the community, we may hardly think of any possible cases. However, no reported evidence on which we may rely to believe does not mean a zero sexual abuse case. It only means that we need to be more attentive and sensitive. We learn from the past, child sexual abuse took place in the community or house where we live. Just to reflect, have you ever heard, suspect, or known a child sexual offender, a abuse case, or a victim in the community/family? How did you or the community respond to it: What did you/ the community do?

“Underestimating the prevalence of child sexual abuse” in our own diocese, ordo, congregation, and even our community is a serious and costly mistake. We should listen to the victims, be attentive to the signs of risky behaviors, deal effectively with all kinds of allegations, and not “being manipulated by offenders, but responding effectively to child sexual abusers” (Rossetti, 2012). “Sexual abuse of children and young people and the ways in which these sins and crimes were addressed have caused enormous pain, anger, and confusion for victims, their families, and the entire Church (A Statement of Episcopal Commitment, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 2018). We need to listen to their sufferings and and respond to their cries so as to understand the seriously damaging effects on their lives, their family, and on the life and mission of the Church.

Note: In this session, we will look at and analyze the reported data of child sexual abuse cases so as to discover the psychological features and mechanisms of child sexual offenders and to empathically understand the psychological consequences and effects on the victims and their families. With these, we are to understand how serious is the effects of child sexual abuse on the life and the future of the victim and on the life and mission of the Church.

Healing-Reconciliation of the Victims/Survivors

As we acknowledge, sexual abuse causes a profound pain and suffering of the children and their families. We also agonize over the sinfulness, criminality, and the breach of trust caused by our religious brothers/priests. We are “to reach out to victims/survivors and their families and demonstrate a sincere commitment to their spiritual and emotional well-being. The first obligation of the Church with regard to the victims is for healing and reconciliation.” We should be part of the Church’s commitment as Pope Francis affirmed “that everything possible must be done to rid the Church of the scourge of the sexual abuse of minors and to open pathways of reconciliation and healing for those who were abused” (Letter of Pope Francis to the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences and Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life Concerning the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, February 2, 2015).

Therefore, we are also responsible to reach out every person who has been the victim of sexual abuse as a minor by anyone in church service, whether the abuse was recent or occurred many years in the past. “This outreach may include provision of counseling, spiritual assistance, support groups, and other social services agreed upon by the victims. Addressing to the U.S. bishops in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI said of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, “It is your God-given responsibility

as pastors to bind up the wounds caused by every breach of trust, to foster healing, to promote reconciliation and to reach out with loving concern to those so seriously wronged.” Working together with those individuals who were themselves abused can have a positively strong impact to the Church and society.

Note: In the second session, based on the understanding of the victims and the offenders during the first session, we are to learn our moral, legal, and public responsibilities, which are to listen to their cries, to foster healing, and to promote reconciliation for those being abused. We may have an empathy to help our religious brothers/priests recover from their mistakes, but, our moral responsibility toward the victims should come first. They need healing and reconciliation.

Effective Response to Allegations of Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse of minor by clergy/religious is a crime in all civil jurisdiction and in universal law of the Church (CIC, c. 1395 §2; CCEO, c. 1453 §1). Due to the moral responsibility and legal or public duties, we are to respond to all kinds of sexual allegation effectively and “to report an allegation of child sexual abuse to the public authorities with due regard for the seal of the Sacrament of Penance.”

Religious institution or diocese is to have policies and procedures in place to respond promptly to any allegation where there is reason to believe that sexual abuse of a minor has occurred. It is highly recommended to have also a competent person or persons to coordinate assistance for the immediate pastoral care of persons who report having been sexually abused as minors by clergy or other church personnel. A review board may also be needed not only to provide a confidential consultation but also to review policies and procedures for dealing with sexual abuse of minors.

Religious or diocesan “personnel are to comply with all applicable civil laws with respect to the reporting of allegations of sexual abuse of minors to civil authorities and cooperate in their investigation in accord with the law of the jurisdiction in question.” This reporting duty remains valid and applicable even when the victim is no longer a minor (A Statement of Episcopal Commitment, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 2018). Furthermore, we also need to “advise the victims of their right to make a report public authorities and support. “

Following the reporting duty, the offending religious/clergy is to be removed from ministry, and if warranted, dismissed from the clerical or religious state. She/he is also then to be “offered therapeutic professional assistance both for the purpose of prevention and also for his own healing and well-being.” However, “presumption of innocence during the investigation of the allegation and all appropriate steps should also be taken into consideration to protect his reputation. He has a right to “retain the assistance of civil and canonical counsel. If the allegation is deemed not substantiated, every step possible is to be taken to restore his good name, should it have been harmed.”

Note: During the third session, we will learn the legal and canonical duties, which are to respond effectively all kinds of allegation of sexual abuse and report to the public authorities, while maintaining and protecting also the reputation of the sexual offenders. With the legal and canonical duties, we need to have a policies and procedures to respond and to report to the public authorities.

Zero tolerance for a Sexual Abuser of Children

There have been documents and letters from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope Benedict, Pope Francis, and Bishops’ Conferences around the world that urged us to make a

deep commitment to protecting children from sexual abuse, to promoting healing and reconciliation with the victims, and to sustaining a safe-environment within the Church for children and youth.

Further, in the same letter, Pope Francis convinced all children and their families to “turn to the Church with full confidence for it is a safe and secure home. Consequently, priority must not be given to any other kind of concern, what ever its nature, such as the desire to avoid scandal, since there is abso-lutely no place in ministry for those who abuse minors.” This zero-tolerance declaration means that we should make a firm commitment to renewing the integrity of our own religious or priestly vocation so as to serve and shepherd God’s people, following the example of Christ, our Lord (A Statement of Episcopal Commitment, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 2018). That means also that we cannot allow the clergy or religious who sexually abused continue to be an active minister.

Note: in this four session, we will learn Pope Francis’ message and the Church’s commitment to protecting children by renewing our integrity as religious or priests. No place for religious or priests who have a sexual tendency or interest in children, in particular those who has committed to child abuse. We are to serve and to shepherd God’s people, especially children, young people, and vulnerable adults.

Sustaining Safe Environment for Children and Youth

Acknowledging the serious effects and consequences of sexual child abuse, we need to readily plan and promote a child safeguarding-policy, prevention, and program to strengthen the protection for children and youth. We need to sustain and strengthen a safe environment by screening, educating, and training our community members, employees, volunteers and others, especially those who have a close contact with children and young people. Further, the standard of conduct, child protection procedure, and child safeguarding protocol should be applied to all kinds of ministries and situations which involve children and young people.

We are also to evaluate the background of all accepted religious members (or incardinated of the community/the diocese). Adequate screening and evaluative techniques in deciding the fitness of religious candidates should be a standard practice. Transfer of all priests/religious who have committed an act of sexual abuse against a minor for residence, including retirement, should carefully follow a child protection procedure. Background check of all paid personnel/employees and volunteers whose duties and activities include contact with minors should also be done.

Note: During the fifth session, we are to sustain and strength a safe environment for children and youth. We need to plan and promote child safeguarding policy and prevention programs to our community members, employees, and volunteers who have a close contact with children and youth.

Human Formation of Religious/Priests: Human Sexuality and Affective Maturity

Research seemed to suggest that a spike up in incidents of child sexual abuses is resulted from a combination factors which include a general society condition, cultural climate of sexual revolution, and insufficient human formation of priests/religious, especially human sexuality. Therefore, it is critical to provide a strong program in human formation and human sexuality for religious or priestly candidates in the initial formation and for those in their ongoing formation as well.

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops (June 2018) clearly stated “With renewed urgency, we will promote programs of human formation for chastity and celibacy for both seminarians and

priests based upon the criteria found in Pastores Dabo Vobis, no. 50.” As the necessary condition of all priestly (religious) candidates, human formation can include “positive formation in living a healthy, chaste life as a priest”. Similarly, Mgr. Rossetti (2012) recommended that we provide extensive formation and on-going formation in healthy chaste psychosocial and psychosexual living for candidates to the priesthood and for priests. These programs ought to include effective emotional regulation, chaste management of one’s sexuality, and the formation of life-giving chaste friendships with peers.”

Note: in the final session, we are to think and design a strong human formation program and comprehensive human sexuality and affective maturity education for all religious candidates and for those who have been in the ongoing formation.

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