

CONGREGAZIONE PER I VESCOVI

**SAFEGUARDING OF MINORS
PART OF THE DNA OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION**

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**SE VITORI DELLA GIOIA
DEL VANGELO**

Atti del corso annuale di formazione
per i nuovi Vescovi

Throughout the whole Church, people are feeling some part of the experience that those who have been abused describe: outrage, shame, deep sadness, conflicting feelings, an urgency to do something about it.

Because abusive behavior has been going on and covered up for so long, it has entered into the system, and we are now observing something like an epidemic outbreak of a disease. What we see shows that the Church administration to some degree had lost its compass. Priests used other people's lives for their own purposes and needs, and the hierarchy was to some extent covering it up.

It may be simplistic, but I think it is the correct perception, that what we do in terms of safeguarding measures, cleaning up and investigating, we don't do it with a fully committed heart and with full conviction; we hesitate to really get into the mess and admit the scale of its impact. We try to do it as if it were an add-on. We turn it on when we think we need it, switch it off when we don't. It's in the Church's DNA, it's inbuilt, but we don't use it; that's what people perceive.

While it is true that for years many people in the Church have committed themselves to helping with healing and justice for victims, there is still the impression that we are working primarily out of a sense of obligation, because the law and the public require certain measures. How can safeguarding instead become a matter of the heart in the deepest sense?

Sexual abuse destroys the very basis of trust and that is the most important consequence of abuse. It destroys trust in oneself, in others and in God. If the abuser is a priest, a religious or a person within the Church, that becomes the identification of anybody in that position. Then there are many questions that concern psychological disturbance and feelings of guilt. There are very often conflicting emotions and attitudes towards sexuality. The usual question that arises is how can a person put together one's own identity re-

garding what they are worth. Can I venture into a life that early on has been very often and very much harmed by such kind of abuse?

Most victims with whom I have met, and to whom I have listened, state that the one important thing that they all long for is being listened to. It is something that is easily said and not so easily done, because it means that whoever the listener is, needs to be open in his or her mind and heart, and to empathise and understand the depth of suffering of the person abused. Many survivors say they would like somebody in the Church's hierarchy to listen to them. Normally, if the abuse has happened in a diocese, they would ask the bishop, or for a religious congregation, the Provincial. Some don't want to meet with any clergy anymore, so it would need to be somebody else. But all concur that the most important single element in a possible healing process is being really listened to ... all say this is the possible starting point.

What's next? We need better laws and procedures, but these are not enough. There is talk of getting all levels of the Church involved in finding a solution, but it seems that there is resistance to accountability at all levels as well. Appealing to Rome is easier. Taking concrete action is much harder.

The Vatican II-era "Catacomb Pact" could be useful as a reference point to bishops today. 40 bishops of the Second Vatican Council met together at the end of the Council in one of the early Christian catacombs and committed themselves to a simple lifestyle and to giving away signs of power and prestige, effectively giving away control and asking for lay men and women's involvement in decision making commissions. And they (and later 500 other bishops) committed themselves to prioritizing pastoral work that put vulnerable people at the forefront.

We are at a moment of real crisis in the Church; I think nobody can deny that. So what does it mean? We need to return to our roots. And the roots have always been the simple, committed and consistent lifestyle that Jesus Christ lived and asks us to live: focusing our attention on God and our neighbors, and not on our own seemingly indispensable comfortableness and signs of power, prestige and privilege. It means really sharing power, asking lay experts for advice and following it, having functioning checks and balances in church administration, not showing favoritism when choosing personnel, promoting honest and constructive feedback, foregoing personal favors and privileges. The martyrs buried in those catacombs remind us that the Gospel costs something, sometimes death. But even if there is no martyrdom in the

physical sense, at least there can be some kind of evidence in our own lives that following Jesus Christ has a cost.

I hope that bishops understand now once and for all that they have to live out their mission and responsibility morally, canonically and spiritually. And beyond sheer and simple compliance, are they determined and committed with their whole heart to do whatever can be done so that no more people are harmed, and all who have been harmed receive justice?

I think it is no longer enough to invest a little bit more, to apologize with different words, to show more contrition. The time has come for a much deeper change, in Christian terms, a "conversion of the heart". That means following wholeheartedly Jesus' call to put the most vulnerable ones at the core of our attention and mission. This is not, as it has been handled until now by many as if it were an additional task that needs to be addressed now, and after some time we can go back to our "real" ministries. This is the DNA of the Church and it needs to be automatic, without thinking twice about it, in all our thoughts, planning and actions.

The law alone does not solve problems. Yes, we need standards and strategy, but culture eats strategy for breakfast and law does not change culture on its own. People are not complying with the law (e.g., they commit murder and cheat, although they know it's wrong and will be punished). Why are they not compliant? Because they aren't really convinced. With regards to safeguarding, there is an interplay between policies, norms, procedures, guidelines and canon law on one hand, and on the other hand one's attitude and willingness to cooperate – not because I am compelled but because I readily, spontaneously and naturally do whatever can be done so that young people are safe and those who have been harmed receive all the help and support they are entitled to.

A major theological question for me is: What is the role of the priest today? What does a priest do today? We see in most countries, at least in the West, that they do all kinds of things that don't necessarily have to do with priestly pastoral and spiritual ministry: administration, bureaucracy, and organization, for which they have not always received specific training and supervision. Can you bring from within the theology of priesthood (and you may add episcopacy) what is essential and how should it be defined today?

Likewise how do we understand being a Church in the world today? What do we need to learn from modern society, modern science and modern administration? There is a model of theology that is disconnected from all of this, and people may say theology is a completely different cup of tea, but

do we not need to reflect within the context of the day-to-day life in which we live? For example, in an era of mass communication, of social media, of transparency, of authenticity, etc., don't we need to reflect on its impact on our faith life, the relationships among us and our relationship with God?

The key to prevention is people becoming aware of abuse that is happening, speaking out, being informed where to report it and then seeing that due process is being fulfilled. I would like to warn against any impression that abuse will be over once and for all. From my point of view this would be a dangerous illusion, because evil will be with us and we will not be able to exclude abuse from happening simply because we introduce new guidelines. These are necessary and very important steps but never completely sufficient ones in the sense that we will never be able to exclude somebody abusing another person.

This is why we will need to continue education and dissemination of information about reporting, etc. This is the work of the *Centre for Child Protection* (CCP) of the Pontifical Gregorian University. We have online training programs and residential programs for future safeguarding officers. We believe that this is the way change can come about over time and how the Church lives out the mission that is in her DNA (cf. <http://childprotection.unigre.it/>).

Indice

INTRODUZIONE.	3
Udienza di Papa Francesco ai nuovi Vescovi	9
Saluto rivolto al Santo Padre, Card. Marc Ouellet	15
Relazioni	
Introduzione generale all' <i>Evangelii gaudium</i> , S.E. Mons. Víctor Manuel Fernández	19
La missione del Popolo di Dio: le Chiese particolari nella Chiesa Universale, S.Em. Card. Sergio da Rocha	33
La testimonianza di comunione tra i cristiani, S.Em. Card. Kurt Koch	41
Il ministero dell'annuncio nella comunione del presbiterio, S.Em. Card. Blase Cupich	51
L'annuncio della Parola in un mondo mediatico, Rev. P. Antonio Spadaro sj	59
La relazione pastorale e l'equilibrio nella vita affettiva dei sacerdoti, Rev. P. Amedeo Cencini F.D.C.C.	67
Il posto privilegiato dei poveri e l'amministrazione dei beni della Chiesa, S.Em. Card. Gregorio Rosa Chávez	83
Il dialogo interreligioso oggi alla luce dell' <i>Evangelii gaudium</i> , Rev. Mons. Khaled Akasheh	97
La pastorale della cultura e l' <i>Evangelii gaudium</i> , S.Em. Card. Gianfranco Ravasi	111
L'esperienza canonica per la gestione di una diocesi, S.E. Mons. Joseph de Metz-Noblat	127

Forum

La vita delle Chiese Cattoliche Orientali, Rev. P. Lorenzo Russo OP	139
La protezione dei minori nella Chiesa, S.Em. Card. Sean Patrick O'Malley	149
Safeguarding of Minors. Part of the DNA of the Church's mission, Rev. P. Hans Zollner SJ	157
Il bene comune e la pace sociale secondo i quattro principi di <i>Evangelii gaudium</i> , Rev. Mons. Bruno Maria Duffé	161
La Sezione Migranti e Rifugiati a servizio delle Chiese locali, Rev. P. Fabio Baggio C.S.	171

Ritiro Spirituale

Motivazioni spirituali per un rinnovato impulso missionario, Rev. P. François Marie Léthel O.C.D.	189
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Omellie

Giovedì della XXII settimana del Tempo Ordinario, S.Em. Card. Lorenzo Baldisseri	213
Venerdì della XXII settimana del Tempo Ordinario, S.Em. Card. Beniamino Stella	217
Natività della Beata Vergine Maria, S.Em. Card. Angelo De Donatis	221
Lunedì della XXIII settimana del Tempo Ordinario, S.Em. Card. Kevin Joseph Farrell	225
Martedì della XXIII settimana del Tempo Ordinario, S.Em. Card. Pietro Parolin	229
Memoria del Santo Nome di Maria, S.Em. Card. Angelo Amato . .	233
Memoria di San Giovanni Crisostomo, S.Em. Card. Marc Ouellet	237