

# REPORT ON THE SAFEGUARDING STUDY TOUR AND PILGRIMAGE TO IRELAND

9-15 June 2025



Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd acknowledges the lifelong trauma of abuse victims, survivors and their families, the failure of the Catholic Church to protect, believe and respond justly to children and adults at risk, and the consequent breaches of community trust.

Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd is committed to fostering a culture of safety and care for children and adults at risk.



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Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd respectfully acknowledges all Traditional Owners of the land and waters of Australia. We pay respect to their Elders, past and present, and young leaders of today and the future. ACSL commits itself to the ongoing work of reconciliation with our Aboriginal families and communities.

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# Executive Summary

This report outlines the key activities, reflections, and outcomes of our Safeguarding Study Tour and Pilgrimage to Ireland. The tour combined structured learning around safeguarding practices within the Church with moments of spiritual enrichment through visits to significant pilgrimage sites. The experience was both educational and deeply moving, fostering a renewed commitment to safeguarding and pastoral care.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE TOUR

- To deepen our understanding of safeguarding policies and procedures within the Irish Church context.
- To celebrate the strength and contribution of Irish women to the protection and care of children and the vulnerable
- To learn about best practices and trends in responding to historical abuse and preventing future harm.
- To engage in personal and group reflection on the spiritual dimensions of safeguarding.
- To visit pilgrimage sites to renew our spiritual mission and sense of purpose in ministry and safeguarding work.

## KEY ACTIVITIES AND VISITS

### a. Safeguarding Meetings and Presentations

- We met with representatives from several organisations and safeguarding offices, including:
  - **The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (NBSCCCI)** – where we learned about their national framework and review processes, and practical insights into parish-level implementation and survivor support.
  - **Meeting with national safeguarding advocacy workers to explore mutual concerns and challenges in regulatory and legislative safeguarding frameworks.**

### b. Pilgrimage Highlights

- Our pilgrimage included Masses and visits to key spiritual and historic sites:
  - **St Teresa's Church** – supporting the Carmelite tradition
  - **St Patricks Cathedral, Dublin**
  - **St Saviours Church, Dublin**
  - **St Francis Xaviers Church, Dublin**
  - **Glendalough** – a peaceful retreat location that provides an opportunity for personal reflection amidst nature and the legacy of St. Kevin and the monastic tradition.
  - **The Mercy International Centre** – a reflection on the enduring legacy of faith and community foundations of the Mercy sisters around the world.

- **Solas Bhríde Centre for Spirituality, Kildare** – insights into the traditional stories, legacy and values of St Brigid.

## REFLECTIONS AND LEARNINGS

- Ireland's painful history of abuse within the Church is acknowledged with great honesty and humility.
- The Church in Ireland has made significant strides in transparency, training, and survivor involvement in shaping safeguarding practices.
- The approach is one of 'one-church' endorsed and supported by both the Episcopal Conference and the Association of Religious.
- There was a strong emphasis on culture change – from a clerical, defensive posture to a survivor-centered, proactive safeguarding approach.
- Pilgrimage served as a powerful metaphor: walking with those who have suffered and seeking renewal and healing both personally and institutionally.
- We observed in some churches that there was a tendency to cling to outmoded habits and unhelpful traditions, including that fostered clericalism which can lead to an abuse of power. This did cause some concern for our church as we move together in a synodal manner.

## OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen local safeguarding practices** by incorporating lessons from the Irish context, particularly around transparency, listening to survivors, and ongoing training.
- **Strengthen partnerships** with Irish safeguarding experts and leaders for future collaboration and exchange.
- **Encourage spiritual reflection** within safeguarding work, ensuring it is rooted in Gospel values of justice, humility, and compassion.
- **Continue the journey** through follow-up sessions, both educational and spiritual, to sustain the momentum from the tour.

## CONCLUSION

Our Safeguarding Study Tour and Pilgrimage to Ireland was a transformative experience. It offered a valuable combination of professional insight, spiritual renewal, and emotional depth. We return with a renewed commitment to creating a Church that is a truly safe and nurturing space for all, especially the most vulnerable.

# The Safeguarding Study Tour and Pilgrimage

## INTRODUCTION

In June 2025, our group of six pilgrims undertook a **Safeguarding Study Tour and Pilgrimage to Ireland**, prior to our attendance at the International Safeguarding Conference in Rome. Our plan was to weave together professional encounters, spiritual reflection, and historical immersion. The journey brought together women from different roles in Church leadership, education, safeguarding, and religious life, united by a shared commitment to justice, healing, and the protection of the vulnerable, as women of faith and women of courage.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Mrs Louise Zavone
- Sr Monica Walsh
- Sr Louise Reeves rsj
- Mrs Tegan Green
- Ms Maria Kervin
- Dr Ursula Stephens

Together, our group visited key safeguarding institutions, sacred sites, and religious communities in Ireland, reflecting on the challenges and hopes of safeguarding in the contemporary Church.

We began our journey with a **walking tour of Dublin**, Ireland's historic capital. Led by our knowledgeable local guide, Pol Tyrrell, we explored key sites that shaped Ireland's cultural and religious identity — from Georgian streets and historic cathedrals to sites of political and literary significance. The walk set the tone for the week, reminding us that safeguarding is carried out in a living tradition — one that honours both history and hope.

## VISIT TO TRINITY COLLEGE AND THE BOOK OF KELLS

A highlight of our time in Dublin was our visit to **Trinity College**, where we viewed the world-famous **Book of Kells** — the 9th-century illuminated Gospel manuscript created by Celtic monks. The intricate artistry and sacred reverence of the manuscript were deeply moving.

As we walked through the **Long Room Library**, surrounded by centuries of wisdom and scholarship, we were reminded that safeguarding, like the Book of Kells itself, is about **preserving what is sacred** — the dignity of each person, especially the vulnerable. The monks who created these texts did so with painstaking care and devotion, reflecting the same spirit we seek to embody in our commitment to justice, truth, and protection.



The newly reimagined Book of Kells Experience is a dynamic and interactive presentation bringing the manuscript's artistry and spiritual significance to life through **immersive visuals**, **digital reconstructions**, and **contextual storytelling**.

We also learned about the **ambitious conservation program** for the Long Room of the Trinity College Library — a monumental effort to restore and preserve this iconic space and its priceless collections. Seeing the balance between **tradition and innovation** in this project was inspiring and reflected the broader theme of renewal that underpinned our entire pilgrimage.

A significant recent addition to the Trinity College library which was seen as most appropriate by our pilgrim group was the addition of the first female sculptures in the long Room - Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), Ada Lovelace (1815 -1852), Augusta Gregory (1852-1932) and Rosalind Franklin (1920-1958). It was heartening to see that these women of great strength and influence were now being honoured.

## ST PATRICKS CATHEDRAL, DUBLIN

Our self- guided tour of Ireland's national and largest cathedral provided some time for immersion into the life and history of Christianity in Ireland. We spent a great deal of time here before we headed off to the Guinness factory for a hearty tour and lunch.

## IMMERSION IN THE LEGACY OF CATHERINE MCAULEY AND THE SISTERS OF MERCY

A deeply reflective day was dedicated to exploring the life, mission, and enduring legacy of **Venerable Catherine McAuley**, foundress of the **Sisters of Mercy**.

This journey took us across several key sites that illuminated her story and her spiritual impact:

### Mercy International Centre – Baggot Street

We began at the **Mercy International Centre**, the original House of Mercy founded by Catherine in 1827. Our time there was guided by Sr Sheila Carney rsm, Board Chair Mercy International Association and included:



- A guided tour of the house, chapel, and Catherine's room, rich in historical detail and spiritual resonance.
- A reflective presentation on the global Mercy mission and the relevance of Catherine's charism to safeguarding and justice today.
- Quiet time for prayer and group sharing, grounding our own commitment to protection and healing in the Mercy tradition.

### St Teresa's Church – Visit to the Crypt

Our visit to **St Teresa’s Church on Clarendon Street**, where the first **13 Sisters of Mercy are buried in the crypt**, provided a moment of solemn reflection. Standing in the presence of these early pioneers of the Mercy mission, we paused to give thanks for their young lives of selfless service and unwavering commitment to the vulnerable.

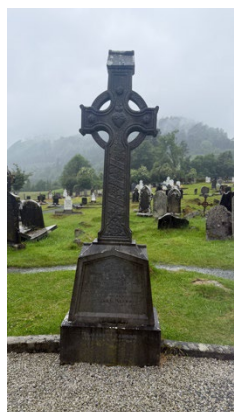
The experience served as a spiritual anchor — a powerful reminder that safeguarding is part of a much larger tradition of protecting human dignity, especially where it is most fragile.

### **Coolock House**

We then visited **Coolock House**, the residence of the Callaghan family, where Catherine spent nearly 20 years as housekeeper and companion. It was here that her compassion deepened, her spirituality matured, and her dream for the House of Mercy began to take form.

We were warmly welcomed by **retired Sisters of Mercy** who now live in community there. Their stories and presence gave a human face to the Mercy tradition and reminded us that religious life, at its best, is rooted in service, humility, and loving community.

## **PILGRIMAGE TO GLENDALOUGH – A SACRED ENCOUNTER IN THE RAIN**



Our visit to **Glendalough**, the ancient monastic valley founded by **St. Kevin**, took place under a soft, persistent rain and grey skies that seemed to draw us inward. The mist and stillness of the valley created a naturally contemplative space. Surrounded by ancient ruins, glacial lakes, and forested hills, we reflected on solitude, resilience, and the sacredness of nature.

Despite the wet weather, our group walked the paths with reverence, allowing the quiet rain to become part of the

spiritual rhythm of the day. The experience reminded us that safeguarding work, like monastic life, often calls for quiet strength, perseverance, and presence — even in the midst of discomfort or uncertainty.

We closed our time in Glendalough with silent prayer among the weathered gravestones and Celtic crosses, invoking the witness of the early Irish saints and seeking grace for the path ahead.



## **VISIT TO AVOCA VILLAGE**

Following Glendalough, we travelled to the charming village of **Avoca**, nestled in the Wicklow hills. Known for its **handweaving tradition** and picturesque setting — famously featured in the TV series *Ballykissangel* — Avoca offered a change of pace and a chance to relax, reflect, and enjoy the beauty of rural Ireland. It was a welcome moment of



lightness and connection, allowing us to process the richness of the day in a more informal setting.

Together, Glendalough and Avoca offered both **spiritual grounding and human warmth**, reinforcing the importance of rest, beauty, and community on any journey of healing and mission.

## **SAFEGUARDING ENGAGEMENTS IN MAYNOOTH – NBSCCCI, TROCAIRE, & PUGIN CHAPEL VISIT**

An important day of our study tour was spent in **Maynooth**, a hub of Catholic formation and safeguarding leadership in Ireland. This day provided a rich blend of professional dialogue, spiritual reflection, and ecumenical insight.

### **National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (NBSCCCI)**

We visited the headquarters of the **NBSCCCI**, where we were welcomed by CEO Aidan Gordon. The staff shared a detailed overview of the national safeguarding framework, including:

- The seven safeguarding standards applied across dioceses and religious orders.
- Independent reviews and how they support accountability and improvement.
- Survivor engagement and the role of continuous training and lay participation.
- Models of restorative justice being used within the church.
- The clarity, transparency, and survivor-focused approach of the NBSCCCI provides a model for safeguarding practice that is rigorous, compassionate, and deeply rooted in Church values.

### **Meeting with Trocaire Safeguarding Staff**

At Maynooth, we also met with Margaret Rooney of Trocaire, who provided an international lens on safeguarding practices. Trocaire's focus includes:

- Risk assessment and capacity building in global humanitarian contexts.
- Implementing child and adult safeguarding policies across diverse cultures.
- Ethical development work rooted in Catholic Social Teaching and human rights.

This session reminded us that safeguarding is global in scope and must remain a core commitment in every context where the Church serves.

### Visit to the Pugin Chapel at St. Patrick's College

We concluded our time in Maynooth with a tour of the magnificent Pugin Chapel, one of the finest examples of Gothic Revival architecture in Ireland. We were guided by Monsignor Joseph McGuinness, Executive Secretary of the Irish Catholic Bishops Conference. The sacred beauty of the space offered a moment of prayer and reflection, anchoring the day's learning in our shared spiritual mission — to be protectors of the vulnerable and stewards of trust.



### MEETING WITH SAFEGUARDING IRELAND

We also had the opportunity to meet with representatives from **Safeguarding Ireland**, an independent national organisation that promotes the safeguarding of adults, particularly vulnerable adults, across health, social care, and faith-based sectors. This meeting expanded our perspective beyond Church structures and highlighted:

- The importance of safeguarding in wider society, including elder care, disability services, and mental health.
- Principles of **supported decision-making** and **autonomy**.
- The need for **interagency collaboration** between Church, state, and community services.
- Their work reinforced the idea that safeguarding is not only a Church responsibility but a **shared societal mission** that depends on advocacy, education, and strong ethical leadership.

In addition to the powerful pilgrimage sites and professional safeguarding engagements, we were grateful for moments of **rest, relaxation, and shared enjoyment** throughout the tour. These opportunities were not only refreshing but also vital to building trust and deepening relationships among the group.

Some highlights included:

- **Evening meals** filled with storytelling, laughter, and conversation that helped form a sense of community and mutual support.
- Time spent exploring local towns, browsing shops, and enjoying the unique rhythm of Irish village life — especially in places like **Avoca** and **Maynooth**.
- Quiet walks in natural settings, particularly amidst the scenic beauty of **Glendalough**, even in the rain.
- Moments of stillness, journaling, or personal prayer, taken individually or in small groups.
- Attending mass in three Dublin Churches: St Teresa's, St Saviours and St Francis Xavier's Church.

- These unstructured times offered space to process the **depth of what we were seeing and learning**, and to integrate the themes of safeguarding, healing, and renewal into our own lives and ministries. They reminded us that **wellbeing and rest** are essential to sustaining any meaningful work — especially in areas as emotionally demanding as safeguarding.

## DINNER WITH DR MARY MCALEESE – WISDOM, COURAGE, AND CONVERSATION



A deeply memorable moment of our journey was the **privilege of sharing dinner with Dr Mary McAleese**, former President of Ireland and a globally respected advocate for human rights, social justice, and reform within the Church.

Our time with Dr McAleese was marked by **warm hospitality**, thoughtful conversation, and courageous insight. Drawing from her years of public service, academic work in canon law, and personal commitment to justice, she offered reflections on:

- The Church's responsibilities in safeguarding and survivor advocacy.
- The role of **lay leadership and women's voices** in shaping a more accountable and inclusive Church.
- Her experiences navigating **faith, leadership, and institutional change** with honesty and grace.

This gathering was more than a social occasion — it was a moment of profound encouragement and challenge. Dr McAleese reminded us that the path toward safeguarding and renewal demands both **compassion and clarity**, as well as the courage to ask difficult questions in the service of truth.

We left the dinner with renewed conviction and a deep sense of solidarity with others across the Church who are working for **transparency, dignity, and healing**.

## REST, RELAXATION, AND CULTURAL JOY

While much of our journey focused on spiritual pilgrimage and safeguarding reflection, we also made space for **relaxation, laughter, and celebration** — vital parts of building a healthy, grounded community.

A highlight was a **night of traditional Irish music and dancing**, where we experienced the **vibrant heart of Irish culture**. The lively music, warm hospitality, and spirited dancing brought smiles all around — and even encouraged a few brave steps by Sr

Monica on the dance floor! In these moments, we were reminded of the joy that binds people together across cultures and generations.

This evening of music and shared laughter offered not just entertainment, but renewal — a space where community could deepen in a spirit of joy, rhythm, and connection.

## FINAL PILGRIMAGE DAY – SOLAS BHRIDE SPIRITUALITY CENTRE, ST BRIGID'S CATHEDRAL, ST BRIGIDS CATHOLIC CHURCH AND ST. BRIGID'S WELL, KILDARE

Our final day was spent in **Kildare**, a place long associated with **St. Brigid**, one of Ireland's three patron saints and a figure of deep spiritual and pastoral significance. Known for her **care for the poor, her healing ministry, and her leadership within early Irish Christianity**, St. Brigid is a powerful model for anyone engaged in the ministry of safeguarding.



We were greeted by Sr Phil and Sr Rita at the Solas Bhríde Spirituality Centre, an initiative of the Brigidine Sisters. The centre is a place for people of all faith and no faith, housed in a building designed in the shape of the Brigidine Cross. After being welcomed with tea, coffee and scones, the essence of Irish hospitality, we gathered in the Brigid room to sit with the flame of hope justice and peace as Sr Rita spoke about this remarkable woman.



Whilst the rain was ever present, we journeyed into the township where Sr Phil guided us to St Brigid's Cathedral, St Brigid's Catholic Church and to the **ancient well of St. Brigid**, a peaceful site on the edge of the town, where water still flows beneath a canopy of trees. The group gathered in silence and prayer, reflecting on Brigid's legacy as a protector, healer, and founder of community. The well's simplicity and serenity invited us to lay down the weight of the week — the challenges, stories, and commitments we had carried — and to receive grace for the journey ahead.



For many, this final pilgrimage stop served as a **moment of closure and blessing**, grounding our safeguarding mission in the deep well of Irish Christian tradition and in Brigid's enduring spirit of **hospitality, ecological awareness, social justice, and gentle strength**.





## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

*My experience on the Pilgrimage and Study Tour has been so enriching on many levels. The exploration of Irish Catholic Heritage was profound, the visits to sites where St Brigid, St Patrick and St Kevin are honoured was very moving. I especially enjoyed the visit to the Catherine McAuley Centre and the Brigidine Solas Bhride centre. The contemporary expression of these charisms is alive and well in many places around the world today. The visit to the actual sites brought the stories alive for me personally. An additional highlight was meeting with Safeguarding Professionals at Maynooth, an opportunity to share the journey of steps being taken to protect children and adults at risk. Another highlight was meal and conversation with former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese.*

*The visit to Rome and attendance at the Safeguarding Conference was extremely beneficial and the international experience of so many presenters added a richness to our experience. It was a chance to see the progress made by Australia since the Royal Commission into Institutional abuse. The input was well-received by participants. A significant cohort of Australians were present at the Conference and it was a chance to further our networks, nationally and internationally. The visits to significant sacred sites in Rome was a renewed affirmation of the global context of the Catholic Church and the committed people of faith around the world working to enhance safeguarding for children and adults at risk.*

*It was a privilege to travel with my five co-pilgrims and we have shared many moments of faith and reflection, of masses in sacred places and new insights together. I will always be grateful for such an experience and for such companions.*

**Louise Reeves rsj**

*As is usually promised, a trip to Ireland brings all seasons. We were not disappointed. On what were to become two quite significant days for me... the skies opened and we were hit by constant rain.*

*Yet, I found the experience of walking in the rain in the footsteps of St Kevin amongst his monastic ruins and following the pathways of St Brigid in Kildare made our pilgrimage much more real and tangible. Even though I was fairly soaked through, I felt I was in good company with the spiritual guides of old and supported by my newfound pilgrim friends.*

**Maria Kirvan**

*It was a delight to be part of a small group of strong women visiting places of womanly vision and action on behalf of justice in Dublin. We were given presentation on the origins of the Sisters of Mercy and of the Brigidine Sisters. Visiting Trinity College & the Book of Kelly plus St Patrick's Cathedral and learning about the associated histories was fascinating.*

*At one church we had an experience of a celebration of Eucharist that spoke to an outdated clericalism. It reminded us that the Journey of Inclusion and of Synodality in the Catholic Church needs much encouragement.*

*The rain on our road trips to Glendalough and Kildare did not detract from appreciating the significance of these historical sites. We had fun times in each other's company over many shared meals, in particular an informal meal with Dr Mary McAleese, former President of Ireland.*

*I found participation in the International Safeguarding Conference to be a powerful expression of how the Catholic Church fails women at a systemic level when it comes to accountability for sexual & spiritual abuse. Common failures were shared from countries across the globe developing & western alike).*

*The large number of participants and the greater than expected number of poster presentations was a visible sign of the compelling need for women's voices to be heard.*

**Monica Walsh sotgs**

