

# Articles

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## The Catholic Church's Responsibility in Creating a Safeguarding Culture

### Abstract

The safeguarding of minors and of vulnerable adult persons is an intrinsic aspect of the mission that the Lord has entrusted the Church and it is the responsibility of all the faithful to fulfil it, whatever capacity they hold in the Church. Unfortunately, it is not possible to eradicate child abuse entirely as it is a human reality, but much can be done by creating a culture of safe space and safe relationships within the Church and beyond. The Catholic Church, as the oldest and biggest institution in the world and with its religious and moral values, has a special responsibility in preventing any kind of abuse, in protecting the most vulnerable, and furthermore, in Safeguarding; in creating safe spaces and safe relationships. Listening to victims and survivors of abuse who have been harmed in the Church or outside, is key for being and acting in a responsible, accountable, and transparent way. This is the cornerstone for credibility and for promoting the faith.

### Keywords

Safeguarding, Responsibility, Accountability, Victims, Power, systemic aspects of organization.

As this article is being prepared, a wide public discussion is on the way about the much-publicized report on how abuse cases were handled in the archdiocese of Munich and Freising, about Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's response to that report, about the situation of the Catholic Church in Germany and in general today, and what more the Holy See could do to help fight this plague within the church. Over and over again, after the publication of every new report in different parts of the world on the abuse and its cover-up, one can see concentrated there, in "focus" the big questions for the Church (but also for society at large) – sex, money, power, leadership, relationships, relationship to the State, to outside experts and to the media. The core challenge is the relationship between the church or Faith and the World, an issue Vatican Council II had begun to address but didn't follow through, and so a 19th century defensive mentality still prevails, as Cardinal Martini noted when he said that the church was 200 years behind the times.<sup>1</sup>

In 2018, Pope Francis wrote a letter to the People of God, addressing the horrible crimes of clerical sexual abuse that have come to the fore in recent years. In this text, he states: "Looking ahead to the future, no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening, but also to prevent the possibility of their being covered up and perpetuated."<sup>2</sup> Speaking about the specifics for such a culture, one could probably write thousands of pages and *still* would not have covered all the important facets and nuances. Consequently, this short article does nothing more than scratch the surface and focuses only on a few central aspects by sharing some reflections around the key terms used in its title: What does *responsibility* mean in this context? Whom do we have in mind when talking about the responsibility of the *Catholic Church*? Why use the word *safeguarding*? How is it related to the protection from and prevention of *abuse*? And, how to work on a real *cultural* shift?

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-19451439#:~:text=Italian%20Cardinal%20Carlo%20Maria%20Martini,our%20prayer%20rooms%20are%20empty.%22> (04.02.2022).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180820\\_lettera-popolo-didio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html) (04.02.2022).

## 1. Responsibility

Over the last three years, the discussion focused not only on individual perpetrators and their responsibility, but also on institutions and the co-responsibility of those who knew or could have known about the crimes but had not acted in accordance with canonical or civil norms. With the words of the President of the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar, Fr. A. Orobator, SJ, one could describe the current perception and state of the Catholic Church as follows: “To put it simply and starkly, the view is widespread and largely justified that the institutional and clerically regimented church is no longer a safe place for the child.”<sup>3</sup> Against this backdrop, countless ecclesial leaders, faithful as well as secular institutions, have stressed that the Catholic Church has a *special* responsibility to change and has started to do so. Looking a bit closer, the call for this special responsibility can be, and often is, explained by varying reasons and motives.

The first and most obvious reason is that the Church must show that she has learned from her blatant failures in safeguarding children and vulnerable persons in order to clear her name and regain trust. For many, the motivations to do so are to counteract the tragic consequences as well as to salvage the Church's tarnished image which the abuse scandals have created over the last decades. From a human point of view, it may seem understandable that the natural approach might be to clench one's teeth (“the storm will subside one day”) or begin a counterattack (“everything is a media campaign” or “others are doing worse things”). However, this is only a recipe for much bigger scandals. In a world where social networks play an increasingly important role and where credibility is one of the highest ideals, an attitude of sincerity and openness is indispensable. It is true that there might be a special focus on the abuse cases in the Church, although there are many other organizations and places where abuse is happening especially in the family. This cannot however, be an excuse, which becomes all the more obvious in the light of the Church's inner call.

The frequently expressed intent to focus on “getting back to our real work” (understood as the proclamation of the Gospel) risks falling short enormously as it leads to a Church responsibility that remains first and foremost self-referential and self-centered. In the end, the Church may be so driven by a variant of the same interest and concern that has led to abuse, to disregard victims

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<sup>3</sup> A. Orobator, *Between Ecclesiology and Ethics: Promoting a Culture of Protection and Care*, “Theological Studies” 80 (2019) 4, pp. 916–918.

and their suffering, to negligence in pursuing the duties laid out in civil and canon laws, and to cover-ups of crimes that feed into the partly still existent resistance to openly face the crisis. In all of this, the reputation of the institution and its protection remains the highest priority.<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, when one speaks of overcoming and preventing “scandal,” this can also have a negative and harmful connotation. When key Church documents – like the Code of Canon Law – speak about *scandal*, the word does not only denote a moral wrongdoing but describes a misbehavior that is qualified by the disgrace and outrage it creates among the public and/or faithful. When the most important goal is defined as to avoid public scandal, the revelation of abuse cases and their mishandling can consequently be easily misunderstood as the main manifestation of the problem and not seen as an important and necessary step towards healing and renewal.<sup>5</sup> In the aforementioned logic, media, victims, and others, who bring abuse atrocities to the public eye, are quickly deemed as trying to attack the Church and aim for her destruction. However, child protection, if it is not accompanied by doing justice to victims and taking on the responsibility for past failures and crimes, risks becoming a lip service and/or something that is primarily associated with anxiety and formal compliancy. What this can mean in practice was observed and described by a pupil who attended the English Benedictine Ampleforth College. Groomed and sexually abused at that school long after the first protection protocols and policies were put in place, she gave the following testimony to the British Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse: “[R]eflecting on her experience of child protection at Ampleforth, she told us that it became ‘less about what was best for the child, and more [about] what the school should do if a false accusation or... allegation was made against a member of staff. It was more an atmosphere of fear rather than an atmosphere of caring and common sense...’”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. e.g. Commission of Investigation into Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, 2009, (Report, I, 1.30; 1.35).

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, (to give an example,) the 2018 Pennsylvania Investigation came to the following conclusion when looking at some local diocesan behavior in the past: “the main thing was not to help children, but to avoid ‘scandal.’ That is not our word, but theirs; ... Finally and above all, don’t tell the police. Child sexual abuse, even short of actual penetration, is and has for all relevant times been a crime. But don’t treat it that way; handle it like a personnel matter, ‘in house.’” *Pennsylvania 40th State-wide Investigating Grand Jury*, 2018, Report I, Redacted, 14 August 2018, 2.3.

<sup>6</sup> IICSA, *Ampleforth and Downside Investigation Report*, August 2018, 64, par. 168.

In contrast to explaining the Church's special responsibility only in reaction to primarily external pressure and extrinsic motivations, it thus seems also important to emphasize the unique responsibility that arises from the core of her message and *raison d'être*. In this regard, the first words of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et spes*, are as simple as they are poignant: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."<sup>7</sup> By taking this to heart, we may be able to make it out of the dark tunnel in which much of the Church's reactions seem to be confined. The change in perspective is fundamental: Focus on and start with the well-being and suffering of the human beings of today not only, but also, when the harm is created by the leaders and representatives of the Church herself. It is obvious that the topic of sexual abuse in the Church will still be in high tide for a long time to come. Child abuse in the Catholic Church will continue to receive attention from the media for the foreseeable future, and for many, it is the most significant stumbling block in their attitude towards the Church and their very faith. For those not so familiar with the Catholic tradition, it may sound pathetic when the Pastoral Constitution states that "The Church has a single intention: that God's kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass."<sup>8</sup> This self-understanding and ultimate goal makes it clear that the Church cannot be satisfied with meeting just the bare minimum legal requirements and standards nor with only focusing on the children and vulnerable people within her own institution. In that sense, the "care and protection [for children and vulnerable adults] form an integral part of the Church's mission in building the Kingdom of God."<sup>9</sup> Using a metaphor from the tech-world, safeguarding minors and vulnerable adults is not an App that one can switch on or off according to one's current needs, it needs to be built-in to all activities of the Church – spiritual, pastoral, educational, charitable etc. – as a vital component. This is all the more true as the Church has a special responsibility due to her enormous outreach, influence, and proximity to children and vulnerable adults. She is the biggest non-governmental provider of educational and welfare services to children in the world. There

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<sup>7</sup> *Gaudium et spes* 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Gaudium et spes* 45.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.chiesacattolica.it/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2019/06/27/Linee-guida-per-la-tutela-dei-minori-e-delle-persone-vulnerabili.pdf> (04.02.2022).

are more than 1.3 billion Catholics worldwide, many of whom are under the age of 18. In the field of education, the Catholic Church runs over 71,000 infant schools/kindergartens with more than 7.3 million pupils in almost all countries. In addition, there are more than 101,000 primary schools with over 34.5 million pupils as well as more than 48,500 secondary schools with over 20.3 million pupils worldwide. The Church also cares for 2.3 million high school pupils and almost 3 million university students.<sup>10</sup> Given all the good work that has been done for centuries in these institutions, maybe one doesn't want to hear about abuse and violence anymore and just wants to go about life as usual, as if nothing had happened. However, if the Church faces the problem head on, as she lives up to her own ideals, she can draw some bigger conclusions and lessons.

## 2. Listening to Victims and Understanding Abuse

A "victim" is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as someone "that has been hurt, damaged, or killed or has suffered, either because of the actions of someone or something else, or because of illness or chance."<sup>11</sup> Inquiries, testimonies, and direct conversations tell us that there have been various – often cumulative – levels of abuse and harm. Often interconnected, they usually refer to divergent periods and events and can have differing causes. Firstly, there is the actual sexual, physical, or spiritual abuse committed by a person of the Church or in the Church context. Secondly, there is the institutional knowledge, toleration, and cover-up of the abuses committed. Thirdly, there is an institutional reluctance toward and obstruction of disclosing failures, a refusal to change, and a lack of concern for victims once abuses become public. Each dimension causes new pain and anger, especially for those directly abused, but also for their families, communities, and the larger public.

Abuse in the Church cannot be limited to the typical headline of: "a priest abusing a child." There have been various lay offenders, and not all victims of sexual and other forms of abuse are minors of age. For example, we refer to the charismatic leaders of spiritual movements, such as Jean Vanier who founded the L'Arche movement. Additionally, reports such as those provided

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.fides.org/en/stats/66809-VATICAN\\_Catholic\\_Church\\_Statistics\\_2019](http://www.fides.org/en/stats/66809-VATICAN_Catholic_Church_Statistics_2019) (04.02.2022).

<sup>11</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/victim> (04.02.2022).

by the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry make it clear that abuses were furthermore also perpetrated by female religious: “The Nazareth Houses in Scotland were, for many children, places of fear, hostility and confusion, places where children were physically abused and emotionally degraded with impunity. There was sexual abuse of children which, in some instances, reached levels of the utmost depravity. Children in need of kind, warm, loving care and comfort did not find it. Children were deprived of compassion, dignity, care and comfort.”<sup>12</sup> Beyond that, children are not the only victims; in all groups of the faithful there are victims – among them also religious sisters and seminarians. Inherent to the core sentence of *Gaudium et Spes* 1 is the responsibility to listen first, to understand what the pain and wounds are, to make yourself vulnerable and responsive to stories of those who suffer – or have suffered – from sexual abuse and its grievous consequences. People who have been sexually (or otherwise) abused by clerics and other representatives of the Church expect, at the very least, to be heard by another representative of the Church. They want to speak out, to vent, to cry, to express their anger and their wishes for the future. They want the institution that has caused them so much pain to admit it and do everything humanly possible to remedy it.

Those who listen – whether they are bishops, vicars general, school principals, or parish priests – must know this and really want to listen with all their heart, avoiding the attitude of defending themselves or the institution. They have to be able to look squarely at all the misfortune of a destroyed life and faith. For some victims, the most important step on the road to healing is finding an open ear and heart. Everything else – financial compensation, therapy, and spiritual accompaniment – has its place. Yet many of those who suffered abuse as children by people they trusted have, as their higher aim, to find their place in the community of Jesus’ disciples. They are deeply wounded if they find the doors closed (literally and figuratively) to their search for justice and liberation. The books by Daniel Pittet,<sup>13</sup> Véronique Garnier-Beauvier,<sup>14</sup> and Luisa Bove<sup>15</sup> are powerful testimonies on this subject. All three are active members of the Church and deeply involved in a spiritual journey of healing. In this they represent

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.childabuseinquiry.scot/media/2146/findings-s0n-case-study-2\\_p7-190628.pdf](https://www.childabuseinquiry.scot/media/2146/findings-s0n-case-study-2_p7-190628.pdf) (04.02.2022).

<sup>13</sup> D. Pittet, *La perdono, padre*, Milano 2017, Piemme.

<sup>14</sup> V. Garnier-Beauvier, *Au troisième jour: De l’abîme à la lumière*, Paris 2017, Artège.

<sup>15</sup> L. Bove, *Giulia e il lupo. Storia di un abuso sessuale nella Chiesa*, Milano 2016, Ancora.

a group of victims that is not often appreciated, neither by other victims nor by Church officials, as they raise their prophetic voice and have an important message for the Church as wounded members *in* the Church. Therefore, it was so important that the Holy Father requested all participants of the February 2019 Meeting of Presidents of Bishops Conferences on the Protection of Minors to prepare themselves before they came to Rome by entering personally into the experiences of survivors by encountering and listening to them. The message was clear – and not only to the bishops: only when one understands how much sexual and other forms of abuse impacts a person’s life, can change happen. Cardinal Cupich’s characterization of “radical listening” made this clear during the 2019 summit in Rome: “The first orientation is a perpetual stance of radical listening to comprehend the deadening experience of those who have been sexually abused by clergy. The Church as a loving mother must continually open herself to the heart-breaking reality of children whose wounds will never heal. Such a stance of listening calls us to cast aside the institutional distance and relational blinders that insulate us from coming face to face with the raw destruction of the lives of children and vulnerable people that clergy sexual abuse brings. Our listening cannot be passive, waiting for those who have been abused to find a way to us. Rather, our listening must be active, searching out those who have been wounded, and seeking to minister to them. Our listening must be willing to accept challenge, and confrontation and yes, even condemnation for the Church’s past and present failures to keep safe the most precious of the Lord’s flock. Our listening must be vigilant, understanding that only by inquiry and perseverance, and action in the face of signs of sexual abuse can we fulfil God’s mandate. Finally, our listening must bring with it the willingness to confront the past grave and callous errors of some bishops and religious superiors in addressing cases of clergy sexual abuse, and the discernment to understand how to establish just accountability for these massive failures.”<sup>16</sup>

Such a listening is, thus, not just an exercise of empathy and good-will. Only by really listening can one understand the devastating scale, effects, and complexity of the phenomenon and is prepared to draw clear consequences. The President of the Australian Bishops Conference, Archbishop Mark Coleridge expressed it in this way: “This conversion is in fact a Copernican revolution. Copernicus proved that the sun does not revolve around the earth but the earth

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources\\_card-cupich-protezioneminori\\_20190222\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_card-cupich-protezioneminori_20190222_en.html) (04.02.2022).

around the sun. For us, the Copernican revolution is the discovery that those who have been abused do not revolve around the Church but the Church around them. In discovering this, we can begin to see with their eyes and to hear with their ears; and once we do that, the world and the Church begin to look very different. This is the necessary conversion, the true revolution and the great grace which can open for the Church a new season of mission.”<sup>17</sup>

Reflecting on the multidimensionality of abuse, Pope Francis has, in recent times, often spoken of the triad linking sexual abuse, the abuse of power, and the abuse of conscience.<sup>18</sup> Such an insight “requires, for example, to see abuse not only as a sin against the sixth commandment – as the 1983 Code of Canon Law does – or against chastity – as the 1990 Code for the Eastern Churches does –, but to see it as delict. It is also of extreme importance that the church begins to see the delict as a violation of the dignity of another person. Once it is seen in that perspective it is possible to see the need for canonical procedures in which the (advocate of the) victim has a role, as well as attend to the question of reparation of damage inflicted on another person.”<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Proper Standards and Structures

Experience teaches us that the public forgives repentant sinners more easily than it does institutions that delay bringing forth the truth and evade responsibility. It's difficult to understand why the Catholic Church, whose penitential theology assigns such importance to confession and sincere repentance, has such difficulty admitting its own guilt, repenting, and starting over. This seems to be due to a natural reluctance towards checks and balances and mechanisms of transparency, especially when it comes to sexuality, money, and power. However, no person who is truly detached from himself or his own wealth and influence should fear these attitudes. In the words of John's Gospel, “the truth will make

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<sup>17</sup> M. Coleridge, Homily at the end of the “Protection of minors in the Church” meeting, 24 February 2019 <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2019/02/24/0155/00320.html#en> (04.02.2022).

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180820\\_lettera-popolo-didio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html) (04.02.2022).

<sup>19</sup> <https://iadc.unigre.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Wijlens-Graduation-Diploma-CCP-14.02.2020.pdf> (04.02.2022).

you free.”<sup>20</sup> Looking at the regional concepts, policies, and cultures that have (or have not) been introduced and practiced in order to better protect children and other vulnerable adults in the Catholic Church, one notices a great variation and diversity. At the same time, there are universal requirements defined by the Pope and the Roman Curia, as well as overlapping structural conditions and risk factors, that provide some common framework. In May 2011, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had, for instance, asked all Bishops’ Conferences worldwide to prepare guidelines, which define clear and coordinated procedures in dealing with clerical child abuse. Although these guidelines were due after one year (i.e. in June 2012), ten years after the deadline, a few Episcopal Conferences – especially from Africa and Asia – have not yet responded. By now, the large majority of Bishops’ Conferences has however become active, even though a certain number of such guidelines lack a thorough elaboration of all areas mentioned in the letter of the CDF.<sup>21</sup>

With the 2016 Motu Proprio “As a loving mother,” Pope Francis made it easier for himself, as well as for competent bodies of the Roman Curia, to discipline and remove bishops and religious superiors who had been negligent in the exercise of their governing responsibilities, even when their negligence was not criminal:<sup>22</sup> “In the case of the abuse of minors and vulnerable adults it is enough that the lack of diligence be grave.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, following up on the 2019 summit, in June 2019, Pope Francis adopted the Motu Proprio “You are the light of the world”<sup>24</sup> (*Vos Estis Lux Mundi*) which sharpened and amended the general norms: now, *inter alia*, it is demanded from each diocese to set up an efficient and easily accessible reporting system within the following 12 months. Additionally, a process for examining allegations against bishops within the regional Church contexts is defined, and this makes it possible for lay experts to get involved in Church investigations. In December 2019, the Pope abolished the pontifical secrecy in dealing with cases of sexual abuse. The fact that incidents had been

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<sup>20</sup> John 8:32.

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20110503\\_abuso-minori\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20110503_abuso-minori_en.html) (04.02.2022).

<sup>22</sup> <https://catholicerald.co.uk/analysis-how-the-popes-reform-will-change-abuse-reporting/> (04.02.2022).

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap\\_20160604\\_come-una-madre-amorevole.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20160604_come-una-madre-amorevole.html) (04.02.2022).

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20190507\\_vos-estis-lux-mundi.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20190507_vos-estis-lux-mundi.html) (04.02.2022).

treated with such a high degree of confidentiality had made the disclosure of information to national courts and state prosecutions much more difficult.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Power in the Ecclesial Context

Clericalism plays a prominent role in the perception and discussion of the root cause of abuse. Many perceive that priests and bishops directly or indirectly communicate that: “I (sc. and no one else here) represent Christ and the Church”; “I do not need anyone to tell me which way to go”; “I can take what I want; I renounce so much anyway”; “No one can criticize me”; “When the media attack us, it is a sign that we are in the following of the Crucified One”; “Those out there do not understand us”; “My vocation is to serve (sc. in a position of power perceived as absolute)”; “I do not need to justify myself, I have a clear conscience, I can clear this up with my Lord God.” This – and even more – could be subsumed under the heading “clericalism”: a sense of entitlement that arises solely from the priestly or episcopal office, as if this were a reason to feel superior and to be able to assert far-reaching claims. In addition, it is to be considered that, together with it, images that are connected with priesthood per se, also resonate transculturally and interreligiously. In all major cultures there are priests or priest-like figures who, in addition to their spiritual role, enjoy special veneration and privileges. This does not necessarily mean it is specific to the Catholic Church. This also exists in the natural religions, taking on a different name, and expressed in various forms and rites. But when it comes to the role and office of the priest per se, many of these transcultural images, symbols, identifications, and projections resonate. The Catholic image of the priest has undergone many changes in the past 2,000 years. The priestly image of many who grew up in Catholic milieus in our latitudes – as well as in Ireland, the USA, or Australia – is just about to collapse. It is changing as we speak. Where once absolute trust in priests and the Church prevailed, there is now a deep-seated distrust, if not contempt. The reason is that, it has become clear that it is only now that, it is being discussed (Why only now? Nobody really knows the answer to that), how the connection between spiritual theologically attributed and church-law sanctioned power has contributed to covering up and denying

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<sup>25</sup> <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2019/12/17/1011/02062.html#en> (04.02.2022).

sexualized violence for decades – even centuries. Here one must theologially and psychologically reflect on how these different levels or strands have grown together and how they could connect negatively or even destructively. If the connection between Church leadership and sacramental ministry leads to the priest being entirely self-reliable and feeling more and more omnipotent, then obviously sooner or later the spiritual level will also get into trouble. Then the temptation becomes very great, not to point to Christ and his act of redemption, but to present oneself as participating in his “omnipotence” and to make use of it. That has undoubtedly led to the self-perception and the perception of others to become exaggerated, creating a feeling of inviolability and an attitude which claims: “Because I’m a priest, I can take whatever fits. Not because I want to seek God and to follow Christ, not because I have reflected more on faith, no, but simply because I am a priest, for this alone I am entitled to it.”

These are more or less pronounced signs of narcissistic personality traits. The question is: how is this promoted by a certain type of formation, by a certain type of theology, by a certain type of organizational structure? But how is this reflected, and how is it changed? For years I have asked myself why people react so sharply when it comes to sexual violence by priests. Because if you look at the statistics, you know that 95% of all sexual violence happens in the familial context. There are no comparative figures for school teachers, doctors, or psychologists, but in all probability the proportions of abusers among them are not very different. The Catholic clergy are the only ones of whom we have reliable figures, because it is the only professional group in the world that has provoked such a decidedly scientific interest in relation to perpetrators of abuse. Every case we hear and read about in the news that deals with a Catholic priest who has abused leads to verbal aggression, bitterness, and despair. Understandably so, because the ideals and expectations with regard to the conduct of priests is higher than it is for school teachers, police officers, or sports coaches. The moral and religious claim is fundamentally different. Where this claim is not met, it is clear that people are much more disappointed, especially in those areas and under the premises that people expected more from priests anyway and had a basic trust in them. In this respect, the abuse that is exercised by clerics – and this is something I have learned over the years – is more serious.

When the meeting of the Presidents of the Bishops’ Conferences and Superiors General was prepared in February 2019, it was clear that it was necessary to take a critical look at the structural, institutional components that made the abuse and its cover-up possible. The magic word that emerged from the

American discussion was “accountability.” When attempts were made to translate the word accountability into Italian, Spanish, French, or Portuguese, it was found that, while it is possible to describe what is meant, there is no equivalent noun in any of these four languages that could convey “accountability” in the sense used here. If I have no term for a word, if I have no term for a fact, what does it mean? It means that I do not think about it and I do not talk about it. The culture of accountability is strong in the Anglo-Saxon world and also partly in the German-speaking world, but it is not easy to find in the Catholic countries of Italy, Spain, Brazil, Congo, or Mexico. Where there is no culture of accountability, there is also little to no acceptance of processes like auditing and monitoring (in this case of the implementation of safeguarding guidelines and policies).

Certainly, all these elements are crucial. They alone, however, do not entail a real conversion and cultural shift. In contrast, concentrating purely on these things may even trigger some opposite effects. To quote Archbishop Coleridge, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast ... You can talk strategy and structure all you like, but if it doesn’t change the culture, you’re really adopting a cosmetic approach.”<sup>26</sup> Using the words of Pope Francis, you/one could even claim that “the structural and organizational reforms are secondary – that is, they come later. The first reform must be the attitude”<sup>27</sup> and, one could add, culture. Culture within the Church includes her self-image from an implicit understanding of herself as “societas perfecta” to a Church which acknowledges that her leaders and her members are vulnerable.<sup>28</sup> This kind of vulnerability and willingness “to discern and be humble enough to change your mind, to apologize and take action”<sup>29</sup> was shown by Pope Francis himself when – after having received the right/correct information – he changed his mind about the situation in Chile which in turn ultimately led to the historical step of a whole Bishops’ Conference

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<sup>26</sup> M. Coleridge, *The Culture of the Catholic Church and the Abuse of Minors* at the “Anglophone Safeguarding Conference”, Rome, 20 June 2018 (private document).

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis> (04.02.2022).

<sup>28</sup> J. Keenan, *The World at Risk. Vulnerability Precarity and Connectedness*, “Theological Studies” 81 (2020), pp. 132–149.

<sup>29</sup> V. Openibo, *Openness to the World as a Consequence of the Ecclesial Mission*, Presentation during the “Protection of minors in the Church” meeting, 23 February 2019 [https://www.vatican.va/resourcess/resourcess\\_suoropenibo-protezioneminori\\_20190223\\_it.html](https://www.vatican.va/resourcess/resourcess_suoropenibo-protezioneminori_20190223_it.html) (04.02.2022).

offering its resignation, accepting its systemic co-responsibility for long-term abuse and its cover-up.

## 5. Creating a Safeguarding Culture

The previously mentioned change of attitude and culture will not come about automatically. It will require energy, creativity, and great perseverance. It is easy to think that writing and publishing policies is enough. From the letter to the fulfillment of the law there is a long way to go. Hence, the importance of encouraging initial and ongoing education, as well as professional training – although one needs to insist that only a change in outlook will make them successful: “We as a Church and I as a lay person/ religious/ priest/ bishop ought and want to think first of the good of the littlest ones.” Standards need to be embedded and awareness needs to be created and spread in Church and society. Here, the Me Too movement has been helpful in broadening society’s mind-set about the topic of abuse. The leadership of the Church has certainly played an important role in this, but a mere top-down approach will not work. The whole Church must not simply split off what happened in our memory and in our hearts. There is a danger of a split between ministers and laity. We have to face it together. Theology, psychology, canon law, and spirituality must work together as one to truly make progress. But above all we must integrate those affected by abuse into Church life. There are deeply wounded people in the Church and that means that the trauma they have experienced is also felt by the Church as a whole. This should never be forgotten when the subject of abuse is discussed. In the congregations, at meetings and events, great sensitivity is always needed.

At the same time, there are perpetrators who are members of the Church. A significant number of abusers have most likely been victims themselves, and part of the psychological mechanism that leads to abuse is probably related to the fact that this is how one acts as a result of this trauma. They too need guidance and, above all, supervision.

Aiming at a “culture with absolutely no abuse” is utopian. We have to acknowledge the sobering fact that there may always be cases of abuse in the domain of the Church. The goal is to reduce the opportunities and make it as impossible as possible for abuse to happen. In this sense, inculturation of guidelines and practices of safeguarding does not mean allowing concessions and deviation from a universal norm but contextualization. The fact that there is a certain

plurality in the Church of the world goes hand-in-hand with a sensitive need for distinction and discernment. On the one hand, there are differences that appear legitimate as they allow for speaking and acting in a context-specific manner. On the other hand, there are peculiarities and a perilous particularism which are simply a product of a lack of understanding and indifference toward one of the most challenging subjects the Church is facing. The first type of diversity must be suitably taken into account and addressed professionally. The latter must be tackled. Intercultural sensitivity must never become a cheap excuse for poor safeguarding. It can, however, also be an advantage if it allows for safeguarding to be conducted in a truly adapted and effective way. This means choosing the right personnel, raising awareness among all those who work with youth, developing and implementing guidelines and codes of conduct, creating reference points and outlets for assistance, and – most of all – setting up sustainable safeguarding structures and rigorous training and formation programs. This will change the culture over time so that one understands that whenever the Gospel is proclaimed, whenever something is planned or built, one's immediate thought is: "what does it mean for the people who are vulnerable – especially children?"

Insofar as this happens, the Church will also live up to her mission of being a model for others. The focus on the dignity of the child, including the collaboration against online child sexual exploitation, has shown that there is a unique convening power of the Church with its center in Rome and in the person of the Pope.<sup>30</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The words of *Gaudium et Spes* 1 remind us that the hopes and challenges of the world "out there" are "by design" and intentionally the hopes and challenges of the Church: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."<sup>31</sup> The Church revolves around this, and not the other way round. Christ was more concerned about the little ones, the most vulnerable – their joys and hopes, their sadness and anxieties – than he was about himself, his reputation, or his comfort. One's

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.childdignity.com/> (04.02.2022).

<sup>31</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* 1.

own attempt to live the Gospel may bring one to listen to a person who has been wounded and abused and to feel their pain. Carrying the cross includes acknowledging the presence of crime and sin in an institution called to holiness. By working on safeguarding, bringing into focus the core of the Church's mission, and dealing with the implications of the abuse of power and inconsistencies in lifestyles, the purification of which Popes Benedict XVI and Francis have repeatedly spoken can come about – and this is the expression of the responsibility of the Church in this field.

With all of the resources at her disposal, the Church could become a front-runner and champion of child safety, which would perfectly match her mission to protect and value the most vulnerable. The Church has a long-standing involvement in educational, academic, social, and health institutions, and in many of those institutions, the Church deals with youth and vulnerable people. Safeguarding minors and vulnerable adults is not an issue for a few specialists only; it is every person's, and certainly every Christian's responsibility – not only of the Church leaders, but of all "disciples of Christ."<sup>32</sup> It is not possible to completely eradicate the abuse of minors, but a great deal can be done to create a culture of safe space and safe relationships in the Church. This is not an option; it is integral part of the mission entrusted to the Church by her Lord, and it is her responsibility to fulfill it.

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<sup>32</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* 1.

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