

*Address of Cardinal Sean O'Malley OFM. Cap., at the Opening of the Plenary  
Assembly of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, Palazzo Maffei  
Marescotti, September 20, 2023.*

Dear Colleagues and Friends of the Commission, I want to begin by thanking you for all the time and effort you have been giving to the work of the Commission since we last met in May. When Pope Francis initiated consultations with the Council of Cardinals ten years ago, the issue of sexual abuse in the life of the Church was of great concern to the Holy Father and all members of the Council.

Since that time, the Commission was founded and has made great strides in raising awareness of the reality of the abuse of children, youth and vulnerable adults and initiating educational, and safeguarding programs throughout the world. The achievements of the past decade notwithstanding, there is of course still much work to do. It is my hope that there could be a project to distill the lessons of the past ten years with the aim of providing some deeper insights into the questions we have sought to address.

It is not the usual activity of the Church to focus on the prevention of crimes. We are aware that there are some members of the Church who resist change and even challenge the courageous testimony of survivors. Professional, comprehensive case management is necessary, in order that survivors are not left out in the cold, begging for justice as Juan Carlos reminds us. But we must go further and establish comprehensive programs to prevent abuse. We cannot change the past, but we can only fully address the crimes of the past by creating a future where justice and reparation are a priority. The presentation yesterday on the synergy between the concept of transitional justice and Church teachings on dealing with the reality of sexual abuse was very enlightening.

As we gather for this Plenary Session it is notable that in less than twelve months our Commission has made significant progress. I am indebted to all of you for your commitment and engagement in carrying out our mandate. Since our last Plenary we have launched a Church-wide consultation on an updated set of policy guidelines for church leadership.

The global reality of the Church presents many challenges. National and regional complexity and cultural diversity can seem overwhelming at times. But I am mindful of the encouragement the Holy Father during gave us at our audience in May when he said:

“Even when the path forward is difficult and demanding, I urge you not to get bogged down; keep reaching out, keep trying to instill confidence in those you meet and who share with you this common cause. Do not grow discouraged when it seems that little is changing for the better. Persevere and keep moving forward!”

The requests made by the Holy Father in the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* have called us to a new way of working together, with a focus on being of service to the local churches. It is our hope that the collaboration agreements we have established with the Roman Curia will support that work.

Our mandate, as expressed in *Praedicate Evangelium* and the words of the Holy Father, contains three main pillars:

1. Assist in updating and implementing guidelines throughout the Church;
2. Assisting in the implementation of Vos Estis Lux Mundi to ensure welcome and pastoral care for those who have been abused, and
3. Preparing for the Holy Father an Annual Report on Safeguarding Policies and Procedures in the Church.

Our new premises, graciously approved by the Holy Father, have allowed us to host gatherings of large groups, including survivors. We have also been able to make use of the chapel of St. John the Baptist, where we gathered for the celebration of the Eucharist yesterday. I was very pleased to welcome the representatives of LOUDfence to our meeting and at Mass yesterday. Their presence and witness during the opening Mass was a call to make room for survivors in all moments of the Church's life, especially when we come together to worship. In your name, I thanked Antonia and Maggie for their advocacy and their accompaniment of survivors and their powerful testimony.

These last two of our assemblies are among the most cohesive and constructive in the history of the Commission thus far. I am grateful for your efforts to establish a plan for our work and desire to be united behind an ambitious expanded mandate.

At the last Plenary we achieved the presentation of a much-needed new Universal Guidelines Framework (UGF) for safeguarding policies and procedures throughout the Church. It is encouraging that the Commission has hosted 13 ad limina visits since last September. They include Rwanda, Zambia, Colombia, Mexico, Tanzania, PNG/Solomon Islands, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Cameroon and the Ivory Coast, and the Commission plans to participate in at least 3 more this year, with the Republic of Congo, Togo, Sri Lanka scheduled thus far.

It is encouraging that the Commission is now a regular host of bishops' conferences associated with the Dicastery for the Evangelization of Peoples. It is a notable and substantive achievement for our Commission that our questionnaire about safeguarding measures is being incorporated into the reporting requirements for Bishops Conferences as they prepare for their ad limina visits.

While staff has been closely involved in the ad limina visits given their presence in Rome, there has been participation by some of the members. It is my hope that we can increase the presence of our members at the Commission's ad limina meetings. With greater use of technology, we should be able to increase the regional groups' participation in these meetings with church leadership. The European Group has engaged with the European Conferences of Bishops and of Religious and meetings have taken place with the African regional groups. Last week Commission staff met with the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences. and the new leadership of CELAM, the Council of Latin America Episcopal Conferences. These regional meetings provide our members the opportunity to hear concerns around safeguarding policies and procedures and focus on needs in the regions, providing the necessary input for the Commission's work of responding to where resources may be lacking and where the Commission can have a positive impact.

Our advice to the Bishops Conferences must be practical also, we cannot point to gaps or deficiencies in safeguarding practices in the Church unless we also have a means of bringing practical assistance. With the help of our Memore Foundation, which has seen its

first grants made to the Church in Rwanda, we can both elevate standards and ensure people have the means to implement necessary changes.

Also, it is important that our Annual Report to the Holy Father adequately addresses the experience of religious life. As a religious and a bishop, I believe the Commission can be of assistance in ensuring that safeguarding policies and practices are a common priority of church leadership in each country.

It also seems a good idea that we might explore a collaboration agreement with the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, with note of their role with regard to lay movements in the Church and safeguarding.

As you know, as we gather in Rome, people are arriving and preparing for the Synod on Synodality. I have been invited by the Holy Father to be present, which will take place for most of next month. I will certainly look for opportunities to include safeguarding and the voices of those impacted by abuse in the Synod's discussions.

It is notable that the guiding document of the Synod addresses the scourge of abuse, "including sexual abuse and the abuse of power, conscience and money". It would be helpful if we could provide a message for the Synod participants, sharing our recommendations for their deliberations about these matters. Sound policies and procedures are essential for effective safeguarding. I often say that *ad hoc* decision-making and improvised policies have led to very bad outcomes regarding sexual abuse in the Church.

In a new development and in keeping with the spirit of synodality, the Commission published the *Guidelines* online and provided an online survey seeking feedback from as broad a group of stakeholders as possible. The survey received good media coverage which helped to get the word out. We have received more than 300 responses and 700 proposals. They range from lengthy reflection documents from Bishops Conferences and National Safeguarding bodies to individual bishops and religious and the lay faithful. The observations so far have confirmed the comprehensive nature of the original ten principles that we disseminated. Furthermore, we have now used this feedback to inform the next stage in our guidelines development.

The Commission's contribution to building a synodal church goes beyond a consultative process in the development of policies and procedures. I often say that the credibility of our efforts at keeping children safe depends on the inclusion of all the faithful and even sometimes those who do not consider themselves Catholic. In Boston, I invite people with different backgrounds to become members of my review board, including a Rabbi. We know that lay people, particularly women, have become prominent in our safeguarding world as they have brought their professional skills to this work. Our own Commission has a majority of women members. And as the roles of the members has developed in the new Commission, you have become closer to the realities of the local Church to be of assistance in strengthening safeguarding where the life of the Church is most active, by evaluating the adequacy of the Guidelines as well as their practical implementation in a given context.

Policies and procedures are important directions for good behavior. But unless they are evaluated and examined in an audit process, their effectiveness can be left in doubt. Until good auditing tools are available readily in the local context, as has become customary in

places like Ireland or the United States, we need to promote a culture of accountability for the prevention measures. You have been charged with playing a key role in providing counsel to local church leadership and of learning firsthand about the difficulties and perhaps the growing pains that are taking place. And, indeed, there may be times when the Commission needs to provide stern warnings where it sees situations that could pose a risk to children and vulnerable people. To the extent you are seen as a trusted counsel and guide, your closeness to all those involved will be an invaluable contribution to the Church's ministry, advocating for transparency and accountability. In this way you will be making an important contribution to fulfilling the mission asked of us by the Holy Father, and of reducing any potential risks to children and vulnerable persons in our Church.

In the Curia, the Commission has signed collaboration agreements with the Dicastries for Evangelization and for the Clergy and is set to sign another agreement with the Dicastery for Oriental Churches which we will visit on Friday. They are available on the Commission's website. These aim to standardize the type of communication expected between the Commission and the Dicastries to establish a collaboration that will help review and strengthen how the practice of safeguarding is part of the Curia's work in serving the local Church. The Commission has already provided input on the development of national plans for priestly formation, for example in the case of the Dicastery for the Clergy and has reviewed the ad quinquennium reports for those Episcopal Conferences under the aegis of the Dicastery for Evangelization, which has significantly increased the visibility of the Commission into the problems faced by the Church in the global south.

The agreements will also serve as the basis for data collection for the Annual Report requested by the Holy Father. You have seen this expressed in the Annual Report Blueprint in your materials as well as the Draft Annual Report which we will consider.

In Africa, our agreement with both the President of the Bishops' Conference and the Rwanda Conference of Religious is bearing fruit. Staff recently visited and we will see a video of their efforts tomorrow. You will see in the interviews carried out that there is a great awareness and consciousness about the issues by local church personnel. And just as important is their desire to develop local training resources and to comply with the requirement of Church norms on the receipt of accusations.

As we had hoped, these agreements provide for local ownership of the plans without imposing models from elsewhere, while ensuring that basic safeguard standards are met. We recently received news of the decision of the Church in Central African Republic and in Nigeria to sign a Memorandum of Understanding I understand that the Cameroon bishops, and Sr. Anna Teresa's own Zimbabwe plus Zambia, have been following developments closely and an agreement is in sight. This marks an important statement of intent and sends a clear signal to all Church personnel that there is a united effort at improving safeguarding in our Church.

We will spend all day Thursday reviewing the work done on providing the Holy Father with an annual report on safeguarding policies and procedures in the Church. We gave ourselves a year to consider how we might undertake such a project given the nature of the questions we are facing and the scope of the project. I think we have a solid blueprint which, with your approval, we can make public.

The longer document that has been prepared aims to begin to flesh out the blueprint. It is not complete by any means, but it goes beyond the blueprint to offer specifics out how the methodology found in the blueprint might be converted into real-time information on different areas of the Church's life and ministry. Our proposal is to use the longer document as the basis of ongoing dialogue with the key church partners that are the basis of our reporting. I think that publishing a draft annual report around the time of our next Plenary in March, one that has been shared with and received feedback from those entities included in the report, will produce a more dynamic and change oriented document.

On Friday, in addition to seeking consensus on key decisions, we shall examine the Study Group Protocol that was commissioned during our last Plenary. Many are familiar with the Commission's role as a point of reflection on key areas of concern related to safeguarding that may need deeper thought and examination. It is what we have come to call the "think-tank" element of the Commission. We do not want to lose this aspect of our work. I am grateful for those who have developed a protocol that details how we can establish a Study Group and how it might carry out its work. It is important to state expectations from the outset, assess what staffing needs might be, and an estimated budget. In addition, it will provide some consensus among safeguarding professionals that the questions under study are relevant and urgent to the Church's work.

In addition to the Protocol, we will review the creation of a Study Group on Vulnerable Persons. This is an area of increasing importance and yet debates remain among Church personnel on its precise applicability and how to address appropriately the question of the abuse of vulnerable persons. The Holy Father has spoken about the spiritual and psychological abuses suffered by those in religious life. It is timely that we approach this subject and provide helpful directions ways in which it needs to be addressed. We could call upon experts in Church life, pastoral ministry, formation, canon law, psychology to name a few. Our aim with the Study Group is to incorporate the contributions of those whose task it will be to implement any approved recommendations otherwise our recommendations might not bring about the needed change.

We will also share updates and discussion on the progress in finalizing the Commission's Statutes Bylaws. There have been ongoing meetings for this topic, and I am confident that we will make progress soon. We can also review where we are on our Strategic Plan and what might need adjusting. It is important to evaluate our own working methods and to hold ourselves accountable for what is asked of us and what we have committed to doing.

It is my intention to request a meeting with Cardinal Fernandez and representatives of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith to discuss how the Commission can work together with the Dicastery while respecting our distinctive competencies. With the creation of the new Commission less than a year ago, our new structure and place in the Curia corresponds to that of other dicasteries. Our new configuration no longer considers the President Delegate and Secretary as members, as was previously the case. Rather, these leadership roles oversee the work of the staff and the office. Then there is the specific role of members, which I feel confident to say are unlike any similar roles in the Curia for their engagement and presence in the work carried out. We have done a lot to define roles and expectations but must ensure they are well reflected in our Statutes and Bylaws.

In light of the Synod discussion which is likely to examine models of leadership, ministry and participation, I would like to convoke a small group of Members to evaluate

how the Commission's structure might respond to the calls of the Synod and reflect the need for change, as is rightly demanded by many in the victim/survivor community.

Let me conclude by saying that the Commission has a great foundation behind it, and a very hopeful future going forward, which is due in no small measure to the efforts of those who have served before us. However, it is you who will make our work alive and active in our Church. Let us recommit ourselves to that task.

We can divide up the work and responsibilities between leadership, members, and personnel. I am grateful for and counting on your contributions, cooperation, and collaboration.

You may have heard the adage that says, "when you live under a magnifying glass, it is probably wise to stay away from the heat." For some that choice is not realistic or possible if they want to act and bring about change, as is our role on the Commission. For understandable reasons, there can be a great deal of intensity, passion and anger around the subject matter of our Commission. However, we can find solidarity in vulnerability, we can learn humility from the humiliations of those who have been impacted by abuse, and we can try and be courageous as Pope Francis has urged us. Thank you.