



# TUTELA MINORUM

PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR THE  
PROTECTION OF MINORS

**Opening Address of Cardinal Sean O'Malley**

**Plenary Assembly**

**Tuesday 7 October 2024**

*Palazzo Maffei Marescotti*

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Last week, during a Penitential Liturgy in St. Peter's Basilica preceding the opening of second session of the Synod on Synodality, the Holy Father asked me to read one of seven prayers he had prepared, each seeking forgiveness for the sins of the Church. I would like to share that prayer with you:

I ask forgiveness, feeling ashamed, for all the times we faithful have been complicit in or have directly committed abuse of conscience, abuse of power, and sexual abuse. How much shame and pain I feel when considering especially the sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable people, abuses that have stolen innocence and profaned the sacredness of those who are weak and helpless. I ask forgiveness, feeling shame, for all the times we have used the condition of ordained ministry and consecrated life to commit this terrible sin, feeling safe and protected while we were profiting diabolically from the little ones and the poor. Forgive us, Lord.

The liturgy included the testimony of a man from South Africa who was sexually abused by a priest when he was 11 years of age. He spoke of how the faces of the abused are often “hidden behind a veil of secrecy that the church, historically, has been complicit in maintaining” and of how “for decades, accusations were ignored, covered up or handled internally rather than reported to authorities”. He also spoke of how this lack of accountability “allowed abusers to continue their behaviour” and eroded the trust that so many had once placed in the Church.

His words are all too familiar for many of us; silence, secrecy, complicity, lack of accountability in leadership, as are the repercussions of those failures. For the past ten years, as members and staff of the Commission, we have read the same words in the letters and emails that from all around the world, and we have heard them spoken by the men and women, victims and survivors we have had the

privilege of encountering.

The work of confronting sexual abuse in the life of the Church can bring frustration at a perceived lack of progress and complacency on the part of leadership. While recognizing that reality, it is important to also look to the progress that has been made. Ten years ago, the presence of a victim of clergy sexual abuse speaking his or her truth from the within the heart of the Church would have been unimaginable. Ten years ago, it was inconceivable that a Synodal Assembly, the primary governing council to the Pope, would publicly acknowledge the “the loss of credibility” due to the scandals in the Church, particularly the “sexual abuse and other abuses of minors and vulnerable persons”. Ten years ago, the clerical sexual abuse crisis was seen as an anglophone problem, without consideration of the critical need for safeguarding through the global Church. All of that has changed, and in good part because of the work and commitment of this

Commission.

The document being studied at during the Synod is the result of consultations in parishes throughout the world. It allowed people to express their understanding of a synodal Church and to identify priority issues, which consistently included safeguarding children and vulnerable persons.

Catholics today identify the culture and practice of transparency and accountability as essential to the mission of the Church. Though establishing the priority of acknowledging and taking responsibility for abuse and implementing safeguarding has taken far too long, it is now permanently a part of the life of the Church. It is noteworthy for all of us that the Commission has played an important role in implementing this change.

The Commission has ensured that safeguarding is and always will be a presence in the life of the Church and that we will press for reform where we identify systemic failures. While not all our goals have yet been achieved,

our efforts have made a significant difference and perhaps most importantly are a sign of hope and solidarity for those who have suffered abuse and for their loved ones.

This Plenary Assembly, the fifth of the Commission, marks the midway point of your term of office. During the coming days, we will assess our progress on the strategic objectives that we set at the outset of this term and the challenges that lie ahead. The *Universal Guidelines Framework* is our primary strategic objective and long-term goal. Reform must be rooted in an effective and sustainable change that is measurable. Arriving at a consensus for the framework will require time, discernment, and openness to cultural diversity. As we have heard from our members representing the developing church, your experience and expertise is of great importance for our work on the Guidelines. Recapping what we have done thus far, during the first phase we established principles for governing the framework and a

trial period for the initial criteria. The current phase is a collaboration with four local churches in Costa Rica, Zimbabwe, Poland and Tonga, each having its own cultural contexts and capacity for implementing safeguarding.

The third phase is planned to incorporate the outcomes of the pilot into a consolidated framework. During the coming days Teresa Devlin of the Guidelines Committee and regional experts working with the pilot projects will provide us more information about this process.

We will also review Patricia Espinosa's strategic assessment of the Commission's capacity building program for the local church, the *Memorare Initiative*. Her assessment will focus on aligning the program with the reporting requirements of *Vos estis lux mundi* and establishing local structures for receiving complaints from and providing professional assistance services for people harmed by abuse.

Yesterday the Executive Council approved two more

initiatives, one in San Luis Potosi in Mexico and one in Tonga, Oceania, where Pope Francis' recent trip to that region made clear that there is an urgent need to strengthen safeguarding. The reports provided by the Regional Group for Asia and Oceania further highlight the lack of basic structures and training, especially for assistance to victims and survivors. It is our hope to bring the resources and experience of the Commission to them, to help meet that need.

One day of our Assembly will be dedicated to the *Annual Report on Safeguarding Policies and Procedures in the Catholic Church*. First, we will be asked to approve a motion for the publication of the Pilot Annual Report for 2023-2024. It is encouraging to know that over the summer many of you met with the Maude de Boer-Buquicchio and the Annual Report Team to review the Report and provide recommendations. Your time given to those meetings allows the Commission to take ownership of the Report, our first analysis of the state of safeguarding in the global



Church.

Our focus now turns to publishing and communicating the Report, so that it communicates the Commission's work and clearly establishes our identity and our commitment to the mission that has been given to us.

We hold it important that the Holy Father, the Secretary of State and all our stakeholders are well informed about the imminent publication of the Annual Report. I have requested a meeting with Pope Francis, with the Secretary and Adjunct Secretary joining in, ahead of the official launch which will take place Tuesday October 29<sup>th</sup> in the Holy See Press Office, with Maude, Bishop Ali and Teresa participating. The Annual Report and Communications Teams have developed a strategy which will be shared with you in our sessions dedicated to communications and media engagement. Also, we will discuss the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Annual Report that last month was provided to us for review. It is the product of engagement and dialogue at every level of the Church.

Over these past five months, the Ad Limina team led by the Secretary has engaged 13 national episcopal conferences. Ahead of each Ad Limina meeting, the Regional Groups were asked to evaluate the information shared with the Commission by the various conferences. When possible, Regional Group members and experts also attend the Ad Limina meetings and join in evaluating the outcomes. This is an important mechanism for providing a balanced review of the data that we collect on safeguarding. This process also establishes a connection between the Commission and the national churches and encourages progress beyond the limits of the Ad Limina. I want to thank all of the members who take time out of their busy schedules to contribute to these meetings.

As you will also see in the blueprint for next year's Report, the Commission's focus will shift from diocesan structures to safeguarding in religious life, particularly within international congregations. The Report will also broaden its scope to include safeguarding policies and

procedures in international lay movements and new communities, which we hope to cover in Section Four. I know that both of these areas have been of growing concern to the Commission. This has also emerged from the work being conducted by the Study Group on Vulnerability. We look forward to hearing from Neville Owen about their seminar which concluded last week.

The Annual Report continues to serve as the basis for dialogue between the Commission and the stakeholders in the Curia, a process that is leading to increased engagement with Curia officials. This week we will welcome Archbishop John Kennedy, Secretary from the Discipline Section of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, to our meeting.

We will also hear from our Secretary, Bishop Ali, on advances in dialogue with other Dicasteries and offices of the Curia, and with external partners in the safeguarding world and donor organizations. And we will hear from Adjunct Secretary, Teresa Kettelkamp, who will provide a

review of our Strategic Plan to measure progress and identify challenges in the pursuit of our agreed objectives. The three pillars of our mandate, comprehensive policy development in the Guidelines; sustaining safeguarding capacity through Memorare, and reporting on the Church's efforts, the good and the bad, with an emphasis on accountability, are interwoven throughout the Annual Report,

I would like to share one last thought with you; the Commission, leadership, members and personnel, is by its nature and structure synodal. The Plenary Assembly is the Commission's primary organ and governing instance. As Members, you have been appointed by the Holy Father, by merit of your professional competence and expertise in safeguarding. You each bring unique and vital insights to our mission, not only because of your professional qualifications but also the social, cultural and ecclesial contexts you represent. You are called to evaluate and critically analyze the work that is placed before you by

colleagues and personnel. It is our hope that our critiques are received as an effort to improve, and that our recommendations can be shared in the context of developing a better learning environment for the next generation of safeguarding professionals.

Our Commission is strongest and most effective when we work collaboratively beyond our individual interests. It is then that we can be a force for change towards a victim centered approach to safeguarding in the Church, and a voice for those who are still at risk of abuse. I thank you all, members, leadership and staff, for your continued and generous dedication to the Commission. The Church is blessed to have your presence and contributions,

ENDS