



## **Protection Commission Opening Remarks**

***March 21, 2025, Draft***

Good morning. As we commence this plenary assembly in the Jubilee year, I wish to review the commission's three pillars which are the foundation of our goals to change the safeguarding and the victim/survivor accompaniment culture of the church in a way that has never been done before.

Through the annual report's commitment to transparency and accountability, the church will be viewed as one entity, whether the particular focus is an episcopal conference, the Roman Curia, a religious congregation, or a lay association.

As St Paul's letter to the Corinthians tells us, 'there is one body, but it has many parts that make up the one body. It is the same with Christ. We were all baptized by one holy spirit and we are formed into one body.'

The Commission's annual report shines a light on the entire church, opening the doors of transparency and accountability, building collaborations and positive relationships consistent with a synodal church and the principles of justice. This is not for our recognition, but rather to help those who are vulnerable and hurting from the crimes and sin of abuse. We seek to do this through the sustained promotion of our common safeguarding ministry. In October 2024, the

commission marked an important milestone with the publication of its pilot annual report.

I thank each of you for accompanying that defining moment in the commission's life. Indeed, since receiving this mandate from our Holy Father, we have always held that the promise of this reporting tool is its achievements as a long-term goal.

This week we will have the opportunity to continue our reflection on the lessons learned from our first annual report, while also turning our attention to the progress made on the second annual report. I look forward to discussing the notable developments of the report as we continue to learn from the collective experience and wisdom of the Members and staff, and the important response from survivors and their loved ones.

The annual report team will provide us with a series of updates, especially regarding additional components of the methodology that we committed to progressively implementing, as outlined in the pilot report. These include implementation of the annual report victim focus group in each of the four regions; inclusion of data sourced from outside of the church, especially from key United Nations committees, academia, journalistic and independent reports; and consultations with the apostolic nuncios in local churches.

During this plenary we will again review the *instrumentum laboris*. This important document has now completed the synodal phase of the methodology, which involved contributions from dozens of stakeholders around the world, allowing

us to incorporate insights and wisdom from the universal church. It is my hope that upon reviewing the *instrumentum*, we might approve it for the next steps towards its publication.

The universal guidelines are the second pillar of our framework. The Holy Father's first words for the institution of the commission are very present to us today: "The effective protection of minors and a commitment to ensure their human and spiritual development, in keeping with the dignity of the human person, are integral parts of the gospel message that the church and all members of the faithful are called to spread throughout the world. The commission's specific task is to propose to me the most opportune initiatives for protecting minors and vulnerable adults, in order that we may do

everything possible to ensure that crimes such as those which have occurred never happen again in the life of the Church. The commission is to promote local responsibility in the particular churches.”

From this mandate, and in response to the guidance of *praedicate evangelium* that local churches develop safeguarding guidelines for protecting minors and vulnerable persons, the Commission developed a universal guidelines framework.

Much work has taken place over the last two years in developing the framework as the Holy Father asked us to do. I have been encouraged by the efforts that the commission members and staff have made to engage local churches, religious congregations, and institutes,

especially since we met last October, and to include them in this framework development by scheduling locally- based listening sessions.

I have been advised that both the guidelines framework training and the listening sessions with key stakeholders have provided great insights to us regarding the needs of the local churches in requiring our assistance in the development of safeguarding guidelines and victim/survivor accompaniment. Importantly, this framework must not be seen as a directive, but as a tool to be adapted and shaped by local ordinaries in accordance with the church's principle of subsidiarity.

During the coming days we will hear how many churches have shared that the implementation of effective safeguarding practices cannot be

imposed through a top-down process from the commission, but that best practices are established through the experience of strong local leaders with the inclusion and support of their colleagues among the laity, religious and clergy. Our work to promote safeguarding policies and procedures is not a theoretical or academic exercise, but an effort to support leaders of the Church in protecting and caring for the people entrusted to their care. Our goal is to save lives from harm and help heal those who are hurting.

Throughout my years of ministry, I have learned not to underestimate the power and effectiveness of safeguarding education, guidelines implementation, and accountability, or the accompaniment of victims/survivors on their journey

toward healing. The Commission's training, support and accompaniment for local church leaders will be a significant help for their developing the capacity to lead with confidence and implement safeguarding policies that will be effective in their cultural context to as best possible ensure the protection of children and vulnerable people.

We can also make important contributions to their recognition of the need for and implementation of compassionate care for victim-survivors and their family members. In our efforts to support this critically important work, while making the effort to respect the local culture we must hold the protection of the dignity of all people, regardless of their social status, as our highest priority. Culture or tradition can never be an excuse for any type of abuse.

During our time together I look forward to discussing the feedback we have received about the guidelines framework and determine which recommendations are appropriate for our next steps. It is my hope that together we can make progress toward developing a plan for all episcopal conferences and religious congregations and institutes to work with us in the mission of creating safe spaces for everyone in the church, listening to and caring for victim-survivors of sexual abuse, and to ensure a just review process for all allegations and concerns that are brought forward.

The Commission's third pillar is the Memorare Initiative, our foundational global capacity building effort. This effort is the result of a 2014 mandate

from the Holy Father which states, “The Commission is to promote local responsibility in the particular churches....” In the context of the Memorare Initiative of the Commission, during the months of developing new processes and procedures, we have learned that each region faces distinct, particular challenges. Differences in the work of safeguarding are only part of the complexity; different cultures, languages and socio-political realities also play a crucial role in the implementation of Memorare. We seek to develop a framework that respects these diversities while remaining focused on capacity building and is aligned with the principles of *Vos estis lux mundi*, a basis for Memorare.

In updating the Memorare Initiative, we focused on three important aspects: evolution, improvement process, and expansion.

In terms of evolution, a communication mandate has been added to all Memorare initiatives, to support and strengthen the implementation of safeguarding and prevention.

The improvement of processes that have been carried out is linked to the goals of transparency, responsibility, and accountability of the initiatives through the implementation of resource management reports and risk assessment of the projects each year.

Much effort has been invested in the expansion of our initiative: there are currently twelve active Memorares and five more recently approved, for a total of seventeen. Also, it is projected that if we can

obtain necessary funding, by the end of this year there could be twenty-two to twenty-five Memorares across all of the four regions.

The care of children and vulnerable people in our church will not be achieved with these measures alone. There must be a commitment to programs for listening, accompaniment, and reparation. Nothing less than the spiritual and emotional healing of the children of God is entrusted to us as we seek guidance in proceeding with this critical mission.

Please know of my gratitude for the time and effort you are all giving to the work of the Commission and allow me to share with you a prayer which I have found helpful in my almost 55 years of ministry: work like it depends on you, pray

like it depends on God, and watch God work. Thank you, and God bless you.