



PRESS RELEASE

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For immediate release

Statement from Cardinal Sean O' Malley OFM Cap., President of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors

Pope Francis has offered both encouragement and clear leadership as we continue to confront the need to ensure children and vulnerable people are kept safe in our Church. Our Holy Father has pointed to the reality of the local church as the key instance where protection and safeguarding must take place. Our Commission is pleased to co-sponsor this II Latin American Congress on Safeguarding that has gathered safeguarding delegates from across the hemisphere to examine how to heed the Holy Father's call to implement good policies and practices at every instance of the Church's life and ministry.

Our gathering in Asunción during these days is designed to ensure ever greater vigilance in the fights against sexual abuse and the education and policy development that needs to be strengthened at all levels of the Church. As the Holy Father says, *'Sexual abuse by anyone in the Church, whenever it took place, is a clear and present danger to the well-being of God's people and it's mishandling will continue to debase the Gospel of the Lord in the eyes of so many'*

This clear and present danger is very real to the Holy Father, to the pastors of our church worldwide, to the faithful in our pews and to those who have left, sadly often distanced by the sexual abuse crisis and its mismanagement.

I echo his concern: We cannot allow fear or fatigue to weaken our response to the crime of sexual abuse, whenever or wherever it took place. We must steel ourselves against becoming immune to the lifelong pain of those who have been abused, we must struggle against a complacent application of minimum norms and standards.

Pope Francis' timely reminder comes four years since the Vatican Summit on Safeguarding, and less than one year since he expanded the mandate and structure of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, placing our work of service at the heart of the Curia which is at the service of the local church. The II Latin American Conference marks the Commission's first major public commitment since the restructuring and new mandate and is a concrete sign of where we are called to be: with the local Church.

The Commission: A new momentum with a local focus

It is fitting, therefore, to highlight how the Commission's mandate points to ever greater collaboration with the local church. With the promulgation of the new Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, the Commission underwent a process of evaluation and change to better meet the practical needs of its new mandate. Today the Commissions' twenty members work regionally, in Africa, the Americas, Asia/Oceania and Europe alongside the particular churches whom they are called to assist and oversee. In January 2023, through a grant provided by the US-based GHR Foundation, the Commission was able to hire 15 safeguarding professionals from all over the world. With a mix of full and part time positions, the Commission's global resource personnel remain in the regions they serve in a way that reflects a synodal structure that respects the principle of subsidiarity and seeks to bring effective and affective support to the particular churches in their implementation of the Holy Father's Safeguarding agenda.

Guidelines: Universal standards in a local context

Since its first Plenary in October 2022, the Commission has received the archives regarding the Safeguarding Guidelines from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith going back to 2011. Over the past 5 months we have received over 30 revised Guidelines sent to us by local churches. According to the Commission's new procedure, we are focusing on those Bishops Conferences that are undertaking their visit *ad limina apostolorum*. By the end of its next Plenary Assembly in May, the Commission will have completed its work on an updated framework for Safeguarding Standards to build on the current criteria contained in the 2011 Circular Letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The new framework, the result of an eight-year process, will reflect changes to universal church law and progress in international safeguarding practice. In a spirit of synodality, the Commission intends to share the updated Guidelines Framework with the entire Church to solicit feedback and

commentary from key stakeholders that include victims' groups, local church leadership and safeguarding professionals.

It will be the task of the Commission's Regional Groups – members and personnel – to assist and review the development of the safeguarding structures on the ground in light of the new framework. Their feedback to the Commission will be an essential element for the Annual Report that the Holy Father has asked the Commission to produce.

Cooperation with the Curia in service to the local church

As referenced, the Commission has also become more directly inserted into the Ad limina process, which represents a key pedagogical moment in the review of safeguarding ministries and structures in local churches. Most recently, the Commission signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Dicastery for the Evangelisations of Peoples, to strengthen our cooperation with them and the particular churches in mission territories over which they have competency. The Commission is in the process of elaborating similar Memoranda with other offices in the Curia, who have competence for elements of the Churches' safeguarding agenda. It is our hope that these Memoranda articulate with some clarity the nature of the relationship of service between the Commission and the various Curial entities that have a close relationship with child protection.

Building effective and affective safeguarding capacity in the local Church

The effective implementation of these measures throughout the Church must necessarily take into consideration the realities of the particular churches and the local, social, cultural and economic contexts into which they are inserted.

The Commission, energized by this journey alongside the local churches, and informed by its work with men and women impacted by clerical child sexual abuse, has also developed a capacity building program for those churches lacking in human and financial resources to effectively implement church policy in safeguarding, prevention and assistance.

The 'Memorare Program', inspired by the prayer of petition to the Mother of God, is a capacity building program offered by the Pontifical Commission to local churches to ensure compliance with good safeguarding policies and procedures as required by Church norms, so that no one impacted by abuse is left unaided. Pilot projects are underway in Africa and under study with local churches in Asia and Latin America.

In the words of the Holy Father, anyone who lessens the impact of the history of abuse or minimizes the current danger dishonors those who have suffered so much and deceives those they claim to serve. Our urgent mission as a Church today is to be with them in their suffering, to serve them in their needs, to come to their aid wherever they are.

The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors is taking steps to reflect the Holy Father's commitment and urgency to bring about a pastoral conversion towards safeguarding throughout the entire Church.

I would like to thank to the Catholic University Nuestra Señora de La Asunción, and to the Latin-American Council of CEPROME for organizing this second gathering about the protection of children in the Church, that allows us to meet together and go forward in this essential mission.