

PRESS RELEASE

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For immediate release

The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors concludes Plenary Assembly,
September 20-22, 2023.

- Commission reviews results of global survey into *Universal Guidelines Framework* (UGF), incorporates feedback.
- Commission approves *Blueprint* on the *Annual Report on Safeguarding Policies and Procedures in the Church*, prepares for publication.
- Commission reviews plans to expand *Memorare Initiative* capacity building program

The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors gathered in Plenary Assembly this week to evaluate progress in the implementation of the three main areas of its new mandate one year after the renewal of its membership.

Those areas are: Assisting in updating and implementing safeguarding guidelines throughout the Church (*Praedicate Evangelium* 78.2); Assisting in the implementation of article 2 of *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* to ensure welcome and assistance for those who have been abused and preparing for the Holy Father an *Annual Report on Safeguarding Policies and Procedures in the Church* (Pope Francis, April 29, 2023).

“Earlier this year, our Holy Father instructed the Commission to keep moving forward with the work of safeguarding entrusted to us, which is what the Commission has been doing. He stressed the importance of walking with victims in their pain and finding ways to repair the harm done. In our first year, we launched a global campaign of consultation on a set of comprehensive guidelines that the Commission intends to use in strengthening safeguarding capabilities throughout whole Church,” said Commission President, Cardinal Sean O’Malley, OFM, Cap.

Cardinal O’ Malley continued: “I am very grateful for the commitment of such a dedicated group of safeguarding professionals from all over the world. Our Church is a large entity that includes all peoples and nations so our task might seem daunting. But we have begun implementing a plan that encompasses the whole Church in its different stages of

development. We heard testimony from the UK advocacy group LOUDfence about the calls of those who are seeking a welcoming space in our Churches. We were pleased to welcome Bishop Edouard Sinayobye from the Diocese of Cyangugu in Rwanda who spoke of the ongoing challenges faced by the Church in that country so many years after the genocide and how the Memorare Initiative will help respond.

“By adopting a systematic approach to our work, the Commission will be able to offer support to all areas of the Church’s life where sound safeguarding practices should become the norm. There is still much work to do, but we are confident we are delivering on the tasks asked of us by the Holy Father.”

Safeguarding guidelines:

The Commission reviewed the outcome of the global survey on the Universal Guidelines Framework (UGF) issued in May 2023. More than 300 responses and 700 suggestions were reviewed by the Commission that largely confirmed the approach adopted. The Commission will continue to incorporate feedback until March 2024. Members began working on the second phase of the UFG which will provide clear criteria for local churches on how safeguarding policies and procedures can become effective. This will involve the issuing of 5-7 criteria related to each of the 10 UGF principles and that point to certain skills required in each diocese to ensure the UGF is being implemented.

Ad Liminas

Since the beginning of the year the Commission has hosted 13 bishops’ conferences on their Ad Limina visits. These dialogues are an opportunity for the Commission to review safeguarding policies and procedures, identify gaps and offer feedback and assistance at a local level with follow up through the Commission’s four Regional Groups: Africa and Madagascar, Americas, Asia/Oceania and Europe. The Commission reviewed reports on the Ad Limina visits and drafted recommendations to be shared with the respective local church and that will be published in the Annual Report.

Building safeguarding capacity in local churches:

The Commission oversees a funding mechanism sponsored by Church donors who have committed to providing \$2.5 million in funding for those parts of the churches with scarce resources. A financial accountability mechanism for use of these funds was published and implemented as part of a program called Memorare and is available on the Commission’s

website. The Plenary heard reports from the Regional Groups on progress in their area, with a focus on the needs in Africa. Twenty local churches – comprising bishops' conferences and conferences of religious – expressed their desire to avail itself of the program. During the meeting the Commission President signed a *Memorandum of Understanding* with the Church in the Central African Republic. This is the second Memorandum of Understanding with the Commission following an earlier one signed with Rwanda in May this year.

Transparency and Accountability via Reporting:

The Commission spent an entire day discussing and editing work related to the *Annual Report on Safeguarding Policies and Procedures in the Church* requested by the Holy Father. The Commission approved a blueprint of the Annual Report which will be made available on the Commission's website by the end of September 2023 with a view to publishing the first Annual Report in the Spring of 2024. As part of this process, the Commission reviewed the status of collaboration agreements with the Roman Curia. It also met with the Superiors of the Dicastery for Eastern Churches.

The Plenary also heard a presentation by David Smolin, Professor of Law at Samford University's Cumberland School of Law, on the applicability of the concept of transitional justice to the Church's work in combatting sexual abuse. The Commission noted the overlap between the categories of transitional justice and church social teaching on justice, reparation, and prevention. The Commission will explore ways to incorporate this way of dealing with significant human rights' abuses into its Annual Report. Professor Smolin's address will be posted to the Commission website before the end of September.

Empowering the victim/survivor community:

The Commission would like to express its profound gratitude to the victims' advocacy group LOUDfence. Antonia Sobocki and Maggie Mathews opened the Plenary Session with a presentation and testimony. LOUDfence advocates for greater welcome of survivors in the Church. In an opening liturgy, the Commission engaged in a LOUDfence action, where victims and survivors of sexual abuse are remembered through the ritual use of the written testimony of survivors. Antonia and Maggie were later received by the Holy Father in the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*. During their brief greeting, the Holy Father called LOUDfence "A sign of hope."

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