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First National Conference

National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland

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## **A Culture of Safeguarding**

As I look out today, the first thing that strikes me is the growing number of dedicated, talented, and faith-filled laity who want to help the Church with this very painful crisis of the sexual abuse of minors. You are willing to work long hours, without complaint, for Church wages, and you daily deal with heart-rending cases. All you ask is but a little support from the Church hierarchy- an encouraging word from the Bishop now and again.

There are many like yourselves who are willing to suffer reading horrible media stories, wading into the mess of conflicts and pain, and you do so largely because you want to help. Many of you feel called by the Holy Spirit to do so. I believe you are. We priests often decry the lack of vocations in parts of the world. It is true; we need more priests and religious. But there is a danger that we might miss what the Holy Spirit is actually doing today. There is a wonderful groundswell of different types of vocations, such as yours-- people who are responding to the real needs of the Church today.

Never doubt for a moment that it is God himself who is calling you. We need your vocation. Thank you for responding so generously.

However, in this ministry, all I can promise you is conflict, frustration, long hours of listening to painful stories, and a heavy sadness ... at least in this life. When the story of child sexual abuse is told, there are no winners. No one comes out of it without some scars. It is blight on humanity and a searing pain for everyone who becomes deeply involved. It is a story of lost innocence, real evil, and devastation on every level. But for those of us who are called, we do not, we must not, shrink from the task before us.

Years ago, I recall one Church administrator who was lamenting the fact that so many other Church programs were being placed on hold because of the all-consuming crisis of child sexual abuse. The crisis was taking most of his time and everyone else he knew. He exclaimed, "When is this going to be over so we can get back to our real ministries?" A voice responded, "This is our real ministry. This is what God is calling us to today."

It might sound rather presumptuous, but I think the mind and heart of God on this issue is rather clear. The Scriptures are not ambiguous on this point.

In his homily to the victims of child abuse in July of last year, Pope Francis used words like "despicable" and "sacrilegious" to describe child sexual abuse. He cited the powerful statement of Jesus in Matthew 18:6, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." At one point, the Scriptures tell us that Jesus became indignant with his own disciples who were trying to keep the children away from him. He said, "Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mk 10:14).

If Jesus was upset when the children were merely kept away, how would he feel if they were actually being abused? And if the perpetrator was one of his own disciples, a Catholic priest, we must conclude that he would be livid. And, if the Church, which his Son founded and abides in, turns a blind eye, we can only conclude he would be filled with a righteous rage. Jesus fashioned a whip of chords and threw people out of the temple, just for changing money and selling animals to be offered. What would he do if his beloved little ones were being abused in the temple? Would he leave one stone standing?

Perhaps one of the great disconnects for the public and one of the reasons the public does not think we in the Church “get it,” is our lack of passion. The following might help a celibate priest understand: “Imagine how you would feel if your beloved niece or nephew was being abused by a fellow priest?” How would you feel? Brothers, you would be livid. You would demand the perpetrator be defrocked and punished. You would insist that the Church apologize. You would want the Bishop to welcome your loved one and apply every source of healing at his disposal. Well, that’s what the people want.

We might begin to deal with this issue by getting angry. Because if we are not angry, it means we really do not understand. And, if any of you here ever lose a sense of outrage, then it’s time to move on to a new ministry. Jesus was visibly upset and outraged by such things. So should we.

First and foremost we are here today because God has called us to this work. Never doubt that God is calling the Church to face this tragedy head on and to fix it. No half measures are acceptable. Now is the time. I am often reminded of how ancient this problem is. In the Council of Elvira in Spain about 309 AD, Canon 71 reads: “Those who sexually abuse boys shall not receive communion, not even when death approaches.” Child sexual abuse is not a new problem. Sadly, for over 1600 years since this council, society and the Church

have done next to nothing about it. Now is the time. Now, the Spirit is mobilizing the Church and society. If we don't yet see this, we are missing an important "sign of the times."

Only three weeks ago, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, Pope Francis personally sent a letter to every bishop and major superior of the world emphasizing the importance of child protection in the Church. He asked for "commitment of the Church at every level." He asked us "to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure the protection of minors." He said, "Priority must not be given to any other kind of concern." He affirmed that "every effort must be ... made." He ended by asking for our "close and complete cooperation." The Holy Father has thus affirmed child protection in the Church as a top priority.

You are needed. One of the painful lessons we have learned is that Church leaders cannot face this issue by themselves behind closed doors. The Bishop and his priest vicar cannot sit down and decide, in isolation, what to do. For decades, we tried that. It was a disaster. Priests, by and large, are not trained to do it. Even the experts can, and sometimes are, manipulated and deceived by these cases.

Cases of child sexual abuse are complicated, conflictual, and not always clear. 20/20 hindsight is easy. When you write it up 15 years later in a media account, it all seems so obvious. But when you are in the midst of it, there is often a lot of smoke and a lack of clarity. Thus, we have learned the importance of teamwork in facing these cases.

In the United States, each diocese now has a functioning review board comprised of lay professionals- legal, investigative, canonical and clinical. The Bishop needs these skills advising him. Even in very recent times, when Church leaders have not kept their review board in the loop- when they have lapsed and tried to go it alone, serious oversights have

resulted. Professional teamwork is key and the review board should see every allegation, without any being screened out.

Nevertheless, despite engaging lay experts and a professional team, conflicts inevitably arise. There are so many different interest groups that weigh in, often with strong, sometimes heated, opinions: civil law, canon law, victims groups, media, parish needs, the desires of the victim, the rights of the alleged perpetrator and more. More than a few times, the desires of these groups conflict.

For example, an allegation surfaces which is then immediately turned over to the civil authorities. Church leaders want to pull the man immediately out of ministry but the civil authorities insist that we do nothing until they have done their preliminary investigation. Victims groups rightly become upset if the man is still in ministry for even a short time once the allegation surfaces. What to do? Similarly, some groups insist that the names of every priest in the diocese who has ever been accused be publicly posted. But some of these priests are already deceased or it has never been substantiated that they actually abused a minor. Thus, the families of these men are greatly opposed, as are the presbyterates. Another example: some public groups want every allegation immediately made public, but some victims do not want it on the front page of the paper. They want the entire matter dealt with as quietly as possible; they feel it would be too much for them; they say they will be harmed—again. On and on ... differing perspectives, different needs and different desires.

In the wake of blistering headlines in the media, which has been so much the case here in Ireland, there is a strong tendency to want to do anything to get the pain to stop. No one wants to read yet another awful and shame-filled story on the front page of the paper. But it is dangerous to craft policies and responses to chase good headlines. As one politician

said, “Bad press makes bad law” (Presumably a gloss on Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendall Holmes’ famous aphorism: “Great cases, like hard cases, make bad law.”) The media lives on bad news. We cannot chase good headlines.

To date, after personally dealing with this issue for 25 years, I actually cannot recall a single headline ever lauding the Church for the way a case was handled. In fact in recent years, there have been many, many cases with which the Church has dealt well, and some victims have been relieved and grateful. Moreover, some of the most far-reaching and effective child protection programs are now run by the Catholic Church.

For example, last year the Catholic Church in the United States spent \$43 million on child abuse prevention and education alone. This figure does not include legal fees, settlements and the like. It was strictly for education and prevention. To date, over 5.2 million adults and children have gone through the safe environment program in the USA. Every adult, priest, lay employee or volunteer, who has contact with children, must go through the training. Criminal background checks are also used before individuals are hired and over 3 million of these have been done. Every three years an independent secular firm is commissioned by the Bishops to conduct a face-to-face audit on every diocese in the country to ensure compliance with the Church’s Charter on the Protection of Children and Young People. Every diocese must have a review board and allegations must be referred to the board. Every diocese must have a safe environment coordinator as well as a victim’s assistance coordinator. A compassionate, prompt and effective response to victims is paramount. Also, there is a National Review Board that advises the body of the U.S. Bishops and is directly responsible for ongoing projects and studies. I am particularly interested in its current safe environment efficacy study which has employed a team of lay experts to look at the prevention policies and programs of the Church over the last few years to see what is working and what is not. I can say without qualification that the Catholic Church in

the United States has the most effective, extensive, and expensive child protection program of any organization in that country. I suspect that much good is being done by you and other Church leaders in Ireland as well ... as I have personally experienced in England, Scotland, Canada, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and other places. This is a story that needs to be told.

It is important that the good news, as well as the bad news, be told. This is a story that needs to be heard, not just to affirm all the good work that you are doing, but more so to inform society about what can and is being done ... what works in addition to what does not work. If society wants to prevent child abuse, the public needs to know what to support and fund throughout its institutions, as well as what to condemn.

But in the end, we do the right, as best we can, because it is right. If we are lauded for it, all the better. If not, we continue to discern and do our best to stay the course. We do what is right because it is right.

In the midst of competing interests and the screaming of awful headlines, we need something to focus our efforts. There needs to be a guiding principle underlying all our efforts. Archbishop Cupich, the new Archbishop of Chicago and one of Pope Francis' newest and very telling appointments, was formerly the chair of the U.S. Bishops' child protection committee. He is a staunch supporter of strong child protection efforts. At one point, he said to us, "If we always put the child at the center of the conversation, then we can't go wrong." Wise words--- "If we always put the child at the center of the conversation, then we cannot go wrong." This, then, is our guiding principle: putting the safety of our children first and foremost.

This might seem obvious, but actually it is not. As I mentioned, there are always competing interests in dealing with these cases. For the Church, in the past, we have not been child-centered. We have naturally been priest-centered. It is built into the structure of our organization. Priests are an important part of the Church family. They have dedicated their lives to the Church and there is a special and important relationship between bishop and priest which we cannot and should not breach. The Bishop is responsible for promoting his well-being. So, when a crisis hits, the Church leadership naturally does all it can to assist the priest in distress. Unfortunately, with child sexual abuse, this has meant, at times, that victims were relegated to second place. As one American bishop said, “We forgot that victims are part of our flock too.” In cases of clerical sexual abuse of a minor, moving from being priest-centered to being child-centered is important, but not always easy for an organization with a 2,000 year history.

What has begun to change this is one very simple practice: bishops have started to listen directly to victims. When courageous people like Marie Collins tell the Bishops their story, they are naturally moved. Bishops are typically compassionate people and when they hear, directly and personally, the searing pain and trauma incurred by child abuse they are moved to action. Thank you Marie and all those like you who have stood up and told your story. More than anything, this is what is turning the tide. You and I are privileged to hear these stories on a regular basis. We reverently hold these stories in our hands like the precious treasure that they are. Pope Francis wrote in his February 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, that, after speaking himself with victims, he was “deeply moved by their witness to the depth of their sufferings and the strength of their faith.” He recommended that pastors and major superiors do the same.

After thirty years of dealing publicly with this issue, (yes, this all began for us in the USA in 1985), a template on how to put children first, on what makes an effective child protection

plan, is emerging. I think it is becoming fairly clear. If you look at the child protection policies and programs in the countries around the globe that have dealt with this issue, an increasingly clear outline is emerging. It includes such basics as:

- a Victims First policy from beginning to end
- an education program to raise consciousness and to prevent abuse
- reporting allegations to civil authorities and supporting the full involvement of the criminal process
- removing the credibly accused person from ministry immediately
- identifying and caring for victims psychologically and spiritually
- involving lay professionals throughout the process
- never returning a perpetrator to ministry again

This last point can be a bit contentious. There is no complete uniformity on this issue. I personally do understand the conflict. As a clinician, I have seen more than a few offenders respond well to treatment. For example, the relapse rate for perpetrators of child sexual abuse at Saint Luke Institute in the States is about 6.2 percent. That means that over 90 percent do not go on to reoffend again if they are identified, treated and subsequently supervised and put in a restricted work, with no direct ministry to minors. Also, the Church preaches redemption—God can and does heal—this is part of our faith. All these statements are true. They argue in favor of making exceptions in certain cases, of being open to putting a person back in a restricted ministry under special circumstances. But Church leaders tried it in the States and the negative outcry was enormous. Clinically, the plan worked. Arguably the relapse rate of 6.2 percent was lower than if the men had been released in society without supervision (although this remains untested). But, pastorally, it did *not* work. It was simply not acceptable. Why?

Child sexual abuse is a volatile issue. It is not like alcoholism where a priest can be rehabilitated and returned to ministry. The stakes in child abuse are too high. We cannot accept even one relapse. I liken it to dealing with nuclear weapons. You can have a terrific policy and deal with 99 percent of your nuclear weapons well, but make one mistake, and it's over. You cannot afford one mistake.

Last year, Pope Francis in his homily to the victims, echoing the words of Saint John Paul II, said, "There is no place in the Church's ministry for those who commit these abuses." This sounds like zero tolerance to me.

What convinced me personally in favor of zero tolerance was the comment made by an American bishop. Several years ago he said to me, "Steve, I need to be able to look my people in the eye and assure them that there is no priest in this diocese to my knowledge who has sexually molested a minor who is still in ministry." I think that's right. You cannot start equivocating. The statement needs to be clear and without exception. "There is no one ministering in this diocese whom we know has sexually abused a minor." Any equivocating will cast suspicions on every priest ministering in the diocese, and on the Church's leadership. We priests cannot live and minister under such suspicion. Nor can a bishop.

Redemption? Yes, of course, but ministry, as canon law understands it, is a privilege, not a right. We forgive. God forgives. But that does not mean one has the right to ministry. And if there is any behavior that warrants losing the ministerial privilege it is the sexual molestation of a minor which Pope Benedict described as "filth." Cardinal Sean O'Malley on February 16<sup>th</sup> in Rome said publicly, twice, that he strongly supports "Zero tolerance" - no offender can ever be returned to ministry. Cardinal O'Malley is President of the Pontifical

Commission on the Protection of Minors; it seems to me just a matter of time before this becomes the law of the Church....

The question of accountability for those in leadership is now on the front burner. In putting together our template for the future, this is the next, and perhaps one of the last, aspects to be clarified. People want Church leaders who have caused much scandal in their handling of cases to be reprimanded or removed. Cardinal O'Malley has indicated his support and the Papal Commission has recently put forward some proposed guidelines to the Holy Father. So, we are hopeful. Nevertheless, while this is important, it is not enough. The Church needs more from its leaders.

It is not enough simply that a bishop or major superior implements appropriate policies and guidelines, and deals with cases well. This is something a competent bureaucrat can do. We need them to be shepherds. We want them to lead. It is they who need to be charged by this issue and personally dedicated to protecting children. They need to be leading this effort, not dragging behind. We want our leaders out in front, calling us to follow the Spirit's lead in protecting children. This is their role. May the Spirit enliven them around the world to make it their own.

I have surfaced today several key points in an emerging international template in dealing with child sexual abuse. It is becoming increasingly unconscionable that this template is not being firmly applied in countries that have not yet gone through a public media lashing on this issue, those countries who have not yet been forced to deal with the sexual abuse of minors. Why wait? Let us be prophetic, and not simply reactive. What would it be like if the Church in these other countries made a public announcement that it was aggressively implementing a program to secure the rights and safety of children? Perhaps there would be some who wouldn't like it. Some would call it an over-reaction. Perhaps. But again, we

do it not to garner good headlines or to make ourselves popular. We do it because it is right. We do it because we are church and the church protects its most vulnerable.

Happily, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has begun this process. It asked every country around the world, all 112 bishops' conferences, to submit its guidelines for protecting children, helping victims, training priests, collaborating with civil authorities and dealing with alleged perpetrators. Over 90 percent of countries have already complied.

This is a good start, but only a start. I would like to suggest that we need an international policy that is mandatory. Sometimes church leaders from different countries say to me, "We don't have that problem in my country." Well ... maybe. But every time leaders from a country have said, "It doesn't happen here," the sordid facts eventually surfaced. And even if, IF, child sexual abuse is a rare occurrence in a country, wouldn't the life of one child be enough to justify having effective prevention programs and response structures in place? How many abused children does it take before we get outraged enough to fashion our own whip of chords?

Another huge step in the right direction is the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, including a strong representation by women, secular professionals, and also by those abused. We commend Msgr. Bob Oliver and all on the Commission for stepping into the breach. We are grateful for their dedicated, compassionate service.

Ultimately, I believe the key is education. Good response policies are important. But the heart of the matter is education—stopping abuse before it occurs. It is difficult to see directly the fruits of these labors. These education programs do not make headlines. But if our goal is to protect our children, then this ought to be the centerpiece.

The Gregorian University's Centre for Child Protection's new e-learning program is an example of what needs to be done. It is building an online program that is soon becoming available around the world. It is low cost, professionally written, and available to anyone with an internet connection. Great thanks to its mentor and shepherd Fr. Hans Zollner SJ.

I know each of you has had a discouraging moment in this ministry from time to time. Yours is a journey of faith—it will not go smoothly. Don't expect it to; you will not always be satisfied with what is being done. But keep at it; we believe that God who has called us will guide us, strengthen us, and bring our labors to fruition. I pray that, because of your service, tomorrow will be a better day. But let us not be deterred from our task today. Child safe programs do work. Education does bring about real change.

As we are starting to educate millions of Catholics around the world, the church is no longer a safe-haven for abusers. Children are more alert to dangers. Parents more adequately supervise their children. Church organizations implement better boundaries for its minors. Potential Abusers are put on notice- they now know they will suffer the full penalty of the law and they will be ejected from ministry. And sadly, if abuse does occur, our institutional response will be swifter and more effective. As Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh said last night, we are creating a "culture of safeguarding."

The initial data coming in indicate that our programs are effective. In the USA, for example, child abuse rates are dropping throughout the society and the rates in the Church are plummeting even faster. At the recorded height, the John Jay Study said 4 percent of clergy were involved as perpetrators. Now, that number has fallen to less than 1 percent. We have turned the corner, but we shall not rest until the number of abused children is zero.

What is at stake first and foremost is our future, our children. The most important task given to every generation is passing on life and faith to the next generation whole, unblemished and intact.

For us here in the Church, what is also at stake, in addition to the care of the young entrusted to us, is the very core of our identity and integrity.

It is not enough simply to deal well with cases. This might get the media off our back. But such is what you would expect of any well-run secular institution. The Church, if it is a Christian Church, must do, and it must be, more. One of the great gifts of Pope Francis is his modeling for us the poor man of Assisi. He has eschewed many of the sumptuous trappings of the papacy and thrown his lot in with the poor, marginalized, and suffering. The world rightly recognizes in him a true disciple of Jesus.

I think there is still a subtly felt, disturbing undercurrent throughout the Church's work in the field of child abuse. Something is not quite right. Even when we respond well to cases, even when we have educated our own, there is still an incomplete feeling to it all. I believe we are not yet satisfied because we have not yet taken up the mantle that should be ours. When people are suffering, when they are marginalized, when they are voiceless, who, first, should be their champion? Who, first, should stand with them in their pain and cry out for justice and offer healing? That person is Jesus ... and it should be thus for his Church.

We are not there yet. Victims often see us, at worst, as the abusers; for many, we are viewed as a cold, uncaring institution; and at best, at times, we are seen as a compassionate helper. The Church that Jesus founded must not simply minister to the poor. Rather, it must stand solidly with the poor and become a voice for those to whom society does not listen.

To stand with the poor and the victims, to become their voice and their companions, we must first listen to their pain. We must, as Pope Francis said, “weep” with them. At times, we must become very angry at what they have unjustly suffered. We understand the sentiments of Jesus who fashioned a whip of chords and threw out those who were defiling the temple.

This process will result in a conversion of heart. We listen; we become angry; we feel the pain; and we weep. This changes hearts. Today, in the Church, I see glimmers of this conversion. Here and there, there are flashes of souls who “get it”, who seem truly moved, transformed, and inspired to action. I have confidence that a day will come when the Catholic Church will be a refuge for those who are abused. The Church will be a mother to them, binding their wounds. The Church will be a father to them, raising a voice on their behalf. The Church will become their brothers and sisters, welcoming them into its family.

I wish, and my prayer, is that the entire Church undergo this conversion. I pray that the Church become what Jesus modeled it to be- poor, humble, and a home to the suffering. I pray that the entire Church be set aflame.