

Message for Anglophone Safeguarding Conference 2016

20 -23 June 2016, Vatican City, Rome

I am grateful to have this opportunity of expressing my greetings to you all as you gather for this Anglophone Safeguarding Conference at the invitation of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and the Bishops' Conference of Kenya. I regret that I cannot be present personally due to long standing engagements from which I could not withdraw. I am grateful to Bishop Marcus Stock for representing our Bishops' Conference here today and for presenting this message.

The work of Safeguarding children is a huge challenge to the Church and to society generally. Much has been learned but there is still a need to listen carefully to the survivors of abuse in order to ensure that the Church continues to learn and remain vigilant. One of the points we have learnt already from that listening is that much more has to be done in both the prevention and response to this crime.

This learning is not relevant or applicable only to the Catholic Church. Many sectors of societies, throughout the world, have yet to learn about the reality of abuse, about the hidden ways of these destructive offences, about the measures needed to create safe environments and about how the suffering and needs of the survivors has to shape the responses which they receive.

Yet all of this is particularly and sharply applicable to the Catholic Church. And we must be clear as to why this is so, why the Catholic Church is constantly in the headlights and headlines of this terrible feature of our world.

For some, the reason may be that they are glad to have an unassailable criticism with which to attack the Church. That can make us very defensive. But the real point is far deeper.

The abuse of children and young people is essentially a betrayal of trust. The abuser must first establish trust and then abuse it.

This is why, as far as we know, child abuse happens most frequently within the bonds of family life. There the trust is a fact of nature. And betraying that trust is a betrayal of our shared human nature.

Abuse by a stranger is less frequent. Abuse by a well-known public person - a TV star or entertainer - is the betrayal of a public trust.

But abuse within the Church is a betrayal of the trust of faith. And this is what makes it so particularly terrible: because it not only destroys a level of human trust but it also destroys the trusting faith particularly of a child or of a vulnerable person, at any age. Their trust in God is shattered. And the essence of the mission of the Church is to offer and witness to the trustworthiness of the Word of God. Any form of abuse, and particularly of children, within the Church is therefore a betrayal of the very essence of the purpose and character of the Church. It is a most profound wound.

The work of safeguarding, then, is also at the heart of the life of the Church for, in this understanding, it is a safeguarding of the purpose and character of the Church itself.

However, this is not the main point to be kept in mind during this Conference and at every moment of this work. At its heart, and central to every policy and programme, must be the figure of the survivor of abuse. It is those who have been so deeply injured that must be the primary focus and motivation of this work. As I implied just now, they have been injured in their humanity, in their capacity to trust, to relate to others, and to form trusting relationships. And this is a radical wound, since we are social beings who find identity, growth, hope and joy in and through our relationships. Survivors have also been injured in their capacity for faith in God and since we are by nature spiritual beings this too is a radical injury.

We know well how important the life of faith can be in enabling us, as wounded people, to find life, mercy, forgiveness, hope and joy in the Lord. This is the work of our salvation. It is the work of divine grace and we know well that grace builds on nature in the work of our salvation. To damage a person both in their nature and in their capacity to receive divine grace is to leave a person profoundly burdened in the greatest quests of their life.

The wellbeing of the survivors of abuse, and our responsibility for what has been done, must drive us forward in this work of listening to them. It is that attentive listening which then enables us to respond more adequately to their needs and to create environments in which they are truly safe and supported.

As we know well, answers are not easy to find, still less to provide with consistency and care. But this is our challenge and I hope and pray that this Conference will be a point of true listening, growth and development in this ministry of safeguarding. Much has been learned, although not consistently. There is still much more listening to be done and much more to be learned, not only about the nature and consequences of abuse but also about the consistency needed in all our dioceses,

religious orders, institutions and countries in the creation and application of norms and standards in all aspects of safeguarding practice today.

I thank the Holy See for its support for this conference. I salute and thank profoundly His Holiness Pope Francis for his consistent effort to lead the Catholic Church in recognising the terrible consequences of this crime, in making clear that there is no place for secrecy, which contributes to the damage inflicted on the victims and survivors of abuse, and in helping us to tackle this grave problem which exists in our community and in our entire human family. We promise the Holy Father our full support and our fervent prayers.

I assure you of my prayers for this Conference; that God will bless and lead us, in all humility, to tackle the evil of abuse in our world, to listen and learn about the ways of our blindness and to give comfort and help to His little ones, of whatever age, who have been wounded and, for so long, left abandoned.

Thank you and may God bless you all.

HE Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster
President of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales