



A TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY – AN UPDATE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GUIDELINES ON PROTECTING MINORS FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

In light of questions recently raised regarding the efforts of the Catholic Church in Canada to respond to the legacy of clergy sexual abuse, for example by way of the publication of names of the “credibly accused”, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCBC) wishes to provide an account of some of the steps the Bishops of Canada are currently taking on this transformative journey.

In October 2018, following its unanimous adoption by the Bishops of Canada, the CCCBC released the updated and expanded national guidelines for the protection of minors in Canada entitled *Protecting Minors from Sexual Abuse: A Call to the Catholic Faithful in Canada for Healing, Reconciliation, and Transformation*. Over the past year, Bishops have taken the time to consider with their diocesan/eparchial staff how to ensure its implementation within their dioceses/eparchies as well as how best to inform and educate clergy, members of religious communities and lay personnel.

An integral part of confronting the sin and crime of sexual abuse involves ongoing meaningful encounters with victims-survivors. Their insights and counsel are key to the creation of safe pastoral environments and to the healing of those who have been abused. The Bishops are attentive to the questions, concerns, and hopes they bring forward, and are committed to finding the right solutions for all.

The tragedy of clergy sexual abuse is and will continue to be addressed with utmost seriousness and respect by the Catholic Bishops of Canada. Just as dioceses in other countries face the same challenge with regard to the legacy of clergy sexual abuse, and have responded in various ways befitting their own circumstances, the Bishops of Canada continue to work diligently to effect real and substantive change for the prevention of abuse, the protection of minors and vulnerable adults, and the healing of victims-survivors. They all recognize how important it is for dioceses/eparchies across our country to seek in their own contexts the most responsible approaches possible which are fully consistent with the law.

Working within the particular circumstances and requirements of each case, as well as the established boundaries of law enforcement, judicial proceedings, and differing provincial/territorial laws, the Bishops of Canada in each diocese/eparchy are mindful of the situation and committed to promote the healing of victims-survivors, to redress injustices, to assure public safety, and to regain the trust of the Catholic faithful and of all people based on preemptive, clear, and effective action.

Here, we must be clear: the CCCB guidelines and recommendations contained in the protection of minors document firmly stipulate that **once a church official receives a complaint about the abuse of a minor, the police are informed without exception. Any alleged offender is removed from ministry pending investigation; if found guilty all necessary measures will be taken to ensure the public and especially minors are protected from the recurrence of sexual abuse.**

Once the police have been informed, it is for them to determine whether it is in the public interest to disclose details of their investigation including, in appropriate cases, the name of the alleged abuser. It is the responsibility of the police to exercise their discretion and account for applicable privacy legislation, the privacy rights of victims, the integrity of their ongoing investigation, the presumption of innocence, and the right of an accused to a fair trial.

Bishops recognize that while the current procedure offers very clear guidelines on their pastoral and civil responsibilities, there remains an important question to consider related to the publication of names of the “credibly accused” who have not been charged and convicted. It is evident that a simple “yes” or “no” answer cannot be given to such a complex matter when seen through the lens of privacy laws (at the federal and provincial levels), the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and the well-being of victims-survivors (some of whom do not wish for the names of their offenders to be published for fear they themselves will be re-victimized or identified). Bishops are obliged to weigh all of these factors as they discern their individual responses to this question.

The process by which each Canadian diocese/eparchy seeks the appropriate solution will also often involve consultation with experts from a variety of professions, other faith groups and neighbouring dioceses/eparchies and, most importantly, victims-survivors. The members of the CCCB’s new Standing Committee for Responsible Ministry, the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Adults, with backgrounds ranging from child protection/safeguarding, psychology, law, and also including victims-survivors, will continue to examine this question, among others, as it begins its work in 2020. The Catholic Bishops of Canada, with support from their own diocesan/eparchial teams as well as from the CCCB Standing Committee, are committed to the healing and transformation of the Church so that each diocese/eparchy can provide a comprehensive and effective response to the diverse and multi-faceted needs of victims-survivors as well as to ensure abuse from occurring in the future.

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