

# TOWARDS HEALING AND RENEWAL

A pastoral response from the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference  
to mark the first anniversary of the publication of the  
*Pastoral Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland*



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## INTRODUCTION

The abuse of children by some priests and religious was an appalling wrong. The inadequate response by some Church leaders has left a deep wound that may never be fully healed.

No apology, no gesture of repentance or sorrow can ever make up for the hurt that has been caused to those abused and to their families: they have been grievously harmed and let down by people who professed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are deeply ashamed of this and we are profoundly sorry for any failures on our part.

Today we wish to give expression to that sorrow by expressing our commitment to existing initiatives as well as to a number of new initiatives. Our hope is that these initiatives will enhance the personal, pastoral, spiritual and practical support available to survivors of child physical and sexual abuse by some priests and religious in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI in his *Pastoral Letter* to the Catholics of Ireland, 'No one imagines that this painful situation will be resolved swiftly'. What is set out here today represents only part of a wider response and a longer journey to be undertaken by the Church in helping to bring healing and peace to survivors of abuse. Part of that journey is the challenge of restoring confidence and hope to those many young people, parents, parishioners, priests and religious, who feel angry, let down or despondent because children have been abused in the care of their Church and because so many in leadership failed to give priority to the love and care of children in their response to such heinous crimes.

It is our hope that the initiatives we are announcing today will go at least some way to rebuilding that trust and to restoring hope. The steps we are taking have been shaped in large part by our conversations as individuals and groups of bishops with survivors of abuse by clergy in the Catholic Church in Ireland. They involve a commitment to transparency and to continuing to implement best practice in safeguarding children into the future. They include a commitment to continue to listen and respond and to make available a wider range of spiritual and liturgical resources to assist in healing.

These commitments form part of a wider effort being made at diocesan and parish level to ensure best practice in child safeguarding and to bring about healing for those who have been abused. They complement the extensive work already being undertaken by the Conference of Religious of Ireland, the Irish Missionary Union and individual religious congregations in the provision of training, counselling and child safeguarding services as well as spiritual support for those who have been abused. Taken together with this wider effort of the Catholic community at every level, our hope is that the initiatives outlined today will constitute further important and helpful steps on the journey to healing and renewal signposted to us by survivors of abuse. It is a journey to which we are wholeheartedly committed.

The steps that will be taken are noted in the following pages.

## 1. PRAYER FOR THE SURVIVORS OF ABUSE

**F**or the Christian community prayer is an essential part of the journey to healing and renewal. Our prayer is all the more truthful in its formulation, and healing in its effect, when it is an authentic expression of the reality in which we find ourselves.

Many survivors have told us how much they value the prayers that are offered for them by individuals and parish communities. We specifically invite contemplative orders in Ireland to dedicate part of their daily life of prayer to pray for those who have been abused by priests and religious. We have committed ourselves to dedicating the first Friday of each month to prayer and fasting in reparation for abuse by clergy and for the failure of leadership in the Church to respond to it effectively. We encourage all parish communities to offer public and private prayer for all who suffered abuse as children. Just as all Catholics in Ireland have been encouraged to do by Pope Benedict XVI, we will also renew our commitment to the tradition of Friday penance with a particular emphasis on remembering the suffering of those who have been abused.

The Christian community has a particular appreciation of the power of liturgy involving Scripture readings, prayers, music, symbols and reflection around a particular theme to bring consolation, healing, support and renewal to those who have experienced pain and loss. Many survivors of abuse have told us how much they would like to see such liturgies take place at an appropriate time and in an appropriate way. We will therefore ask a group at national level to outline how this proposal for liturgies of lament, atonement and

healing can be progressed. The group will include survivors of abuse, and others with scriptural, theological and liturgical expertise along with representatives of parish life. It will make recommendations about the types of liturgies that would be most appropriate as well as where and when such liturgies might most helpfully take place.



## 2. LISTENING WITH SENSITIVITY AND CARE

One of our greatest failures in the past was our failure to listen to the distressing cries of those who were abused as children by priests or religious. Many who were courageous enough to speak about what happened to them found that no one would listen. The voice of the vulnerable so often went unheard. We renew our commitment today to listen with openness, sensitivity and care to those who have been abused. Each of us will continue to make ourselves personally available to meet with survivors of abuse and to listen attentively to their experiences.

It is also vital that parish communities become places of welcome, listening and support for those who have suffered physical and sexual abuse by Church personnel. What has happened within the Church has to be acknowledged openly and honestly by all. We invite priests, religious and parish communities to reflect on how they can bring their social, pastoral, spiritual and liturgical resources as well as their known capacity for practical care to help in the process of healing for those who have been abused and their families. Parish communities have a key part to play in giving expression to the commitment of the whole Catholic community to addressing the failings of the past and bringing healing and renewal to all who have been harmed.

Some survivors of abuse have also spoken to us about the importance of having their stories properly heard and remembered for future generations. We pledge ourselves to continue to explore with survivors of abuse how this might best be achieved.

### **3. SPIRITUAL SUPPORT TO INDIVIDUAL SURVIVORS OF ABUSE**

**A**buse by clergy or religious often has a profoundly negative impact on the faith of those abused and on that of their families. Many survivors have spoken to us about their struggle with faith and their sense of belonging within the Church as a result of this and how it was responded to. In particular, they have told us how the Church has failed to offer sufficient help to work through this particular consequence of their abuse. As a response we have begun to prepare a structure of spiritual support for those dealing with issues of faith following the trauma of abuse by Church personnel.

## 4. CREATING A SAFER FUTURE FOR CHILDREN IN THE CHURCH

In his *Pastoral Letter* to the Catholics of Ireland, Pope Benedict XVI said ‘Only decisive action carried out with complete honesty and transparency will restore the respect and good will of the Irish people towards the Church to which we have consecrated our lives’.

Over the past twelve months every bishop in Ireland, together with the superiors of religious congregations, has signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (NBSCCCI). This commits all of us to full implementation of the *Safeguarding Children: Standards and Guidance Document for the Catholic Church in Ireland*, published and updated by the NBSCCCI. These can be accessed at [www.safeguarding.ie](http://www.safeguarding.ie). It includes a commitment to full cooperation with the Gardaí and HSE in the South as well as the PSNI and DHSSPS in Northern Ireland in respect of all allegations of abuse against Church personnel.

In addition to implementing the *Standards and Guidance* material published by the NBSCCCI, each bishop is providing financial and other resources for the training of personnel at diocesan and parish level in the implementation of the NBSCCCI *Standards and Guidance* material. We restate our commitment today to ensuring that all priests and religious as well as sufficient numbers of lay people working in our dioceses are trained in and promote best practice in the safeguarding of children.

We also commit ourselves to continue to participate in the vetting procedures made available by An Garda Síochána.

## **5. THE REVIEW OF DIOCESES, RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS AND SOCIETIES BY THE NATIONAL BOARD FOR SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN**

**H**onesty about the response to past, present and future allegations of child sexual abuse by priests in our dioceses is essential to restoring trust and moving forward on the journey to healing and renewal. The Irish Bishops' Conference, the Conference of Religious of Ireland and the Irish Missionary Union have tasked the NBSCCCI with monitoring, reviewing and reporting on an annual basis on the compliance of each diocese and religious congregation with best practice in child safeguarding as set out in the NBSCCCI's *Safeguarding and Guidance* material. This includes the ability of the NBSCCCI to monitor and report on the response of each bishop and each leader of religious congregations and societies to allegations of abuse which may arise.

As part of a specific commitment by the bishops to transparency about the past, the NBSCCCI has also initiated a review of current and past practice of all twenty-six dioceses in Ireland. This review will also be extended to each religious congregation.

## 6. FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR FUTURE SAFEGUARDING AND CARE

Many dioceses have invested heavily in local safeguarding initiatives, including training and the provision of counselling and other forms of assistance to those who have been abused. Today in Ireland, as with other organisations, the financial resources available to dioceses are limited and subject to ever-increasing demands.

As a sign of our commitment to addressing the failures of the past and their consequences, we pledge today to continue to provide financial resources to the structures for safeguarding children and young people in the Church and to the ongoing care of those who have been abused. We will do so in a number of ways. These include:

- *Funding of the NBSCCCI and related safeguarding activities.* Since the founding in 2006 of the NBSCCCI by the Bishops' Conference, CORI and IMU, each of these, through subventions from individual dioceses and congregations, has contributed substantial sums to its operating costs.
- *A five-year funding commitment from the Bishops' Conference to provide an enhanced counselling service co-funded by religious congregations and societies.* As we listened to survivors of abuse many spoke to us of the importance of the services provided to them by Faoiseamh, the independent helpline and counselling service established and largely funded by religious congregations. Today the Irish Bishops' Conference announces that it will, over the next five years, co-fund with the religious congregations and societies the newly founded agency

‘Towards Healing’, which will continue the work of Faoiseamh while extending it to provide an enhanced range of professional counselling options.

- *Spiritual Support.* We also announce today the introduction of a new initiative for survivors whose faith has been damaged and who want to work through this particular consequence of their abuse. A number of religious congregations and societies with experience and expertise in this area will be asked to make some members available for this work. Together with trained lay people and diocesan priests, it is hoped that they will assist those dealing with issues of faith following the trauma of abuse by Church personnel. An experienced spiritual director will be appointed to form and lead this initiative. Initially, this service will be located throughout the island of Ireland. However, discussions have already commenced to extend this service to survivors resident in Britain. Details of the spiritual support service will be publicised within the coming months.

## CONCLUSION: THE PATH TO HEALING AND RENEWAL

In his *Pastoral Letter* to the Catholics of Ireland, Pope Benedict XVI invites us to journey together on the ‘path of healing, renewal and reparation’. He asks for honest self-examination and a committed programme of renewal. Specifically, he says that ‘a new vision is needed, to inspire present and future generations to treasure the gift of our common faith’. We hope that the initiatives we have announced today will make a significant and helpful contribution to this journey towards healing, renewal and reparation. We also pledge to continue the process of dialogue with survivors of abuse and with lay faithful, priests and religious about how the Church in Ireland can inspire present and future generations to a new vision of faith in the light of the guidance and support offered by the Apostolic Visitation.

In conclusion, we commit ourselves to working with Catholics and all people of good will to ensure that every child on this island is properly cared for and kept safe from all forms of abuse and harm.

