

## **Opening address by Archbishop Eamon Martin at the National Safeguarding Conference , Tullamore**

### **Introduction**

Friends, this conference provides all of us with an opportunity to reflect on where the journey of 'safeguarding' in the Church has taken us. I am honoured – especially as a previous National Board member – to give the opening address. I encourage you to participate fully in this important event: by listening carefully to the presentations, by engaging in the discussions and feedback, and by offering your suggestions about how we might build upon the progress that we have already made.

### **National Board for Safeguarding**

It is now twenty years since the publication in 1996 of the so-called 'green book': *Child Sexual Abuse: Framework for a Church Response*. Ten years later, at their *ad limina* visit in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI set out for the Irish Bishops the principles by which to guide our efforts in safeguarding. He said:

*"In your continuing efforts to deal effectively with this problem, it is important to establish the truth of what happened in the past, to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent it from occurring again, to ensure the principles of justice are fully respected and, above all, to bring healing to the victims and all those affected by these egregious crimes."*

Shortly after this the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland began its work in preliminary mode, although it was not formally incorporated until 2008. The Board has helped to bring us a long way. Still, we recognise that when it comes to safeguarding we can never say we have arrived at the point where our work is done. We continue to learn from best practice which is always evolving; we remain open to new ways of going about our work, to learning from our mistakes, and to identifying and responding to new challenges and emerging risks. In short, we avoid complacency.

When it comes to the protection of our little ones, and those who are most vulnerable, we want only the best, knowing that they are special in the eyes of God. Jesus said (Mark 9:37): *"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."*

Today, I want to thank Mr John Morgan (Chairman) and the members of the National Board who continue to help us identify, develop and disseminate best practice in the field. I thank Mrs Teresa Devlin and the staff of the National Office for the huge amount of work that has gone into the production and 'roll-out' of the revised Standards and Guidance materials during the past year. Of course the implementation of the Standards will take substantial commitment and effort from all of us, but great credit is due to all those who contributed their time and expertise in refining the materials and ensuring their compliance with developments in the statutory sector – north and south.

### **Safeguarding volunteers in parishes**

An occasion like this also provides me with an opportunity to say thanks to you – the people who help to translate the words and aspirations on the pages of our safeguarding manuals into action and change on the ground. Risk to children, young people and the vulnerable is minimised when there is a pervasive 'culture' of safeguarding with everyone playing their part at every level of Church life. You represent the many hundreds of volunteers who care enough about children and their

Church to become involved in this essential task. As designated persons, training facilitators, local and diocesan safeguarding representatives and Committee members, you are exercising your baptismal calling by bringing your gifts and expertise to the service of your local parish, diocese, religious community or congregation. It is your active commitment and vigilance, with the support of clear standards in Safeguarding and Guidance materials, which helps to maintain an environment that is as safe as possible for our children and young people.

### **Jubilee Year of Mercy and the Synod on the Family**

We are in the Jubilee Year of Mercy, and Pope Francis is encouraging all of us to become more actively involved in the work of mercy. I see the work of safeguarding as a prophetic work of mercy in the Church today. This time last year I had the privilege of being present with Pope Francis at the Synod on the Family. Delegates from all over the world shared with us their experiences of real threats to children and the vulnerable. We heard about dangers to children due to forced migration of families, and about young people getting caught up in international networks of human trafficking. Other delegates spoke to us of the exploitation of children in prostitution or as cheap labour, as child soldiers or for organ trafficking.

We have seen for ourselves shocking scenes of little children being handed from choppy waters into the arms of rescuers, or washed up like discarded dolls on the seashore. I found it very disturbing during the summer to read that more than 600 unaccompanied children wander around the Calais refugee camp, clearly in a situation of great risk.

The risks are not always far away from us. We have learned to our shame that abuse of young people too often occurs in the very places where one might have thought they would be most safe and cared for, including, sadly, in their homes, schools, and parish communities.

Let us remain alert to potential risk situations here in Ireland with our increased rates of homelessness, forced home repossessions and alarming levels of violence in the home. We cannot ignore the bleak solution for children and their parents who are spending long periods in direct provision centres for asylum seekers in this country. Consider also the new challenges presented by social media, easily accessible pornography on the internet and the vulnerability of young people to those who would entrap or deceive them.

Let no one say the work of safeguarding is done. It remains an essential outreach of mercy towards the marginalised, the neglected and those most at risk. You are at the vanguard of this important work of mercy, witnessing prophetically from within the Church to the need for society always to be on the alert for danger and exploitation.

### **2016 Conference**

This year's conference will include a particular focus on two new standards to guide our safeguarding work: 'Care of the Complainant' and 'Care of the Respondent'.

Pope Francis, by establishing and fully backing the work of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, has placed the healing of victims of abuse firmly within the work of the Gospel of Mercy. He sees outreach to those who have suffered abuse, and their families, as "an expression of the compassion of Jesus". He has encouraged us to

meet with victims and their loved ones, to listen to those who have suffered so greatly and to ask their forgiveness.

This essential work is not easy for victims and survivors and it is challenging for all of us in the Church. And mistakes have been made. I have at times failed to realise how easily my own words and approach can unintentionally come across as hurtful or defensive to those who have been betrayed and let down by Church leaders or other personnel in the past. As I said at our first National Conference last year, I am humbled by the resilience and fortitude of those who come forward to share their painful memories. There are deep emotions involved and sensitive listening is needed so that the Church's response, both during and after any investigation, is compassionate, merciful, pastoral, proper and just.

Responding to survivors is particularly challenging and sensitive when it comes to issues of redress and compensation. These issues also need to be approached with openness, respecting the right to justice for survivors, respondents and all concerned.

A few years ago it would have been very difficult for us to address the issue of pastoral care for respondents at a Church safeguarding conference. Even today it is important for us not to deflect from the immense hurt and trauma of complainants by considering care for those who are accused of abuse. The work of mercy, however, compels us to reflect on the impact of accusations on those accused, on their family members and their communities.

For those falsely accused it can be very difficult for them to overcome the mistrust and suspicion that sometimes accompanies lengthy criminal, civil and canonical processes. Despite a lot of media attention and speculation, bishops and religious superiors are often unable to clarify publicly the precise status of the investigation and the details surrounding it. No two cases are identical. Even when criminal, civil or canonical processes are concluded, risk assessments by professionals may indicate continued grounds for concern or intervention. Still, having regard to all the particularities of a given case, Church authorities must remain open to constructive criticism about the implementation of our procedures. There remains much work to be done in this regard and I trust that the new standard and associated guidance will assist us with this effort.

Regarding priests and religious who are found guilty of the sexual abuse of minors, Pope Benedict XVI had strong words to say in his letter to the Catholics of Ireland in 2010:

*"You betrayed the trust that was placed in you...you must answer for it before Almighty God and before properly constituted tribunals. You have brought shame and dishonour upon your confreres; you violated the sanctity of the sacrament of Holy Orders..."*

He went on:

*"I urge you to examine your conscience, take responsibility for the sins you have committed, and humbly express your sorrow...Openly acknowledge your guilt, submit yourselves to the demands of justice, but do not despair of God's mercy".*

The Church's response to those found guilty is one of the most delicate and controversial issues in safeguarding. In a society which demonises and clamours for permanent exclusion of such offenders one wonders how to strike the balance between mercy and justice, seeking redemption for the offender while always being careful not to

compound the lifelong trauma of survivors. Whilst we must be mindful of the view that when offenders are ostracised and cut off from support there is a greater danger of reoffending, it is widely recognised now that those found guilty of sexual abuse of minors cannot minister again as priests. As Pope John Paul II said in 2002: 'There is no place in the priesthood for those who would harm the young'.

### **Towards Healing and Towards Peace**

I wish to avail of this opportunity to acknowledge the vital work of the Church's '*Towards Healing*' initiative which aims to provide outreach to survivors of abuse in a professional and timely manner. As well as contributing to safeguarding by reporting appropriately to the civil authorities on behalf of clients, *Towards Healing* has, over the past five years, provided more than 150,000 face-to-face counselling sessions and taken nearly 120,000 helpline calls. Its advocacy service has supported almost 800 clients and it continues to develop a raft of listening, referral, mediation and restorative justice services for individuals, groups or families.

*Towards Healing* is truly the work of mercy, as is '*Towards Peace*', the Church's spiritual support service for survivors who wish to avail of it. We must always remember that abuse not only damages lives, past and present, but it is also, as Pope Francis has said, "toxic" to faith and hope in God.

One of the painful legacies of the traumatic chapter of abuse in the Church is that individuals and families who were once at the heart of parish life, helping as altar servers, volunteers or helpers, often highly supportive of their local priests, had that trust cruelly ripped apart by abusive behaviour, and then their hurt compounded further by an attitude of disbelief or an inappropriate response when they courageously came forward with their story. It is no wonder that many survivors of abuse have lost a sense of belonging to the Church. *Towards Peace* is there for those do come forward desiring to begin the process of spiritual healing and reconciliation. Its spiritual direction and support services are spiritual works of mercy.

### **Day of Prayer for Survivors of Abuse**

In this context I wish to mention that, in response to Pope Francis' request, we will have the first dedicated day of prayer in Ireland for the survivors of abuse. It will take place on the First Friday of Lent next year and it will provide an opportunity at local level for parishes and congregations to pray for all those involved in the work of safeguarding, for healing in the lives of those deeply wounded by abuse, for atonement and ongoing purification of all members of the Church in this regard, and for raising awareness of the ongoing need for prevention of abuse in parishes, homes and families.

I am mindful of the prayer on the Healing Stone which was placed before the altar during the 50th International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin four years ago. That stone now greets pilgrims to the penitential island of Lough Derg. It reads: '*Lord, we are so sorry for what some of us did to your children: treated them so cruelly, especially, in their hour of need. We have left them with a lifelong suffering. This was not your plan for them or us. Please help us to help them. Guide us, Lord, Amen.*'

### **Safeguarding the Future**

One thing we can be sure of, as we gather here for our annual conference, is that the work of safeguarding and outreach remains relevant and essential. Its place within the work of mercy reminds us that it should not be seen as extraneous to pastoral ministry and the work of the Gospel, but an essential and intrinsic element of the pastoral ministry and mission of the Church. We are called to heal what has been described as this "deep wound in the Body of Christ". By placing the needs of children and our most

vulnerable parishioners in paramount pastoral position, we enhance, rather than diminish our pastoral practice.

At the beginning of this Year of Mercy Pope Francis said: "*Mercy is not contrary to justice but is the behaviour of God toward the sinner.*" (Misericordiae Vultus, 21), and again:

*"The Church starts from the real-life situations of today's families, all in need of mercy, beginning with those who suffer most. With the Merciful Heart of Jesus, the Church must draw near and guide the weakest of her members, who are experiencing a wounded or lost love, by restoring confidence and hope, as the beacon light of a port or a torch carried in the crowd, to illuminate those who have lost their way or find themselves in the midst of a storm"* (MV, 25).

May God bless you in your work and continue to guide us all in the merciful work of safeguarding.

### **ENDS**

- Archbishop Eamon Martin is the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland