

PASTORAL LETTER FROM HIS LORDSHIP THE BISHOP

TO BE READ AT ALL THE SUNDAY MASSES OF: THE 27TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME (Saturday 6th – Sunday 7th October 2018) IN THE DIOCESE OF GIBRALTAR

Dear brothers and sisters,

Please forgive me for a longer than usual Pastoral Letter, but I believe you will agree, especially in the present upheaval in the Church due to revelations of abuse by members of the Church, the matter deserves some attention.

On the 8th of September 2016, I was ordained Bishop of Gibraltar. Being called to serve here once again, has been a wonderful blessing for me, but I was also conscious of the real responsibility that had been placed on my shoulders by the Lord.

A Bishop wants to care for all the souls that have been entrusted to him. More so, those in our society without a voice. They need to be defended, nourished with the Word of God and the Sacraments, but also protected from all that is contrary to the Gospel of Christ. For this reason, I was very conscious of the plea the Holy Father made some months later, on the 28th December 2016, Feast of the Holy Innocents. These were the babies that were martyred for Christ, since Herod wanted to kill the newborn Messiah, as we know from the Gospel of Matthew (2:16). I would like to share those words of Pope Francis with you, encouraging every diocese:

“...to renew our complete commitment to ensuring that these atrocities [of abuse] will no longer take place in our midst. Let us find the courage needed to take all necessary measures and to protect in every way the lives of our children, so that such crimes may never be repeated. In this area, let us adhere, clearly and faithfully, to ‘zero tolerance’.... Let us not allow them to be robbed of joy. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of joy, but guard it and nourish its growth.”

Sadly, the abuse of the young and vulnerable has reached alarming, perhaps even quasi-epidemic, proportions. Almost every week, we hear of more crimes being uncovered. The use of the internet has exacerbated the problem exponentially. At the beginning of this month, the Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, warned that figures from the *National Crime Agency* reveal that up to 80,000 people in the UK present some kind of abuse threat to children online alone, although experts in the field throughout U.K. have cautioned that this is a hugely conservative estimate.

The effects of abuse are almost invariably devastating and last a lifetime. A careful, impartial, analysis of press-reported incidences throughout the world, shows that it is a highly complex issue, of multi-dimensional factors, including social, economic, criminal, human-trafficking and psychological. It saddens me to admit that the Church in some parts of the world have historically simply failed to prevent this from occurring within our Church, due to inefficient, even deaf, channels which should have efficiently listened to victims and acted decisively. The focus of anger with the Church is often not on the abuse itself, but on those in authority who could and should have stopped it happening. Instead, many of them protected the perpetrators from prosecution. This is changing rapidly.

Abuse is not something unique to any one sector of society. Indeed, all the research shows that absolutely every institution, social or ethnic groups, religious denominations or none, are similarly

affected. No sector of society, including the Church, are immune to this evil. From a spiritual view, I am inclined to admit that there seem to be elements of satanic proportions, since the innocent are specifically targeted on an insane scale and made to endure unspeakable evil harm. This must stop!

I hope you can now understand why I could no longer ignore the absence of proper Safeguarding provision in this diocese for which I am ultimately responsible before the Almighty. That is why around January 2018, the Diocese was finally able to begin its work to bring about Safeguarding, with the aim of 'zero-tolerance' firmly in mind. Eventually, a Committee was set up and they have worked hard to produce a Policy for the Diocese. I am sincerely grateful for all their generous dedication to the project. It gives me great joy therefore to welcome the fruits of their labour, which came into effect last Tuesday 2nd October, providentially, the ***Feast of the Guardian Angels***.

All systems and processes on Safeguarding should require that everyone connected with the Church ensures that children and vulnerable people are always safe. From now on, you can always access our Policy document and other material at any time on our Diocesan website. The Policy is not a static document and will be revised and updated periodically to ensure we can promote the highest of Safeguarding standards at all times.

Quoting from our new Policy document: "The Catholic Church in Gibraltar holds that all children, young persons and vulnerable adults are a wonderful gift from God. Each person enjoys an intrinsic right to dignity of life, respect and security from physical, psychological and emotional harm. They are to be treasured, nurtured and safeguarded by everyone. We are therefore committed to safeguarding as an integral part of the life and ministry of the Church. We endeavour to safeguard children, young people and vulnerable adults through the promotion of a sustained and sustainable culture of appropriate vigilance".

Safeguarding is not only important to protect children and the vulnerable in our society, but also to protect those who work on behalf of our Church, whether officially or as a volunteer. In our present-day context, everyone should be keen to adopt a 'zero-tolerance' standard, for the good of all. In the next few months, we will roll out appropriate training, beginning with our priests, to cover every area of our pastoral activities. This needs time. It cannot be done all at once.

I realise that all this can sound daunting to some, especially if you have been happily working as a volunteer in our Church for many years. However, please let me reassure you that Safeguarding builds on the common sense we have all always used towards those whom we serve pastorally. The fact that there have been no significant incidents, proves that we already have a sound, healthy basis on which to build with confidence and improve.

The usual experience of those who have undergone Safeguarding formation or training in other dioceses is that it is worthwhile and enjoyable to learn. There is nothing to be fearful, except of bad practice. Having greater confidence in what we do, will only make us happier to serve in an environment where everyone can feel safe.

While invoking the intercession of Our Lady of Europe, may the Guardian Angels pray for us all, our families and our children, especially anyone who is vulnerable and who needs our care, protection and love. God bless you all,

+Carmel, Bishop of Gibraltar