



**Statement prior to the Meeting
on the Protection of Minors in Rome
UISG / USG**

**“The abuse of children is wrong anywhere and anytime:
this point is not negotiable”**

(Original text in English)

As the meeting on safeguarding and protection of minors begins we, the Major Superiors of Religious Orders and Congregations around the world, unite in support of this initiative of Pope Francis.

In our work as religious, we come across many situations where children are abused, neglected, maltreated and unwanted. We see child soldiers; the trafficking of minors; the sexual abuse of minors; the physical and emotional abuse of minors. They cry out to us. As adults, as Christians and as religious we want to work so that their lives are changed and that the situations in which they are brought up are improved.

The common theme across all of these issues is vulnerability. Children are the most vulnerable in our societies. Children who are poor, who are disabled or destitute, or who are on the margins, who belong to lower social classes or castes may have a particular vulnerability. They are considered dispensable, to be used and abused.

Sexual abuse in the Church

This particular meeting focuses on the sexual abuse of children and the abuse of power and conscience by those in authority in the Church, especially bishops, priests and religious. It is a story stretching back for decades, a narrative of immense pain for those who have suffered this abuse.

We bow our heads in shame at the realisation that such abuse has taken place in our Congregations and Orders, and in our Church. We have learned that those who abuse deliberately hide their actions and are manipulative. By definition, it is difficult to uncover this abuse. Our shame is increased by our own lack of realisation of what has been happening. We acknowledge that when we look at Provinces and Regions in our Orders and Congregations across the world, that the response of those in authority has not been what it should have been. They failed to see warning signs or failed to take them seriously.

Our hopes for this Meeting

Our hope for this meeting is that the Holy Spirit will work powerfully during these three days. A three-day meeting is a short time. However, we believe that with the winds of change blowing through our Church and with goodwill on all sides, important processes and structures of accountability can be started and the ones already in place can be supported. New steps forward can be imagined and decisions can be made so that implementation can follow speedily and universally with proper respect for different cultures. The abuse of children is wrong anywhere and anytime: this point is not negotiable.

The Holy Father

The leadership of the Holy Father is key. He has shown the way in so many of these areas; he has acknowledged the pain and guilt; he has met with survivors; he has acknowledged his own mistakes and his need to learn from these survivors. We join with him in his mission to humbly acknowledge and confess the wrongs that have been done; to reach out to survivors; to learn from them how to accompany those who have been abused and how they wish us to hear their stories.

For our own part we commit to do our best to listen better to survivors, humbly acknowledging that that has not always been the case. We will implement what is decided at this meeting in terms of the accountability required of those in authority.

A culture of Safeguarding

We need a different culture in the Church and in our wider society. We need a culture where children are treasured and where safeguarding is promoted.

- Education and Health Care: Through the schools and the hospitals which many of us run, we can make a difference. Those institutions now have a heightened awareness of the issue of abuse and better protocols and higher standards of protection are in place. Children in these places are more secure than ever before. Sometimes, although admittedly not in all cases, our practices can be a model for others.
- Formation: we will integrate the protection of minors and vulnerable adults into our formation programmes, ensuring that, at every stage, appropriate instruction and education is given to both formators and those in formation. Cultural assumptions must be challenged. As said earlier, it must be clear that whatever the culture and background, the abuse of children is never permitted or tolerable.

- Spirituality: We will ask our Spirituality Centres to develop special outreach to any survivor who wishes to find help in their struggles with faith and meaning. Finding Jesus in a personal way is something that can heal us all. But we understand, too, that those who have been abused by priests or religious may want to stay far distant from the Church and from those who represent the Church. We do know that there are some survivors who want to make this journey of healing and we will try humbly to journey with them. A spirituality that emphasises personal growth and healing is for many survivors a special gift and grace. Traditional ways of speaking of sin need particular attention. Those who have been abused often carry a sense of guilt, shame and even sin. In reality, however, they are the ones who have been sinned against.

These and other steps are ways in which our work as religious can help the efforts of the Church.

Conversion

Pope Francis rightly attacks the culture of clericalism which has hindered our fight against abuse and indeed is one of the root causes. In addition, the strong sense of family in our Orders and Congregations – something usually so positive - can make it harder to condemn and expose abuse. It resulted in a misplaced loyalty, errors in judgment, slowness to act, denial and at times, cover-up. We still need conversion and we want to change. We want to act with humility. We want to see our blind spots. We want to name any abuse of power. We commit to engage in a journey with those we serve, moving forward with transparency and trust, honesty and sincere repentance.

Resources

Resources are always an issue. A glance at societies that have put child protection practices in place shows that even government health services struggle with providing adequate resources. We need to collaborate with each other in this area so that resources are used effectively and efficiently. The UISG and USG will work to ensure that Congregations cooperate so that we reach out in the most effective way to survivors in their journey of healing. Formation and ongoing formation can perhaps be the best areas where we can work together. The screening of candidates who join religious life is also something we can collaborate on, identifying best practices. This screening should be compulsory and of the highest quality.

A plea for the Involvement of parents and of women

We ask the help of parents in our fight against abuse. They have a natural instinct for the protection of children that is indispensable. Their advice, their support, their expertise and their challenge to us will be particularly welcome. In particular we underline the role of mothers. It is fair to say that if women had been asked for their advice and assistance in the evaluation of cases, stronger, faster and more effective action would have been taken. Our ways of handling allegations would have been different, and victims and their families would have been spared a great deal of suffering.

A message to Survivors

Lastly, but most importantly, we want to send a message directly to survivors and their families. We acknowledge that there was an inadequate attempt to deal with this issue and a shameful lack of capacity to understand your pain. We offer our sincerest apologies and our sorrow. We ask you to believe in our goodwill and in our sincerity. We invite you to work with us to put in place new structures to ensure that the risks are minimised.

This meeting will focus on the Protection of Minors. However, recent media attention has also focused on the abuse and exploitation of religious sisters, seminarians and candidates in formation houses. This is a matter of grave and shocking concern. We pledge ourselves to do all in our power to find an effective response. We want to ensure that those who generously apply to join religious orders or who are trained in seminaries live in places of safety where their vocation is nourished and where their desire to love God and others is helped to grow to maturity.

As the meeting on safeguarding starts, we ask pardon of all for our failures and repeat that we stand with the Holy Father. We commit our efforts to working with him so that the Church can move forward in a coherent, credible and unified way, a way that is genuinely healing, truly renewed, with new eyes to see and new ears to hear.