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How You Can Help Address Child Abuse Overseas

The Catholic Church in the U.S. has come a long way in protecting children against abuse. Thanks to victims/survivors of sexual abuse coming forward, as well as the efforts by clergy, staff, volunteers and parents to implement the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, children in our communities are safer and victims/survivors of sexual abuse by clerics are receiving the help they need. In their journey to address these difficult issues, parishes in the U.S. have learned lessons that could be invaluable to Church partners overseas that are facing the same problem. We are asking for your help. By sharing your stories and insight with your parish twins, global missions and partners overseas, you can assist in expanding protection for children worldwide. Your input can help overseas parishes learn how to better protect children from abuse, provide healing for survivors, respond more effectively to allegations, and develop protection policies. To help your parish begin this conversation, the USCCB and CRS offer this 4-stage process as a guide.

Note: Child abuse is an important but sensitive topic to discuss with overseas partners and twin parishes. Your first step should be to encourage your “parish twins” and other partners to keep their local bishops informed about these initiatives and ensure coherence with the pastoral plan for the local Church. No activity should be undertaken by either U.S. parishes or their overseas partners without the approval of the local bishop and, if applicable, the religious superior. According to a 2015 Letter from Pope Francis to the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences, all episcopal conferences should have policies in place to safeguard children. Encourage your “parish twins” and other partners to contact their dioceses to learn more about their safeguarding policies.

STAGE 1 – OPEN A DIALOGUE ABOUT CHILD PROTECTION

Some parishes and partner organizations abroad may immediately understand the importance of child protection while others may not, particularly given sensitivities in their local context and culture. A conversation starter could be to first find common ground regarding how we all care for children and the vulnerable and want to protect them from harm. The following key messages can be the starting point for your dialogue:

- Protecting vulnerable children and families is part of the Gospel. In Matthew 19:14 Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” If we fail to protect children and others who are vulnerable, we fail in our mission to carry out Christ’s teaching.
Ask your overseas partner: How do you carry out your ministry to protect the most vulnerable and respond to victims?
- Pope Francis has called on all Catholic leaders to protect children from abuse in multiple audiences and letters. In a 2016 General Audience on International Missing Children’s Day, he stated, “It is a duty of everyone to protect children, especially those exposed to elevated risk of exploitation, trafficking, and deviant conduct.” **Ask your overseas partner: “How have leaders in your diocese, parish, or organization responded to this call?”** It can be very



helpful to explain how your own parish and diocesan leaders have responded to Pope Francis's call to protect children from abuse.

- Child abuse includes all forms of physical and emotional maltreatment, sexual exploitation, neglect, and exploitation that results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, development or dignity. Victims of child abuse can experience a wide range of devastating effects, such as emotional problems, depression, anger, anxiety, guilt, and trouble with relationships. **Ask your overseas partner: if they understand this definition as well as the consequences of abuse.** Also, share what your parish and diocese have done to respond to the many forms of child abuse and its effects.
- Donors and organizations increasingly require protection policies of their sub-grantees. **Ask your overseas partner: if they are aware of these potential requirements and if they are open to dialogue with your parish to discuss a child protection policy.**
- Overseas parishes are open to risk if they do not set up adequate protection systems. Risk could include the sexual, physical or even emotional abuse of children. Even if abuse does not occur, without protection systems in place there is also a risk of adults behaving inappropriately with children. Any harm that occurs as a result of risk could lead to severe consequences for the child, as well as possible legal issues or other ramifications for the parish. **Ask your overseas partners: if they are aware of these risks and if they are open to a dialogue with your parish to respond.** Share with your overseas parish how you have reduced the risk of child abuse in your own diocese and parish.

STAGE 2 – ASSESS WHETHER A CHILD PROTECTION POLICY IS ALREADY IN PLACE

Based on the first stage of your conversation, you can assess whether the overseas parish has any form of institutional response to child protection. This can come in a variety of forms: a formal policy, a child-centered statement of values, or sets of written rules or norms of behavior that protect children.

When determining if these responses exist, please consider these issues:

- the scope of the overseas parish's work with children and their families (i.e. projects with children as direct or indirect beneficiaries)
 - This could include a school or early childhood center that is at the parish (all schools should also have child protection policies in place)
- the child protection environment in the country (e.g. cultural assumptions, applicable laws and policies)
- whether or not the overseas parish is working with other donors that require a child protection policy.

STAGE 3 – HELP STRENGTHEN OR DEVELOP A CHILD PROTECTION POLICY AND PROCEDURES

If the overseas parish already has a policy in place, you may offer the *Charter* and the *Circular Letter to Assist Episcopal Conferences in Developing Guidelines for Dealing with Cases of Sexual Abuse of Minors Perpetrated by Cleric*. See additional resources at the end of the document as suggestions for potential resources to improve their policies.

SPOTLIGHT: FAMILY CARE, NOT ORPHANAGES

Some U.S. parishes offer support to children overseas by giving material or financial assistance to children living in residential care or orphanages. What they often don't know is that orphanages are almost never in a child's best interest, and often cause great harm to a child's social and mental development. Moreover, eighty-percent of the children living in "orphanages" worldwide are not even true orphans – that is, they have at least one living parent. Most often, they are placed in residential care because their families are very poor and feel overwhelmed or unable to care for their children. After being placed in an orphanage, these children often lose contact with their families and often face isolation, rejection, and stigmatization. Children in residential care are also at greater risk for abuse, child trafficking, and depression.

In contrast, children are much better off living with their own families or in a foster arrangement with another

family. Churches and local organizations can provide additional support to these families by strengthening their health and economic well-being and ensuring that their children can go to school. For more information see: faithtoaction.org



Photo by David Snyder for CRS

If you determine that your overseas parish does not have a policy, or if it doesn't answer all the questions below, then you may provide them a sample of your diocese's child protection policy as an example. The questions below are designed to help you and your partner think through the issues involved in developing or adapting a child protection policy. Remind your partner to check with their local ordinary and diocese for guidance before beginning this process.

PURPOSE

- What is the goal of the policy (e.g. to protect children from abuse and exploitation and also respond with appropriate care, support and protective actions when abuse occurs)?

DESCRIPTION AND SCOPE

- Why is your organization creating this policy?
- On what principles are you basing this policy?
- To whom does it apply (e.g. all staff, clergy, volunteers, etc)?

PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

- Does your organization use a broad definition of child protection to include protection from physical harm, child labor, emotional intimidation and all forms of sexual exploitation? If not, why not?
- What specific actions are prohibited under your child protection policy? How does this relate to applicable laws where the organization is located?
- How do you communicate your child protection policy to staff, volunteers, community members and/or prospective beneficiaries?

RESPONSIBILITY TO REPORT

- What should be reported, and to whom?
- What guidance are you including around reporting, such as confidentiality, sensitivity and due-process?
- What guidance are you including regarding documentation of reports?
- Does the responsibility include notifying law enforcement?

PROCEDURES

- How will you screen clergy, employees, and volunteers who will have access to children for any past violations?
- What additional responsibilities do you require of your management to ensure your organization has a safe environment for children?

RESPONSE TO VICTIMS

- How will your organization provide outreach to (alleged) victims of abuse?

- What pastoral care is available to help victims find healing?
- What other resources are available in the community, to whom you can refer?

CONSEQUENCES

- What are the consequences for staff or volunteers who do not adhere to the policy, or if an allegation against them is made? (Note: This should be consistent with applicable local and Canon Law.) How are offenders removed from their position?
- What is the procedure if the alleged perpetrator is a member of the clergy?

STAFF TRAINING AND CAPACITY

- What child protection training and/or resources are available for staff and volunteers?
- Are they aware of appropriate reporting forms? Consent forms? How to identify and/or respond to a child who discloses abuse?

STAGE 4 - ENCOURAGE OVERSEAS PARTNERS TO IMPLEMENT THE POLICY AND PROVIDE TRAINING

Once the policy is created or strengthened, you can provide your overseas partner with guidance on how it can be implemented and enforced. However, child protection policies alone are not sufficient to prevent the abuse of children. Clergy, employees, and volunteers, must also play an active role in identifying, reporting, and preventing abuse. U.S. parishes should encourage their overseas partners to implement child protection training, especially for those with direct contact with children. To do this, U.S. parishes can share their own experiences in training for child protection or suggest other training modules such as the *Facilitator Guide*, developed by CRS.

FINAL REFLECTION

The Catholic Church is deeply committed to protecting the safety and dignity of children. We encourage your parish to help your partners overseas to ensure children have the support, confidence, and safe environment in which they can grow in their faith. By opening a dialogue with your overseas partners and using the four-stage process above, your parish can extend its knowledge and experiences to protect all of God's children and provide healing to victims/survivors. A parish reaching beyond its own members and beyond national boundaries is truly "Catholic." As Pope Francis stated in a January 2017 letter to bishops on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, "let us find the courage needed to take all necessary measures and to protect in every way the lives of our children."



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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION TO CHILD PROTECTION POLICIES AND CHILD ABUSE INFORMATION

Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

<https://www.usccb.org/resources/Charter-for-the-Protection-of-Children-and-Young-People-2018-final%281%29.pdf>

Circular Letter to Assist Episcopal Conferences in Developing Guidelines for Dealing with Cases of Sexual Abuse of Minors Perpetrated by Clerics

[vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20110503_abuso-minori_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20110503_abuso-minori_en.html)

Child Protection Resources from the Holy See

[vatican.va/resources/index_en.htm](https://www.vatican.va/resources/index_en.htm)

Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors Resource Page

<https://www.tutelaminorum.org/>

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE: TRAINING MATERIALS

Catholic Relief Services: A Facilitator's Guide for Partner Policy Protection Development Workshops

Catholic Relief Services aims to help facilitators to guide partners and organizations to develop or further strengthen protection policy. There are five modules designed to increase partner's understanding of the issues involved in child safeguarding policy and best practices for organizations in creating safe, protective environment. By the end of workshops, partners will understand how to develop a protection policy, recognize signs of child abuse, and how to create a reporting and investigation mechanism. The guide includes handouts that goes along with each activity, sample protection policies and, further training resources for organizations and partners in creating safe and protective environments.

https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/tools-research/child_protection_guide_march_2017_final.pdf

OTHER

The Call to Global Solidarity within the Catholic Church

[usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/called-to-global-solidarity-international-challenges-for-u-s-parishes.cfm](https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/called-to-global-solidarity-international-challenges-for-u-s-parishes.cfm)

Additional Information and Resources on Child and Youth Protection (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

[usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/index.cfm](https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/index.cfm)