

Bishop recalls how he handled abuse crisis in his diocese and its lasting effects

With each passing day, the news seems to be one horror after another. In pews around the world, there isn't likely a single person who hasn't heard about the abuse scandals affecting the Catholic Church.

Victims are speaking out, priests and Church leaders are facing civil and Church law around the world or closer to home in Pennsylvania – where a grand jury report exposed decades of abuse and cover-up.

What hasn't been heard as often, is how an abuse scandal affects a Church leader himself. How does a bishop come to terms with a crisis within his own diocese? How does he face victims of abuse by his own priests?

Canada's Catholic bishops have vowed to implement newly updated abuse prevention guidelines, updating [From Pain to Hope](#), which was unique when it was created in 1992. These new guidelines, made public Oct. 4, focus on healing for victims and repairing the damage done to both the Church and society.



Bishop Ronald Fabbro Diocese of London

In a seven-page, deeply personal [introduction to those guidelines](#), Bishop Ronald Fabbro of London, Ont., provides some insight based on his own experience dealing with an abuse crisis and helping victims heal.

“These victims have suffered and survived abuse as children. It stays with them for their whole lives and that’s deeply moved me. That’s something that remains with me every day of my ministry as a bishop.”

“It’s critical. This is the issue that we need to face in the Church today,” said Bishop Fabbro, a spokesperson for Canada’s bishops on the new guidelines. “We’ve made mistakes in the past and we have to be strongly committed to ensuring that they not occur again.”

“We can’t guarantee it won’t happen, but what we can do is show that we are handling it responsibly.”

Just four years into his ministry as the shepherd of the [London Diocese](#), Bishop Fabbro found himself at the “epicentre” of a crisis, starting on Aug. 6, 2006, when he went to a church in his diocese to celebrate the Eucharist.

At that point, more than 40 women had come forward with harrowing stories of abuse by a local priest, Bishop Fabbro recalled.

Father Charles Sylvestre would be convicted of indecently assaulting 47 girls between 1954 and 1986. His victims were between seven and 15 at the time of the abuse. Sylvestre died in 2007, three months into his three-year prison term.

In his homily that Sunday, Bishop Fabbro apologized to the victims and for the failure of the Church to protect them. He also committed to getting rid of the “scourge” of clergy sex abuse from his diocese.

Bishop Fabbro’s videotaped apology was shown in all parishes, a move that “freed others to talk of their experiences, their anger that it was happening in the Church, and their determination” to stop it.

Creating such an environment was one of the lessons learned.

The Diocese consulted with community partners – including local sexual assault centres, the [Ursuline Sisters](#) and the Ontario Attorney-General’s office – to create a 115-page manual for bishops and churches, and its Safe Environment Policy, reviewed regularly, includes a Code of Conduct for priests.

Bishop Fabbro was designated to raise awareness of sexual abuse in churches, schools and institutions.

Moreover, it’s what he himself learned from the victims he met

that has had the most impact – and influences the Canadian bishops' updated abuse guidelines. The focus is on helping victims in the healing process so they aren't victimized twice – once by the abuse and a second time when they are disbelieved, made to feel guilty or blamed.

“It takes great courage for survivors to disclose their abuse. Survivors have taught the Church how to protect our children better,” Bishop Fabbro wrote. “No survivor should be made to feel guilty for having disclosed the abuse they suffered.

“We have also learned that a culture of silence and a false concern for the Church's reputation must be replaced by an entirely different culture, one of transparency and accountability.”

Fabbro said victims are “absolutely critical” to efforts to stop abuse.

Canada's bishops have strengthened their prevention guidelines to comply with recent requirements made by Pope Francis and his predecessor, Pope Benedict, put in Church law to deal with any accusation against a member of the clergy.

Those include appointing a bishop's delegate, assembling a committee including lay people and priests to investigate, and requiring the local bishop to provide a report on all his actions to the Vatican.

It's up to each bishop to ensure that his diocese meets that standard by the new guidelines.

The Edmonton Archdiocese has had formal [abuse prevention policies](#) and training in place since 2010, and they incorporate many of the recommendations in the bishops' document.

Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith plans to comment next week.

The national guidelines have been in the works for years prior to the current abuse scandals, but now they are perhaps needed more than ever as Catholics in the Church look for guidance – and those who have left are looking for a way to return.

“They have been scandalized by the mistakes that were made in the past,” Bishop Fabbro said. “They have left the Church. We need to make this commitment that we are taking this seriously to show our people that we are doing everything we can to have safe environments in our parish settings.

“All of us want to put an end to the abuse of minors in our Church, that we have a safe environment for our children. And the bishops have to show that we are committed to this.”