

Canadian abuse protection model considered a 'significant example' for others

The priest hand-picked by Pope Francis to chair next month's summit on clerical sexual abuse at the Vatican has thrust the Canadian model for protecting minors into the spotlight as Church leaders from around the world prepare for the unprecedented meeting.

Rev. Federico Lombardi has described new guidelines adopted by Canada's bishops as a "significant example" of a document that examines the circumstances and dynamics of abuse while also proposing safeguards to prevent it in the future. He praised the Canadian bishops for providing "a wider orientation for bishops and indeed the entire ecclesial community."

"One of the great merits of the Canadian document is that it has not limited itself to repeating the earlier 'new lessons' in general terms, but it has formulated ... precise and detailed recommendations and action points," Lombardi wrote in the semi-official Vatican publication *La Civiltà Cattolica*.

Given Lombardi's endorsement and his role as chair of the Feb. 21-24 Vatican meeting, the document is expected to be front-and-centre during the three-day summit of heads of bishops conferences from around the world.

Titled *Protecting Minors from Sexual Abuse: A Call to the Catholic Faithful in Canada for Healing, Reconciliation, and Transformation*, the document gained almost immediate attention in Rome after it was adopted unanimously at the plenary of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops last September.



Rev. Tom Rosica

Rev. Tom Rosica, the chief executive officer of Salt + Light TV who had attended the Canadian bishops' meeting, took copies of the new guidelines with him to Rome in early October and shared them with Vatican officials.

A week later, CCCB president Bishop Lionel Gendron and key CCCB officials were in Rome to discuss the Canadian guidelines at length with heads of Vatican departments and with Pope Francis.

"The importance is, this is at the highest level of the Church now," said Rosica. "Father (Hans) Zollner, Father Lombardi and (Archbishop of Malta Charles) Scicluna saw the guidelines. They realized that Canada is way ahead of the game."

When Lombardi was appointed to chair the February meeting of episcopal conference heads with Pope Francis, he had a copy of the Canadian guidelines as he worked on two articles for *La Civiltà Cattolica*. His articles, intended to set the tone and agenda for the February meeting, appeared in the English edition of the paper in January.

Given Canada's history since the Mount Cashel orphanage story in the late 1980s – the world's first wide-ranging, highly public sex-abuse scandal – and as the first national conference of bishops to issue guidelines for investigating and reporting abuse cases in 1992, it's not surprising Canada has assumed a leading role, said Rosica.

"This is the third version of the Canadian guidelines," he said. "So they're constantly adapting it. It's honest. It becomes a manual. I think it's a wonderful thing it's being held up as a model."

London, Ont., Bishop Ron Fabbro was taken by surprise when he saw the emphasis

placed by Lombardi on the new guidelines.

“He obviously sees that there’s a lot of value in that, which is now going to be brought to the rest of the bishops of the world,” said Fabbro. “It was gratifying, too.”

Fabbro started work on the guidelines in 2011. Fabbro, who wrote the introduction to the document, is most proud of how the Canadian guidelines focus on victims.

“We need the victims to come first,” he said. “We as the Church have a healing role to play. The document goes into the fact that we witness to what we are as Church. We listen to the victims and then we can do what the Church should be doing – being instruments of Jesus’ healing.”

The Vatican isn’t the only one taking notes from the Canadian guidelines. In Texas, one of the world’s leading consulting companies on sexual abuse has been combing through the guidelines.

Praesidium Inc. develops, monitors and advises about 4,000 employers in 20 countries on sexual abuse policies, procedures and enforcement. Its client base includes 130 male Catholic religious orders and nearly 50 Catholic dioceses, four of them in Canada including the Archdiocese of Edmonton.

In 2017, the Archdiocese of Edmonton became the first in Canada to receive Praesidium Accreditation for its abuse prevention program.

To prevent abuse, every employee or volunteer in the Archdiocese – up to and including Archbishop Richard Smith himself – has been required to take training through Praesidium, an international abuse prevention consultancy. Since 2011, over 10,000 people including priests, deacons, seminarians, staff and volunteers have received that training.