

Church in Canada addresses next steps in combating sexual abuse

The Catholic Church in Canada now has the task of implementing its new sexual abuse document published last year and recovering the virtue of chastity, say bishops and theologians.

Bishop Ronald Fabbro of London, who shepherded the development of the document *Protecting Minors from Sexual Abuse: A Call to the Catholic Faithful in Canada for Healing, Reconciliation, and Transformation* published last year, said the next steps for Canada involve implementing the policies in the document, something the bishops of Canada pledged to do at the last plenary of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB).

“Secondly, the CCCB is setting up a committee which will look at the emerging needs with regard to clergy sexual abuse,” Bishop Fabbro said. “What are the best practices, if we are actually implementing this in our diocese? What are lessons we continue to learn? How do we improve our policies and respond to any emerging needs so that we are doing everything we can to create a safe environment for our children?”

Education on the Church’s teaching on chastity is important, he said, noting that the 2011 John Jay College report commissioned by the United States Catholic Bishops said there “was no talk at all about seminarians’ sexuality, and that was a factor that was involved in priests later abusing minors.”

Bishop Fabbro said he has made human formation, including psychological testing, an important aspect of seminary formation.

Those who have abused minors show evidence of a psychological disorder, he said. “You can detect it in the way they talk, how there’s a separation, how they can separate functioning as a priest and this totally different life where they’re grooming and preparing to have sexual relationships with a minor.”

Pedophilia and ephebophilia are psychological disorders, he stressed, and even if the person confesses the sin involved, “just going to confession and confessing the sin is not going to lead to the stopping of the sin.”

“The psychological issues remain in the person even after confession. We have a much better understanding of how pedophilia works than we had in the past.”

Archbishop Christian Lépine of Montreal believes the bishops still need to work on the notion of fraternal correction and of holding each other accountable.

For both bishops and priests, the idea of zero tolerance, “that if you are ever convicted, you won’t do ministry anymore” is very powerful, he said.

“It says to those who would abuse that the Church is not a place where you can hide.”

Transparency and good canonical processes are also necessary. Transparency means having nothing to hide, “because sin likes to be hidden,” Archbishop Lépine said – even if the motive for hiding sin is to protect the reputation of the Church. “When it is hidden, you make it worse.”

“To take abuse seriously, you need also to take the process, the judiciary, canonical process seriously, and to do that you need competence,” he said. This includes lay people, priests, religious, other bishops, “an array of competencies,” to listen to the victims, take seriously the allegations, have a proper judicial or canonical process. “We need competency and we don’t always have this competency.”

“Proposals for procedural safeguards aimed at protecting minors have a place, certainly,” said Ryan Topping, Vice President and Academic Dean of Newman Theological College, Edmonton. “But these have only a limited place, as the Holy Father made plain in his closing address [at the sexual abuse summit in Rome Feb. 24].



Dr. Ryan Topping

“Clerical power is not the first cause of abuse. Sin is,” Topping said.

“Instead of looking to materialist and specifically Marxist categories to help us understand these evil acts, we need to recover, as Pope Francis said in his closing speech, the ‘holy fear of God.’ The reason why minors were abused is not because of power inequalities; it is because men called to the priesthood failed to live up to their vocation to chastity in imitation of the priesthood of Jesus Christ.”

“Over the last 40 years, on questions of sexual ethics, we in the Church largely followed the playbook set by secular culture,” Topping said. “The

connection between the environment of moral laxity that reigned in many seminaries during the 1960s to 1980s and the kinds of spiritual decay that this produced, has now become plain.”

“I believe Church leaders will see that a new opportunity for boldness has opened up for them. In a way, the Church’s hand has been forced. Proposals for abuse protection that ignore or downplay the objectivity of the moral law, natural and divine, will now be far more likely to be felt as hollow than they might have been prior to this crisis.”

“What possesses a person to sexually abuse a minor?” asked Michel MacDonald, executive director of the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF). “Clearly, such a person is living a dual life; they are not integrated in their humanity, and that is in my opinion something that goes very deep.”

“Someone who is wounded in this way, that is, who has or desires to sexually abuse another, also opens themselves up to the demonic and this is something that is not spoken about,” he said. “We tend to keep the discussion at the level of psychological factors. This is important but we should also remember the spiritual element.”

MacDonald also addressed the formation of seminarians. “I believe that the laity should be more actively involved in the assessment and formation of candidates for the priesthood. Seminarians should develop friendships with good, solid Catholic families,” he said. “Also, the laity should not be afraid to speak out if they have concerns about candidates for the priesthood.”

St. John Paul II’s teachings on the Theology of the Body could help Catholics better understand the virtue of chastity, he said. “Too often we see chastity in a negative light, i.e. abstaining from the use of our sexual faculties. Chastity is the mature understanding and possession of one’s self, of one’s being as self-gift. Only when we practise the virtue of chastity can we live our lives in an integrated and wholesome way; or in simpler terms, to be holy.”

Archbishop Lépine stressed that the Church must always start with Christ, be coherent with Him and faithful to him. “The abuse of minors is so much against Jesus Christ, against everything he said, everything he represents,” he said.

“When we start contemplating others like objects, it’s somehow because we stopped believing in love, in free self-giving of one’s self.”

The archbishop said he believes many live the virtue of chastity but more needs to be done to communicate the love of chastity, the belief in chastity. “The Theology of the Body is a strong pedagogical school: it’s about the meaning of the body, the meaning of self-giving present in the body, the meaning of self-giving present in the body, faithfulness.”