

New CCCB guidelines focus on healing harm of sexual abuse, preventing offences in the future

Canada's Catholic bishops have vowed to implement newly updated abuse prevention guidelines that focus on healing for victims and repairing the damage done to both the Church and society as a whole.



Bishop Lionel Gendron CCCB Photo

"With my fellow bishops I join in my own prayers and actions for a future which will be rid of the evil, the ignorance and the errors responsible for so much pain and suffering," said Bishop Lionel Gendron, the president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The bishops unanimously agreed on 69 recommendations focusing on greater transparency and accountability and inspired by lessons the bishops learned over the last 25 years since the publication of [*From Pain to Hope*](#), the first document of its kind in the world dealing with clerical sexual abuse.

The new guidelines document, released Oct. 4, is titled [*Protecting Minors from Sexual Abuse: A Call to the Catholic Faithful in Canada for Healing, Reconciliation, and Transformation*](#).

Canada's bishops pledged to implement its recommendations in their dioceses and eparchies at their recent annual assembly in Cornwall, Ont. They include not only legal requirements for reporting all sexual misconduct of minors, but also

canonical provisions for reporting abuse to the Vatican, which could result in Church penalties such as the defrocking of a priest or religious.

Transparency and accountability are major themes in the CCCB document. One recommendation is that victims of sexual abuse who receive a financial settlement not be held to any confidentiality requirement – something that was common in years past, based on legal advice.

Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith welcomed the new guidelines as an indication of the commitment of all bishops across Canada to be transparent, accountable and to help victims heal.

“We also have to have our eyes wide open to the causes of all this. This will mean a readiness to ask direct and tough questions; it will mean launching investigations where needed, and these inquiries will need to involve laypersons with the appropriate expertise,” Archbishop Smith said.

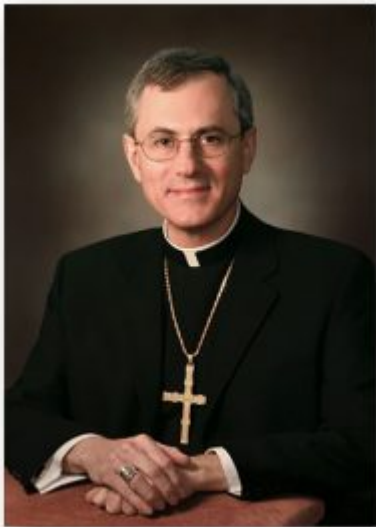
“These questions and investigations will enable our eyes to be wide open to the truth, to the facts, and this in turn will help us to see clearly the way ahead.”

Smith said he plans to comment further at a news conference planned for next week.

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.

The [Called to Protect for Ministries](#) program provides training for all clergy, seminarians, employees and lay volunteers to ensure that all are suitable to be in positions of trust with children and vulnerable persons, that church-sponsored activities and programs are conducted in a safe environment, and that abuses are properly reported. All candidates for ministry and volunteers must be screened using background and police checks.

The focus is that victims must always come first, the bishops say:



Bishop Ronald Fabbro Diocese of London

“Our highest priority needs to be our care for them,” Bishop Ronald Fabbro of London, Ont. who wrote a gut-wrenching introduction to the new document detailing a sex abuse scandal within his diocese.

“One of the key lessons I learned was that survivors and their families should be the centre of our attention. If we had listened to them and their cries for justice, many tragic failures of the past could have been avoided.”

Its recommendations are particularly sensitive for Fabbro, who began serving as bishop just days into the trial of Father Charles Sylvestre in 2006. Sylvestre was 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.

Bishop Fabbro detailed the events and response, his apology, and his meetings with victims just four years after he was ordained as Bishop of London in 2002.

“From the beginning, I spoke openly and honestly about the crisis and the damage done by the grave sins and errors of the past,” Fabbro wrote.

“Our diocese has been hit hard by the crisis of sexual abuse. All of our people, including our priests, have had to carry the heavy burden of this scandal.”

Sylvestre was among 22 priests reportedly convicted, charged or sued for abuse in the London Diocese. Among them was Father Barry Glendinning who also taught at Newman Theological College in Edmonton from 1976 to 1982 and assisted at parishes. He was laicized in 2008 and died in 2011.

Work on the bishops’ new document was nearly finished when the Church was

rocked by recent sex-abuse scandals and coverups in the United States, Europe, Asia and Australia. In June, American Archbishop [Theodore McCarrick](#) resigned as a cardinal amid allegations of sexual misconduct. In August, a Pennsylvania grand jury report exposed decades of abuse involving more than 300 priests and 1,000 victims that was covered up by Church leaders.

The Canadian bishops' document also reflects an evolved understanding of offenders. In many cases in the past, bishops relied on a clinician's assessment that an offending priest was fit to return to ministry after treatment.

"Today clinicians are better able to distinguish between situational offenders and those with fixed sexual proclivities who would always be at risk of re-offending. This has resulted in more reliable judgments and more appropriate precautions on the part of those responsible for dealing with offenders," the document states.

In addition, the document recommends changes to ministry to prevent clericalism or superiority of the authority of the clergy.

"Many such offenders took full advantage of their authority and social status in order to abuse children within the communities they were meant to serve," the document says.

"The culture of clericalism made it easier for clergy and religious to overcome the resistance of their victims with psychological and spiritual intimidation as well as by physical force. In some communities, this culture and its conditions made Church leaders less vigilant about protecting minors and dismissive of allegations when they arose."

The document notes until the early 1980s, most sexual abuse victims were invisible to various civil authorities and to society at large, not only in the Church but in all institutions, including families.

"Individuals who came forward risked bringing shame upon their families and communities," it says. "It was not uncommon for victims to be blamed and shunned."

Not only was there little understanding of the problem of sexual abuse, Church leaders were "ill-equipped to handle allegations and unprepared to accompany survivors on the path to healing," the document says.

– With files from Canadian Catholic News and The Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton

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