

This week, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) published a document pledging to “stimulate a cultural transformation in attitudes about sexual abuse.”

The document is entitled *Protecting Minors from Sexual Abuse: A Call to the Catholic Faithful in Canada for Healing, Reconciliation, and Transformation*. It is directed at bishops, religious leaders, and volunteers in contact with minors and vulnerable persons.

The attendees at the annual plenary meeting of the bishops in Cornwall adopted the document unanimously on September 27 and distributed it in each diocese across the country.

It sets out national standards that every bishop has pledged to implement.

The document notes, “since the 1992 publication of *From Pain to Hope*, it has become even clearer that sexual abuse of minors by clergy and religious has had devastating effects, first and foremost on individual victims-survivors and their families, on all members of the Catholic Church—locally, nationally, and internationally—as well as on society as a whole.”

“Church leaders in Canada and elsewhere have had to address not only such feelings, but also so many broken lives, as well as their duty to repair the damage to individuals and to communities.”

A major focus of the document is implementing protocols to prevent abuse. It calls for measures that are “clear, comprehensive, and accessible.”

In Ottawa, we have had our own protocols and a Responsible Ministry and volunteer screening program for many years. These aligned with the previous guidelines issued by the CCCB in 1992,

following *From Pain to Hope*, one of the first national sets of directives in the Catholic Church worldwide.

Last year, the Ottawa Archdiocese took a proactive decision to put even more emphasis on safeguarding our pastoral environments and protecting all members of our community, especially minors and vulnerable adults. We set up a new Diocesan Safe Environment Office (DSEO) with a full-time lay employee.

The first priorities of the DSEO have been to review and update our policies and procedures for safe screening, supervising, monitoring, reporting and investigating abuse claims. In addition, the Office is preparing an intensive program of training and education.

Increased lay involvement is crucial to promoting the accountability of bishops. Consequently, the new CCCB document encourages the presence of an advisory committee of qualified laypersons and professionals (called in Ottawa the Diocesan Review Board) tasked principally with advising the bishop in his assessment of allegations of sexual abuse, to eliminate the possibility of cover-ups.

We have almost completed updating these protocols and have begun the process of comparing them to the newly issued CCCB guidelines to ensure conformity. This coming week, we will hold our regularly scheduled pastoral days, the central focus of which will be the implementation of new safeguarding procedures.

The 184-page document makes 69 recommendations based on the lessons learned by the bishops over the past quarter-century. "Chief among these is that victims must come first," said a statement from the CCCB.

The Catholic Church in Canada is striving to “learn from the past; to face the challenge of pastoral conversion; to embrace the need to renew pastoral ministry; and to make visible the truth of God who is loving, forgiving and merciful.”

We have learned many painful lessons in addressing the issue of abuse in the Church, including the obligation for accountability, transparency, prevention, and healing. We need to take these steps collectively and individually to repair the extensive damage inflicted on the Church and society by decades of priestly abuse and concealment by bishops.

With contrition, we note, “sexual abuse is a profound contradiction of everything that Jesus Christ represents.”