

Opening Remarks by Mr Mark Pellicano, Head of Safeguarding

Your Grace, Your Excellency, honorable members of parliament, colleagues, and partners in safeguarding,

Good morning,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the first Safeguarding Conference in Malta.

This conference marks an important milestone in the Church's journey of safeguarding in our country. The Safeguarding Commission was established ten years ago by His Grace, Archbishop Charles Scicluna, building on the foundation of the former Response Team that had been set up in the early 1990s by Archbishop Joseph Mercieca. This made Malta one of the first Episcopal Conferences to develop such safeguarding models within the universal Church.

Last year, the Maltese Episcopal Conference and the Conference of Major Religious Superiors adopted a new Safeguarding Policy which broadened and strengthened the Commission's remit. This policy entrusts the Commission with promoting safe environments within the Church, primarily through preventive practices and training, care and advocacy for victims, handling of complaints, conducting preliminary investigations and risk assessments, and following up on the wellbeing of those involved.

The policy also affirms the values that guide all our work: responsibility, transparency, and integrity, and commits us to a victim-centred approach, mandatory reporting, and the protection of both complainants and respondents, ensuring that every person involved is treated with fairness and compassion.

Importantly, the policy clarifies that the Commission's scope is not limited to cases of sexual abuse. We are also responsible for establishing preventive measures and look into safeguarding concerns related to abuse of power, emotional abuse, online abuse, spiritual abuse, and physical abuse. Our experience has shown that harm within institutions often develops gradually through different forms of boundary violations and misuse of authority before escalating into more serious forms of abuse. We are also increasingly aware that abuse now occurs both online and offline, and that safeguarding in today's world requires vigilance across all spaces where people interact.

Through our work, we have had the privilege of engaging with people from all sectors of the Maltese society. Over the years, many NGOs, government agencies, and representatives of other faith communities have reached out to us for support in safeguarding training, or to help them to develop their own safeguarding policies and structures.

It was precisely these collaborations that inspired us to organise this Safeguarding Conference, hosted by the Archdiocese of Malta, as a space to share our experience and to promote what we believe is a shared mission. This conference allows us to present what we have learned along the way — including our challenges, our practices, and our achievements — so that together we can continue working to ensure that all minors and vulnerable adults in Malta are protected and supported in every environment.

We are deeply honoured by the presence of His Grace, Archbishop Charles Scicluna, Archbishop of Malta, who has been pivotal in hosting and supporting this initiative. Archbishop Scicluna is recognised internationally for his leadership in investigating clerical sexual abuse and advancing safeguarding and canonical justice reforms. We look forward to hearing his reflections and being inspired by his wisdom.

We are equally honoured to welcome Bishop Luis Manuel Ali Herrera, our keynote speaker. Bishop Ali Herrera, who holds degrees in theology and psychology, has long been involved in formation and pastoral accompaniment. In 2024, he was appointed by His Holiness Pope Francis as Secretary of Tutela Minorum - the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. His expertise brings together theology, psychology, and safeguarding in a truly integrative and holistic way.

It is also our honour to welcome Fr Eric Cauchi, the President of the Conference of Major Superiors of Religious in Malta, who also serves as Provincial of the Salesians, together with Fr. Giovanni Curmi, Vicar General of the Diocese of Gozo. Through their experience and leadership, they bring valuable perspectives on the ongoing work of safeguarding within the Church.

The aim of this conference is to bring together Church leaders – both local and international - alongside statutory authorities, professionals, and civil society, to share expertise, address emerging challenges, and strengthen collaboration in the field of safeguarding.

We are grateful to the distinguished participants in our two discussion panels: the first composed of representatives of statutory entities, and the second of professionals working in different social sectors who encounter safeguarding needs in their daily practice.

This conference brings together people who hold safeguarding responsibilities in faith communities, public services, education, healthcare, social work, and other sectors. We believe that by sharing experiences and perspectives – and by learning from both the universal Church and the Church in Malta – we can strengthen the safeguarding culture in our country, ensuring that those who have been harmed receive the support they need, and that others are protected from harm in the first place.

Let us now begin this conference with a spirit of openness, collaboration, and shared responsibility. I hope that this day will be a fruitful and inspiring experience for all of us.

Thank you.