



Global lessons on protection

Opening address by Bishop Luis Manuel Alí Herrera

Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors

Archdiocese of Malta, 2025

Your Excellency Archbishop Scicluna,
Mr. Pellicano,
dear friends and colleagues:

When I landed last night and saw the lights of Valletta, I reflected on how faith has endured in places that have been part of our Christian culture since its inception. This realization reminded me why it is a privilege and a blessing to be here. I am here on behalf of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, which assists the Holy Father in promoting a culture of protection throughout the universal Church. **Our mission is simple, yet challenging: we strive for every corner of the Church to not only preach the Gospel, but also practice a Gospel of protection, care, and justice for all.**

This mission is not only institutional; it is also deeply spiritual. I have been working on these issues for fifteen years. It was not something I asked for, nor was it a canonical appointment. It presented itself to me when I first met a victim of clerical abuse. From that moment on, I have been fully convinced that the issue of establishing a culture of care and protection within the Church is essential to our credibility as witnesses to the Christ's love for us.

In many ways, Malta embodies the spirit of our mission. From its earliest Christian roots, this island has been a place where faith and compassion converge. When the Apostle Paul was shipwrecked on these shores, the Acts of the Apostles tell us, "The people of Malta showed us unusual kindness" (Acts 28:2).

That phrase has always stuck with me. "Unusual kindness." In a moment of fear and confusion, the people of this island welcomed strangers, cared for the wounded, and provided warmth to the cold.

That scene could have happened yesterday. It is one of the most beautiful images of what it means to "protect a person." Protection isn't primarily based on rules or procedures; it begins with concrete actions that protect.

It is the Gospel made visible in how we treat one another, especially those who are suffering or vulnerable. In essence, protection is the church's way of saying, "Every person matters." "Every person matters. Every life is sacred."

Nowhere do we see this truth more powerfully than in the life of St. Josephine Bakhita. As a child, she was kidnapped, enslaved, and treated like an object. She lost her name, her language, and her freedom, yet she never lost her dignity. When she found God's love, she discovered that she was not a number or a possession but a daughter. She used to say, "I am definitively loved, and whatever happens to me, I am awaited by this Love."

These words come from someone who lost everything yet discovered that her worth could never be taken away. Her life reminds us that protection is not only about preventing harm; it's also about helping people rediscover who they are. It's about ensuring that no one ever feels nameless again and that everyone is respected, known, and loved.

Malta has something profound to teach the world about this, too. In Europe, Malta stands at a crossroads. Though small in size, its voice reaches far and wide - even to Latin America, where I come from.

Malta's culture of dialogue and openness to collaboration between the Church and society, and between the local and the universal, have made it a point of reference on Europe's path to protection. As stated in the second annual report of the Pontifical Commission and the general description of safeguarding by the Maltese Bishops' Conference, faith is combined with professionalism and compassion with institutional responsibility. This combination gives credibility to the Church's mission in our time.

If I'm not mistaken, there's a Maltese word that captures this spirit: "ġieh." It means honor, but not in the sense of prestige or pride. Rather, it refers to the respect due to the dignity of another person. Living protection as an evangelical mission is precisely this: living with "ġieh," or reverence for the dignity of every human being.

Protection is not merely an administrative duty. Rather, it is an ecclesial vocation and the Church's daily practice of mercy and restoration of trust.

The three pillars of our global mission

When Pope Francis established the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, he did not ask us to create more structures or offices. Rather, he asked us to help the Church become a family that protects, rebuilds trust, and recognizes the Gospel not only in words, but also in how we care for one another. This mission has taken shape through three main pillars: the Universal Guidelines Framework, the Annual Report, and the Memorare Initiative.

Each of these pillars reminds us that protection is not the responsibility of a few specialists but a shared vocation in which everyone participates: families, professionals, and society as a whole.

1. The Universal Guidelines Framework

The first pillar is the Universal Guiding Framework (UGF). Rather than a set of rules, it is a process of listening. This listening began in 2023 when we opened the text to a period of public consultation inviting feedback on our proposed Safeguarding Principals from all interested parties, internal and external to the Church. The feedback from this consultation was integrated into the development of Criteria and Indicators for each Principal.

Then over the last year we presented this updated text to local churches. Commission members and staff held listening sessions around the world, from Africa to Europe and the Americas to Asia and Oceania. During these conversations, we not only listened to policies and procedures but also to the stories of faith communities and their members.

We held a total of 23 listening sessions, which taught us that true protection begins when we are truly willing to listen to survivors, families, and those in positions of responsibility. Healing begins with that openness.

Another lesson learned from this multicultural exercise is that, while our guidelines must be universal, they cannot be one-size-fits-all. They must respect and adapt to local cultures and real human experience. Our guidelines must broaden their focus to protect not only minors but also the elderly and all people in vulnerable situations. They must address all forms of abuse, including sexual, spiritual, emotional, and financial abuse, as well as abuse of power.

Finally, we were reminded that smaller churches and religious communities often need more than documents - need accompaniment, formation, and sustainable support.

None of this happens in isolation. Protection only works when the church works hand in hand with society. As one participant in Zimbabwe put it, "The child belongs to the whole village."

The UGF is trying to build that very thing: a common language that unites principles and people, theology and practice, and faith and professionalism. Here in Malta, that balance is already evident.

Your church collaborates with civil institutions, therapists, teachers, and NGOs.

You demonstrate that protection is stronger when shared by the Church and society rather than by the Church alone.

2. The Annual Report

The second pillar is the annual report.

When the first report was published in 2024, it was as if we had opened a window after a long night. It revealed where we stood: what structures existed, what was lacking, and where assistance was required.

It was the first time the Church had thoroughly analyzed its capacity to protect. It was a map, not a completed journey. As the Spanish poet Machado says, "The path is made by walking."

The second report, published this month and including you and 18 other episcopal conferences around the world, emphasizes integral reparation because, as Pope Francis told us in a speech in May 2023, "What has been broken must not remain in pieces..." (Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, May 5, 2023).

As we prepare the third report, our focus is on justice as part of what we call conversional justice, alongside truth, integral reparation, and institutional reform.

This year's work examines how justice can be lived out in practice, such as how we respond when harm has been done and how accountability and reconciliation can coexist. Additionally, we will explore how the Church's response systems can be shaped with mercy while maintaining accountability.

The methodology of the Annual Report has also evolved. From the beginning, survivors and experts have been part of the reflection process itself, not as consultants, but as active participants. Their insights have enriched the process by providing the reports with not only data but also concrete testimonies in which their voices, claims, and often tears are heard.

This year, special attention has been given to consecrated life, where authority and vulnerability often converge.

By listening to religious communities, the Commission learned that protection can be a way of living communion - a daily expression of respect and care in shared life and mission.

Beyond ecclesial structures, the Annual Report recognizes that effective protection depends on clear reporting mechanisms and cooperation with civil systems.

Research and experience confirm that robust reporting frameworks and genuine collaboration with public protection services lead to more cases of abuse being reported and more lives being protected.

Having laws or guidelines on paper is not enough; collaboration and trust between the Church, family, and society are the decisive factors, with each playing its part in protecting the vulnerable.

For this reason, the Annual Report continues to invite all local churches to view transparency as an evangelical witness and a way of telling the truth that allows grace to enter, rather than as an external requirement.

Here in Malta, this conviction is put into practice. Your culture of protection - open to reflection, committed to collaborating with public institutions, and strengthened by professional integrity - is a living example of what the Annual Report calls for: a church that protects with love, leads with humility, and heals with truth.

3. The Memorare Initiative

Perhaps the third pillar is where it is most evident that synodality begins with solidarity among churches.

Memorare, named after a Marian prayer, helps local churches develop their own prevention systems, train care leaders, and open offices to receive complaints and support victims. It does this by accompanying episcopal conferences and protection teams, not by imposing models.

Currently, twenty-one episcopal conferences from Africa, Asia, Oceania, Europe, and Central and South America are participating in this initiative.

This approach has created something I want to highlight: a network of relationships connecting communities far beyond their own borders.

Bishops are reaching out to one another across regions to share experiences and lessons learned. Protection coordinators in Africa and Asia are conversing with their counterparts in Europe and Latin America.

This is a quiet, almost hidden expression of synodality - the Church learning from its diversity. The initiative is also helping the Church consider protection an integral part of its evangelizing mission.

In many places, protection teams collaborate with seminaries, catechetical centers, and youth ministries to ensure the formation of priests and lay leaders includes an awareness of dignity, boundaries, and care.

Of course, it's not an easy path. We've encountered many shortcomings: some local churches continue to struggle with limited resources, cultural challenges, and language barriers that slow down the work.

Others are tempted to view protection as merely a technical task or a bureaucratic requirement rather than an evangelizing action in its own right.

The Power of Collaboration and the Path of Conversional Justice

Collaboration is not just a strategy; it is a gift. It occurs when the Church begins to view protection not as an obligation, but as communion. It happens when bishops, priests, religious leaders, lay professionals, families, and civil partners work together to protect life. Wherever that happens, the Gospel is reincarnated.

Around the world, collaboration between the Church and civil society has demonstrated its transformative power.

The Commission's first two annual reports revealed that when the Church collaborates with public authorities, change becomes visible and lasting.

In some places, cooperation agreements between church institutions and national agencies ensure that cases are handled transparently and quickly.

In other places, protection centers bring together church professionals, social workers, and psychologists who now share training standards and reporting channels with state agencies.

In many regions, dioceses and government offices collaborate to promote prevention in schools, youth services, and religious organizations. They recognize that protection is most effective when systems are aligned, not parallel.

These experiences are not about uniformity but trust - trust built through shared responsibility, respect for different roles, and clear communication.

The Church's annual reports emphasize that protection is strongest when the Church's internal procedures are coordinated with civil protection frameworks.

When both sides recognize each other's mission, survivors receive a consistent and compassionate response, and those who report abuse are not lost between institutions.

At the same time, collaboration requires courage.

The Church must be truly open, share what it knows carefully, and allow independent reviewers to examine its work. This is how we can serve the truth honestly.

We also need our civic leaders to recognize the contributions of the Church at its best: its deep presence in communities, its power to educate, and its commitment to teaching people to avoid harm. Both institutions serve the same goal: the dignity and safety of all children and vulnerable individuals.

In this sense, building a national culture of protection that is coherent, harmonized, and anchored in law and conscience is not just an administrative aspiration but also a moral imperative.

This horizon is taking shape here in Malta.

Throughout Europe, Malta is known for its openness to dialogue and its ability to build bridges between the local and the universal.

This conference is another step in that direction, bringing together the Church, the state, professionals, and citizens to form a united front in defense of human dignity.

You are helping to create what the Annual Report refers to as a "community of protection": a living network of trust and shared responsibility in which all institutions—ecclesiastical and civil—contribute their expertise to a common mission: making this island a safe place for all.

The call for deeper collaboration between the Church and public authorities has also been echoed at the European level.

The same call for deeper collaboration between the Church and public life is being heard across Europe. Recent dialogues between church leaders, legal experts, and protection professionals have emphasized that cooperation with civil authorities must be at the core of our frameworks, not on the margins.

Transparent and consistent relationships with public institutions—even in areas such as data protection, privacy, and legal procedures—are expressions of integrity and respect for the common good, not obstacles to faith.

These conversations have also reminded us that protection must be shaped by a trauma-informed, victim-centered approach that recognizes the shared yet distinct roles of families, church communities, and state institutions.

In November 2024 the Commission organized a continental meeting for Europe, gathering church leaders and experts to discuss how collaboration has begun to reshape the culture of protection.

They discussed mediation and restorative processes supported by independent commissions that encourage open dialogue between victims and church representatives, as well as open investigations led by teams of theologians, lawyers, and social scientists. They also talked about public acknowledgments that combine justice, penance, and reconciliation.

In other contexts, long-term partnerships between church institutions, universities, and training centers are equipping clergy and laypeople to respond with competence and compassion.

The same conviction emerges everywhere: protection must be based on justice and empathy, and healing occurs when institutions share responsibility for the truth.

These exchanges clearly demonstrate that transparency and collaboration are not threats to the Church's autonomy but rather signs of its maturity.

When protection becomes a shared professional and moral commitment, trust deepens, and the credibility of the Church and society is renewed.

The European participants concluded that the way forward lies in greater coordination and coherence—not a one-size-fits-all system, but rather a constellation of initiatives united by the same vision of dignity, responsibility, and hope.

This conviction is now being echoed in broader global forums where international agencies and religious organizations recognize the importance of cooperating with religious communities to build lasting protection systems. They remind us that the Church's protective work is part of a broader human alliance—a partnership of conscience dedicated to the safety of all people.

Let us reflect on the example of Saint Josephine Bakhita, who experienced violence yet refused to harbor hatred.

She found a God who remembered her name and restored her dignity.

Her life reminds us that justice without compassion is sterile and that mercy without truth is empty.

Conversional justice holds both together: the truth that heals and the mercy that restores.

This is the justice we hope to see flourish where the Church and society collaborate.

Justice as responsibility, where leaders accept accountability as a service.

Justice as encounter, where survivors are not outsiders, but partners whose voices shape reform.

Justice as communion is when the Church, the state, and families learn to protect together.

Your efforts to protect, inspired by professionalism and faith and based on cooperation with public institutions, show what it means to protect through communion.

You demonstrate that when the Church and civil society move forward together, credibility grows, trust is restored, and the Gospel is proclaimed.

From this small but luminous island, this message shines far beyond its shores.

Protection is the language of love, and love is the truest form of justice.

May our "unusual kindness - the kindness that Saint Paul experienced on these shores - become our way of life.

May this island, once a place of shipwrecks, continue to be a place of new beginnings where faith, truth, and compassion converge in God's loving embrace.

Thank you.