

Safeguarding Conference

A Shared Mission

Hosted by the Archdiocese of Malta

Keynote address by:

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5 CPD Hours Certificate
available on request

13.11.25

8:30am - 2:00pm
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The current realities of safeguarding and the implications for both the present and the future

Safeguarding: From Silence to Renewal — A Journey of Faith, Responsibility, and Tranquility

When I look back thirty years ago, I still remember myself as a young novice, wrestling with something I never quite understood at the time—the *sacro silenzio* at ten o'clock in the evening, the sacred silence.

In those early days, silence felt almost unbearable. We Maltese are not known for our silence—we are a Mediterranean people, vibrant, expressive, emotional. Silence was alien to us; it seemed to suffocate the warmth of our human contact. I remember suffering through those first nights of silence—unable to read, unable to speak, unable even to breathe too loudly without feeling somehow guilty.

But time, as it often does, transformed that struggle. Slowly, I grew fond of that silence—not the silence imposed from outside, but a silence that began to grow from within. It became a space for peace, for prayer, for listening to the quiet movements of the heart. And I learned that even that silence could be broken—discreetly, compassionately—when a brother was homesick, when worry or grief called for comfort.

From Sacred Silence to Troubled Silence

Ten years later, as a deacon in inner-city Dublin, I found myself in a very different world, living a totally different reaction towards silence. It was a neighborhood where teenage pregnancies outnumbered religious vocations, where social poverty met spiritual hunger but also were anger towards a silence of homerty was palpable. A mother was never known to betray her children, let alone damage them. This was anything but *sacro*

silenzio. And that silence, too, was sacred—but only because it cried out to be broken.

It was then that I began to understand how silence can both heal and harm. There is a silence that listens—and a silence that hides. A silence that rests in faith—and a silence that is born of fear (Cossenz, 2018).

Remembering in Order to Heal

Today, as Religious Congregations, when we speak of Safeguarding, we are also invited to revisit our collective memory and stay with the present moment—to return to the roots of our silence. We must ask ourselves: what kept so many good, intelligent, and faith-filled people from speaking courageously about the pain that weighed upon our Church?

If we lose memory, we lose our footing.

If we forget our wounds, we cannot hope to heal them.

“To hold the past in truth is not to dwell on guilt—it is to take responsibility for what we have been, so that we may grow into what God calls us to become”. (Doyle, 2022)

St. Catherine of Siena, writing to Pope Gregory XI, used a striking image:

*“If a wound is not cured when necessary, but only ointment is applied, not only will it not heal, but it will infect the whole body, often fatally”*¹ (Catherine of Siena, 1376/2000).

This, I believe, describes what denial and minimization have done to the Church. Perhaps it is easy to judge using our current knowledge and mental categories. This “silence” spoke loudly of helplessness.

For too long, we covered wounds rather than cleansing them. We confused “protecting the Church” with protecting its image. And so, the body became sick.

¹ She urges him to stop treating a corrupt leader with soothing remedies instead of cutting out the corruption. (Letter to Pope Gregory XI, June–Sept. 1376 — often listed as Letter 74).

As the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors emphasizes, “Safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility, integral to the mission of the Church” (*Tutela Minorum*, 2024, para. 4).

We learned, painfully, that silence postpones healing, but never brings it.

A Brief History: From Response to Responsibility

The story of safeguarding in Malta mirrors this transformation.

In 1999, the Church established the Response Team—a first, courageous attempt to face allegations of sexual abuse by clergy. It was necessary, but limited—reactive rather than proactive, focused on responding to individual cases.

By 2015, we saw the birth of the Safeguarding Commission, a permanent and professional structure tasked with protection, prevention, education, and support. The current Safeguarding Policy endorsed by the Maltese Episcopal Conference and the Conference of Major Religious Superiors (Safeguarding Commission Malta, 2024) is a first timer; frankly in an ecclesial context marked by a mentality of sectarianism and working in parallel rather than in synergy. This shift marks more than an institutional change. It signals a conversion of mentality—from secrecy to transparency: together, from fear to trust: together, from reaction to formation: together.

The Safeguarding Policy 2024 of the Maltese Church explicitly names its guiding principles as “responsibility, accountability, transparency, and integrity” (Safeguarding Commission Malta, 2024, p. 3).

This marks a passage from a narrow concern about clerical misconduct to a holistic concern for the well-being of every person, especially the most vulnerable (*Tutela Minorum*, 2023).

Maybe today is the occasion to reflectively acknowledge what the Safeguarding Commission was able to provide a paradigm shift. Its own transformation as a team was able to instil a change of being as religious; from a fixed and static ‘being’ to a movement towards ‘on becoming’. From this journey, three great themes emerge—Loyalty, Responsibility, and Tranquility—each essential if safeguarding is to remain not only a policy but a spiritual movement of renewal.

1. Loyalty: The Courage to Be Faithful to the Gospel

To speak the truth is never easy. And this was equally true within the same Church.

In the past 30 years we have understood better through a reflective journey how truth-telling was mistaken for disloyalty; honesty was branded as rebellion. When one dared to question or challenge, the verdict was often swift—“you are being disloyal.”

But what does loyalty really mean?

True loyalty is not blind obedience. *“True loyalty is faithfulness—to the Gospel, to Christ, to the community of believers who deserve integrity and transparency”* (Coughlin, 2023).

When loyalty is misunderstood, fear takes root. The desire to belong, to be accepted, to be respected by one’s peers can lead to silence—a silence that feels safe, but is deeply wounding.

As *Tutela Minorum* (2024) affirms, *“The credibility of the Church in proclaiming the Gospel depends on her ability to protect and honor the dignity of each person, especially the youngest and most vulnerable”* (para. 8).

It is the loyal disciple, not the indifferent one, who calls the Church to conversion.

When truth is spoken in love, the fruit is not division but healing. It calls forth non-defensive listening—the capacity to hear without fear, to welcome critique as an act of love. That kind of listening is the highest expression of loyalty. This, by time, and always as a painful process, has become the principle force guiding a culture of collaboration between KSMR and the Safeguarding Commission. Please allow me to acknowledge, that behind this process are persons in the roles of Leaders who have been called to carry the cross with and on behalf of others; but what is this weight, compared to the pain victims and relatives endure? It is a pain shared by us too.

2. Responsibility: From Power to Authority

Our world values power—titles, influence, visibility. But the Gospel invites us to something deeper: authority. Power controls; authority nurtures. Power demands obedience; authority inspires growth.

Responsibility in the Church cannot be rooted in fear. Our model is not control, but service; not domination, but discipleship.

When the safeguarding crisis erupted, it exposed not only the wounds of victims but also the fragility of our structures. It forced us to confront the limits of our “power” and rediscover the meaning of authority as humble credibility.

As the Maltese Safeguarding Commission stresses, “*Safeguarding is not merely compliance but conversion—a movement toward transparency, healing, and shared responsibility*” (Safeguarding Commission Malta, 2024, p. 7).

From fear of investigation, we moved toward a culture of listening; from denial toward transparency; from self-protection toward compassion.

What once seemed like decline may in fact be renewal. What once appeared as loss may be the seed of new life.

The Latin roots of *authority*—*auctoritas*, from *auctor*, “one who causes to grow”—remind us that true authority enables life, fosters growth, and empowers others to flourish.

We are moving from *potestas* to *auctoritas*, from command to credibility, from prestige to authenticity. And the horizontal thread, linking the story and how it is evolving, is the Safeguarding Commission. All members of the Advisory Board, the professionals from different fields, the Head of Safeguarding himself together form a culture of prophetic tenure; like Christ they challenge and guide us to call a spade, a spade but lovingly journey with the vulnerables on both sides of the coin, the victims and the subjects of complaint and the wounded systems carrying both differently. Paradoxically, we had to carry this painful reality to anticipate synodality before the term was coined by Pope Francis. A reality were lay and religious, professed and professionals, got on the carriage of a wounded humanity in search for meaning and healing in the Risen Lord.

3. Tranquility: The Peace that Comes from Truth

The final theme—Tranquility—brings us full circle.

Today, more than ever, tranquility must become something interior—a peace that comes from honesty and integrity.

Tranquility is not numbness or resignation but *“the deep stillness that flows from facing reality with courage”* (Francis, 2019).

Real peace cannot be built on avoidance. The light of the Gospel always exposes before it heals.

Through its patient work with victims, with religious communities, and with leaders, the Commission has lifted the veil of denial. It has taught us that fear is not a sin—but cowardice can be. When we refuse to act because of fear, when we hide behind structures, when we silence truth in the name of order, we sin against faith itself.

As I have previously stated, a recent example is the joint safeguarding policy signed between the Episcopal Conference of Malta and the KSMR—the first of its kind in our Church’s history. Behind that document lie years of listening, repentance, and hope. It represents a Church learning to trust not in its perfection but in God’s mercy (Safeguarding Commission Malta, 2024).

Consecrated Life in Transformation

The collaboration between the Safeguarding Commission and religious congregations has revealed something vital: there is life within the wounds.

Consecrated life is not over; it is being reshaped by grace—from prestige to authenticity, rigidity to relationship, fear to faith. Pope Benedict XVI once reflected that *“the Church will no longer be as we knew it,”* a prophetic intuition that resonates deeply with the transformation now unfolding within religious life. His words were not a lament but a quiet recognition that purification and renewal are inseparable in the mystery of faith. Religious life, too, is being reshaped — moving from structures of prestige to spaces of authenticity, from external conformity to interior conviction. The decline of numbers may conceal the birth of a more transparent, contemplative, and

missionary form of consecration. As Pope Benedict foresaw, the Church of the future will be smaller, humbler, yet more faithful; so too, religious life today is discovering that its strength lies not in visibility or influence, but in witness — a serene fidelity rooted in simplicity, communion, and hope.

Consecrated life was never meant to be an end in itself; it is a way that begins and ends in love. Painfully, we had to embrace what Mother Teresa used to say: “love until it hurts”. And the past hurts spoke not of love. It is again the time to love not only until, but precisely, because it hurts...it hurts...it hurts...

Our rules and constitutions hold great value; however, without love, they remain devoid of vitality. *“The true renewal of religious life does not arise from new structural frameworks but from an inner conversion of heart—through rediscovering the charism of our founders and expressing it creatively within contemporary contexts”* (O’Leary, 2021). The transformation undertaken by the Safeguarding Commission exemplifies this process. Evolving from an institution primarily concerned with compliance and adjudication, it has become a collaborative and reflective body in which truth remains the defining principle, fostering a profound cultural shift within our religious communities.

The Passion that Heals and Transforms

To conclude, we turn to the Passion of Christ, the heart of our faith, the epistemology of what lies under the identity of The Safeguarding Commission. The Passion is both love and suffering—the betrayal by a friend, the denial by Peter, the abandonment by His disciples, the silence of the Father. Yet, in that suffering, love triumphed.

Only by entering that mystery can we understand what safeguarding truly means. It is not merely protecting from harm; it is sharing in God’s compassion, learning to suffer with and for others so that life may be renewed.

As St. Paul writes, *“I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”* (Galatians 2:19–20, New Revised Standard Version).

As *Tutela Minorum* (2024) affirms, safeguarding is not optional: “It is an essential expression of the Church’s faith and mission to embody the compassion of Christ for the most vulnerable” (para. 2).

Safeguarding, therefore, is not merely a structural requirement or a matter of compliance. It represents a spiritual conversion—a call to encounter anew the face of Christ in those who are vulnerable. KSMR remains deeply committed to fostering this understanding within the contemporary context of safeguarding, recognizing its profound implications for both the present and the future.

Final Reflection

Brothers and sisters, this journey from silence to renewal has been long and costly. It has taken courage to face what was hidden, to name what was painful, to act when it would have been easier to remain still.

The image we hold of God shapes our humanity.

If our God is compassionate, we too become compassionate.

If our God suffers with His people, we too learn to bear one another’s burdens.

The opposite of love is not anger, but indifference — the apathy that closes the heart to God and to others.

Indifference is the surest sign of a faith grown cold.

KSMR acknowledges the transformative process that the Safeguarding Commission has gradually unfolded over time: namely, the recognition that an impassive God leads humanity toward apathy, whereas the *pathetic* God—the God of *pathos*—revealed in the Incarnation and culminating in the death of the Son of God on the cross, draws us into *sympathy*. The term derives from the Greek *sympátheia*, meaning “to share in feeling” or “to suffer with” (Chavez, 2025). In this light, religious life, within the contemporary context of safeguarding, is no longer defined by “suffering for” or “suffering because of,” but rather by the call to “suffer with and along the way.”

As already stated, then, the Safeguarding Commission is not simply a structure or a compliance exercise. It is a spiritual conversion, a call to

rediscover the face of Christ in the vulnerable. It is the path through which the Church — purified by pain, strengthened by hope — can again shine with the light of truth, compassion, and justice.

But it is precisely here that we rediscover the Gospel:
that resurrection is always born from crucifixion,
that light comes only through the cracks of our brokenness,
“and that God, who began this good work in us, will bring it to completion”
(Philippians 1:6).

May we continue this path—faithful, responsible, and tranquil—trusting not in our strength, but in the transforming power of divine love.

Eric Cachia sdb

13.11.2025

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