

Continuing Formation for Safeguarding

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This essay, revised from a talk presented at the Conference of Major Superiors of Men's Safeguarding Workshop on October 25, 2021, explores the need for continuing formation in safeguarding. It encourages a renewed embrace of the vocation of consecrated life, a commitment to creating safe communities free from harassment and abuse, a focus on uncomfortable discussions about sexuality, and intentional self-care to renew consecrated life's roots in God.

The prayer popularly attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero starts:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is the Lord's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.¹

In fact, that reflection was penned by Fr. Kenneth Untener, later the bishop of Saginaw, MI in the United States. I cite it, not from a pedantic urge to correct the historical record, but to remind us of the next lines: "Nothing we do is complete, no statement says all that should be said, no program accomplishes the Church's mission, no set of goals and objectives includes everything."²

That's true of our safeguarding efforts. And it's true of this essay—it cannot cover everything, even on the topic of continuing formation for

¹ There are many copies of this prayer on the internet. Here's one place it can be found: <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own>.

² See the note about this prayer at <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own>.

safeguarding, never mind the enormous subject of fashioning a culture of resistance to the culture of abuse and power. The issues are vast and daunting:

- listening to survivors with compassion;
- crafting effective responses to them;
- enacting comprehensive education and formation programs for our member;
- keeping safe the offending members;
- establishing protocols for accountability and transparency in our communities and institutions;
- forestalling burn-out in those in the front line of this ministry;
- **and** grounding it *all* in our entering ever more deeply into the paschal mystery.

In light of all that, even this small contribution to continuing formation in our apostolate of protection and safeguarding will be inadequate to the task.

Romero's prayer offers the encouragement that there is a liberation in realizing we can't say or do *everything*, because that then enables us to do *something* and do it very well. Safeguarding work, like this talk, may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

In that spirit I offer a few reflections on where we now are in our responses to abuse, especially in light of the emerging safeguarding landscape.

Allegations of misconduct with adults underscore with new urgency our goal of fostering healthy religious life. Ongoing formation will need to help us develop better skills in transparency, accountability, and

friendship. These are some of the elements of a culture of resistance to the culture of abuse and power.

Many have noted the parallels between the pandemic and the abuse crisis: In both, the devastation fell most heavily on the most vulnerable; there was much finger pointing and blaming; both exposed deep rot in the systems that were supposed to keep people safe and healthy; and mainstream responses have been hampered by dissenting deniers.

In both, there has been the beguiling temptation to “get back” to the way things were, prior to the crisis.

And now a new wave of issues—COVID variants, allegations of abuse and harassment of adults—threatens to undo all the progress that has been made.

We remember those early days of the abuse scandals: the shock and shame, the paralysis, as we cast about to fashion responses that were effective, appropriate, pastoral and Christian.

These responses were not always either confident or competent. It’s taken twenty years, much continuing formation, and many missteps.

But it is appropriate to recognize that the necessary efforts to address the scandal of abuse of minors have been very robust, and we can modestly assert that they have borne much fruit.

While every dimension of the responses have not been perfect, we have made enormous progress in keeping our commitments to promote a consistent culture of protection.

We’ve moved beyond denial—mostly—to awakening and awareness. We are better—not good enough yet, but better—at listening to survivors and their stories.

We are better—not good enough yet, but better—at being humble and welcoming, rather than just being defensive.

Beyond that awakening and awareness, we've undertaken a great deal of action—not enough, perhaps, but not nothing—in protecting children:

- We have comprehensive policies and procedures in place, and mechanisms to ensure that we actually follow them. We paid attention to the physical conditions in our institutions and our residences and our policies on visitors to them.
- We have educated ourselves, our colleagues, parents and children themselves, about warning signs of potential abuse.
- We are more transparent in cooperating with law enforcement, in disclosing allegations, and in trusting our members with information about such allegations and the financial costs the Institute has borne.

But as with the pandemic, a new wave of abuse allegations has crashed upon us. Now we must confront the challenges of sexual harassment and boundary violations with adults, within our institutions, our communities and in formation.

Did we get complacent?

Have we still been holding on to remnants of denial?

Did we forget what we thought we had learned, about power differentials?

What has gone wrong in our abuse prevention protocols and education?

Did we succumb to the same blind spot as Andrew Cuomo?

When he resigned as Governor of New York, he claimed that, in his mind, he had never crossed the line with anyone, but didn't realize the extent to which the line has been redrawn.

Did some even fall into thinking that, “Of course, abuse of children is clearly wrong, but somehow you could excuse or overlook or even rationalize sexual acting out and harassment directed at adults?”

Perhaps part of the problem lies in our terming this a “crisis,” as if it’s an acute condition that will admit of a solution, and simply “go away” one day—like calling COVID a crisis that will one day, magically, disappear. With the pandemic, we’ve come to realize that COVID is a chronic condition, likely to be with us always. So too, with abuse and harassment.

In 306 CE at Elvira, Spain, canon 71 specifically stated that people who sexually abuse boys shall not be given communion even on their death beds. The Council of Nicaea in 325 CE declared that unchaste priests could not exercise ministry. The Third Lateran Council of 1179 taught that clerics who had sex with men or boys were to be dismissed from the clerical state. Session 13 of Trent required bishops to punish and deprive of office sexually active clerics. So, the Church has had to confront this ugly reality of sexual abuse for a long time.

Yet even if we were able to make our church institutions and religious communities absolutely safe, abuse and harassment will continue in other organizations and institutions, and especially in families and neighborhood clusters. We must always bear in mind that in every one of our parishes, schools and works, there will be some who have suffered abuse, most of them not at the hands of clerics.

Figures suggest that there are more than 42 million survivors of sexual abuse in America; about 1 in 3 girls abused before age of 18; about 1 in 5 boys, though may be many more, as at least 30% of all abuse is not reported. And with the survivors will be people close to them, who bear the collateral damage of their abuse.

Our ministry to them, to hear them, to accompany them, to grieve with them, to hope with them, will always be a constituent dimension of our religious life and witness.

Most of us are familiar with Fr. Ron Rolheiser, OMI's seminal 2002 article: "On Carrying a Scandal Biblically."³ In it he articulates how we must stand at the foot of the cross, and honestly name this moment of humiliation. It calls us to a humbling and a pruning, requiring courage instead of defensiveness or distancing or attempts to escape the shame.

I would expand that image. Traditionally Jesus on the cross wear only a loincloth. That is a bow to an understandable desire for modesty. But it's a pious fiction. Jesus was crucified stark naked. The Romans had utter contempt for circumcision and heaped special ridicule on the Jews they executed.

Rolheiser's invitation to be at the cross of Jesus is, I think, an invitation to radical honesty with ourselves about the real depths of suffering and humiliation, of survivors; and so the depths of what the Church—you and I –will need to undergo if we are to en flesh the compassion of the Christ. We too will be stripped naked.

Our conversion to such a radical stance is, I think, the central element of ongoing formation in safeguarding.

It begins with a renewed embrace of the reality of our vocation.

It entails a new commitment to revitalize our communities as safe places where Christ heals and transforms our sexuality.

Safe communities will call forth uncomfortable but necessary conversations about sexuality, affectivity and vowed chastity.

³ A copy is available at Fr. Rolheiser's website:
<https://ronrolheiser.com/me/uploads/2014/02/scandal.pdf>.

And conversion will require intentional and appropriate self-care and attention to *ex stasis*, standing outside of ourselves to the Sacred, the Transcendent.

A word about each.

First, vocation.

This is a *kairos* moment to renew and intensify our vocations—very literally, the response to our call:

The church, the *ekklēsia*, is the community that has been *kaleō ek*, that is called, addressed; called out, from darkness and death, and called upon, summoned to a mission.

These features of our vocation, our call, underlie why we need ongoing formation, not just in abuse prevention, but in deepening and actualizing our identity as vowed religious.

We—individually, as religious communities, as Church—have been called into existence from nothingness. We have been called into human life, and into humanity's history, with its wounds and its wonders, its grace and its sin. We have been called, each of us, by name, beloved child of God. We have been called out of sin and darkness and into covenant with God. This is part of what traditionally is called the *purgative way*.

Moreover, we have been called to discipleship, summoned to participate in the mission of Jesus, to bear fruit for the coming Kingdom of God, not just as individualist lone rangers but as vital members of the Body of Christ. This is the *illuminative way*.

And we have been called to die, and to a dying that imitates and enfleshes the death of Christ. We have been called onto the way of the cross, the passion of Christ. That dying itself is a mission, and an election. This is the *dark night of the soul*.

Ultimately, we are called to life eternal: called out of the grave; called into resurrection; called into the wounds of the Risen Lord; called into the Spirit's creative, redemptive and sanctifying work; called into the supper of the Lamb; called into the new creation, the reconciled cosmos under the headship of Christ; called into the very heart of the Trinity. This is the *unitive way*. And it is meant to start now, not just after the death of our present bodies.

I think our religious vocation, *radical conversion to mystical transformation*, is the horizon for framing our ongoing formation in safeguarding. Each step is rooted in awe—touching the Sacred.

Radical conversion will mean that we do more than just commit ourselves to fulfilling Safeguarding Standards, as crucial as that is.

It means we consciously move to the foot of the cross, as Rolheiser urges, and allow ourselves to be plunged into the passion of Christ, the dark night of the soul. This necessarily entails embracing the passion and suffering of all his wounded ones.

It means intentionally shifting from our place of security and privilege to one of vulnerability and humility, stripped even of loincloths; only then we can be clothed in the robes of the beloved children of the household of God.

It means learning to hear better the Lord's call, as we are learning to hear better the cry of the poor, the survivors.

Mark 10:35–45 illustrates dramatically this shift in self-understanding.

James and John ask for the places at the right hand and the left of Jesus. The other disciples object and quarrel, asserting their claims to privilege. Jesus reminds them of their true vocation: to be servant and slave of all. For those at the right and left hand of Jesus turn out to be his fellow crucified ones, equally naked and humiliated.

The disciples resist that kind of conversion. They must be plunged into the baptism of Christ—the mystery of his dying and rising—before they get it. The same is true for *us* disciples too.

Second, our vocations and our conversion entail a new commitment to revitalize our communities as safe places where Christ heals and transforms our sexuality.

We need to acknowledge and name the kinds of individual behaviors, cultural features and institutional structures that vitiate healthy religious communities. Healthy and mature friendships, lived in communities of mutual affection, transparency and accountability are, for us vowed religious, the strongest bulwark against abusive behaviors.

We all can name the behaviors of individual religious in pain: substance abuse; cynicism; regular absence from community liturgies, common prayer, meals and the like; depression; resistance to accountability; workaholism. Those are risk factors for acting out inappropriately.

Harder to address is the culture of a dysfunctional community, where workaholism is the expected norm, equated with religious generosity, and used as a kind of yardstick to measure the suitability of someone's religious vocation.

It can manifest itself in a widespread adolescent attitude that "I don't interfere or ask questions so that no one will challenge me either."

So, no one ever actually speaks to a religious about their drinking, or their frequent absences or dominating table conversation with bitter commentaries.

And the structures of community life can maintain that dysfunctionality, as when it is the superior_who is drinking too much or absent from

their duties and there are no clear lines of authority for expressing concerns.

And now, we must honestly admit another expression of dysfunction: abuse and harassment of adults, including colleagues in our institutions, parishioners, spiritual directees, and our fellow religious, especially of those in formation. A special word about that last example.

Those entering a religious community have invested a great deal in that vocational choice. They have spent a long time praying about it, then undergoing the application process, leaving behind their previous life; so they really want this to work out. They trust their formators especially but also all the formed members of a community. And that means that they can be easily manipulated by abusive individuals. They can end up keeping silent and giving a kind of “consent” to being harassed.

Formation and community life can infantilize them, diminish their freedom to choose whether to stay or leave. This is why Pope Francis has extended the definition of vulnerable persons to include those in formation and those in a spiritual relationships.

Harassment within religious communities can be subtle, but very real, and very destructive. It can exhibit the confluence of all three factors:

- the individual harasser’s bad behavior;
- the community’s dysfunctional culture that avoids confrontation and turns a blind eye to misconduct;
- and a structural element, when the harasser is the superior, and the community has not articulated a clear mechanism for reporting abuse to a different authority.

And if a community already finds it difficult to address other behaviors like substance abuse or absence from common life, so much more

difficult will it be to address issues around sexuality and harassment of adults, especially when it occurs within the community's own ranks.

Third, commitment to fostering supportive communities will call forth uncomfortable but necessary conversations about sexuality, affectivity and vowed chastity.

Conversations about sex are bound to be uncomfortable. It is a complicated reality, and there are intergenerational differences based in the nature and scope of cultural differences of society and of our family backgrounds.

Many of our older men had little or no sexual experience prior to entering religious life. Younger religious may be more secure in such self-disclosure; but that doesn't automatically mean they are more mature or better integrated in their sexuality. And prior to entering they all have been exposed to much more pornography than older religious, which is a continuing challenge for them.

Some communities easily acknowledge those sexual histories, while others treat it as taboo, except perhaps in the psychological testing.

Some institutes signal an unwillingness to accept gay candidates. Does that drive those candidates and those who are already members into denial or hiding?

Does denial of their sexual histories make community conversations more difficult? Does it undercut honesty with superiors and formators?

Conversations about harassment of adults, especially of those in formation will be even more fraught with discomfort.

Matthew 18:15 mandates we confront the brother who sins, at first in private and then with other witnesses, and then with the Church. That might work when the issue is crumbs in the butter, but harassment is of a different order of magnitude. Harassment is also illegal, so even if

it's occurring just within the religious community, the institution where the harasser is employed may also be involved.

We need clear templates of what to do in responding to allegations of misbehavior with adults, including some basic pastoral responses. This is acutely true when harassment occurs within the religious community itself. Without clear protocols for addressing misbehavior directed at adults, as a firm foundation on which to base these conversations, members end up feeling powerless, which in turn leads to distancing, fear and isolation.

To start, educate your members in the definitions and dynamics of abuse and sexual harassment of adults, just as you helped them learn about those involving minors. Make sure they know the basics: the legal definition of harassment; what behaviors and words could constitute harassment; and how to respond if they see it or if they experience it directed at themselves.

Remind formators and those in formation that if submitting or refusing to submit to this conduct is used as a basis for decisions affecting an individual's advancement to vows or ordination, that could constitute harassment.

Those subjected to harassment might feel flattered, annoyed, disgusted, fearful, confused, angry, trapped. They may be surprised to find someone is attracted to them.

Of more concern, if they previously experienced any traumatic event sexually, perhaps in overt acts or in being the object of unwanted attraction, this new harassment may light up some of those memories. In such situations, directors of works and superiors need to get them competent assistance.

Being harassed by another religious can tap into one's own sexual insecurities and shames, even sow doubts about one's vocation. It's

important to remember that these are issues more of power than of passion.

We all agree that we do not want to cross sexual boundaries, even in advertently. None of us wants to be subjected to such boundary violations; we do not want to invite those even inadvertently.

We want to protect our community members, our colleagues in apostolic works, the members of our faith communities, and all people from such encroachments. We want our vows to enable us to live and love credibly without exploitation, coercion, or possessiveness.

But we aren't really sure of where the lines are in terms of humor and compliments and topics of conversation and physical expressions among adults, even among our own community members.

We're not sure how it will be received by the other or by the those watching and listening to us or by the superior.

And when we don't really know how to speak and listen to one another on these uncomfortable topics, we can feel like we're always walking on eggshells. What happens to trust? Can we become our true selves when conversation is superficial, and affection is straight-jacketed? Is community a place where we can be truly ourselves or must we forever live out of a public image of ourselves?

We need to encourage, and model, open and honest conversations about healthy celibacy and chastity. All of us are sexual beings, and at different times all of us are attracted to others.

All of us must acquire more skills in celibate living and celibate loving; and we need one another in acquiring, using, refining, these skills.

We need courage to replace fear, acceptance to replace shame, generosity to replace selfishness and self-centeredness, compassion to replace resentment. We need conversations, not silence. We need to

foster a culture of safeguarding, not a culture of neglect or denial. We all need the grace to love ourselves as the Lord loves us, with the same intimacy.

Those in formation, formators and candidates alike, need to speak candidly about issues around being judged, pornography, power, appropriate intimacy in friendship and the community's culture.

We will struggle to articulate what policies and procedures to recommend to superiors and provincials in addressing these emerging issues of adult boundaries. Building the requisite trust for these conversations will point us to the realization that they cannot be "one and done" but that each community will need to return to these topics throughout the coming year and beyond.

We may not know exactly the landscape of what healthy intimacy looks like, but we at least can ask those critical questions.

These conversations are an indispensable part of fostering richer friendships among religious. Healthy friendships are a bulwark against harassing behavior. Our capacity for friendship is the truly humanizing, maturing facility and habit. And as Aquinas noted, friendship is the closest analogue for a relationship with God.⁴

Simone Weil once observed, "In a perfect friendship, the two friends have consented to be two and not one. Friendship is a miracle by which a person consents to view from a distance, and without coming any nearer, the very person who is as necessary to him as bread."⁵ Friendship, then, is two freedoms meeting as two and not as one.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II.q23.a1.

⁵ Cited in Basil Hume, OSB, *Light in the Lord: Reflections on Priesthood* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 37.

Entering religious life does not mean we abandon our sexuality or squelch our capacity and instinct for love and friendship. That energy and drive cannot be divorced from religious life.

Or rather, it can be, but that creates a kind of fragmentation, in which all that is good, our talents, our bodies, sexual desire itself, is deemed in fact bad or shameful or not religious or not holy. And then a religious can't talk about it, even to God. But God is all truth, all loving, Creator, and God doesn't fashion us as sexual persons in order just to frustrate and shame us.

It's time for the Church to help all of us have more realistic conversations about being sexual human beings—all of us including celibates. And the Triune God is our first exemplar in the ways of friendship.

God's offer of friendship starts in the Garden of Eden, when God talks face to face with Adam and Eve, in the "breeze time" of the afternoon. Despite human sin, God renews the offer of that friendship again and again, with each new Covenant, to Noah, to Abraham, to Israel, to "the many" through the blood of Christ. God is always faithful to the Covenant; alas we humans are not.

The offer of divine friendship in the Judeo-Christian tradition is very different from all the other religions of the Ancient Near East. God is not a task master, and we are not slaves on the divine estate. God is not an absent landlord, and we are not abandoned tenants. God is not a tyrant who has to be bought off with incantations and rituals, and we are not shamans. Instead, God upholds the dignity of each person, and so demands justice, especially for the poor.

In short, God is Holy: that is, all powerful, and uses that power for all good. And we are neither all good or all powerful; yet we are the ones God chooses as Covenant partners and as friends.

We can nurture that gift of friendship with God through the discipline of a daily Examen, in which we share all the stuff of our lives, the quotidian as well as the dramatic, with our friend Jesus. That kind of prayer deepens our realization that God really does care about every dimension and aspect of our lives, including our sexuality. And it can deepen our gratitude for the friends who enrich our lives.

Fourth, how do our communities make concrete this kind of commitment to uncomfortable conversations, for the sake of radical transformation?

We Jesuits are using a method of discerning conversations, done in small groups, over three rounds. Those of you who have used our Conversations That Matter have encountered this method.⁶

The issue is placed before the community members in advance—perhaps an article or a video or simply a statement of a problem facing the community—so that each has time to take the issue to prayer and reflection.

In round one, each man speaks in turn, expressing his affective response to the issue.

There is no arguing or rebuttal or cross talk. At the end of the first round, there is a chance for silent reflection on what was said.

In round two, again each in turn speaks, this time about what is his affective response to what he heard the others say in the first round. He does not add new insights of his own which he had neglected to state in the first round; instead, he reports what it was like for him to hear the others. At the end of the second round, again a period of silent reflection on what each heard.

⁶ Anyone interested in learning more about this program may reach out to jccusjlife@jesuits.org for further information.

In the third round, participants can speak in any order they choose, focusing on any common expressions of grace, or resistance, that seem to be emerging from the group.

The key is *listening* to each other, and the method allows each the freedom to express himself without fear of being criticized or refuted. This invites not just more trust in the group, but more attentiveness to how the Spirit is at play in their midst.

I would add one final element to the proposed ongoing formation: Continuing education in our ministerial profession. Continuing education needs to address more than just abuse prevention. We need to embrace continuing education as part of our professional development and our commitment to excellence.

We religious need to counter the attitude that we are not held to the same standards as others. That attitude is at the heart of clericalism and ingrained in the culture of unaccountability. As one Jesuit said, when asked if he was going to attend a talk by another professor, said, "I don't go to lectures. I *give* lectures."

Along with learning new skills in celibate chastity and in community conversations, committing ourselves to regular updating of our preaching and pastoral skills would be one specific antidote to ingrained narcissism and clerical privilege. It is one small but crucial element in our election to move beyond mere compliance to the Safeguarding Standards, and to embrace the radical conversion which places us at the cross, that plunges us into the baptism of Christ, that readies us for union with the Trinity.

Finally, all this will require intentional and appropriate self-care and attention to *ex stasis*, standing outside of ourselves to touch the Sacred, the Transcendent.

We all need self-care and support for and from one another.

Some obvious things: we need to look after our own physical health. We also need to attend to our spiritual health: Regular spiritual direction, annual retreat, daily prayer, the sacraments, perhaps journaling, monthly days of solitude, vacations, spiritual reading and conversation.

We need to cultivate a life of the mind and a life of culture, including good literature, entertaining films, lectures and the theater.

Art, music and poetry all are essential elements of religion itself, because all of them open us up to *ex stasis*, standing outside ourselves to touch the Sacred, the Transcendent.

Drink in the beauty of nature and marvel at God's creation.

Tap the sources of your religious charism, the spirituality of your religious communities, in the writings and lives of your founders and great saints and inspirational leaders.

Just as married couples have to continue to learn about each other and themselves throughout their marriage and have to work at making their marriage ever more solid and secure, ever more all-encompassing, so too we religious need to work at our vocation. We are not finally formed just by taking first profession or final vows. To be a religious at 50 is not the same as at 25; to be a religious at 70 is not the same as at 50; to be a religious is an on-going work of grace and nature as God prepares us to live and to die in our religious communities as beloved disciples of Jesus.

All these elements of appropriate self-care offer new and rich fruit with which to age gracefully, to increase our self-emptying, and to ready us for that full union with Christ and our final incorporation into the very

life of the Trinity. That reality always must be the horizon and touchstone of all we do and say and are as religious, as fellow pilgrims and as trail guides on the way.

We take small steps on that journey: we listen to survivors; we take an honest inventory of ourselves and our communities, our need for conversion and our resistance; we have difficult conversations about our sexuality and chastity and religious life; we choose to embrace our vocations; we choose to grow up!

I leave you with words from poet Candace Kelly:

If you stand very still in the heart
of the woods you will hear many
wonderful things... the snap of a twig, and the wind in the trees,
and the whirl of invisible wings.

If you stand very still in the turmoil
of life, and you wait for a voice from
within, you will be LED down the quiet ways
of wisdom and peace in a mad world
of chaos and din.

If you stand very still and hold to
your faith, you will get all the help
that you ask; you will draw from the
silence the things that you need: hope and courage and strength
for your task.

(Candace Kelly, 1986)

You may find the original posting of this essay, as well as the author's biographical and contact information, at <https://www.reviewforreligious.com/essays/continuing-formation-for-safeguarding/>.