
Italian Bishops' Conference. National Report on prevention in Italian dioceses: how and why

The First National Report on abuse prevention measures carried out across Italian dioceses, promoted by the Italian Bishops' Conference, will be presented tomorrow, November 17, on the eve of the [Second National Day of Prayer for Victims and Survivors of Abuse](#), for the protection of minors and vulnerable persons. The initiative, the first for the Italian Church, comes as a direct and concrete response by the Church in Italy to Pope Francis' request to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors on April 29 last. "I would like you, on an annual basis, to prepare for me a report on the Church's initiatives for the protection of minors and vulnerable adults. This might be difficult at the beginning, but I ask you to begin where necessary, in order to furnish a reliable account on what is presently being done and what needs to change, so that the competent authorities can act." (Pope Francis, [Address to the members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors](#), April 29, 2022). The Report on Services for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons and Counselling Centres refers to the years 2020-2021. In fact, the regional and [diocesan/inter-diocesan Services](#) and Centres were created in accordance with the Guidelines for the Protection of Minors, approved by the Italian Bishops in May 2019. Data collection and processing was entrusted to the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore - Piacenza branch, chosen not only for its renowned expertise in statistics and sociological research, but also for its specific and remarkable experience in the field of protection and care of minors in associations of a religious character. The purpose of this survey is to provide a mapping of these centres, their structure, the activities they carry out, their strengths and areas requiring further development within their formation activities, the quality of counselling and assistance to victims, as well as the circumstances of the reported abuses or incidents. The analysis of these findings will improve the effectiveness of the educational service and the assistance provided to victims. During their General Assembly of May 2022, the Italian bishops, in its adoption of [five lines of action](#) for enhancing effective prevention of the phenomenon of abuse of minors and vulnerable persons, underlined their commitment to combating the phenomenon of abuse by promoting safe environments tailored to the needs of the youngest and most vulnerable. Among other things, the Italian Episcopal Conference is a permanent invited observer of the Observatory for the Fight against Paedophilia and Child Pornography, established pursuant to Law n.269/1998. In addition to prosecuting these crimes with the utmost severity, it is necessary to consolidate a culture of the protection of minors that progresses from their protection as a response to crime and awareness of the damage inflicted (child protection), to pro-active measures aimed at creating environments that foster and safeguard their dignity and interpersonal well-being (child safeguarding). The Church, with its centuries-old efforts for the care of children, thanks to the generous efforts of individuals and institutions, intends to devote the utmost commitment to this task via a major formation program involving all pastoral workers and ecclesial communities. Furthermore, one of the five lines of action approved by the 76th General Assembly is the commitment to set up Counselling Centres: an ecclesial and pastoral service for the purpose of welcoming, listening to and accompanying persons who claim they have been victims of abuse in ecclesial contexts, also occurring in the past, with the intention of sharing their stories of suffering, reporting the abuse they were victims of and the perpetrator. The Centres are now operating in 70 per cent of Italian dioceses. Not all dioceses are represented because some are very small, and finding the right persons for this delicate pastoral service of welcome and counselling is not easy. Moreover, in small dioceses, where people are more likely to know each other, victims of abuse or those who wish to report abuse may feel discouraged to turn to the local counselling centre, preferring to go to a neighbouring diocese instead. Finally, in order to strengthen prevention and response measures, improve support for victims and survivors and fine-tune the criteria for further researches, at a later stage a quantitative and qualitative analysis will be conducted on the data provided by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of

the Faith regarding the complaints collected/files opened by Church authorities, in the period 2001 - 2020, concerning crimes against minors, alleged or confirmed, committed by clerics in Italy since the 1950s. The importance of accessing these data, recorded in one single archive, which would otherwise be impossible to retrieve, perhaps lost or incomplete, dispersed in multiple archives, is reflected in their reliability, completeness and accuracy, given that they underwent a thorough evaluation and were thus subjected to the scrutiny of rigorous criminal procedures. They are therefore not mere newspaper articles, anonymous complaints, questionnaires devised for statistical purposes or projections. Therefore, it is extremely important to analyse these highly reliable findings thoroughly, in order to determine the typical features of abusive dynamics in the ecclesial context, how they develop and what strategies can be put in place for their best prevention. The Church in Italy intends to do everything in its power in terms of research and analysis, opting for a plurality of in-depth studies that take into account the specific features of the ecclesial context, entrusted to several groups of researchers from different universities and study centres, based on methodological criteria shared by the scientific community, rather than a single and generic survey entrusted to a single team with inevitable criticalities. The first report on Services and Counselling Centres, and the periodical reports that will ensue, along with the research on data from the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith, are only the first steps on a path undertaken with clarity and determination.

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