

Protecting God's Children for Adults

Spotlight on the Catholic Church and Child Sexual Abuse

By [Crispin Ketelhut](#)

When a child becomes the victim of sexual abuse, it's always a tragedy and a serious tragedy. But even more so when it involves the Church. It's more tragic because that person, first of all, represents the Church and, for the young child, represents God. And so many times, we know, psychologically, the child cannot make the difference between seeing that coming from God and the Church... And we must be honest that sometimes the accusation that these cases have not been handled in a way that has been effective—in a way that has been just, must be admitted.



—Archbishop Gregory Aymond¹

The reality of child sexual abuse is devastating for many. As described by Archbishop Gregory Aymond, the Catholic Church has not always responded in the way it should have to cases of abuse.

The Catholic Church's proactive response in 2002 was the approval of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (Charter). Since then, there is substantial, tangible and consistent evidence that the Church has worked diligently to be a better protector of children. Efforts include, but are not limited to the fact that each diocese throughout the country now has a safe environment program to protect children, an avenue for healing and reconciliation for survivors, a streamlined process to swiftly respond to allegations, transparency in cooperating with civil authorities and measures to discipline offenders.²

Safe environment efforts now span the entire United States, and beyond. The reason we've come so far is because of each and every one of you, and your commitment toward the protection of children. It means that:

- When you're coaching and teaching our youth, you recognize proper boundaries and work to uphold them.
- When you decide to volunteer at your youth's school, you willingly participate in standard screening measures such as a background check.

- When you're volunteering within faith formation and youth ministry, you ensure that your actions and behavior are transparent.
- Even though you haven't done anything wrong, you might modify your behavior to ensure that a child isn't more susceptible to inappropriate behavior from someone else.
- You're brave when it comes time to communicate your concerns about questionable behavior—and you keep communicating if it appears that nothing is being done.
- You're willing to participate in training to learn warning signs and trust your instincts.

If you've ever completed safe environment training in a live setting, read one of the training bulletins, completed a module or recertification, listened to someone recount their story, shown compassion toward a survivor, etc.—you've been a part of these efforts to protect the vulnerable by learning more about the problem and what you can do about it.

Did you know that 6,907 victim survivors have come forward to tell their stories since the publication of the Charter?³ There will likely be more. Thus it is crucial to reflect on the great power we each have when communicating with others about the subject of child sexual abuse. If you haven't already had the privilege, you may one day have a peer or young person choose you to receive a disclosure about the abuse that occurred to them. You'll be presented with this gift that took great courage, and you will have a choice in how you respond to assist the person. It is our hope that you'll think back to the steps you learned in your safe environment training. For example, let the person talk, and listen carefully. Address the person's feelings, and let them know that you trust and believe them. Limit questions. Do offer discretion; don't offer confidentiality. Depending on the situation, you may need to report the information, with discretion.

Because you've participated in the safe environment training, you're also now more aware of red-flag behaviors and the proper avenues to communicate your concerns. For example:

- If you're aware of an adult exhibiting behavior that is against the code of conduct, speak directly to the person and/or speak to a supervisor.
- If you're aware that a child is in immediate danger, call 911.
- If you're not positive, but you suspect that a child is being abused, call the child abuse hotline for the area.
- If you suspect or know a child is being, or has been abused by a diocesan employee or volunteer, first call the child abuse hotline, and then notify the diocese to potentially remove the person from public ministry during the investigation.

If, and when, you are faced with any of these types of situations, you'll have the ability to be a conduit of hope and healing. Your reactions have the potential to positively or negatively affect a victim survivor's reality—and your response can have long-lasting effects into his or her future.

Thank you for your willingness to be a protector of children. There's a word in Spanish that is

used frequently to express hope and encouragement among friends. The word is “¡Ánimo!” and it’s also used when a friend tells another that they can do something, that they’re almost at the finish line or that they do have the strength needed for a task.

And so this story continues, because we certainly aren’t finished. You can do this. We will continue to work to protect children, and we’ll do it together. ¡Ánimo!

References:

¹Video interview with the VIRTUS Programs. (2002). Protecting God's Children Program DVD; National Catholic Services, LLC.

²Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. (2011 Revision). Found at: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/charter.cfm>

³Annual Audit Statistics; Compilation of data from 2004-2014. (2014). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

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