



VOTF Protection of Children Essay: 20 Year Retrospective

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Twenty years have passed since the public exposé of clergy sexual abuse within the Catholic Church by the *Boston Globe Spotlight* Team. And it is 20 years since the foundation of Voice of the Faithful and the Protection of Children Working Group in response to those revelations. Immediate reaction to the horror of child abuse within our church spurred us into action: listening to victims' stories, supporting victims of clergy abuse in their journey of recovery, and working to create and maintain safe environments for children and vulnerable adults in our faith communities. The Protection of Children (POC) working group continues its mission to ensure safety of children; in the past few years members have been working on an analysis of diocesan safe environments by reviewing diocesan website postings.

Early in the history of VOTF the POC team identified the ongoing need to raise awareness and educate adults and children on abuse prevention measures in parish communities. We worked with local and national organizations to promote abuse prevention training. Over the years POC members engaged in conversations with many abuse prevention organizations, including consultations with the chairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' National Review Board on dispersing prevention information and tips for parents and adults on perpetrator grooming behaviors.

We also consulted with researchers at the University of New Hampshire Crimes Against Children. Through these and other efforts we came to understand that, to truly protect children in our parish communities, changes must occur at the local level. To that effect, the POC team created helpful hints to aid parishes in education and awareness efforts. Our Safety Sunday project provides short tips for publication in parish bulletins, especially during the month of April, which has been designated National Child Abuse Prevention Month. Many parish safe environment coordinators have continued to utilize the resources found on our [Child Protection webpages](#).

In recent years POC members have noted a de-emphasis on maintaining safe environments in our parishes as a strong prevention measure to potential abuse. This de-emphasis diverts us from the shame and horror that abuse of children occurred and persisted for so many years in our churches. Timely reminders to remain vigilant are needed. For example, the annual observance in April of National Child Abuse Prevention month in the United States should be promoted in every diocese as a reminder of the ongoing necessity to protect the children and the vulnerable among us. Does your diocese promote this annual observance?

The responses of many bishops to cases of clergy sexual abuse over the past twenty years were designed to protect the institution at the expense of sacrificing the well-being of victims of clergy abuse. But ultimately such posturing has sacrificed the image and future of the institution. Clergy

sexual abuse still resonates within the Church today as the faulted structures that allowed this abuse to occur and to be covered up still exist. The fact is: the institution has been damaged. It is time for the hierarchy to be held accountable to their own mandates for safe environments and abuse prevention measures. And it is time to enforce diocesan standards of prevention and safe environments in our parishes.

What can you do? The POC team encourages you to look into abuse prevention measures posted on your diocese's website. Are these measures comprehensive and carried out in your parish or faith community? It is time for us in the pews to evaluate diocesan child protection measures to determine whether they are lived out in local parish communities.

During this month of April, dedicated to educate and raise awareness of the need to protect children from predators in every environment, VOTF members recall our outrage at the injustice served on victims of clergy sexual abuse, their families, and communities. We recall the shame we feel at the failure of leadership to protect our children. We support the call from Hans Zollner, S.J., president of the Centre for Child Protection in Rome, for forceful implementation of changes in church law introduced by Pope Francis and his predecessors, especially the 2019 motu proprio, *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* ([America Magazine, Feb 4, 2022](#)).

We also call for the enforcement of standards set in the U.S. bishops' 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People and the Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons. And we call for change in faulted structures and attitudes that foment clericalism, especially the insular and authoritarian culture fostered in many dioceses.

VOTF has focused on supporting survivors, promoting parish safe environment efforts, and calling for structural change in the governance of the Church for twenty years. And our work continues! Following the example of the VOTF Finance Working Group, the most recent work of the POC investigated how the church as institution presents efforts to prevent abuse and respond to those abused. Over the past three years the POC team developed a comprehensive set of questions for reviewing diocesan websites to assess efforts of bishops in every diocese. We recently completed the website review for diocesan Child Protection and Safe Environment efforts and scored performances of the 176 dioceses in the U.S. A link to the detailed findings from that review will be available shortly on the VOTF's [Child Protection](#) webpage.

ONGOING CHILD PROTECTION EFFORTS

Results of this review indicate the need to enhance diocesan child protection policies and safe environment measures. Actions by all are essential to keep children safe in our church communities. Clearly-stated, publicly-available, and comprehensive diocesan guidelines for safe environments provide measurable standards that can be modeled in parishes and are essential to prevent further child abuse. The USCCB can more frequently update their *Charter and Norms*. The USCCB National Review Board should more closely monitor compliance with the bishops' own standards for child protection by augmenting annual audits. VOTF will continue to monitor diocesan child protection measures on an annual basis.

Parishioners have a key role in ensuring the protection of children in our parishes. We need to work with diocesan and parish safe environment personnel to bolster child protection guidelines at the diocesan level and ensure that safety measures are carried out in their faith communities. Alive in the life of Jesus, the entire People of God can transform into a sacramental community where children, youth, and the vulnerable are nurtured and protected in safe environments.