



Conference of Major Superiors of Men

A CMSM Pledge

Meeting in National Assembly in August 2002, the members of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, stunned by the abhorrent tragedy of sexual abuse perpetrated by their brother religious upon innocence, pledged themselves in commitment to the protection of children and young people. The members honored the United States Bishops for their pledge in the June 2002 *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* and for the values expressed in their commitment. At the same time religious men sought to commit themselves to those values, but with due and essential respect for the culture and canonical structures of religious life. The following statement of that Assembly expresses the CMSM Pledge.



Improving Pastoral Care and Accountability In Response to the Tragedy of Sexual Abuse

Conference of Major Superiors of Men
Annual Assembly, Philadelphia, PA
August 10, 2002

As leaders of the men's Catholic religious orders and societies of apostolic life with 21,000 priests and brothers in the United States, and consistent with our institutes' traditions and Gospel values, we are committed to the protection of children and young people.

We share in the anguish expressed by many Catholics and others over the issues of sexual abuse of minors by diocesan and religious priests, and by religious brothers. We are deeply moved by the stories of the victims and their families.

Sexual abuse of minors is abhorrent. When the abuser is a trusted member of church or society who holds himself out as a healer, the abuse is magnified. We share in the anger of betrayal. We attempt to reach out to victims with care and hope to rebuild the trust that has been lost. Often, these abusers were under our supervision or the supervision of our predecessors and this fills us with a painful sense of responsibility for what has occurred. We hope and pray that we have acted responsibly and too often find that our decisions have not lived up to the hopes and expectations of those who were abused and those whom we serve and work with in ministry. We are deeply sorry for that and publicly apologize for whenever and however we have failed victims or families.

We believe that in most instances over this last decade, as we have learned more about the tragic consequences of sexual abuse, we have acted responsibly in dealing with allegations. But, we have also heard the clear call to more accountability and transparency in how we as leaders of men religious deal with the protection of children from sexual abuse by members of our institutes and how we handle allegations of sexual abuse and follow-up outreach to victims and supervision of our members charged with sexual abuse.

Therefore, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men gathered in Assembly in Philadelphia from August 7-10, 2002, instructs the leadership of the Conference:

- To research currently available services, design needed services, and provide them to its membership to enable them to have in place the **mechanisms to respond** promptly to any allegation of sexual abuse. These services will help them to have a competent assistance coordinator to aid in the immediate pastoral care of persons who claim to have been abused by members of their institutes. These services could include methods of collaboration between institutes that are members of CMSM.
- To research and design further services whereby its member institutes can, either on their own or in union with others, establish an **independent review board**, the majority of whom will be laypersons not in the employ of those institutes. These boards will assess allegations, review regular institute policies and procedures for dealing with sexual abuse of minors, and advise the major superior on the offender's fitness for ministry. These boards will act retrospectively and prospectively on these matters and give advice on all aspects of responses required in connection with these cases.
- To research and design mechanisms of **public accountability** for US major superiors that would include a national review board made up of laypersons and others not involved in the leadership of CMSM institutes. The board shall review annually the implementation of sexual abuse policies in those CMSM institutes that subscribe for the service and make recommendations about their implementation in a published form.
- To seek consultation with an expert (or experts) in the protection of children for its service to membership, especially for educational programs for the **protection of children** and the prevention of sexual abuse of minors by those in their own institutes and in society at large.
- To research currently available service and resources, design needed services and provide them to its membership to respond promptly to the need for more effective **methods of intervention, care, treatment, and follow-up supervision** of institute members in need of treatment and continuing supervision for sexual abuse. These services could be designed to be implemented collaboratively among CMSM member institutes.
- To initiate **dialogue** with appropriate groups (Bishops, women religious, victims, professionals, abusers and others) for the creation of programs for healing, reconciliation and wellness for all those affected by sexual abuse.

These programs and services will be developed as soon as possible and made available to the membership.

Men's religious communities have already taken many steps to protect those in our care. Religious communities have developed careful guidelines for screening new candidates including intense psychological testing. For more than 12 years, CMSM has been encouraging and helping its members to review and update policies for professional conduct on a regular basis and to follow local, state and federal laws when dealing with abuse issues. The vast majority of our membership has done so. The members of CMSM continue to strongly support the five principles for dealing with situations of abuse offered by the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops in 1993¹.

Legal, psychological, and organizational policies can help reduce the number of future situations, but cannot fully address the deep and profound pain that our leaders feel over any abuse of the human person, especially the horror of sexual abuse of children. Religious priests or brothers who have molested children or adolescents have broken the bonds of trust invested in them. We feel this hurt deeply. We are also distressed and confused as to how men can harm young people in this way. We support all efforts to try to come to a better understanding of this proclivity, already aware that many of the abusers were themselves sexually abused as children. We strive to understand how we can spot the signs of this tendency early on before abuse occurs. Many of our congregations were founded precisely to care for children in schools, shelters, orphanages, in the inner city, or overseas. For many religious men, their very lives are lived out each day in sensitively caring for, teaching and protecting children. That this ministry could provide occasions for this kind of abuse overwhelms us with concern for the future.

Because of who we are as religious living lives in the witness of community, we are also called to compassionate responses to any among us who has committed this abuse. He is still our brother in Christ. We must share his burden. He remains a member of our family. Just as a family does not abandon a member convicted of serious crimes, we cannot turn our backs on our brother. If a religious has abused a child or adolescent, he is not only subject to civil and criminal law, but, according to the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* adopted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, he also cannot be reassigned to public ministries or be involved with young people. Though it may be long in coming, we must walk the journey with him through repentance, healing, forgiveness, and hopefully reconciliation.

But our compassion does not cloud our clarity. We abhor sexual abuse. We will not tolerate any type of abuse by our members. Our tradition of fraternal correction requires us to hold

¹ 1. Respond promptly to all allegations of abuse where there is reasonable belief that abuse has occurred. 2. If such an allegation is supported by sufficient evidence, relieve the alleged offender promptly of his ministerial duties and refer him for appropriate medical evaluation and intervention. 3. Comply with the obligations of civil law as regards reporting of the incident and cooperating with the investigation. 4. Reach out to the victims and their families and communicate sincere commitment to their spiritual and emotional well-being. 5. Within the confines of respect for privacy of the individuals involved, deal as openly as possible with the members of the community.

one another accountable. In addition to being a crime, sexual abuse of this type violates our most fundamental values as religious. Bearing our responsibility, we place these men under severe restrictions after treatment and those with the greatest danger to the public are carefully supervised to avoid occasions where they can engage in abuse again. In situations where dismissal is appropriate, due process will be respected. It is our agreed upon policy with the U.S. bishops confirmed by the Code of Canon Law that disclosures about our men must be made to the local bishop when assignment for ministry is sought, including any past occasions of sexual abuse. We honor the values and principles of the Dallas *Charter* and we seek to apply them to the unique situation of men's religious institutes in the Church. When the status of the *Essential Norms* is clarified, we look forward to dialogue with the Bishops on their application.

Because celibacy has been portrayed so negatively in some recent news reports, we want to say that celibacy in religious life is freely chosen as part of our commitment to life in community along with the vows of poverty and obedience. For us, this celibacy finds its source in the life and teachings of Jesus and in the most ancient traditions of our religious institutes. It is imposed by no one, and is rooted in the journey to God that is at the heart of monastic and religious life. Whatever happens with the discipline of celibacy that is associated with the diocesan priesthood, celibacy will remain a treasured feature of religious life. We see it as the ultimate witness to the holiness of sexuality, not as a flight from it or repression of it. We also have learned over many years that only those truly called to it can live it well and find the fullness of their human meaning in it. It is not meant for the faint of heart or for those fleeing the world.

In the Acts of the Apostles we read, "the community of believers were of one mind and one heart" (Acts 4:32). We are of one mind and one heart in our responsibility to care for our children. Though at times the well of anger surrounding this public debate seems bottomless and our hearts are deeply troubled by this betrayal, as religious we are committed to working with parents, church leaders, civil society and all people of good will to restore the trust that has been lost, and to find what we need to learn from this tragedy, what it calls us to as people of faith and as a nation.

August 2002