Safeguarding Day 2024
Homily of Archbishop Dermot Farrell
September 21 – 6pm Vigil Mass at St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Dublin
(Also available at https://dublindiocese.ie/safeguarding-day-2024/)

- **The ordinary faithful of our land have named the abuse crisis for what it is: *an open wound*.**
- **Until the abuse crisis is fully addressed, there will be no authentic, enduring renewal and reform of our Church.**
- **It is vital that we come to recognise the dynamics of denial, and address them.**
- **Until we truly own what has happened, the necessary change of heart will remain on the surface – and a superficial 'change of heart' is no change of heart.**
- **Accountability worthy of its name cannot be mere lip service. Apparent accountability is not only offensive, it is a lie, and a lie which compounds the denials of the past, and intensifies the pain of survivors.**
- **If we are ever to move beyond episodic progress in the face of abuse, Irish society – all of us in all our different traditions and layers – will have to come to terms with the legacy of our complex history.**

On this weekend, in which the Archdiocese of Dublin brings to the attention of all the faithful the safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, we *see* Jesus put the welcome of the child to the forefront, not just of his ministry, but of God's way of giving his life to us. '*Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*' (Mark 9:37) In the ancient world, the child had no 'rights;' children were even more vulnerable than in our world. For Christ, it is our welcome, and our protection, of these little ones that is the threshold of our welcome of God. Here is the truth of our faith from the Lord himself. (see 1 Cor 11:23, cf. 1 Cor 7:12).

Sexual Abuse – an Open Wound in our Church and in our Land

As part of the Church's journey towards following Christ more closely and together, Pope Francis asked dioceses across the world to examine how we follow Christ together. In their response to Pope Francis's request, the faithful across the dioceses of Ireland named the toll of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, along with its concealment as the most urgent issue to be addressed. The ordinary faithful of our land named it for what it is: *an open wound*. Those who took part in the listening and consultation meetings, including many survivors of abuse, named a huge sense of loss, compounded by an ongoing and understandable anger at the impact of abuse on survivors and on their families, on the many who, because of it, have grown distant from the Church, and on the many honest and generous women and men – religious and clergy – whose good work and lives of service have been betrayed. The report from the Irish dioceses sent to the Holy Father underlined that, despite the efforts of those in Church leadership, a 'reckoning' had not taken place: the Church in Ireland has yet fully to come to terms with what was done to the thousands upon thousands of innocent and vulnerable people over such a long period of time. Until the abuse crisis is fully addressed, there will be no authentic, enduring renewal and reform of our Church. The seriousness with which we – all of us in the Church, all the baptised – address the abuse crisis is a real measure of the depth of our faith, and of our commitment to true justice, and to renewal in our Church. As last Sunday's reading from the Letter of Saint James so clearly put it: we show to each other that we have faith by what we do (see James 2:14–18), and in today's Second Reading, "Peacemakers, when they work for peace, sow the seeds which will bear fruit in justice." (James 3:18) Faith and justice go hand in hand. True justice and *enduring* renewal go hand-in-hand. There is no other way. We fool ourselves if we think there is.

The Recent Scoping Report

The publication of the Scoping Report into abuse in religious-run schools brings this home to us once again. Sadly, it is not new to hear that there was widespread abuse of pupils and that shameful acts were perpetrated by religious themselves, as well as by teachers, peers, and others employed in their schools. What was new was the presentation of an extensive, sustained and horrific pattern of abuse which has disfigured our tradition of Catholic education and profoundly damaged the lives of so many young people and their families.

The Culture of Denial

Listening to the stark and distressing testimony of this, and other reports over the last 20 years is as painful and difficult, as the content of those reports is outrageous and scandalous. While some are filled with anger, others close their ears, or dismiss it, or explain it away, or blame the extensive coverage on hostility towards the Church. There is a thread of denial and disengagement in many of these responses. It is possible to go further, and speak even of a '*culture* of denial' with respect to sexual abuse.

It is vital that we come to recognise the dynamics of denial, and address them. Not just the call of the gospel, but basic human justice, demands that we not dismiss the witness of those who suffered abuse, but recognise their continuing hurt and suffering, and begin to come to terms with the fact that this darkness has roots deep within ourselves. When that darkness finds itself masked by outward displays of piety and exterior appearances of service, its destructive potential is amplified. Report after report, victim after victim, testifies to the horror unleashed by this manifestation of evil.

One of the greatest disempowering factors is that people feel that their contribution will make no difference. But that is to leave in place the veil that covers this horrific, life-destroying scandal. What everybody says, how everyone reacts in the face safeguarding makes a significant difference. We are talking about a change of culture – both Church culture, and the culture of our society. *Everybody* makes a difference. Nobody is too old, or too young, or too poor, or too rich, or not "important" enough to ensure that our children are safe. The safety of our children, and of the vulnerable people in our midst is *everyone's* business. It does not matter whether one sees yourself as a person of faith or not: the safety of our children has to do with us. It is not some "job" we can hand over to "professionals." These are our children. They have been failed in the past. For their sakes we must come to terms with the reality of abuse.

We Must Come to Terms with the Reality of Abuse

How do we engage with this appalling legacy? Sorrow and empathy are vital starting points, but they are not enough. It is essential that all of us come to terms with the reality that has been experienced by so many. Even if the experience of the greater majority of schoolchildren has been, and remains, one of care, support and opportunity, we may not remain partially or even wholly blind to the suffering and loss of so many. This is a question of people, not a question of percentages.

We ask ourselves how such sustained patterns of evil could arise and either be unknown to those who should have known, or ignored if, as appears to have been too often the case, if it was known or suspected. Clearly, fear of scandal, a sense of shame, and moral cowardice all played a part. So too did the position of power and privilege that the Church and religious institutions enjoyed in a society which was overly deferential in a society that was depressed and impoverished, in an Ireland which for decades had been unable to offer its people, especially those from poorer urban and rural backgrounds the possibility of making a decent living in their own land.

But there is a deeper level – a more demanding and engaged dimension: we who have come to know these stories of abuse and exploitation, and have taken on board the pervasiveness of an education culture that was marked by violence and punishment, are called to see this as part of our own history – as part of our story, as a Church, as a society, and as a country. Simplistic separations will do nothing to heal what has occurred. We have to acknowledge what happened

as ours. This involves a change of culture, and cultural change is slow. It demands ongoing attention, constant work, and determined leadership. But change happens: the peace process on this island shows us that. Real change takes time, which makes it all the more important that we do not give up.

Until we truly own what has happened, the necessary change of heart will remain on the surface – and a superficial 'change of heart,' is no change of heart. In the Church, we are called to renew our commitment to make our Church, our parishes, our schools and all our activities safe for children and vulnerable adults, and to embrace the structures and accountability which that requires.

Injustice Flourishes Where Accountability is Lacking

We are called to be alert to other forms of abuse and exploitation, sometimes more subtle but no less dangerous, sometimes perpetrated in plain sight on the marginalised and the outsiders in our society. *Injustice and exploitation flourish where there is no accountability*, where there is no calling to account because it is not possible for voices to be raised. In the last two decades, the structures put in place, the appointment and training of safeguarding representatives at every level of Church life, have made it easier for such voices to be heard. However, accountability that is worthy of its name is about more than designating individuals to exercise special responsibility. It is about a culture where people are encouraged to express their concerns with the assurance that they will be heard. In a time when there is much talk of a synodal Church, that is, of a Church that works things out together, we all have to work so that the Church's true character and true culture can emerge: one that recognises that the Holy Spirit is at work among us all, and that all the baptised have a contribution to make, all have the right to raise their voices and to be heard respectfully. Accountability worthy of its name cannot be mere lip service. Apparent accountability is not only offensive, it is a lie, and a lie which compounds the denials of the past, and intensifies the pain of survivors. If justice is to be restored, if we are to work towards healing, then we must embrace a culture of accountability.

A Listening Church is a Safer Church

The ecclesial vision of Saint John XXIII and the popes since the Council asks us to work towards a Church that listens and discerns. That listening Church is also a safer Church, precisely because there is an openness to hear from all, and to reach out to those who may struggle to give expression to their experiences and insights.

If we are ever to move beyond episodic progress in the face of abuse, Irish society – all of us in all our different traditions and layers – will have to come to terms with the legacy of our complex history. Simple narratives can be very appealing, but they do not lead to the insight, understanding, and acknowledgement that brings enduring change. This is not a flight from responsibility, but rather the only foundation on which healthy relationships, within our Church, and within the broader society, can be developed. This only happens when we pay honest attention to the voices of those who, as children, experienced the horrible reality of our failures – as followers of Christ and as a society. We have all lost out because of what was visited upon the innocent, and the weak.

"Let the children come to me," says Jesus in today's Gospel. My sisters and brothers, on this Safeguarding Sunday, may we take to ourselves the compassion of Christ, his humility, and his insistence that the little ones, the little ones around us all, may once again safely and securely come to him.

+Dermot Farrell
Archbishop of Dublin