



# NEWSLETTER



## SYNODALITY AND SAFEGUARDING

It seems that we are never very far away from an abuse scandal. The latest one concerns a residential centre, Ard Greine, in Donegal. Brandon (not his real name), one of the residents, and himself a vulnerable adult due to his intellectual disability, engaged in behaviour that was distressing and harmful to 18 other vulnerable residents. This went on from 2003 to 2016, with the knowledge of staff and HSE managers. Concerns were raised by staff but no effective action was taken and the abusive behaviour continued. The families of those who were abused were not informed.

Breda O'Brien, in the Irish Times of 23 October, writes about how institutions become dysfunctional. This happens when the values people live by do not reflect those the institution espouses or where people identify so strongly with the institution they cannot allow things to become known that might discredit it. "At its worst" she writes, "the Irish Catholic Church exhibited elements of both types [of dysfunction]. Slowly, painfully, and in a manner that can never be deemed complete, the church has built a culture of safeguarding, *mostly through the work of dedicated volunteers*" (emphasis added).

When he launched the diocesan phase of the synod in the Pro-Cathedral on 17 October, Archbishop Farrell quoted Pope Francis saying that a synodal

church is a church that listens: "in which everyone has something to learn...all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit in order to know what he says to the churches". When those brave people who suffered abuse in the church began to tell their stories, many were unable to hear and accept what they said. However, others listened and they knew what it meant for the church and how it needed to change. They took responsibility for making the necessary changes in the way things are done in our parishes. The leadership provided by church leaders was vital, of course, and the professional staff of the Child Safeguarding and Protection Service made (we hope!) a significant contribution. Nonetheless, Breda O'Brien is surely correct when she says that the culture of safeguarding has largely been the work of dedicated volunteers: parish safeguarding representatives, members of parish pastoral councils and those working with children and vulnerable adults who have insisted that the highest standards of safeguarding are applied.

As O'Brien points out, the culture of safeguarding within the church is not complete. Complacency is the greatest danger. There are challenges ahead. Pope Francis often refers to clericalism as a factor in the abuse scandals within the church. A sense of superiority and entitlement among clerics does not make for good safeguarding practice. The other side of this coin is that deference among the laity can equally obstruct the protection of children and vulnerable adults.

The situation in Ard Greine was not typical of abuse situations we might come across in a parish situation. Brandon's abusive behaviour was there for all to see. Most abusers abuse in secret, though they may give hints of their abusive behaviour by ignoring or crossing boundaries or otherwise behaving in ways that are inappropriate. We cannot stop abuse unless we are open to the possibility that it can happen, and can read the signs. We have to be able to ask questions and voice our concerns when we see behaviour that either we know to be wrong (like bullying) or that makes us uneasy (like boundary crossing).

Asking questions about another person's behaviour or practice is risky. You could be misreading the signs. However, asking questions is not the same as making accusations. We have to build a culture in which it is okay to ask questions about the behaviour of another person, even if that other person is a parish priest or a bishop. The synod provides us with an opportunity to think about how we relate to each other and what we can do to keep each other safe so that, in doing so, we protect children and vulnerable adults from abuse.

As we try to consider how we are to be as a church community in the Archdiocese of Dublin now and into the future, we would do well to reflect on the service rendered by those parish volunteers who have given of themselves with such generosity and determination to make our parishes safer places for children and vulnerable adults. Perhaps they are pointing the way to a better future, not just in relation to safeguarding, but also in relation to how to be church.

## VETTING

As previously reported, the National Vetting Bureau has limited the number of roles for which they will process a vetting application on behalf of a parish. As a consequence, fewer people are now being vetted than was the case prior to the introduction of the vetting legislation in 2016. It is ironic that putting vetting on a statutory basis has weakened, rather than enhanced, the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults.

Prior to 2016, we vetted all of our parish volunteers. This was a policy that was somewhat resisted when it was first introduced but eventually came to be accepted, by all but a very few. We had to pull back from that policy somewhat when the legislation was introduced but, based on legal advice, we continued to vet all those involved in public ministry.

The National Vetting Bureau subsequently indicated that they do not accept the interpretation of the legislation provided by our legal advisors and that vetting is only available for roles that are specific to work with children or vulnerable adults. By contrast, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, have interpreted the requirement to carry out risk assessments under the Children First Act, 2015 to apply in situations where there is only potential involvement of children in church activities. At national level, there is a lack of a joined up approach to safeguarding.

We are not happy that the current situation provides for the level of safeguarding to which we aspire. Other organisations involved in working with children and vulnerable adults have voiced similar concerns and misgivings. A review of the legislation is getting under way shortly and we will contribute to that review. In the meantime, Garry Kehoe, is running a series of workshops on Zoom for parishes to explain how vetting is being done now.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Ireland and the Holy See are signatories, states the principle that "in all actions concerning children...the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration". This is often referred to as the paramountcy principle and it underpins domestic legislation regarding children. However, the limited scope of the vetting legislation illustrates that, whatever claims are made to the contrary, the right of children and vulnerable adults to a safe environment competes against the claims of others for attention and primacy.

### The parish roles for which vetting is required are as follows:

1. Children's catechist;
2. Parish safeguarding representative;
3. Sacristans;
4. Altar server leaders;
5. Children's and youth choir leaders;
6. Children's liturgy and prayer group leaders;
7. Parish youth club leaders;
8. Sacramental preparation leaders;
9. Visitation team members;
10. Lay preachers;
11. Parish pilgrimage leaders;
12. Parish centre staff and volunteers;
13. Extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist.

*If there is a role for which you believe vetting ought to be obtained, please contact Garry Kehoe or Vivienne Knight for advice.*



## NATALIE DOHERTY MEMBER OF THE DIOCESAN ADVISORY PANEL

My name is Natalie Doherty and I am a Faith Development Worker in the Archdiocese of Dublin, currently based in Kilnamanagh-Castleview Parish in West Dublin. I am a member of the Safeguarding Committee and I am on my second term on the Committee. In my time as Chairperson of my home Parish Pastoral Council, we hosted an information evening in the parish centre and, following this, I was asked to join the Safeguarding Committee. Due to my work with the Diocese, I have seen safeguarding procedures in action, in everyday life in parish and particularly at the last two World Youth Days in Krakow and Panama. All those attending were Garda vetted, received safeguarding training and had a defined system and protocol to follow during their time on pilgrimage. While work in the area of safeguarding can be challenging, it is a standard practice of our day-to-day life in the parish and important for providing a safe place for all who engage in our parishes, as well as those who minister in our parishes.

## CSPS TEAM CONTACTS

### Andrew Fagan

Director

**01 8360314**

E: [andrew.fagan@dublindiocese.ie](mailto:andrew.fagan@dublindiocese.ie)

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### Deirdre Donnelly

Safeguarding & Support Officer

**01 8360314**

[deirdre.donnelly@dublindiocese.ie](mailto:deirdre.donnelly@dublindiocese.ie)

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### Garry Kehoe

Safeguarding Training & Compliance Manager

**01 8360314 / 086 0841734**

[garry.kehoe@dublindiocese.ie](mailto:garry.kehoe@dublindiocese.ie)

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### Vivienne Knight

Garda Vetting Coordinator

**01 8360314**

[garda.vetting@dublindiocese.ie](mailto:garda.vetting@dublindiocese.ie)

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### Noeleen Rooney

Case Management Administrator

**01 8360314**

[noeleen.rooney@dublindiocese.ie](mailto:noeleen.rooney@dublindiocese.ie)

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In keeping with government guidelines, the staff team are working from home. The main office number, 01 8360314, is diverted so that calls to the office will be picked up by a member of the team. If your call is not picked up immediately we will respond to any message you leave within one working day.

Vetting enquiries and applications can be submitted online to:  
[garda.vetting@dublindiocese.ie](mailto:garda.vetting@dublindiocese.ie)