Catholic Diocese
of Cleveland

528/2026

Office of the Bishop

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE BISHOP

Concerning the Revised Policy for the Safety of Children in Matters of Sexual Abuse and the Revised Standards of Conduct for Ministry

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."
Matthew 18:5

To the Clergy, Consecrated Religious, Seminarians, Employees, Volunteers, and Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Cleveland:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The protection of children, young people, and vulnerable persons is a sacred responsibility entrusted to the Church by Our Lord Jesus Christ. Those entrusted to our pastoral care must encounter in the Church a community marked by holiness, integrity, justice, compassion, and genuine concern for their dignity. For this reason, safeguarding is not simply a matter of policies or procedures, but a fundamental part of our pastoral mission and commitment to the Gospel. The Church must be a place where every person can encounter the Lord in safety and trust, where allegations are taken seriously, where those who have been harmed are treated with compassion and respect, and where appropriate action is taken to prevent abuse and to respond justly when concerns arise.

The protection of minors and vulnerable persons, together with the cultivation of a culture of integrity, accountability, and respect in ministry, flows directly from the trust placed in the Church and from our responsibility to be faithful stewards of that trust. Abuse of a minor or vulnerable person is a grave violation of the sacred trust placed in the Church and causes profound harm to individuals, families, communities, and the Body of Christ. We therefore have a solemn responsibility to prevent abuse, to respond promptly and appropriately when concerns or allegations arise, to cooperate with civil and ecclesiastical authorities, and to accompany victims and survivors with compassion, respect, and pastoral care.

Safeguarding, however, is not limited to the prevention of abuse or the proper handling of allegations. It also requires the cultivation of a culture of ethical conduct, accountability, professional responsibility, and respect for the dignity of every person. The protection of minors and vulnerable persons, as well as the integrity of those who serve the Church are therefore inseparably linked.

For this reason, I have promulgated the revised *Policy for the Safety of Children in Matters of Sexual Abuse* together with the revised *Standards of Conduct for Ministry*. The *Policy* establishes the safeguarding standards, procedures, and reporting requirements by which the Diocese seeks to prevent abuse, respond appropriately to allegations and concerns, promote accountability, and provide for the protection of minors and vulnerable persons. The *Standards* establish the

expectations for personal and professional conduct applicable to those who serve the Church, helping to foster healthy ministry, appropriate boundaries, ethical behavior, and respect for the dignity of every person.

These documents are intended to work together in promoting safe environments, fostering ethical and accountable ministry, establishing clear expectations for conduct, updating prevention and reporting practices, supporting appropriate responses to allegations and concerns, and assisting the Church in carrying out her pastoral responsibilities with justice, charity, and fidelity to the truth. Together, they are intended to foster a culture in which abuse is prevented, concerns are taken seriously, allegations are addressed with diligence and justice, and all who exercise ministry conduct themselves with integrity, accountability, and respect for the dignity of others. These norms reflect the Church's commitment to safeguarding, ethical conduct, and responsible stewardship of the trust placed in those who serve in her name.

The *Policy* and the *Standards* also recognize that safeguarding and accountability must be understood within the Church's broader commitment to truth and justice. The rights and dignity of every person, including those who report concerns, those who may have suffered harm, as well as those against whom allegations are made, must be respected. Allegations must be addressed seriously and without prejudice, and determinations of canonical responsibility must be made according to the applicable law by the competent ecclesiastical authority.

The Diocese of Cleveland has long maintained policies and procedures intended to promote the protection of children and vulnerable persons and to provide for the training and accountability of those who work with them. On March 21, 1989, the Diocese formally adopted the *Policy Regarding Allegations of Child Abuse*, which was revised on October 16, 1992.

On February 27, 2003, the *Policy for the Safety of Children in Matters of Sexual Abuse* was promulgated as particular legislation for the Diocese of Cleveland in accordance with the *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*, adopted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in June of 2002, and recognized by the Congregation for Bishops on December 8, 2002. In accordance with the *Policy's* provision for periodic review and amendment, the *Policy* was revised and promulgated on June 15, 2016, in view of the revision of the *Charter* and *Essential Norms* which were recognized by the Congregation for Bishops on January 1, 2006, and promulgated on May 5, 2006.

Since that time, the Church's legal and pastoral framework concerning the protection of minors and vulnerable persons has continued to develop. To ensure that the Diocese's safeguarding practices remain consistent to the Church's current law and continue to embody best practices in safeguarding, the present revision of the *Policy* and the *Standards* reflects these developments in the universal law of the Church, the particular law and safeguarding standards applicable in the

United States, and relevant procedural guidance concerning the interpretation and application of canonical norms.[1]

In addition to incorporating changes in canon law, the revised *Policy* has been updated in the following ways:

- The revised policy updates the definition of sexual abuse to align more closely with canon law and civil law, which have evolved and changed over the years (*Policy* Section 1.21). For example, it now includes "grooming" which is now prohibited under Ohio law.
- The revised policy incorporates the existing practice that a person who has committed sexual abuse with a minor as defined by the policy may not be employed in any capacity or engage in any volunteer activity whatsoever (*Policy* Section 5.1).
- The revised policy now provides flexibility to take into account the facts and circumstances of convictions other than convictions involving sexual abuse of a minor in determining whether the conviction is a bar to employment or volunteering (*Policy* Section 5.2).
- The revised policy clarifies the role of minors in Volunteer and Employment positions. (*Policy* Section 6.1.3 and 6.2.1). For example, the policy clarifies that Minors are not permitted to volunteer or be employed in positions whose regular work location is in either a parish office or rectory although incidental or occasional need to perform volunteer work in the parish office or rectory is not prohibited.
- The revised policy strengthens criminal record check requirements for employees and volunteers (*Policy* Section 6.1.2 and 6.2.2). For example, criminal record check requirements will apply to all adult employees regardless of the position they will hold, and to all adult Volunteers where the Volunteer's position either (1) involves Interaction with Minors (as defined in the *Policy*) or (2) where the Volunteer is a Regularly Scheduled Liturgical Minister (as defined in the *Policy*).
    - Please note that there is a "phased" approach to criminal record checks for Regularly Scheduled Liturgical Ministers to reduce the immediate burden on parishes and other entities covered by the *Policy*. The Office for the Protection of Children and Youth will provide further information and reminders on this subject, as well as coordinate criminal record checks. The **implementation schedule** is described further below and is listed in Appendix 5 of the *Policy*.
    - All screening results will be centralized for review and record-keeping in the Office for Protection of Children and Youth. Centralization of these records will both support the entities by relieving them of the duty to process; and will align our diocese with all other Ohio dioceses in best practices for background checks.

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[1]The principal sources reflected in this revision include the following:

Universal Law:

- *Vos estis lux mundi* (*VELM*), Pope Francis (2019; revised 2023);
- *Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela* (*SST*), Pope John Paul II (2001), and the accompanying *Norms on Delicts Reserved to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith*, DDF (2001; revised 2010, 2021);
- *Pascite gregem Dei*, Apostolic Constitution reforming Book VI of the *Code of Canon Law*, Pope Francis (2021).

Particular Law and Safeguarding Standards in the United States:

- *Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons*, USCCB (2002; revised 2006);
- *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, USCCB (2002; revised 2005, 2011, 2018, 2026).

Procedural Guidance:

- *Vademecum on Certain Points of Procedure in Treating Cases of Sexual Abuse*, DDF (2020; revised 2022).

    - The revised policy also requires Selection.com registration upon hire or volunteering in order to ensure that new offenses committed are identified more quickly and out of state offenses which a BCI check would not capture are captured.
- The revised policy reduces burdens associated with volunteer screening (*Policy* Section 6.2).
- The new policy updates requirements for handling allegations of sexual abuse by laity to ensure thorough investigations while reducing the burden on parishes and entities (*Policy* Section 10).

The revised *Policy* and *Standards* establish clear expectations for clergy, religious, seminarians, employees, volunteers, and all who exercise ministry on behalf of the Church. Any person who becomes aware of conduct that may constitute abuse, misconduct, or a violation of these norms is expected to address such concerns in accordance with diocesan policy and applicable civil and ecclesiastical requirements.

The revised norms shall take effect on **January 1, 2027**. From that date forward, all persons subject to the *Policy* and the *Standards* are bound to observe their provisions according to their terms, except as otherwise provided in the implementation schedule, as referenced above.

This **implementation schedule** establishes the periods during which the Office for the Protection of Children and Youth will focus its compliance efforts on particular categories of ministers and the deadlines by which those categories of ministers must satisfy the applicable compliance requirements. While all other provisions of the *Policy* and the *Standards* shall become effective and binding on their effective date of January 1, 2027, the requirements regarding VIRTUS compliance, safe-environment training, criminal-record checks, and related screening measures **do not become binding on the persons identified in the implementation schedule until the end of their applicable implementation period**. Persons who have not fulfilled the applicable compliance requirements by the conclusion of their applicable implementation period may not continue to serve in that ministry until such requirements have been satisfied.

The implementation schedule for screening of Adult Regularly Scheduled Liturgical Ministers is as follows:

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion
March 15, 2027 – December 31, 2027
Music Ministry (Cantors, Choir Members, Instrumentalists, Choir Directors)
June 15, 2027 – March 31, 2028
Altar Servers, Lectors, Sacristans, and Liturgical Ministry Leaders
September 15, 2027 – June 30, 2028
Greeters and Ushers
January 15, 2028 – September 30, 2028

I ask all who exercise these ministries to cooperate fully with this process and to complete all applicable requirements within the period assigned to their respective ministry. Through our shared commitment to these norms, we strengthen the culture of safeguarding, accountability, and integrity that is essential to the Church's mission.

While these requirements are essential, no policy or standard, however carefully written, can by itself create a culture of safety, integrity, and accountability. Such a culture depends upon the commitment of every member of the Church. I therefore ask every priest, deacon, religious, seminarian, employee, teacher, catechist, volunteer, ministry leader, and member of our Catholic community to receive these norms not merely as requirements to be observed, but as an expression of our shared responsibility to care for one another and to protect those entrusted to our care.

To victims and survivors, I express my profound respect, sorrow, and pastoral concern. The Church recognizes that the wounds caused by abuse can endure for many years. Where the Church has failed to protect the vulnerable or has responded inadequately, we must acknowledge that failure honestly. No concern for institutional reputation may ever take precedence over the safety and dignity of a person who may have been harmed. Our response must be marked by listening, compassion, accountability, justice, and a sincere commitment to healing.

To my brother priests and deacons, consecrated religious, seminarians, employees, and volunteers, I express my gratitude for your generous and faithful service to the people of God. By embracing these revised norms and carrying out your responsibilities with integrity, professionalism, accountability, and charity, you help strengthen the trust placed in the Church and contribute to environments where all persons may encounter Christ securely and with confidence. I ask you to receive these norms as an expression of the sacred responsibility entrusted to you. No ministry, office, reputation, friendship, or institutional interest can justify failing to protect a vulnerable person or disregarding the standards of conduct expected of those who serve the Church. We must be a Church in which concerns are heard, boundaries are respected, warning signs are not ignored, and allegations are addressed with seriousness and justice.

To the entire People of God, I ask your cooperation. Safeguarding belongs to all of us. Every member of our Catholic community has a role in ensuring that children and vulnerable persons are safe, respected, and able to speak without fear.

Let us therefore renew our commitment to a culture of vigilance, integrity, accountability, and compassion. May we have the courage to speak the truth, the wisdom to act justly, and the charity to accompany those who suffer. May the Lord, the Good Shepherd, teach us to recognize in every child, every vulnerable person, and everyone entrusted to our care one who is precious in His sight.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, intercede for all victims and survivors of abuse, for their families, and for all who labor to protect God's children and serve His people faithfully.

With confidence in the grace of Christ and with the assurance of my prayers, I remain

Your brother in Christ,

Most Reverend Edward C. Malesic, J.C.L.
Bishop of Cleveland