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Pontifical university plans to offer diploma in child protection by 2016

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The Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, which will offer a diploma course in minor protection in 2016. Credit: Luigi Santoro via Wikimedia Commons.



By [Elise Harris](#)

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Rome, Italy, Jul 2, 2015 / 06:02 am (CNA/EWTN News).- Beginning in the spring of 2016, Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University will begin offering an intensive one-semester diploma program on the safeguarding of minors and the prevention of sex abuse by clergy.

A new one semester diploma course in the protection of minors is being offered by the Center for Child Protection in Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, and is set to welcome its first round of applicants in February, 2016.

"There are not courses like this diploma in pontifical universities in Rome. Certainly programs in secular universities and in UK have them, but (this is a) first in pontifical and Catholic universities," Fr. Hans Zollner, SJ said at the June 24 announcement of the course.

Fr. Zollner is the president of the Pontifical Gregorian University's Center for Child Protection (CCP) and is a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, created by Pope Francis last autumn.

He was present alongside three other panelists for a press conference at the conclusion of the center's June 21-24 annual Anglophone Conference, during which the diploma course was announced.

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The diploma will be awarded at the close of a one-semester residential course on the safeguarding of minors. The program aims to form persons who will eventually become child protection officers for dioceses, religious congregations, and similar organizations, as well as advisors and trainers in the field of safeguarding.

Broken down into six two-week seminars, the first course is set to run from February – June 2016. Seminars will delve into topics including terms and definitions surrounding the protection of minors, child rights, development and safety, safeguarding and prevention, theology, truth and justice, and care for those who have been abused.

Comprised of 30 credits, the course will welcome between 15 and 18 applicants. The diploma will be awarded by the Institute of Psychology of the Pontifical Gregorian University, which founded the CCP in 2012.

Fr. Zollner emphasized that the program is “not meant mostly for America or Canada, but is flexible enough to take in a cultural component,” due to the different concept of boundaries in particular cultures.

He expressed his hope that participants would come not just from Western nations where policies are already in place, but especially “from countries where there are no or very little such initiatives, especially in Africa, Asia and South America.”

In addition to exploring the psychological, pastoral, canonical, and practical approaches to safeguarding minors, the course will also address a systematic theological approach to the topic.

The spiritual and theological approach to child protection was the theme of the CCP's conference, and is a topic Fr. Zollner noted has “not been substantially reflected upon” since the full gravity of the clerical abuse crisis began to surface 40 years ago.

In an interview with CNA, Fr. Zollner said that “strangely enough,” no theologian has really taken on the task of developing a theological understanding of the issue, and that while preparing for last week's conference none of the five speakers were able to find a single study on it.

“We have spiritual literature, pastoral literature, psycho-pastoral literature, we have practical theological literature and a little bit on moral theological literature, but theological, Christological, ecclesiological, almost nothing. And this is really a surprise,” he said.

The CCP began exploring the theological perspective after Cardinal Joseph Levada, prefect emeritus of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, pointed out that it was missing from the center's preparations for their first conference in 2012.

“Whereas we have done much on the therapeutic and prevention side, and we've tried to come up with new judicial norms, strangely enough (the theological) side seemed, at least to me, split off, and you don't find literature in this field,” Fr. Zollner reflected.

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So this year's conference "was an attempt to really set the stage" for further development of this perspective.

Since resources on the theological take on child protection are slim outside of a few writings on moral theology, each of the conference's speakers were invited to make their own study on the topic and to present their reflections.

Among the speakers were Sr. Sara Butler, president of the Academy of Catholic Theology in Washington D.C. and Fr. James Corkery, SJ, professor of Systematic Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University. Both were present at the conference alongside Fr. Zellner and Bishop Edward Burns of Juneau, who was recently appointed chairman of the US bishops' child and youth protection committee.

Other speakers included Fr. Robert J. Geisinger SJ, Promoter of Justice for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and acclaimed American author Fr. Robert Barron.

Topics covered in the speeches included the biblical framework of how God himself deals with offenders and offenses. The topic of mercy and justice was also brought up, particularly in how it extends to offenders and those who cover up offenses, such as in cases of bishops' accountability.

The sacramental structure of the priesthood was also touched on, as well as the theme of salvation as it applies to victims of abuse, particularly in terms of the whole and happy life they are called to live, and Christ's closeness to them, being himself an innocent victim who suffered violence.

Fr. Zollner also referred to a reflection from Sr. Sara on an 11th century practice of accountability for abuse put into place by St. Peter Damian, a process that involved not only priests, bishops, and the Pope, but also the laity.

This emphasis on the role of the laity in the reform of the Church at that time was a very interesting point, Fr. Zollner said, explaining that both clergy and the laity have the responsibility within their communities of helping to create a safe environment.

He revealed that since there is no literature on the theological approach to safeguarding children, the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors has created working groups studying the various theological and spiritual implications of the topic.

"There are different aspects: spirituality, prayer life, and also theological reflections," he said, explaining that currently the working group for theology "is more probably on the modeled theological side."

A working group within the commission dedicated to organizing a day of prayer for abuse survivors has also been formed.

"I hope this is a starting point for something new," he said, and noted that

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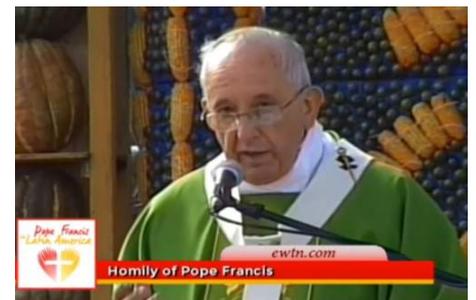
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though there are no plans as of yet, a future hope of the commission is to invite doctoral students to work on the theme.

“Theologians should really reflect on how God acts in this, what the Church is, what the life of the Church and the faithful is in this,” no matter how difficult the task may be, the priest continued.

He said that one short-term goal in developing this new perspective could be for the commission to invite theologians to come and speak about the topic. He also said that some publications could be made and handed out to dioceses and religious congregations.

“What we have learned here is that if the leaders are convinced it could also come down to those who work with children in parishes, in schools, in orphanages, etc., (so) that they are motivated not only because the law obliges you, but because you are convinced that this a part of the mission of the Church,” Fr. Zollner reflected.

The fact that the Church acts on this issue not out of legal binding but out of conviction in her mission is something Fr. Zollner said he believes is “not really appreciated or even understood.”

“Whatever we can do for the poor and the little ones is part of the mission of Jesus Christ ... the first step is to realize that Jesus has come, as he says, for the sick, for those who are in need, not for the healthy,” he said.

“The mission of the Church is precisely this: to represent this to the world, and especially to those who are most wounded.”

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This is a good start. A course like this should be taught at every Catholic university in the U.S. that offers degrees in education, social services, law, criminal justice and medicine.

Those grads are on the front line of this crisis that robs children of their innocence and scars them for life.

Our priests aren't the only offenders.

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Jim Saratoga 11 days ago

Nothing about the application process.
What degree / diploma is awarded ?
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