

<http://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/9324/q-a-with-hans-zollner-sj>

Features> Q&A with Hans Zollner SJ 02 January 2017 | by Christopher Lamb



The Centre for Child Protection (CCP) has now been in existence for five years. In this time, you have visited about 40 countries on five continents in order to build awareness and promote safeguarding measures. What is your concept of ‘universal Church’ as a result of these experiences?

Wherever I have gone, I have experienced a unity of faith, a sense of being at home — whether in a church during a liturgy or meeting, with people of different cultures at their schools, workplaces and dinner tables. You feel a shared connection no matter how the faith is expressed through different cultures. Certainly, the common catechism, the one Creed and especially the Eucharist are universal points of convergence and unity.

Nevertheless, my experience has been that there is also unity in the problems we face as a global Church. It is alarming to discover that the sexual abuse of minors has been committed in every corner and in each country of the Church. With this discovery there is also the awareness that certain factors pertaining to the organisation of the Church can also be part of the problem. These include the way the hierarchy functions in the face of an injustice committed by one of its own, as well as the understanding of the relationship that a bishop or a provincial has to the priests in their charge when there is a serious problem to face. In many places I see a momentum and readiness to change and proactively confront the large-scale difficulties which involve, for example, a basic understanding of what the role of a priest is today, questions around human formation for seminarians and religious. We realise that in an age where authenticity is one of the highest values, we are called to review our ways of dealing with power, money and a comfortable lifestyle, confronting it with the message of the Gospel. There can be no place for condoning an attitude of entitlement to take whatever one longs for even if it entails sexual misconduct.

So what could we envision as a possible solution? A sort of international Church-led police force?

Of course there can never be a Church police force, like a new sort of Inquisition. The Church does not and cannot lawfully or legitimately exercise a secular governing power throughout the entire world. First of all, the Church respects the organisation of the state and cooperates with laws and legal proceedings where it can. Ours is a call for

clear cooperation with civil law in the instances in which we can speak of a crime. Yet there are some cases in which an accusation is not so clear, or where the statute of limitations has run out or where there is an ineffective police force. In these cases the Church still has a moral obligation to act, and at the very least, to judge the situation of the accused and determine if they may no longer serve in a role of responsibility in the Church.

How the Church deals with allegations of abuse has been evolving. When Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), he worked to transfer the responsibility for processing cases of clerical sexual abuse to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Since the CDF took on this responsibility in 2001, there has been a more thorough approach to processing allegations, and many clergy offenders have been brought to justice. Yet there are limits to what the CDF can do. It is also true that the canonical process usually takes a long time, and both the victims and those who are accused are often left in the dark not knowing at which point in the process their case may be.

Despite these shortcomings, there is a definite need for a central agency to deal with this problem, and in the Church, this is a function of the CDF. It is also giving advice on the drafting of safeguarding guidelines for bishops' conferences. So long as there is not enough clarity regarding what a president of a bishops' conference or a metropolitan can enforce, there needs to be this central clearinghouse, an entity 'super partes'.

However, this is not enough, because it does not take into account the necessity and potential that the Church has for promoting safeguarding within its own domain and beyond. This is probably one of the reasons Pope Francis in March 2014 established the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors which brings together people from different continents and professions who serve in an advisory capacity to the Holy Father. Since I am the leader of the Pontifical Commission's working group focused on the education of Church leaders, this role connects very well to the work of the CCP.

In keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, reiterated by Pope Francis, whichever tasks can be entrusted to a lower (or local) level of responsibility should be so delegated, as long as the necessary competence and capacities at that level can be guaranteed. With regard to its work of safeguarding, this is the approach that the Centre for Child Protection of the Pontifical Gregorian University follows. We offer education and formation that can be adapted to different languages and diverse local and social-cultural contexts, while sharing in a common global project for the protection of minors.

You have highlighted the cultural differences that exist. How does the Centre for Child Protection propose to maintain a consistent approach between many varied contexts?

The Centre for Child Protection works from an academic vantage point in collaboration with universities and scholars. From this standpoint, keeping a scientific standard – which implies evidence-based, peer-reviewed research and publications – is vital to its mission. However, the methods of science in the many sciences involved are

not independent from historical and cultural factors. It can be difficult to arrive at a shared understanding, for example, of what ‘touch’ means in each culture, even if we are talking about something as simple as a handshake. This would lead some to say that in safeguarding we cannot achieve a common standard. But to emphasize the differences would be a mistake. Every culture has an understanding of what rape is. People of all backgrounds know when trust is broken. So on one hand, we want to use scientific criteria to measure the impact of the abuse and the effectiveness of safeguarding measures. On the other hand, if we don’t take the differences in culture seriously—those different ways in which people live out family life, build trust, and relate with authority, etc.—then we are likely to miss the concrete form and shape of how abusive behaviour is coming about, how it is sanctioned within the culture, how it is dealt with, including reparation or negligence, and where you could intervene or begin to start safeguarding.

If we try to enforce a Western standard, people may overtly comply with it but not follow through to a deeper conversion in attitude, which is necessary to effect lasting change. I can give some examples of places that challenge Western sensitivities. Recently, when I was in Mexico, a bishop came to me and told me the story of an indigenous area where it is simply taken for granted and accepted by the tribes of the region that parents can sell their girls to the neighbours. Or we can speak of the situation in India, within another indigenous population, where if a young girl has sexual relations outside of marriage and becomes pregnant, and if the father of her child is not the match that has been arranged by the family, there is a ritual to make amends. The families slaughter two goats, and the blood is shed so that the transgression is removed; then they prepare a feast, and then the child of the forbidden union is given to a foster family. The girl is now free to marry the one she has been promised to. The people seem OK with this solution, but how would a Western understanding of law speak to this situation?

We can take another example from the Philippines. There, the refusal to touch or caress children is considered very odd, even sick. For them it is completely normal that males walk down the street together holding hands. How do you teach kids and adults where the boundaries are, what is good touch and what is bad touch? It would be possible to give many more examples such as these that illustrate the challenges of safeguarding in different contexts where simply insisting on “Anglophone” or “Western European” formulations of safeguarding is not going to solve the problem. So long as we do not really understand these deeply-seated behavioural patterns, and how the area of human affectivity is lived out in a culture, we won’t be able to have an impact.

Other cultures need our input, but they also need to translate it into their own language, symbols and ways of educating people and changing behaviour. People need to be taught and empowered to behave in new ways—for example, to critique authority. Imagine the resistance to this sort of idea in Africa where in many places the priest reigns like a chieftain!

In this historic moment, the Church has a unique capability to bring about and support changes in thinking and behaving. We have a unique global communication system that is founded in faith and proclaims the same values, even if these are transmitted and spelled out differently. We can reach the grassroots level as well as the

leaders of organisations and governments. The Church could be a unique channel of communication and cooperation, yet we have not yet fully taken advantage of this. The abuse problem is an example of our lack of cooperation because the Church in almost each country has been repeating the same mistakes as the others who have had to deal with the crisis before them.

What we can learn from the countries that have already experienced a media blitz focused on spotlighting sexual abuse in Church organisations—countries such as Canada, Germany, the United States, Belgium, Netherlands, Australia, now France...?

Indeed, one of the challenges is how we cope as a global community and develop ways and methods of working together and learning from each other.

We have seen that where there has been clear leadership, leadership that is both convinced and convincing, in those places the implementation of a safeguarding programme works. We don't need to reinvent the wheel in order to respond to the major questions of this topic. For example, Australia has done their research extremely well and has a wealth of information to offer. Several countries have learned the hard way about how to respond and they can pass on their resources. In each country a serious response has only been attempted after a media firestorm focused on abuse cover-up. Without these public scandals, it seems nothing would have changed. Our simple message to countries where the Church has not yet gone through a trial by media is: recognise potential problems and begin the change now!

We have learned we need a central authority. When the leadership is not clear, or when there are blurred authority structures and relationships, all kinds of harm and misconduct become possible, and it is necessary that a superior authority intervene, especially to bring about justice for survivors. Subsidiarity means you need to have someone who has authority, knowledge and standing but they are willing to share it. So we need trained people, who can implement change in structure, and these people need a lot of perseverance.

We have also learned that we need different educational measures to reach different levels of society. People have different competencies, they cannot all be expected to go through 36 units of e-learning programmes. So a "basic training" programme is also necessary - without losing impact, or missing context and with all the thoroughness of deep background research.

Considering all that has been said, what needs to happen now? What direction can the Church take in furthering its commitment to safeguarding minors?

Over the last five years, there is a new awareness about the issue of child sexual abuse in all parts of the world. Now there is openness to talking about the problem, and it is possible to organise conferences and educational programmes. Given the great need for a response within and from the Church and the growing openness to work together, the Centre for Child Protection is in a position to shape a model of cooperation among countries and cultures.

We are already moving in this direction. The CCP offers an e-learning programme designed to be adapted to different cultures, and we ask our partners not only for feedback, but also for input and collaboration. We are working to build a knowledge base founded in research, teaching skills, contacts from around the world and field experience. We are going to countries and experiencing what it is like first-hand, understanding how people relate to this issue and putting all these different situations in dialogue. At the moment we work with about 25 partners in more than 15 countries on four continents. Almost all of them are universities or departments of pedagogy, theology, psychology and medicine.

However, we cannot be the ones coming from Rome to work out a solution for everyone. What needs to happen is that our partners contextualise the programme, making it accessible in its core message using a concise language and method. This needs to be done for their own situation and we offer them assistance to do that. We are working to disseminate knowledge in a way that is understandable in all parts of the world. For example, many people do not understand canon law, even though it applies to all Catholics and all priests. So what we do is work with experts in specialised topics, such as canon law, to bring their knowledge to a much wider audience.

The CCP is distinguished by its multidisciplinary approach, engaging psychology, theology, canon law, sociology, pedagogy and the media. It also is unique in the sense that we purposely do not sell the programme, but ask partners to take on co-responsibility for it. This active and reflective participation can bring about change as the trainers themselves develop the capacity to be experts for their situation.

In addition to the e-learning programme, there is an intensive one-semester diploma course at the Pontifical Gregorian University offering training for the trainers, bringing together experts to teach on their area of expertise. We work together with the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples to target areas where there is very little competence and provide scholarships for disadvantaged students to attend the course. The diploma course gets participants talking about cases, culture and challenges, and seeks to network the students for on-going collaboration.

The next step for us is the creation of the Centre for Child Protection Global Alliance. This is a network of partner institutions in different countries, with whom we have established a deeper working relationship. These core partners will become our point of reference for different countries and regions, for the inculturation and dissemination of safeguarding resources, again with the aim of creating a network. In exchange we offer these partners on-going formation for their trainers, a means to keep up with the latest standards of knowledge and methods, and a sort of mentoring system.

So what is necessary for the success of all this and for it to become sustainable? Different countries and local churches need to support each other so that no one is doing something alone. We could look at ways of implementing “sister” dioceses and parishes to support one another. We also need to find more ways of working with organisations outside the Church who share our common cause, and the Centre for

Child Protection has begun to do this. In this way, together we are creating a movement to safeguard minors, and it is gaining momentum.

If you had a wish for your work, what would it be?

First of all, I wish that those who are engaged in this work and sensitive to this topic do not lose heart from the resistance and inertia they often meet, but rather, that they take courage and be strong! This is an uncomfortable topic, and there are cultural, systemic and individual blocks. There is a type of shame associated with talking about it, and while shame can be a healthy and normal response to those things that strip a person of their dignity, it should not become a block for the Church to own up and address challenging issues.

I would wish for a better infrastructure, that the Church and society would be invested in safeguarding measures, and that the very pertinent questions regarding justice for survivors would be addressed. I hope that there will be better spiritual accompaniment and integration of those survivors who want to pass on the experience of their spiritual journey to the community. I also wish there were proper care for perpetrators especially those who carry a high risk of re-offending. I look forward to a time when the many people who are involved in this field connect better and focus on those scientific and procedural challenges that we know about. We are working towards these goals. One example is that next year there will be a congress “Child Dignity in the Digital World” where we want to bring together the leaders from the worlds of business and internet, politicians, law enforcement agents, psychologists psychiatrists and church leaders, and we have already received the support of the Holy See.