



**Safeguarding Sunday
Sunday 4th February 2024**

**Pastoral Letter from
Most Rev. Donal McKeown
Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Down and Connor**

Introduction

Every year, Safeguarding Sunday provides us with an opportunity to highlight the fact that Safeguarding is not just one task among many in the life of our Church. Rather, it is a vital ministry that touches all aspects of parish life. Today is also an opportunity to recommit ourselves to maintaining and fostering a culture of Safeguarding in our parishes. This is a responsibility shared by all of us in making our parishes and Church spaces safe and welcoming for young people and adults at risk.

Furthermore, we as a Diocese are engaged in working alongside other Christian Churches, groups and agencies. With them, we are trying to address issues related to Safeguarding in areas such as reducing domestic violence, supporting children with disabilities and welcoming new-comer families.

National Board Report

On this particular Safeguarding Sunday, I as Apostolic Administrator, draw your attention to the publication of the National Board Report on Safeguarding Practice in the Diocese of Down and Connor. You will find it on the Diocesan website and your parish websites.

In 2022, Archbishop Noel Treanor invited the National Board to carry out an independent and external review of Safeguarding. This review was undertaken by two senior, experienced social workers commissioned by the National Board. They spent a week meeting with Safeguarding staff and parish volunteers from across the Diocese. And most importantly, the voice of a victim was heard. As part of their remit, the Reviewers visited three of our parishes and met with a youth group who had been engaged in pastoral youth ministry, where they observed Safeguarding Practice in action.

My thoughts go to those who have experienced abuse within our Church and who carry with them the scars of their experience. I hope this Report would give you some solace.

As a Diocese, Down and Connor will strive to ensure that their experience in the past will not be repeated in the future.

We continue to owe victims and their families a duty of care with compassion and healing in their spiritual and personal lives.

The conclusion of the Report states that the Diocese of Down and Connor, 'has a strong Safeguarding structure, which promotes and delivers on engagement with and support for parishes and their Safeguarding personnel.'

The Report goes on to say, 'None of this would be possible without the commitment and dedication the Reviewers witnessed from people at all levels.'

The fact that the Diocese has been found to be in full compliance with the Safeguarding Standards of the National Board, is due in no small measure to the professionalism of the Safeguarding staff and the immense generosity of hundreds of Safeguarding volunteers. It is with heart-felt sincerity that I thank them for their continued commitment to creating a safe and welcoming environment for our young people in every parish. While we recognise the good work that has been done, we fully appreciate the need to avoid complacency and remain focused on responding to the significant challenges inherent in the ministry of Safeguarding.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the significant contribution of Archbishop Noel Treanor. Throughout his time as bishop of the Diocese, he worked conscientiously to promote a culture of Safeguarding at all levels. We trust that such a culture of Safeguarding will continue to facilitate the development of good practice and the delivery of effective pastoral care.

Conclusion

In today's Gospel story, Jesus went to meet the mother-in-law of Simon Peter, who was ill. We are told that Jesus, 'took her by the hand and helped her up'. This same Jesus, as the Risen Lord, continues to reach out and lift up those in need of his healing touch. It is the mission of the Church to imitate Jesus in this ministry of healing, not least with those who have been abused and their families. In this work, we all have a vital part to play in supporting the work of Safeguarding through our prayers and actions.