



Great progress has been made, but we must be wary of fatigue setting in around child safeguarding, writes **Theresa Devlin**

The establishment of the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (the national board) was announced in December 2005, and it held its inaugural meeting in May 2006. It was created by the three sponsoring bodies, the Irish bishops' conference, the Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI) and the Irish Missionary Union (IMU) with the intention of developing a coordinated approach to child safeguarding across the Church in Ireland.

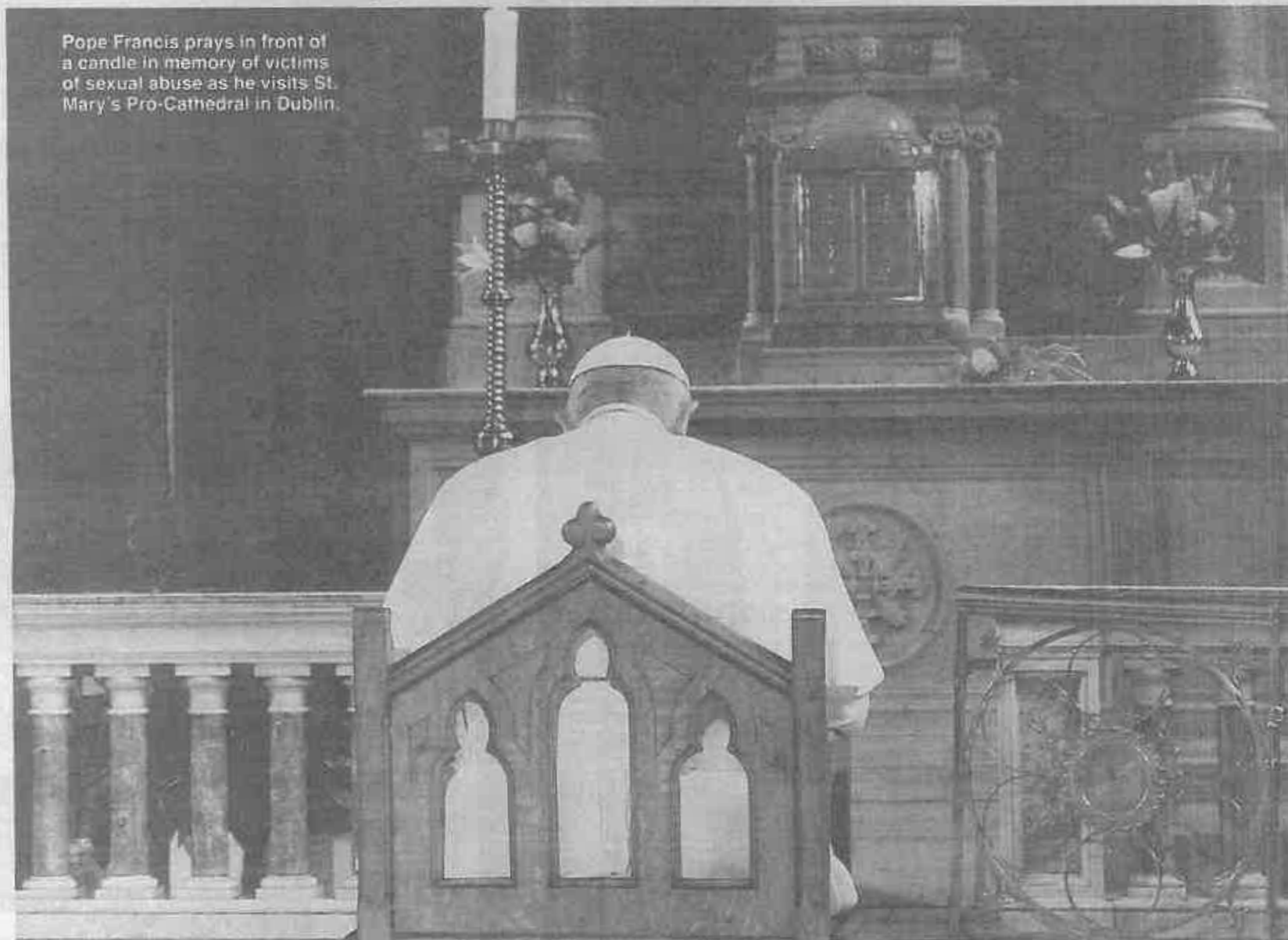
The national board developed a new and comprehensive guidance which it published in February 2009 under the title, *Safeguarding Children – Standards and guidance document for the Catholic Church in Ireland*. In 2010, the conduct of audits of child safeguarding compliance by Church authorities with the 2009 standards was begun and this process took five years for the national board to complete. There are approximately 180 separate and canonically independent entities that together comprise the Catholic Church in Ireland, and all of these had to be reviewed. A written report was published on the national board's website on every review completed, and these can be accessed at www.safeguarding.ie

Methodology

As part of the methodology for these reviews, all cases of accused and suspected priests and religious that had not already been examined by one of the four inquiries established by the State were scrutinised and evaluated.

In February 2010, the Irish hierarchy were invited to Rome by Pope Benedict XVI to discuss with him and with senior curial cardinals the situation in the Catholic

The Church continues to face very real challenges in relation to keeping children safe



Pope Francis prays in front of a candle in memory of victims of sexual abuse as he visits St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral in Dublin.

Church in Ireland pertaining to clerical child sexual abuse.

A month later, Benedict XVI issued his *Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland*. In this document he Pope apologised to Irish victims of clerical child sexual abuse. He also addressed all members of the Irish Church and said: "With this Letter, I wish to exhort all of you, as God's people in Ireland, to reflect on the wounds inflicted on Christ's body, the sometimes painful remedies

needed to bind and heal them, and the need for unity, charity and mutual support in the long-term process of restoration and ecclesial renewal".

Pope Benedict announced his intention to hold "an Apostolic Visitation of certain dioceses in Ireland, as well as seminaries and religious congregations...the Visitation...is intended to assist the local Church on her path of renewal".

In 2011, the bishops

published their pastoral letter, 'Towards Healing and Renewal' to mark the anniversary of the Pope's letter; and in this, they made commitments to support the development of the two agencies, Towards Healing which offers practical supports, including counselling, to victims of clerical child abuse; and Towards Peace which provides spiritual supports for those adults who were abused as children by priests

and religious, and who as part of their recovery want to explore rebuilding their spirituality.

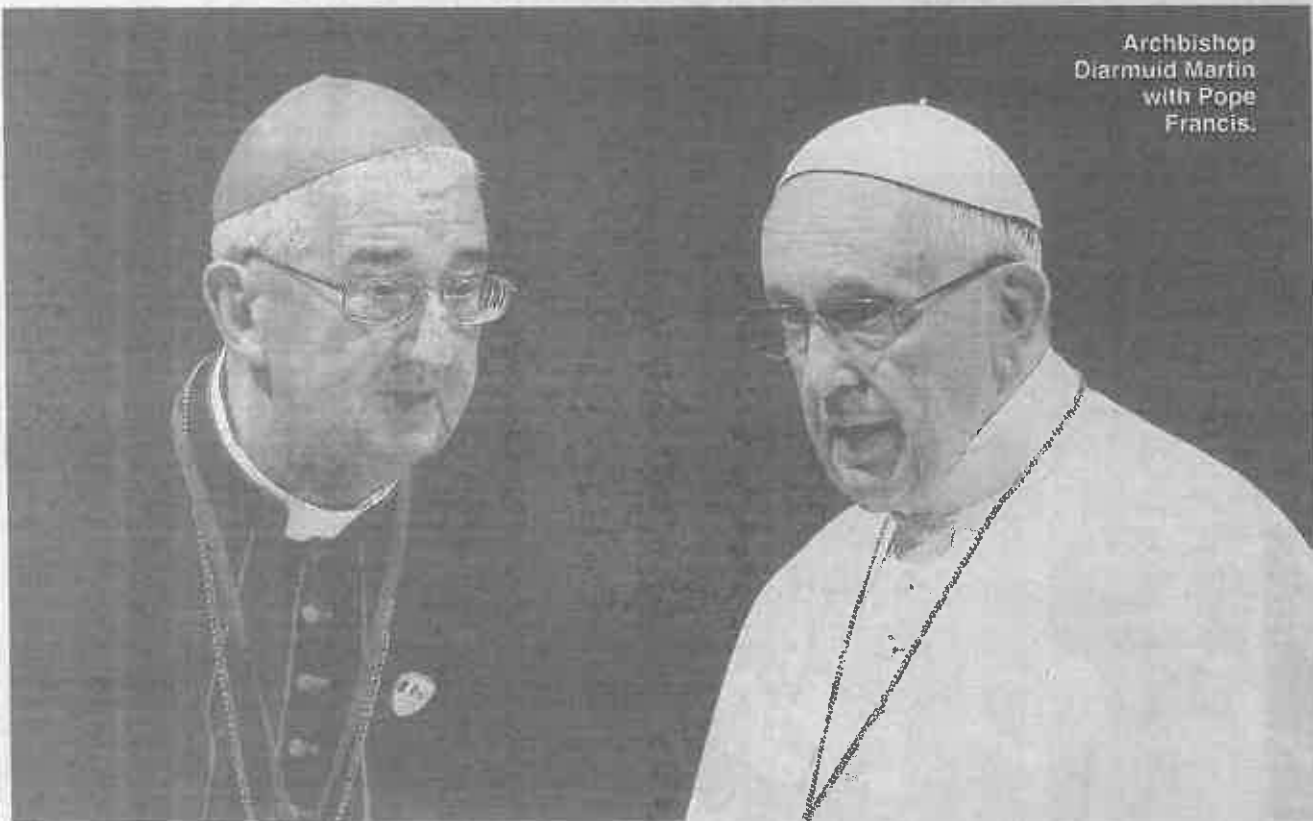
The national board has been very active since its foundation as an independent agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland. In 2016, once accepted and adopted by the sponsoring bodies, it issued a one-Church document, *Safeguarding Children Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland*, along with very detailed associated guidance.

The national board since its inception has encouraged the development of a dedicated structure of personnel to manage child safeguarding. The current structure provides great

clarity, not just in relation to process matters such as reporting allegations and creating safe environments, but also it identifies responsibilities. While clearly the Church authority (bishop or major superior) has overall responsibility for child safeguarding and reporting allegations of abuse, there is now in place a body of expertise in the role holders to support him or her in decision making.

Each Church body has a designated liaison person (DLP), usually a lay person, who is entirely responsible for case management. This role involves reporting allegations, putting in place safety plans for those accused of abuse, monitoring their behaviour and ensuring

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Archbishop Diarmuid Martin with Pope Francis.

(2014) 265
(2015) 153
(2016) 86
(2017) 135
(2018) 143

However, significant events, such as the papal visit in 2018 and other major events have enabled those who have not yet come forward to disclose their abuse, to do so. The national board welcomes these opportunities which provide victims and survivors with the confidence to raise their concerns about abuse they have experienced in the Church.

Challenges

A lot has been achieved by the Catholic Church in Ireland in the area of Child Safeguarding since the publication of the Murphy Report ten years ago, and this is heartening. However, the Church continues to face very real challenges in relation to keeping children safe. Among these are:
 ● Making sure that the achievements made are consolidated, and that safeguarding fatigue and/or complacency is not allowed

to take root;
 ● Supporting the safeguarding component of Catholic Church ministries which attract children and young people to become involved in Church activities, with an aim of ensuring that children feel comfortable and safe;
 ● Keeping up to date with changing technology, and understanding how children and young people are vulnerable to abuse through social media.

In his encouraging address to the Irish bishops in August 2018, Pope Francis told them: "In Ireland, as elsewhere, the honesty and integrity with which the Church chooses to confront this painful chapter of her history can offer an example and a warning to society as a whole. Continue on this path."

This particular journey does not end.

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that following criminal and civil authority action that penal processes are initiated.

Support people are offered to complainants to advocate for their needs for counselling and support and to provide a communication channel to the Church authority. Similarly advisors are offered to respondents (those accused of abuse). Each Church authority has access to an advisory panel to offer advice on all aspects of case management, but more recently many Church bodies have now disbanded these panels in favour of the National Case Management Committee – a dedicated committee of the national board.

The national board has also been providing advice and guidance to Church bodies on the management of cases of suspected child abuse by clerics and religious, and has strengthened its role in this area by developing the aforementioned case management committee to which bishops and provincials of religious orders can bring for advice

cases about which they are concerned.

The national board has developed and provided a wide range of training courses for Church child safeguarding personnel across the whole island, and has trained trainers who can deliver necessary courses at local diocesan, parish or religious order level. Specialist training, From the Head to the Heart, is being developed and delivered to seminarians in the national seminary in Maynooth, Redemptoris Mater seminary in Dundalk and the Pontifical Irish College in Rome, in line with one of the recommendations of the Apostolic Visitors who visited Ireland in 2011.

The national board has contributed to the development of theory and practice in child safeguarding through participation in the annual Anglophone Safeguarding Conference which has generally been held in Rome, co-hosting the 2019 event with the New Zealand Catholic Church; and through its own biennial national conferences, another of which will take

place in 2020. The staff in the national office in Maynooth has launched a series of GAP (Guidance, Advice and Practice) papers on various aspects of child safeguarding, three of which are now available on its website, with three more to be completed before the end of 2019.

“The national board has monitored the incidence of child abuse by priests and religious since April 2009”

The national board has also worked closely with Towards Healing, Towards Peace and with other councils and offices within the Church in Ireland, as well as with the statutory child protection agencies – police, and child and family services – in both jurisdictions in Ireland. This interagency work is in recognition of the realities that keeping children safe is everyone's responsibility, while no one person or organisation can do all that is needed on their own.

Finally, the national board has monitored the incidence of child abuse by priests and religious since April 2009, and it has reported on its analysis of statistics and trends in its annual reports, all of which are available on the national board website.

It is important in decoding these figures to be aware that they mostly refer to retrospective allegations about abuse in the past, rather than indicating levels of current abuse. Looking annually at the notifications of allegations of abuse by clerics and religious reporting to the national board since 2009, it is not

possible to confidently discern a pattern:

(2009) 197
(2010) 272
(2011) 196
(2012) 242
(2013) 164



Theresa Devlin is Chief Executive Officer of the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

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- Bow Soprano Davide Antochi
- Dublin Youth Choir
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