THE NATIONAL BOARD FOR

SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN

IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND

Briefing Paper

Briefing Paper on A Restorative and Transitional Justice Model of Engaging with Victims and Survivors in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

August 2026

About the Briefing Papers

The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (NBSCCCI) was established to provide advice, services and assistance in furtherance of the development of the safeguarding of children within the Roman Catholic Church on the island of Ireland. The NBSCCCI also monitors compliance with legislation, policy and best practice and reports on these activities annually, as comprehensively set out in the Memorandum of Association of the Company, Coimirce.
Article 4 (iii) of the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Company requires the National Board to: " report and provide, upon request from the Constituents or any Constituent, support, advisory and training services to such Constituents or Constituent on policies and practices relating to safeguarding of children."

The National Board already provides comprehensive Guidance to support the implementation of A Safe and Welcoming Church: Safeguarding Children Policy for the Catholic Church in Ireland 2024. In addition, annually we produce Guidance, Advice and Practice (GAP) papers that further complement the detailed Guidance on topics of current interest to constituents.
This development of Briefing papers is envisaged to provide information contained in detailed research papers, journal articles, and inquiry reports relevant to safeguarding that we condense into a short digest format for ease of reference.

The Briefing papers are the National Board's critique and assessments of key points and lessons that can be learned from externally written reports or in this case events.
The views expressed are those of the NBSCCCI and should not be considered as a definitive position on the given topic.

Contents

1. Background: 4
2. Establish the truth of what happened in the past..... 5
3. Take whatever steps are necessary to prevent it from occurring again 6
4. To ensure that the principles of justice are fully respected..... 7
5. Bring healing above all to the victims and all those affected..... 10
6. Conclusion..... 12
7. References..... 14

1. Background

In February 2010, prompted by the publication of the Ryan Report (May 2009) and the Murphy Report (November 2009), Pope Benedict XVI summoned the entire Irish College of Bishops to a critical two-day summit at the Vatican. This meeting marked a pivotal moment in the Church's response to the abuse crisis in Ireland. During the summit, Pope Benedict issued four clear instructions to the Irish bishops:

- To establish the truth of what happened in the past;
- To take whatever steps are necessary to prevent it from occurring again;
- To ensure that the principles of justice are fully respected;
- To bring healing above all to the victims and all those affected.

These directives continue to provide a foundational framework for evaluating the Church's safeguarding journey in Ireland.

The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (NBSCCCI) 2025 conference "A Restorative and Transitional Justice Model of Engaging with Victims and Survivors in the Catholic Church in Ireland," placed the lived experience of victims and survivors at the centre of the Church's response. The conference harnessed survivor testimony, academic research and the experience of church bodies to emphasise the importance of restorative and transitional justice approaches as mechanisms not only for acknowledging past wrongs but also for fostering accountability, rebuilding trust, and enabling meaningful engagement with those most affected.

Emerging models used and proposed for use across the Church reflect a shift from compliance based safeguarding towards a more holistic, survivor informed approach. The 2025 NBSCCCI conference aimed to highlight the importance of truth-telling, recognition of harm, participation of survivors in shaping responses, and the promotion of healing and reconciliation within a framework of justice. Themes that closely align with Pope Benedict XVI's original instruct. Through the conference, the presenters and the participants the NBSCCCI sought to offer practical tools and pathways for the realisation of those instructions in a contemporary context.

This briefing paper reviews each of the four instructions issued by Pope Benedict XVI considering the key learning and insights emerging from the 2025 NBSCCCI conference. It examines the progress made to date, identifies areas where further action is required, and assesses the extent to which the Church has fulfilled these commitments. The paper also considers how the principles of restorative, transitional and conversional justice, as articulated during the 2025 NBSCCCI conference, can guide and support the Church in fully realising Pope Benedict XVI's directives and advancing sustainable Church wide change.

2. Establish the truth of what happened in the past

Establishing the truth of what happened in the past requires more than compiling reports or disclosing historical facts; it demands a profound cultural, moral, and spiritual transformation within the Church. As articulated by Dr Pat Jones of Durham University at the 2025 NBSCCCI conference, the journey towards truth is inseparable from the Church's call to become a restorative community one that acknowledges harm, listens deeply, and commits to repair. Dr Jones' presentation, drawing on the Durham University research project and the wider findings of The Cross of the Moment (Durham University 2024), underscores that abuse within the Church did not occur in isolation but was enabled by deeply embedded cultural dynamics. Silence, secrecy, clericalism, and lack of accountability not only facilitated abuse but also shaped the Church's response in its aftermath. Therefore, any serious effort to establish truth should confront these underlying realities. Truth-telling, in this context, is not simply about documenting past events but about exposing and understanding the systems, attitudes, and failures that allowed harm to occur and then persist.

Central to this process are the voices and experiences of survivors. Survivor testimony in Ireland has consistently highlighted that the harm caused by abuse was often compounded by the Church's response to disclosures. Experiences of disbelief, minimisation, defensiveness, adversarial engagement, or a perceived prioritisation of institutional reputation over accountability frequently deepened the suffering already endured by survivors. Many have described this experience of "secondary abuse" or institutional betrayal as causing profound and lasting harm, in some cases being experienced as more damaging than the original abuse itself. (Towards Peace, 2022; RSM Ireland, 2024).

Equally, survivors have testified to the positive impact of encounters characterised by genuine listening, compassion, honesty, and accountability (RSM Ireland, 2024, Education Scoping Inquiry (2024)). These experiences demonstrate that establishing the truth is not merely a forensic or procedural exercise but a deeply relational one, requiring a willingness to hear difficult truths, acknowledge past failures, and respond without defensiveness. Such an approach is essential if trust is to be rebuilt and meaningful healing supported.

A restorative approach, therefore, calls the Church to create safe, structured, and survivor-informed opportunities in which truth can be spoken freely and accepted. This includes supporting survivor led initiatives, facilitating opportunities for testimony, and ensuring that survivors' experiences directly inform safeguarding policy and practice. In doing so, the Church moves from a position of control to one of participation, recognising survivors not as passive recipients of care but as essential contributors to truth and reform.

Dr Jones further highlighted that meaningful engagement with truth requires both theological and practical conversion. Theologically, this involves re-examining concepts of priesthood and authority that may have contributed to unhealthy power dynamics, particularly clericalism, which has been widely identified as a root cause of both abuse and institutional failure. Practically, it requires the establishment of visible and robust systems of accountability, where responsibility is clearly owned, and transparency is non-negotiable.

In this context, Dr Jones's engagement with the insights of Pope Francis (various) and Bishop Erik Varden (2025) is particularly instructive. Reparation is not limited to an apology; it entails an honest acknowledgement of wrongdoing, acceptance of responsibility, and concrete actions to address harm. Truth, therefore, must be lived as well as spoken. It must be embodied in structures, behaviours, and relationships that demonstrate a genuine commitment to accountability, justice, and restoration.

Importantly, Dr Jones highlighted the recovery of practices such as lament and communal truth-telling as essential to this process. These practices would enable the Church not only to acknowledge wrongdoing but also to grieve it collectively, recognising the depth of harm inflicted and the losses experienced by individuals, families, and communities. Acts of lament create space for honesty, humility, and repentance, all of which are prerequisites for an authentic encounter with truth.

The research from Durham University's Boundary Breaking Project (Jones, Pound & Sexton, 2024) reinforces the conclusion that becoming a restorative Church requires far more than improved procedures or safeguarding structures. Establishing the truth necessitates a deeper cultural and spiritual transformation, one that challenges long-standing habits of silence, denial, and defensiveness. It replaces them with openness, humility, accountability, and a willingness to learn from survivors.

Encouragingly, there are signs of progress. Survivor-led initiatives and restorative practices developed by Church bodies, some of whom we reflect on in this paper, offer important examples of how a more participatory, transparent, and survivor-centred approach can emerge. These initiatives demonstrate that when responsibility for truth, healing, and reform is shared across the whole Church community, rather than confined to leadership alone, more authentic, credible, and lasting change becomes possible.

3. Take whatever steps are necessary to prevent it from occurring again

Institutional reform signifies a commitment not only to repentance for the past but also to take responsibility for the present and indeed the future. The Catholic church's current approach to safeguarding in Ireland is shaped around two equally important, interlinked strands rooted in compassion and in responsibility. One strand focuses on the response to abuse victims and survivors, and the other strand promotes prevention by advocating the implementation of safeguarding strategies. Contemporary safeguarding strategies that strive to prevent the recurrence of abuse have been informed by survivors' experiences, developments in the sphere of child development, research into the archetypes of child abusers, situational crime prevention and national legislation both north and south within Ireland.

The Catholic church in Ireland first introduced the pillar of abuse prevention in Our Children, Our Church (2005), embarking on a unified national safeguarding system. Coimirce was incorporated in December 2008 as a company jointly established by the Irish Catholics Bishops' Conference, the Conference of Religious of Ireland and the Irish Missionary Union (now combined as AMRI). The main objective of the company was and is to provide advice, services and assistance in the furtherance of the development of the safeguarding of children within the Catholic Church on the island of Ireland and to monitor compliance with legislation, policy and best practice and to report on these activities annually.

Recognising that perpetrators of abuse will try to infiltrate systems to access children, the Catholic church in Ireland has designed a robust safeguarding structure that advocates nurturing children in safe environments. This safeguarding structure includes the implementation of safe recruitment procedures for clergy, religious, staff and volunteers. Child safeguarding training is mandatory for all adults with a suite of courses matched to a person's contact with children in their role. Specific training events are provided on identified safeguarding topics, e.g. a recent event was held discussing Artificial Intelligence and Safeguarding in a Church context.

Church personnel are equipped to develop safe environments for children's activities

through their capacity to identify harmful behaviours; the collaborative construction and implementation of behavioural contracts which identify harmful behaviours; and having access to solid reporting systems. Regularly risk assessing environments and situations ensures the provision of safe sacred spaces for children. Using such a situational crime prevention model empowers organisations to create environments that are child-safe and to minimise situations in which children are vulnerable. (Australian Institute of Family Studies: No. 25, Spring, 2006). Statistics indicate that only 2% (4) of abuse allegations reported to the NBSCCCI relate to incidents occurring after 2000, while 78% concern alleged abuse from the period 1960–1989 (NBSCCCI Annual Report 2025). These figures suggest that the contemporary safeguarding measures implemented across the Church in Ireland have been largely effective. Nevertheless, the Church must remain committed to maintaining robust safeguarding standards and to reducing the incidence of abuse to zero.

The NBSCCCI incorporates an annual safeguarding self-audit reporting system and an external review process that facilitates independent review of the individual church bodies in their application of safeguarding policy and practices.

As Dr Jones argued a change in culture within the church is necessary to prevent child abuse. Sustainable change becomes possible when harmful attitudes towards victims are transformed, and when victims and survivors are welcomed, included and valued in all aspects of the church. The power imbalances in relationships must be openly acknowledged and avenues for the safe challenging of inappropriate and unsafe behaviour are accessible. A safe network of people must be established within the church who are trained to be upstanders, defying the previous culture of silence. The church must clearly define what constitutes inappropriate behaviour and commit to never tolerating it.

The church's history of abuse, poor responses to survivors alongside advancements in technology are daily reminders that the safeguarding needs of children are evolving, and church structures and processes cannot remain static in responding to children's needs.

4. Ensure that the principles of justice are fully respected

Traditional responses within the Church have tended to prioritise legal, canonical, and risk-management processes. Although these responses may be deemed necessary, they have often been experienced by survivors as adversarial, fragmented, overly procedural, or detached from their lived reality. A predominant focus on liability, reputation, or compliance can unintentionally sideline the survivor's need for truth, acknowledgement, participation, and moral accountability.

As a result, many survivors continue to experience feelings of being unheard, disbelieved, marginalised, or excluded from processes intended to address abuse. Survivor consultations in Ireland have highlighted the importance of being listened to with respect, believed when disclosing abuse, treated with dignity, and having survivors' perspectives inform processes of accountability, safeguarding, and reform within the Church. (Towards Peace, 2022; RSM Ireland, 2024). Where these elements are absent, institutional trust remains damaged, and healing is impeded.

Against this background, restorative justice and transitional justice frameworks offer important insights. Restorative justice shifts the focus from rule breaking to harm, asking who was harmed, how, and what is required to put things right to the fullest extent possible. Transitional justice, developed in societies responding to systemic or widespread human rights violations, provides tools for addressing historical wrongdoing through processes of truth-telling, justice, reparation, and institutional reform (Teitel, 2000; Smolin, 2023). While traditionally applied in post-conflict or post-authoritarian contexts, transitional justice is

increasingly recognised as relevant to institutions grappling with historic abuse and structural failure.

Within the Catholic Church, these secular justice frameworks have been re-interpreted through a theological lens as conversional justice. This approach emphasises that authentic justice requires ongoing conversion at both personal and institutional levels. In the Irish context, widely adopting a restorative and transitional (conversional) justice model represents a deliberate shift from reactive and compliance driven responses towards a survivor-centred, relational, and ethically grounded approach. Such a model does not replace civil or canonical processes; rather, it complements them by addressing their limitations and ensuring that engagement with survivors is human, participatory, and credible. Pope Francis repeatedly affirmed that safeguarding and justice require "a continuous and pro-found conversion of hearts, attested by concrete and effective actions" (Vos Estis Lux Mundi, 2019).

Ms Teresa Devlin's presentation introduced conversional justice as a distinctly Catholic development of transitional justice, adapted to address the legacy of abuse within the Church. As above transitional justice may focus on societal responses after large-scale human rights violations; conversional justice reframes this through a theological lens: genuine change requires conversion of heart, openness to truth, and a turning away from evil toward the good. Drawing on Professor David Smolin (2023-2025) Pope Benedict XVI (2006), and Pope Francis (2018), Ms Devlin's presentation emphasised that the Church's response to abuse must be rooted in spiritual transformation, not merely administrative reform. This includes acknowledging past failures, establishing the truth, ensuring accountability, and committing to healing those harmed.

The framework is built on four key pillars; Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Institutional Reform each grounded in Scripture and Catholic teaching. Truth requires honest examination of what happened and who knew; justice demands accountability through civil and canonical processes; reparation involves pastoral support, apology, compensation, and sincere efforts to aid survivors' healing; and institutional reform ensures abuse can never happen again through safeguarding, transparency, and victim involvement. Ms Devlin's presentation highlighted the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors' (PCPM) multi-year focus on strengthening each of the key pillars of safeguarding and accountability. She concluded by drawing on Pope Leo XIV's (2025) call for bishops to remain close both to their priests and to victims, stressing the urgency of greater responsibility, sensitivity, and accompaniment as the Church continues its long journey of conversion and repair. Such conversion requires the Church to turn away from secrecy, defensiveness, and clericalism, and to embody repentance through visible and concrete acts of accountability, justice, and reform.

conversion → repentance → accountability → reform

Prof. Marie Keenan of UCD, along with a survivor and a survivor advocate from Restore Together, in their presentation at the 2025 NBSCCCI conference, suggested that justice responses to non-recent institutional abuse must move beyond conventional criminal, civil, and transitional justice models, because these models can often be adversarial, individualistic, backwards looking, and structurally incapable of addressing the full reality of institutional harm.

Professor Keenan's presentation highlighted that survivors need to experience justice through truth, acknowledgement, accountability, access to records, participation, redress, and belonging. They argued truth is not met by systems focused on liability, evidence thresholds, or narrow legal definitions of responsibility. Conventional justice frequently produces secondary victimisation, deepens mistrust, and fails to address the relational, political, and societal dimensions of institutional abuse. These institutional actors also carry fears around financial viability, reputational damage, and historical complexity, the space then often becomes highly contested and adversarial, leaving "nobody winning."

Prof Keenan proposed Restorative Justice as a more holistic, trauma-informed, and future oriented approach capable of addressing harms that legal systems cannot. Restorative justice centres the needs and voices of survivors, engages all relevant actors, and allows for multiple truths, accountability, and follow-through, such as access to records, redress, memorialisation, and non-recurrence. She outlined its pillars, encounter, reparation, transformation, and repair of social bonds and argued that the Catholic Church is uniquely positioned to lead in this area because Restorative justice resonates deeply with Catholic theology; repair, reconciliation, transformation, and healing. Research shows appetite, positive outcomes, and untapped potential for Restorative justice within Church contexts. Prof Keenan concluded with proposed practical steps for Church leadership; unpack fear, analyse the cost of doing nothing, center survivors in co-design, engage restorative trained professionals, and take small but meaningful steps toward a justice response rooted in Gospel values and genuine repair.

Archbishop Eamon Martin outlined the Diocese of Dromore Redress Scheme, which was open to applications from 29th September 2021 until 30th April 2024 for individuals who had suffered sexual abuse by clerics within the Diocese of Dromore. He explained that the decision to establish both financial and non-financial forms of redress arose from his engagement with survivors, who expressed a need for acknowledgment of the abuse they had endured, recognition of the harm caused, and access to reasonable compensation without the burden of lengthy investigations or adversarial litigation. The scheme was designed as a victim-centred alternative to civil legal proceedings, providing a more accessible, timely, and less confrontational process for survivors seeking redress.

During its operation, more than 90% of applicants had their claims considered by an independent assessment panel, with the initial assessment taking place on average within 33 days of receipt of an application. Furthermore, over 90% of applicants accepted the awards offered by the independent panel, demonstrating a high level of engagement with and confidence in the scheme. Forms of non-financial redress provided to victims and survivors of abuse included meeting with Archbishop Eamon, personal and public apologies for the abuse experienced, pastoral support and access to therapeutic services.

Ms Saoirse Fox and Fr Terry Howard SJ from the Jesuits in Ireland presented their experience of the Jesuits response to reports of non-recent child sexual abuse. They explained that in March 2021, following repeated requests from a victim/survivor known to them they released the name of a Jesuit priest, Joseph Marmion, who had abused children, with the intention of reaching out to other potential victims.

In the wake of the response to the statement from survivors and victims of Marmion, the Jesuits engaged two independent Restorative Facilitators, to develop survivor-led restorative processes for people affected by Marmion's abuse. Ms Fox explained that the Jesuits recognised that the methodology and the processes involved should be designed and led by those harmed. Working with the facilitators, former pupils who had been abused identified that they wished to have as complete an understanding as possible of Marmion's behaviour and how much the Jesuits were aware of and responded to it.

Between 2021 and 2023, survivors, witnesses, and Jesuits participated in a two year restorative process. This included individual and group meetings, opportunities for survivors to describe the impact of the abuse, and discussions about the Order's actions, omissions, and institutional culture. Restorative meetings occurred between survivors and Jesuits and explored issues such as silence, cover-up, clericalism, and how the abuse was allowed to happen. The process also involved significant internal engagement within the Jesuit Order with more than 70% of Jesuits in Ireland taking part in aspects of the process, which they described as an opportunity to confront the abuse history and support survivors.

Ms Fox and Fr Howard described that the Jesuits have adopted an approach of transparency through public disclosure, releasing the names of two other members who had abused children in 2024 and in 2025 the Jesuits published the names of 15 deceased Jesuits who were the subject of child sexual abuse complaints following a review by an independent working group. The Order view this approach as being one part of a wider process of accountability, transparency and making amends. They have accepted that, in the past, the Order often prioritised protecting its reputation over protecting children. The Order has publicly apologised and acknowledged that earlier action could have prevented further abuse.

Fr Brendan Carr and Mr John Moore outlined the Spiritans' journey in responding to the legacy of historical abuse, tracing key milestones from the 1990s to the present day. Early reports such as the Ryan Report (2009) and the NBSCCCI review of the Spiritans (2012) highlighted deep cultural problems, including children not being heard, resistance to safeguarding, and a lack of systematic exploration of abuse. Fr Carr and Mr Moore described that over three decades, the Spiritans introduced child protection policies, established governance structures for schools, engaged with national safeguarding bodies, and, more recently, piloted restorative justice approaches. They acknowledged significant barriers: conflicting expectations between survivors and the congregation, challenges around redress, delays, trauma, trust, and the emotional toll on all involved.

For the Spiritans, the RTE documentary Blackrock Boys (2022) and the Scoping Inquiry (2024) intensified the need for transparency, truth-telling, and survivor-centred engagement. Fr Carr and Mr Moore described the Spiritans' restorative justice model, which provides survivors with alternative pathways for engagement, including restorative circles, meetings with leadership, advocacy, and access to support services. Fr Carr and Mr Moore reported that while restorative processes can yield healing, the Spiritans recognise limitations in the process they experienced including an uneven focus on different types of abuse, lack of clear pathways, emotional strain, and tensions between survivor expectations and what the congregation can realistically offer. They also highlighted what they described as data protection challenges and the complexity of reconciling institutional and survivor perspectives.

Fr Carr and Mr Moore report that the Spiritans' "Road to Damascus" message emphasises unconditional cooperation, transparency, and a long-term commitment to cultural change, accountability, and survivor-centred practice.

In abuse contexts, restorative justice must be survivor-led, voluntary, and trauma-informed, recognising power imbalances and avoiding any pressure for reconciliation. The overwhelming message from the conference is that justice responses that focus solely on individual perpetrators risk ignoring systemic complicity, including cultures of clericalism, silence, and "unethical passivity" (Jones, 2025). The credibility of any justice process depends on demonstrable change, including transparent leadership, survivor involvement in policy formation, independent oversight and audit and ongoing safeguarding formation.

In their research McAlinden, Keenan and Gallen (2025) suggest that traditional legal mechanisms, such as inquiries and redress schemes, often fall short of meeting survivors' needs, because they fail to meaningfully engage with the structural and relational dimensions of abuse. At the NBSCCCI conference (2025) Dr Marie Keenan proposed a hybrid model rooted in restorative, transitional, and transformative justice, in which accountability is not only legal or moral, but also relational and ideological. Her framework, she suggested, offers the Church a path toward genuine responsibility and healing, grounded in listening, structural reform, and sustained engagement.

5. Bring healing above all to the victims and all those affected.

While significant safeguarding reforms have been implemented in Ireland since the February 2010 summit between Pope Benedict XVI and the Irish College of Bishops, survivors continue to experience secondary or institutional harm, particularly through lack of acknowledgement of the harm caused, delayed and defensive responses, fragmented accountability and processes being legalistic rather than relational. Traditional responses focused on risk management, litigation, or compensation have proven insufficient on their own. Historically there has been a significant level of importance attached to civil legal advice. Early versions of Committees were invariably chaired by retired judges and Church leaders relied heavily on advice from lawyers in determining their response both to the emerging crisis generally, but also to individual victims and survivors. Research consistently shows that institutional responses can deepen trauma when survivors are disbelieved, silenced, or excluded from decision-making (Herman, 1992; Daly, 2014). As highlighted during the NBSCCCI conference (2025) by each of the victims and survivors' contributions, harm did not end with the abuse itself, it was often prolonged by the Church's response.

Traditional approaches often fail to address victims and survivors expressed needs for truth, understanding of what happened, acknowledgement, moral accountability and repair of relationships. This gap necessitates approaches that engage both justice and healing, and that can respond to harm at personal, communal, and institutional levels. Pope Francis emphasised that reparation presupposes acknowledging guilt and asking forgiveness, recognising that no reparation can fully undo harm (Dilexit Nos, 2024 para. 187). Survivors repeatedly emphasise that acknowledgement itself is reparative. The failure to tell the truth perpetuates harm and undermines trust (Jones, Pound & Sexton 2024).

The Conference workshops provided a valuable opportunity for participants to reflect on the priciples of truth, justice, reparation, and non-recurrence for victims and survivors of abuse. Facilitated using a World Café style and synodal methodology, the discussions generated a range of insights which, despite differing perspectives and experiences, revealed a striking degree of consensus.

A recurring theme throughout the discussions was the need to adopt a more profoundly God-centred approach, grounded in the Gospel values of human dignity, compassion, justice, truth, and reconciliation.

Participants repeatedly emphasised the inherent dignity of every person and the importance of recognising, respecting, and learning from the lived experiences of victims and survivors. Empathy, inclusion, authenticity, and genuine encounter were identified as essential foundations for any credible response to abuse. The importance of relationships emerged particularly strongly. Participants highlighted the need for attentive listening, authentic accompaniment, and the creation of spaces where victims and survivors are not only heard but genuinely listened to. This reflected a shared conviction that healing requires openness to difficult truths and the courage to hear what may be uncomfortable or challenging. Such reflections resonate strongly with Pope Benedict XVI's (2006) call to the Church in Ireland to place healing, above all, at the service of victims and all those affected by abuse, recognising both the depth of suffering endured and the need for a sustained commitment to renewal. Participants also stressed that justice, healing, and reform must be understood as an ongoing journey rather than a single event or process. Faith, courage, perseverance, and a commitment to sustained engagement were seen as necessary if trust is to be rebuilt. The importance of follow-through, accountability, and remaining committed to the work of renewal over time was highlighted repeatedly. Alongside this, there was a clear recognition that meaningful change requires concrete action.

Participants spoke of the need for ongoing formation, the development of skills and competencies, and the humility to acknowledge where external expertise and support are required. There was widespread agreement that the Church must honestly acknowledge both the harm caused by abuse and the failures of institutional responses. Themes of memorialisation, ritual, symbolism, and remembrance were identified as important ways of honouring victims and survivors, sustaining collective memory, and ensuring that the lessons of the past remain present in the life of the Church.

Although not every group was able to complete all aspects of the exercise due to time constraints at the event the reflections shared were both thoughtful and powerful. Across the discussions, the centrality of Gospel values consistently emerged as the lens through which truth, justice, reparation, and non-recurrence should be understood. Participants affirmed that any authentic process of renewal must begin with listening to and learning from victims and survivors and be sustained through relationships characterised by empathy, honesty, accountability, humility, and hope.

Ms Una Allen, Director of Towards Healing, reflected on the deep spiritual and emotional impact of child abuse in the Catholic church in Ireland as expressed through the Synodal Process. Victims and survivors describe profound betrayal by the Church, with abuse committed by those acting in the name of Christ causing devastating effects on faith, family life, and their relationship with God. Many experience spiritual trauma a sense that God is absent, uncaring, or unreachable leading to loss of trust and hope. Ms Allen's presentation highlighted the concept of "soul murder", emphasising the lifelong harm caused when a child's identity, peace, and spiritual grounding are violated. Survivors' voices reveal not only the original trauma but also the ongoing pain of being unheard, dismissed, or retraumatised by Church responses.

Through the lens of synodality, Ms Allen identified five major concerns emerging from survivor engagement: secondary victimisation and betrayal, listening without truly hearing, the Church's preoccupation with money, the personal cost to survivors of engaging with Church processes, and the need for a Gospel-based response. Her recommendations call for survivor-led, carefully planned encounters; dedicated contact persons; acceptance of responsibility; timely civil and canonical action; non-adversarial restitution; and assurances of safety. She concluded with a call for a change of heart and invited Church members to reflect personally on their response to abuse, their compassion, and where God may be calling them in this work of healing and accompaniment.

Other notable events occured alongside the NBSCCCI conference and these include the publication of the second report of Tutela Minorum: (The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (2024)) released in October 2025 this focused specifically on the pillar of reparations, emphasising that reparations must be comprehensive, going beyond financial compensation to include:

- Creating safe, "welcoming listening centres" for victims/survivors.
- Providing professional psychological and spiritual support.
- Making transparent public and private apologies.
- Allowing survivors to help develop safeguarding policies.

A Safe and Welcoming Church: Safeguarding Children Policy for the Catholic Church in Ireland 2024 (NBSCCCI 2024) emphasises care for victims and survivors, and their families that can only be achieved through authentic collaboration. Each victim and survivor is an individual, so responses should be led by them, and tailored to their needs, with the church listening with an openness and an ability to show compassion. Church leaders must be prepared to respond using a transitional justice approach, uncovering the truth of what happened, ensuring a canonical process which may bring a sense of justice.

Counselling must be made available to victims and survivors of abuse alongside the provision of a support person offering. Alternative forms of reparation, including financial compensation, must be made available to victims and survivors. Church leaders must make a commitment to put in place robust practices, which ensure that children are safe now. A truly survivor-centred approach requires belief and validation of lived experience; choice and control over participation and clear communication and boundaries incorporating long term accompaniment rather than one-off engagement.

6. Conclusions

The Catholic Church in Ireland has travelled a considerable distance since the abuse crisis first emerged into public consciousness. Robust safeguarding structures, independent audits, external scrutiny, and an ongoing commitment to prevention have helped create a significantly safer environment for children and young people. The legacy of abuse continues to be experienced by victims and survivors, many of whom carry not only the wounds of the original abuse but also the consequences of responses that were sometimes defensive, legalistic, delayed, or lacking in compassion and accountability.

The NBSCCCI Conference 2025 made clear that the next phase of the Church's journey must be characterised not simply by the prevention of future harm, but by a deeper commitment to truth, justice, reparation, healing, and institutional conversion. Throughout the conference, survivors, academics, safeguarding professionals, and Church leaders consistently emphasised that authentic engagement begins with listening. Survivors challenge the Church to move beyond procedural responses and towards relationships marked by honesty, empathy, accompaniment, accountability, and respect for lived experience.

A recurring message is that safeguarding and care for victims and survivors are not separate responsibilities but part of the same Gospel imperative. If safeguarding seeks to protect the vulnerable today, restorative and transitional justice seeks to respond faithfully to those who were harmed in the past. Both are essential expressions of the Church's mission and witness.
The conference demonstrated that meaningful engagement with victims and survivors is neither impossible nor aspirational. It is already taking place in a number of settings across Ireland through restorative initiatives, survivor-led dialogue, pastoral accompaniment, and innovative approaches to redress and repair. These examples illustrate that another way is possible: one that prioritises truth over reputation, accountability over defensiveness, and healing over institutional self-protection.

As Dr Pat Jones highlighted, a restorative response requires three fundamental commitments: establishing the truth, accepting responsibility, and providing meaningful forms of reparation and support. These are not merely administrative tasks but moral and theological obligations. They require the Church to acknowledge honestly the harm that has occurred, to answer difficult questions with openness and integrity, and to undertake whatever acts of repair are possible. Such commitments represent a movement from remorse to restoration and from apology to transformation.

The conference also highlighted an important truth: justice in this context is not an event but a journey. It is a long-term pilgrimage of conversion requiring courage, humility, perseverance, and a willingness to remain present to victims and survivors long after formal processes have ended. Genuine renewal will depend not only on policies and procedures but upon a culture capable of truth-telling, lament, accountability, accompaniment, and learning.

Ultimately, the credibility of the Church's response will be measured by the strength of its safeguarding systems, its willingness to hear survivors, acknowledge responsibility, repair relationships, and demonstrate through concrete actions that lessons have been learned. When survivors' voices are placed at the centre, when truth is fully acknowledged, when accountability is embraced, and when reform is pursued with sincerity and determination, the possibility emerges not only for healing and justice, but for the renewal of trust and the restoration of the Church's witness.

The NBSCCCI Conference 2025 offered a compelling vision of that future. It challenged the Church in Ireland to move beyond safeguarding as compliance and towards safeguarding as discipleship; beyond responding to abuse as a crisis of the past and towards embracing it as an ongoing call to conversion.
More than fifteen years after Pope Benedict XVI called on the Church in Ireland to establish the truth, ensure justice, prevent recurrence, and bring healing above all to victims and all those affected, these four imperatives remain both the measure of our progress and the mandate for our future.

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