

Diocesan Safeguarding Day, 2024

Letter from Archbishop Farrell

Sunday, 22 September, is Diocesan Safeguarding Sunday. The theme for this year is: **A Safe and Welcoming Church for Children and Vulnerable Adults**. A *Safe and Welcoming Church* is the name given to the new child safeguarding policy for the Catholic Church in Ireland, which was launched in June of this year. It replaces *Safeguarding Children* which dates back to 2008.

The decision to give the child safeguarding policy of the Catholic Church in Ireland a new title reflects a change in our understanding and approach to safeguarding. We understand that safeguarding is not simply a response to the crisis brought about by disclosures of abuse in the Church but is something deeply rooted in gospel values, scripture and Church teaching. It goes beyond the prevention of harm and consists, as Pope Francis has written, in the creation of the material and spiritual conditions for children's full development. It is fitting, therefore, that we take this opportunity to consider our engagement with children and also with vulnerable adults.

When we hear people reflect on their faith journeys, they frequently recall childhood experiences in their local parishes through involvement with children's choirs, altar servers or other parish activities. Of course, faith formation starts in the home but parents need their parish communities to help them raise their children to know, love and serve God.

It is understandable, given our recent history, that some of us are concerned that our attempts to engage with children will be misunderstood or misconstrued. However, we will not make the world a safer place for children by disengaging from them. Children, young people and vulnerable adults need responsible adults, who have their best interests at heart, to guide and protect them.

A tendency, apparent before COVID, to disengage from activities involving children and young people in many of our parishes accelerated during the pandemic. Parish activities involving children ceased, along with other parish activities. As we got over the period of social isolation, many activities started up again but activities involving children and young people have been slower to resume. This is not the case for every parish but it is true of many. At the same time, there has been a growing awareness that sacramental preparation is a parish responsibility, not simply a school one. Sacramental preparation provides opportunities for evangelisation of parents as well as of children.

So, in this Safeguarding Day of 2024, I ask you to reflect on how you and your fellow parishioners relate to children, young people and vulnerable adults. Is yours a safe and welcoming parish? If the answer is yes, are there further avenues to be explored? Conscious of Pope Francis's call to go to the margins, is there more we can all do to reach out to the most vulnerable in society, adults as well as children, so that they may know the love of God through involvement in his Church?

+ Dermot Farrell