



## OPEN LETTER

FROM H.L. MGR ANTON TEUMA  
BISHOP OF GOZO

2 March 2021  
AE 07/2021

*Beloved in Christ, priests, religious and laypeople,*

During the past weeks, the news of alleged sexual abuse in our Diocese generated feelings of pain, anger, uncertainty and related sentiments in many of us.

1. It does not fall within our sphere to go into the merits of the particular cases. The Courts of Justice should proceed with the due process whereby it is hoped that the facts emerge in their truth. Until this is achieved, personal judgments are at best guesswork and at worst an obstruction of the process of the establishment of the truth.

This notwithstanding, I feel it is my duty, as pastor and father, to reflect upon and discern God's call in this particular situation. In the light of the Paschal Mystery, I am convinced that from this suffering and death God wants to lead us to resurrection and a new life.

2. Most of our priests and religious carry out their ministry with faithfulness and dedication. However, it could be that a few, instead of being true and authentic servants of the Lord in his disciples, end up abusing vulnerable persons. While fully cognizant of the fact that each of us is responsible for one's actions, as a priest and pastor with a wounded heart, I humbly ask for forgiveness from all victims and their families, for any kind of abuse perpetrated within the context of the Church.

3. Together with H.H. Pope Francis, I strongly reiterate that no kind of abuse should be tolerated in society, let alone in the Church! Woe to anyone who causes harm to the little ones (cfr Mt 18:6). I firmly exhort you to file a report with the police immediately if you come to know of any kind of abuse. If the abuse occurs within the context of the Church, or by any member who has any role within the Church, a separate report should be lodged with the Safeguarding Commission.<sup>1</sup> When abuse occurs, silence is not a virtue but becomes a potent weapon in the hands of the abuser.

The process of healing necessitates that justice be served and the perpetrator receives just punishment for the crime. It also requires that the victim be given an appropriate therapy and psychological support. To achieve this aim a helpline connected with the Safeguarding of Minors – Gozo has been launched.<sup>2</sup> Both victims and their families can receive adequate psychological support.

4. The Safeguarding of Minors – Gozo in our Diocese is currently doing a sterling service offering specialised courses and a host of related initiatives targeted to create awareness among the public of this festering wound in society and in the Church. Among other initiatives, a program focusing on the education and formation of minors enabling them to discern potential abusers and take appropriate safeguarding action, is in its final stages of completion.

Every time that news regarding any kind of abuse within the context of the Church emerges, it is understandable that many of you be assailed by disquieting questions such as: “Should I allow my son/daughter to be altar-servers? Should I send them for catechism lessons with a clear conscience? Could I send them for hikes organised by the parish without anything untoward happening to them?”; and many other disturbing questions.

5. I am convinced that in this particular situation God wants us priests, religious and pastoral collaborators to take our ongoing formation with renewed seriousness. These past months the Diocesan Commission for the Clergy has prepared a program of ongoing formation to help us priests to mature on the human, spiritual and pastoral levels. Also, with the help of the Safeguarding of Minors – Gozo, clear policies designed at setting the parents’ minds at rest when they entrust their children in the care of the Church and the particular pastoral operators, are being formulated.

6. God our Saviour wants everyone to be saved (cfr 1 Tim 2:4). While the condemnation of any kind of abuse is crystal clear, it does not relieve us of the duty to show respect to the abuser. This is even more so if one keeps in mind that in most cases the abuser has been himself/herself a victim at some point. I can fully appreciate the anger which rises unbidden towards the abuser guilty of such detestable crimes. We should however keep in mind that while doing our best to minister to the victim of abuse perpetrated in private, we do not create another victim of public and collective abuse. While every abuser is in duty bound to pay for his/her crime, their right to conversion and rehabilitation should be respected and not waived aside. God does not seek the death of the evil-doer but his repentance (cfr Ezech 18:23).

7. Research shows that the victim’s rehabilitation may be better achieved when the abuser not only gets the punishment commensurate to the crime, but also embarks upon a program of conversion and change. If the possibility of rehabilitation of the abuser is denied, it could result in a similar abuse, this time perpetrated on the abuser himself/herself.

8. In such cases, I find myself asking whether the obsession with publicising the sessions of the Court, commonly justified by the ambiguous need for transparency, is in fact benefitting society at large, as well as the victims themselves and their families. In order for truth to be truly liberating (cfr Jn 8:23), also with regard to the victim, it has to be realised with prudence and charity (see Eph 4:15). Would it not be preferable that in such cases, the exclusive authority of the Court in the matter and the obsession of communicating with the public at all costs through the media, be tempered by the experience provided by the psychological

sciences so that the fundamental and inalienable right to integrity of the human person be truly upheld?

9. In conclusion, a word from the heart to you, dear parents. I can only surmise how anxiously you waited for the moment of the birth of your loved ones! How you showered them with love and tenderness particularly during the first weeks of their lives! Please continue to bestow these life-giving sentiments upon them for as long as they live with you under the same roof. Endeavour to cultivate the best of relations with them. Create time and the ambience to favor acceptance without preconditions to secure a long-lasting relationship with them.

10. The evangelical scene featuring Jesus welcoming and blessing the young ones (Mk 10:13-16) is a program for us all – priests, religious and laity. I give you my word that the Church in our Diocese will continue to strive with vigour so that each and every boy and girl in Gozo be ensured the possibility of maturing as human persons and authentic Christians.

God's blessing be upon you all.

✠ **Anton Teuma**  
Bishop of Gozo

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**IMPORTANT CONTACTS**

<sup>1</sup> Interdiocesan Safeguarding Commission, tel. 22470950.

<sup>2</sup> Safeguarding of Minors – Gozo, mob. 79553492.