

Statement by Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance in Ireland on the publication of the NBSCCCI Review of Child Safeguarding in the Irish monasteries of monks

In December 2014, the Abbots and superiors of the Irish Cistercian monasteries invited the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (NBSCCCI) to undertake a joint review of its safeguarding practices, as part of the wider review of safeguarding practice within and across all the Church authorities on the island of Ireland. The purpose of the review was to assess if current safeguarding practice within the Irish monasteries of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance fully complies with the standards set down within the guidance issued by the NBSCCCI in February 2009, and that any known allegations and concerns had been appropriately dealt with.

The Order acknowledges the review outcome as outlined in the report published today entitled ***Review of Safeguarding Practice within the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance in Ireland*** and in accepting its findings in their totality also commits to fully implementing the seven key recommendations made.

The Report notes that reviewers visited four of the five Irish Cistercian communities; at Mount Melleray in Waterford, Mount St Joseph in Tipperary, Mellifont Abbey in Louth and Bethlehem Abbey in Antrim, where a total of 48 child sexual abuse allegations were made against 21 monks since 1975, the most recent of which relates to the early 1990s. 2 monks were subsequently convicted of an offence or offences against a child or young person. 15 monks against whom an allegation has been made, are now deceased.

It is noteworthy that there have never been any allegations made against monks in the fifth Cistercian community at Bolton Abbey in County Kildare. Cistercian College, the boarding school at Mount St Joseph, Roscrea, operates an independent Child Safeguarding policy and was not part of this review.

The Order wishes to take the opportunity today to make a heartfelt and unequivocal apology to all victims of sexual abuse by members of our Order and to plead for their forgiveness for the hurt and distress caused to them by our clear failure to deal with their complaints in a comprehensive or timely manner.

While we may never be able to make absolute reparation to those affected for such a gross violation of their trust, we do make a solemn commitment to take all possible steps to contribute to the healing process for victims, their families and all others affected. We hope there is some consolation for those impacted, in our sincere promise to face up to the sins of the past as well as fully safeguard for the future.

We would also like to appeal to any person who may have experienced abuse in the past and who has not yet come forward, to consider doing so now in the full assurance that their situation will be treated with the highest priority and utmost seriousness and managed in accordance with the law and all appropriate guidelines.

These revelations have also brought a profound sadness into the heart of our monastic communities and a deep sense of betrayal to all those in our Order who lead honest, contemplative lives entirely dedicated to Christ and his workings.

While the Report highlights both gaps and an initial slowness in implementing safeguarding practices, it also acknowledges progress made in recent years in this regard and the Order wishes once again today to restate its commitment to comprehensively address all issues highlighted. The Report acknowledges that the Cistercian communities today are small and that there is very little activity today that brings the monks into

direct contact with children and young people. It also accepts that meeting a key requirement in regard to safeguarding structure is complex because of the manner in which the monasteries are constituted.

Since initiating this Review, the Order has implemented a series of additional measures which we believe will assist in addressing the Report's key recommendations as outlined.

- *All members of the Order who transfer to or from an Irish Cistercian monastery can only do so with a formal declaration from their Abbot or Superior which addresses any safeguarding concerns.*
- *The safeguarding files in all monasteries have been standardised according to the NBSCCCI recommended format.*

At the General Chapter of September 2014, the five monasteries of Cistercian monks in Ireland were encouraged to consider a proposal for a new organisational and governance structure. Discussions on this proposal are ongoing but this will ultimately assist in achieving a centralised safeguarding structure with an agreed reporting mechanism and record management system.

Discussions will continue with NBSCCCI with regard to appropriate vetting mechanisms across the Order in Ireland and on developing a formal transfer process for those moving from monastery to monastery. We are planning a training needs assessment later this year as recommended and to develop a common statement on communicating safeguarding information across all monasteries.

It is also worth noting that many outstanding issues will also be addressed in the new One Church Child Safeguarding Policy which is currently being formulated by the NBSCCCI and this will assist the Order in strengthening its safeguarding practice. The Irish Cistercian monasteries will also report annually on progress to date in implementing these key recommendations and continue to work towards achieving full compliance with current safeguarding practice and guidelines.

Once again, we offer our sincerest apologies to the victims for our very clear failure in managing allegations of sexual abuse by members of our Order.

Those who may have suffered sexual abuse and would like to speak with someone are encouraged to contact one of the services below:

Towards Healing – www.towardshealing.ie

Free phone 1800 303416 (Republic of Ireland) Free phone 0800 0963315 (Northern Ireland)

Towards Peace – www.towardspeace.ie

Phone: 01 5053028 Mobile: 086 7710533 Email: towardspeace@iecon.ie

One-In-Four – www.oneinfour.ie

Phone: 01 6624070, Monday – Friday 9.30 to 5.30pm Email: info@oneinfour.ie

ENDS

Media Queries: Iarla Mongey 087 2356461 iarla.mongey@drurypn.ie