

Disclosure of Abuse and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

The following guidance is issued in accordance with current sacramental practice.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation offers the penitent the seal of absolute confidentiality; in this context alone is the priest bound to keep secret what is disclosed. Knowledge of the information is for the priest, the penitent and God. Where there is involvement of an interpreter, e.g. during the Confession of a deaf person, a duty of complete confidentiality is extended to this person. Information gained in the context of the sacramental confession may not be used in any other forum. Disclosure of an incident of sexual abuse in the context of the sacramental confession is very rare but a priest must know what to do in these circumstances.

Be aware of the policy and procedures in respect of disclosure of abuse by a child or by an adult. Always reassure the person that he or she has acted properly in seeking help from you. **See the national procedures:**

- **Children – management of allegations and concerns**
- **Adults – management of allegations and concerns**
- **Quick Guide – responding to allegations and concerns**

A priest must be clear with the penitent about the status of a conversation and ensure that there is no misunderstanding about whether the Seal of Confession applies.

A victim or survivor of abuse is not guilty of any sin in respect of the abuse suffered. In part, their healing relies on the recognition of this fact. Abusers will often tell their victims that they are to blame and that they will be punished if they tell of the abuse. The priest should help the victim/survivor to place the responsibility where it belongs, i.e. with the offender.

Survivors and victims of abuse will usually need help. From within the context of the sacramental confession the priest can encourage the penitent to seek such help outside the sacrament. They should also be given encouragement to pass on the information to an appropriate person. It is not the priest's role to engage in counselling in the context of the sacramental confession, even if he is appropriately professionally qualified to do so, since this leads to a confusion of roles and might give rise to conflicts of interest for himself and the penitent.

When the nature of the abuse disclosed is criminal, the Penitent should be directed to bring the matter to the attention of the statutory authorities and informed that the diocesan safeguarding coordinator can help in making any necessary contacts.

The confessor should ask for action consistent with a firm purpose of amendment as a constituent part of an assigned penance. The penitent's agreement to act in a way consistent with a firm purpose of amendment provides evidence of a proper disposition for the reception of absolution.

If the priest is subsequently contacted by the penitent, outside of the Seal of the Confessional, the Seal of Confession still applies to what was disclosed in the original Confession. However, the priest

must make it clear to the penitent that the Seal of Confession no longer applies to anything disclosed subsequently outside Confession. Although the priest cannot use any knowledge gained from the original Confession or act on it, he must explain that he has a responsibility to take all reasonable steps to protect children or adults who may be at risk of abuse.

The national reporting requirements in the National Safeguarding Procedures Manual must be followed if an abuser discloses his or her abuse outside the sacramental confession. These are:

- **Children – management of allegations and concerns**
- **Adults – management of allegations and concerns**