

**Sexual Abuse
in the Catholic Church:
Paths to Healing and
Transformation**

A REFLECTION DOCUMENT



A MESSAGE FROM THE PROVINCIAL

Next February 21, Pope Francis will bring together in Rome the presidents of the various episcopal conferences around the world, who will try to respond, collectively and vigorously, to the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. In the meantime, several episcopal conferences, including Canada's, have updated their policies on the prevention of sexual abuse. Our own province policy is also being updated and will be published soon. But the publication and implementation of such a policy is only a partial response to the crisis; a profound ecclesial conversion is needed. In his Letter to the People of God last August, Pope Francis wrote: "every one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need. This change calls for a personal and communal conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does." For many months now, I have believed that the Jesuits of Canada and our colleagues and friends are called to help foster this ecclesial conversion in the communities we serve.

If we are to help foster the climate of change and conversion called for by the Pope, we ourselves must be transformed, so that we too can "see things as the Lord does." In the fall, I invited Gordon Rixon to lead a workshop for the superiors of the various communities of the province. The goal of the workshop was to help the superiors rediscover the resources which our Ignatian and Jesuit tradition provides to help us develop a gospel response to the abuse crisis in the Church. The intention of this reflection document is similar: to help local Jesuit communities and works engage in a process of spiritual conversation that explores some of the causes of this crisis and helps them rediscover some basic tools of Ignatian discernment that can help us choose and implement a gospel response that encourages the ecclesial conversion called for by Pope Francis.

This document was prepared at my request by a small team of writers, to whom I am very grateful. It proposes a three step process: a first time of spiritual conversation that invites participants to share their experiences and feelings regarding abuses in the Church; a time of personal reading and reflection using the text proper; and a second time of spiritual conversation for sharing responses to the text. This three step process might work best over the course of a half-day or day-long gathering, but it could also be spread over a week's time, with an initial gathering for the first spiritual conversation, time at home to read and reflect on the text, and a meeting for the second spiritual conversation. There may be other ways better suited to your situation, but whatever means are chosen, they should be accompanied by communal and personal prayer.

With my prayers for all of us as we begin this process,



Erik Oland, S.J.
Provincial

The first gathering for spiritual conversation

The subject of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is difficult, complex and emotional. The magnitude of the phenomenon and, above all, the intolerable nature of the actions involved also generate anger and great suffering for many of us. Therefore, during this first gathering for spiritual conversation, it is very important to take the time necessary for good listening, without interruption and without judgment. We must avoid addressing the issue only on the intellectual and rational level, being careful on the other hand not to get bogged down in the emotions that such an exchange can cause.

In the first round, we suggest that you invite people to share their experiences or feelings regarding abuses in the Church. All experiences and points of view should be expressed in personal terms and welcomed with respect. The facilitator of the exchange must ensure that the climate is one of listening and that the participants do not react hastily to what they hear. It will be helpful, especially if some of the participants are not familiar with spiritual conversation in the Ignatian tradition, to review its basic principles. In a second round, all the people who want to do so can share what touches them in what they have just heard.

After this first spiritual conversation, which should end with a time of communal prayer, some simple instructions on how to read the text fruitfully should be offered. What is hoped for is a reflective or sapiential reading that takes note not only of the analyses and proposals in the text itself, but also of my own personal responses to them:

- a. As I read, where do I experience a sense of personal connection with, or feelings of agreement with, what the text presents? Where am I pleasantly surprised? Where do I sense new possibilities or a way forward? What do these responses mean to me?
- b. Or I may be listless, bored, unhappy, angry or sad at other points: what is the meaning of this response? Are there unpleasant memories that are being evoked by this passage? Am I being challenged in an unexpected way? Am I experiencing resistance? What else might be happening?
- c. Perhaps you will read and not notice anything going on in you: reflect on that. Have I never thought about this before? What else might be happening?

It will be helpful to keep short marginal notes of these responses next to the passages where they occurred, so that they can be reviewed later.

Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: Paths to Healing and Transformation

Tragedy, moral defect, source of shame, crisis, cancer: these are the terms which are often put forward to describe the crisis of sexual and pedophile abuses in the Catholic Church. Though Catholics certainly do not agree on the causes of the crisis, nevertheless they seem united concerning the urgent need to act and to confront this scandal. Everyone is calling on the Church's leadership to take aggressive measures to overcome it because it renders inaudible – if not insignificant – the call of the Gospel.

For this purpose, Pope Francis has put a certain number of measures in place, primary among them the creation of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. Many Catholics, however, have reproached him for what they perceive to be an inconsistent empathy, as well as a certain slowness in confronting the scandal, for example in the case of Chile. On the other hand, exemplary sanctions have been imposed by the Holy Father on priests and prelates suspected of having committed sexual abuse or of having knowingly closed their eyes to the reprehensible actions of their confreres.

The people of God called forth

Last August 20, in a letter addressed to the whole people of God, the Pope expressed “shame and repentance” over the failure of the Church which “neglected and abandoned the little ones”; faced with the “atrocities” and the “wounds inflicted [that] will never disappear,” at the hands of “consecrated persons, members of the clergy, but also all those who have the responsibility to look after the most vulnerable and to protect them.” These collective wounds require a collective response, “a conversion in the way the Church acts” that will not be possible “without the active participation of all members of the people of God.” “Saying no to abuse,” Francis adds, “is saying no categorically to all forms of clericalism,” one of the principle causes for him of the “culture of abuse” that has developed within the Church.



Lino, *L'âge de la révolte*, 2011, acrylic and collage on paper

Clericalism. The Pope has referred to the “evil of clericalism” on multiple occasions. We catch a first glimpse of what he means in a homily at Santa Marta on December 13, 2016, where he said: “There is that spirit of clericalism in the Church, that we feel: clerics feel superior; they distance themselves from the people. They say ‘this should be done like this, like this, like this, and you — go away!’” He goes into greater detail in the Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*, where he writes: “Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God. The minority – ordained ministers – are at their service. There has been a growing awareness of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church.... A clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism *which keeps them away from decision-making.*”

Last year, during his meeting with the episcopate of Chile on January 16, 2018, the Pope gave a clear account of the consequences of such clericalism:

The lack of consciousness of belonging to God’s faithful people as servants, and not masters, can lead us to one of the temptations that is most damaging to the missionary outreach that we are called to promote: clericalism, which ends up as a caricature of the vocation we have received. A failure to realize that the mission belongs to the entire Church, and not to the individual priest or bishop, limits the horizon, and even worse, stifles all the initiatives that the Spirit may be awakening in our midst. Let us be clear about this. The laypersons are not our peons, or our employees.... Clericalism forgets that the visibility and the sacramentality of the Church belong to all the faithful people of God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 9-14), not only to the few chosen and enlightened.

Clericalism, then, as it is presented by the Pope, is a distortion of the relationship between the ordained and non-ordained members of Christ’s Body. It conceives of that relation as a form of power over the baptized faithful. We can understand the Pope’s analysis better with the help of some basic principles of Ignatian communal discernment. A group (a local parish, a small prayer group, a religious community, and so on) is healthy when it is living out of a dynamic equilibrium between its mission or task and the relationships that bind group members together. Too much emphasis on task at the expense of relation, and the group fragments; too much emphasis on caring for relationships at the expense of mission, and the group stagnates and dies. When a group lives out of this dynamic equilibrium, power – the group’s capacity to act and have an effect on the world – is generated from the free commitment of the members of the group to accomplishing the mission together. Power resides, then, not in an individual, but in the group. The task of leadership is to motivate and direct the free commitment of group members so as to empower the group to act.

As Pope Francis points out in his address to the bishops of Chile, the mission of the Church belongs to all the faithful people of God by virtue of their baptism. Church leadership is a service intended to call forth the free commitment of the baptized to this mission through preaching, sacramental ministry and governance. Clericalism, rather than motivating and empowering this free commitment, usurps the vocation of the faithful to speak and to act as members of the Body of Christ. As a result, over time the faithful themselves become passive and leave mission to a select few; in this way clericalism is not merely a disorder of the clergy, but of the whole Church community. It sets the conditions for a cult of authority that makes widespread sexual abuse possible.

The recent scandals have proven the Holy Father right. The report of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury revealed the extent of the pedophile assaults committed by the priests and religious in the Catholic dioceses of that American state. The allegations against former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick have revealed, according to them, the sexual abuses committed by the Archbishop Emeritus of Washington – relieved of his ecclesial duties – against seminarians of his diocese. Add to that the allegations of sexual abuses committed by priests and bishops against nuns in Africa for decades. Three very different issues but with one common denominator: behind these sexual abuses and the subsequent decisions to cover them up we find the abuse of power. All of this leads to spiritual abuses and predatory attitudes toward subordinates and protégés, and to an impenetrable code of silence, where the victims do not dare denounce those who were seen as men of God.

In Canada, sexual and pedophile abuses have also very often been marked by colonialism, with many being committed against Indigenous children by priests and religious of Euro-Canadian backgrounds. Here we think of the painful testimonies of the victims during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but also, more recently, of the scandals revealed during the hearings of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

A Patriarchal Mentality. This culture of clericalism has been supported and reinforced by what can be termed a patriarchal mentality, or what is often called patriarchy. Every culture exists as an organic and evolving set of meanings and values that allow members of that culture to discover and craft a meaningful direction for their lives, to establish and perpetuate a common way of life, to collaborate on common endeavours, and to provide meaningful foundations for social institutions. These sets of meanings and values are not merely ideas; they are symbolic and social structures that often influence us and orient us in the world. In many cultures specific sets of meanings and values cluster around more primordial symbols like immanence and transcendence, nature and culture, male and female.

In the case of patriarchy as a social and cultural force, certain of these structures create and reproduce patterns that place men in a position of power. As a result, there is a privileging of men, and a devaluation of women. Put bluntly, a woman is worth less, her word is worth less, and justice served on her behalf is less important. In such a setting, organizations that adhere strongly to “masculine” values have a tendency to make light of incidents of abuse that flow from them: we can consider here recent scandals that have tarnished the reputation of the Canadian Armed Forces, the RCMP, and amateur and professional sports. Where the leadership of such organizations is predominantly masculine, the patriarchal mentality is often reinforced.

The work of American psychiatrist Thomas Plante has shown that the occurrence of sexual and pedophile abuses is no higher among members of the clergy than among the general male population. Nevertheless, there is a clear need for us as a Church to address not only clericalism, but also those elements of a patriarchal mentality that have supported a culture of abuse.

Since, in the context of a patriarchal mentality, clericalism also expresses itself as the marginalization of women and their experience in our common life, reforms that restore a voice to women in decision-making at every level of ecclesial structure are also urgently needed. Significant shifts have already occurred: the number of women in ministry has grown exponentially in virtually all parts of the world; seminarians, at least in Western cultures, often study with these women as their peers; women are taking on administrative roles in diocesan tribunals and offices, in seminaries and in conferences of bishops. More is needed, as could be seen from the controversies surrounding the inclusion of women in the Synod on Young People last fall. Including the contribution and insights of women in those cultural systems that inform the common life of the Church will contribute significantly to breaking the patriarchal mentality that reinforces clericalism.

Institutional self-preservation and insensitivity to the suffering of the victims. One of the most important consequences of the spirit of clericalism, according to the Pope in the passages we quoted above, is the loss of a sense of mission. Not only does clericalism not recognize that mission belongs to the whole People of God, but it replaces the call to mission with a vocation to institutional self-preservation: “Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.” (*The Joy of the Gospel*)

The concern for institutional self-preservation has marked the response to sexual and pedophile abuse. When clergy or church leaders perceive themselves to be “set above,” a temptation to “keep things in the family” is difficult to resist. The possibility of scandal seems, in such circumstances, the greatest evil to avoid. And so a culture of secrecy develops to protect offenders and those responsible for them. In early stages, moving offending priests to new locations, refusing to cooperate with police and judicial authorities, distrust of the media and the courts, recourse (often abusive) to the statute of limitations and to canonical procedures were the usual characteristics of institutional self-preservation and the resulting culture of silence. Later on, even as offending clergy were sent to treatment and eventually relieved of duties entirely, dioceses and religious communities heeded the advice of corporate lawyers to try to fight allegations in the courts, and undertake long, drawn-out judicial procedures against their insurance companies over responsibility for compensation, and saw the need for “discretion” as paramount “for the sake of all concerned” and “to avoid scandal”, instead of placing victims at the centre of their concerns.

This has resulted in a stain on the reputation of the Church, which seemed to be more concerned with preserving its funds and its reputation, than with listening to the distress of the victims.

Conversion and renewed gospel action

Pope Francis has, on many occasions, emphasized the importance of beginning any process of renewal and reform by rooting ourselves, personally and communally, in Christ. The Spiritual Exercises and the Jesuit Constitutions provide resources to develop a gospel response to the abuse crisis that fosters the ecclesial conversion we seek for ourselves and others.

God is always already labouring for our salvation. At every turn, the Spiritual Exercises lead us to experience the fundamental truth that God is already labouring for our good, long before we become aware of it. Whether it is the First Week discovery that we have been preserved from the consequences of our sin by God's love in Christ, or the rediscovery in the *Contemplatio* of the Fourth Week that God has always behaved towards us as a Lover towards his or her Beloved, showing us love in deeds more than words, the Exercises confront us with the simple truth that God takes the initiative in the labour of salvation, healing and reconciliation.

The Preamble to the Jesuit Constitutions takes up this same truth in its communal dimension: "God our Creator and Lord is the one who in his Supreme Wisdom and Goodness must *preserve, direct, and carry forward* in his divine service this least Society of Jesus, just as he deigned to begin it; ...on our own part what helps most toward this end must be, more than any exterior constitution, the *interior law of charity* and love which *the Holy Spirit writes and imprints upon hearts.*" It is God who gathers and gives us the means to come together; the first Companions knew themselves to be gathered together from among warring peoples by God's reconciling love.

Taking seriously the experience of God's constant initiative in reconciling and gathering God's people implies a significant shift in our way of "reading the signs of the times" in the midst of the abuse crisis. If we immerse ourselves personally and communally in this truth, allowing ourselves to re-appropriate it existentially, then we will realize that the shame and confusion, the pain and institutional paralysis cannot be the last word on the crisis. We will begin to look, in the various responses to the crisis of abuse, both within and outside of the Church's institutional and communal limits, for signs of the typical patterns of God's reconciling and justice-making labours. We will be enabled and led to welcome such initiatives and collaborate with them.

But even more, our perception of the crisis itself could be transformed: we could begin to hear in the voices of the victims of abuse the call of Christ to be purified of the corporate sin that has entrapped us all. We will remember that the holiness of the Church is not an already-achieved static perfection, but rather a constant process of conversion and reform initiated by the Holy Spirit already at work in our midst. God's initiative always invites our collaboration. What follows are some elements of this collaboration.

Committing to an authentic process of reconciliation. As a traumatic, painful yet necessary experience, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the occasion for a collective awareness of the structural sins and the systemic racism of which the Canadian State and the main Christian Churches were guilty during the 19th and 20th Centuries. The commission of inquiry into the pedophile assaults committed at the Mount Cashel Orphanage in Newfoundland had had a similar effect in the 1990s. They have contributed to the process of breaking down the culture of silence and of institutional self-preservation, and have proved the value of transparency in matters of clerical sexual abuse. The culture of transparency in response to abuse is still somewhat inconsistently developed, and needs to become more firmly rooted by such means as independent external audits of institutional records.

Over and above the judicial procedures, there is the issue of sincere and authentic reconciliation with the victims. This supposes that the Church and the assembly of the baptized give themselves to a difficult exercise of humility and introspection. Our theology invites us in fact never to ignore the suffering of men and women whose human dignity has been shattered by members of our Church, often with the active complicity of their families and their faith communities, who did not want to hear and accept their distress. These families and communities also contributed, in one way or another, to the conspiracy of silence. This wounded ecclesial body must necessarily be bandaged and healed.

“If one member suffers, all members suffer with him.” With this verse from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians Pope Francis opens his letter to the people of God. Perhaps that is the beginning of an authentic process of reparation between offenders and victims. Recently, various voices have made themselves heard in an effort to invite the Church to get involved in a process of restorative justice with the victims of sexual abuse. “You cannot speak of mercy to victims of sexual abuse without proposing measures of reparation!” said the President of the French Association of Restorative Justice, Stéphane Jacquot, in November 2018. He then invited all of the French Catholic dioceses to set up a commission of restorative justice so that the suffering of victims could be heard and the moral bankruptcy of the Church that was supposed to protect them could be revealed in all its ugliness. “The more we understand the truth, the more we feel the wound of that which, in the life of our Church, has been in contradiction to the message of the Gospel, the more we will find healing,” he said.

This implies a demanding exercise in humility: we must make an act of contrition, ask for pardon, and commit to a process of reparation toward the victims of abuse. It is not enough just to ask for forgiveness; the Church has to commit to an authentic process of reparation as a *sine qua non* condition for rebuilding a bond of trust, both among the people of God and between the Church and the world. All the more so now that Christians are called to radiate the joy of the Gospel to the men and women of our time, especially those on the frontiers. Now, for the Gospel message to be heard, the messenger has to be seen again as credible, that is to say, *worthy of faith and trust*. Ignatian persons recognize and embrace this demanding challenge as a call to live the Standard of Christ and the Third Degree of Humility that chooses solidarity with victims because that is where Christ chooses to be.

The ecclesial community will have to begin sincerely and actively to listen to the victims of abuse. The anger and the suffering necessarily must be heard, first because they are a reflection of the structural sins, which the Church must urgently face, then, and above all, because listening is a tool for transforming our pastoral and ecclesial actions. Listening is about making ourselves available to the suffering of others, about entering into a process of responsibility and of solidarity leading ultimately to a conversion and a transformation of structures, of behaviours, and of attitudes that made the abuse possible and refused to acknowledge the suffering and distress of victims.

The equality of all the baptized. Furthermore, the crisis of the abuse scandals can be the occasion for an in-depth reform of our way of doing things in the Church. This begins with a return to the ideas of co-responsibility for mission in the Church and of the equality of all the baptized put forward by Vatican II – ideas that as yet have not been fully implemented and have not fully realized their prophetic potential.

“Baptism establishes a fundamental principle of equality among all the baptized, that outweighs everything else,” affirmed the Jesuit theologian Christoph Theobald last August in an interview with the French daily *La Croix*. Quoting at length from the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council, he pleaded also in favour of a return to the “inverted hierarchy” experienced by Jesus, as a way out of the clericalism that Pope Francis depicts as a perversion of the very mission of the Church and even more so of ecclesial leadership. In his eyes, to lead means first to serve. “The greatest distinction that we can receive, the greatest promotion that we can be accorded is to serve Christ in the faithful people of God, in the hungry, the forgotten, the prisoner, the sick, the addicted, the abandoned, in individual persons with their histories and their hopes, with their expectations and their disillusionments, with their suffering and their wounds,” he said to the new Cardinals on June 28, 2018. This takes up the elements of Ignatian leadership in discerning communities that we have already discussed.

Include the laity in decision-making. In the last few months, several prelates have publicly asked for forgiveness for the moral failure of the Church and even more of the bishops, who did not know how to prevent these abuses, nor protect the victims, nor how to hear their suffering. Taking note of the failure of the church hierarchy, several prelates and churchmen are inviting the church hierarchy to “share power in an effective way, ask [for] the advice of lay experts and follow their recommendations, and put in place some checks and balances in church governance,” the Jesuit Hans Zollner shared with *America Magazine* in September 2018.

Promote a mature, adult faith. Is not the best antidote to clericalism the development of a mature and adult faith among all the baptized? Clericalism and the cult of authority are enabled by a corresponding timidity among the non-ordained people of God. This timidity is often rooted in an arrested faith development. Faith formation too easily comes to an end after confirmation has been received. Faith formation programs that encourage young adults to move beyond early adolescent forms of faith as conformity to rules, and to take responsibility for a personal and living relationship with Christ, have been successful in helping the people of God become autonomous and responsible members of the Church who can discern their own moral choices and contribute to community life. Such adult autonomy in the faith enables the non-ordained faithful to engage priests and bishops on a more equal footing, and enables them to voice their needs and those of the mission more clearly. Again, the Spiritual Exercises provide us with a plethora of tools that promote a mature and autonomous faith life; Ignatian and Jesuit works and communities are uniquely positioned to accompany others in the Church by means of these tools.

A process that will take time

As we bring this document to a close, the one dimension of our response that ought to be highlighted is that this will be a *long* process of discernment, repentance, humility, and painful listening and speaking. When the problems are as deep and longstanding as those we have identified, in the very marrow of our culture and our way of seeing, ecclesial conversion will take a long time. This fact is implicit in our ongoing experience with the Truth and Reconciliation process. This realization is not meant in a discouraging way, but just in a way that helps us move forward with both intention and patience. Francis of Assisi, according to Saint Bonaventure, was fond of saying, at the end of his life, “Brothers, let us begin again, for up to now we have done little or nothing.” This is, perhaps, typical Franciscan overstatement, but there is something right about the idea of beginning again each day, of continuing to begin again. This is very likely what it will take for us to really undergo the transformation we need.

We want to continue every day to choose and implement a gospel response to the abuse crisis as an Ignatian community labouring in Canada. Beyond the limited examples just presented, what other means can we find to promote a genuine ecclesial conversion amongst ourselves and around us?

QUESTIONS for further reflection:

Beyond individual cases, the crisis experienced within the ecclesial institution has brought to light the structural issues (sins) of our way of functioning as a Church. In our own setting, do we find evidence of clericalism, a patriarchal mentality and institutional self-preservation? How do these present themselves? Again in our own setting, is there evidence that we are breaking free of these issues?



Are we ready to hear the suffering of the victims of abuse? Are we ready to help alleviate this suffering by ensuring that justice is done and by ensuring that our Church does not shirk its responsibilities?



What are we doing, in our community or in our works, to recognize and promote the mature faith of all, as well as the development of critical thinking and personal autonomy in the Church? What practices have we put in place that foster more egalitarian relations (M / F, priests / laity) among us?

SUGGESTED READINGS

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<https://www.la-croix.com/Debats/Forum-et-debats/Vous-pouvez-pas-parler-misericorde-victimes-dabus-sans-proposer-mesures-reparation-2018-11-15-1200983280>

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<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/do-the-right-thing/201808/separating-facts-about-clergy-abuse-fiction>

Thomas Rosica, CSB, « We can only move forward when we name the evil of clericalism », *National Catholic Reporter*, August 23, 2018

<https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/we-can-only-move-forward-when-we-name-evil-clericalism>

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<https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Catholicisme/Lecoute-lexperience-feminine-manque-lEglise-2018-10-24-1200978249>

The second gathering for spiritual conversation

During the second gathering for spiritual conversation, it remains important to take the time necessary for good listening, without interruption and without judgment. We must avoid addressing the issue only on the intellectual and rational level, being careful on the other hand not to get bogged down in the emotions that such an exchange can cause.

In the first round, we suggest that you invite people to share the most significant responses and insights they experienced while reading the text. All experiences and points of view should be expressed in personal terms and welcomed with respect. The facilitator of the exchange must ensure that the climate is one of listening and that the participants do not react hastily to what they hear. It will be helpful, especially if some of the participants are not familiar with spiritual conversation in the Ignatian tradition, to review its basic principles. In a second round, all the people who want to do so can share what touches them in what they have just heard.

If the facilitator discerns that elements have emerged that can be helpful for moving forward as a community or as an apostolate, he or she can make note of them and share them with the relevant persons. The provincial also welcomes any insights, suggestions, and proposals that can help us move forward as a province in articulating a gospel response to the abuse crisis in Canada, in service to the Church.