

From Safe Environments to Faith Environments: Furthering the Gospel Message of Christ

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In his last formal address to the Victim Assistance Ministry Conference as chair of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for Protection of Children and Youth, Archbishop Gregory Aymond of New Orleans called for a paradigm shift – “from Safe Environments to Faith Environments.” A key point of his address was clear: Our efforts to right the wrong of sexual abuse and to protect the life and dignity of our children are not just about safety, but about our faith. All that we do as Church to respond to those suffering the pain of abuse; to protect children and youth; and to promote right relationships models the Gospel message of Christ.

Not our Compliance, but our Calling

Often when we hear about the efforts of the Church in regard to sexual abuse, we hear about the importance of compliance with the USCCB *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. From a faith environment perspective, the importance is not in our compliance, but in our calling. As Catholics we are called to respect the life and dignity of every human person from conception to natural death. The *Charter* guides us in action to our calling. Our calling furthers the Gospel message of Christ.

Not Retribution, but Reverence

When we are bogged down with the requirements of a safe environment program or when we linger on the costs of healing and prevention efforts, we may be tempted to say, “That’s not my problem, I didn’t cause the abuse.” From a faith perspective however, this is a matter of looking out for the need of others – their healing, safety, support and respect. As Christ said, “Whatever you do for the least of my brothers you do for me.”

Not Managing Risk, but Modeling Right Relationships

Safe environment programs are more than “risk management,” focusing on the actions to reduce the risk of abuse, to reduce further damage to our children and our Church. They involve modeling Christ, creating for children the kind of loving relationships that Christ teaches about in His gospel message. Every protective message to children, from noting their unique and special creation, their dignity as a person, and true meaning of love in relationships furthers the Gospel message of Christ.

Not merely Programs, Policies, and Procedures, but Who and How We Are

As we move from the concept of safe environments to that of faith environments we realize that our efforts are more than a program with requirements to be checked off on a list. Healing those who have been harmed, preventing abuse, and modeling right relationships must be an inherent part of *who and how we are with children*.

Matthew 18: 4-5 NAB, “And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”