

# Child Sexual Abuse: It's My Responsibility, and It's Yours, Too

By [Crispin Ketelhut Montelione](#)

**"It is better that scandals arise than the truth be suppressed."** —Pope St. Gregory the Great



Shock. Anger. Disgust. Outrage. Contempt. Frustration. Betrayal. Shame. Fear. Pain. Sorrow. Numbness.

If you're like me, you're feeling one, several—or all of these emotions after learning about more recent bishop allegations, information published in grand jury reports and ongoing scandals involving abusers and the Catholic Church. *These reactions are the appropriate emotions to*

*injustice.* The sexual abuse by clergy that we have learned about over the years is unjust. It is wrong. One victim of child sexual abuse is far too many. One victim of child sexual abuse on behalf of someone representing God or the Church is even more egregious, and a serious violation of trust. Victims who continued to be abused because of severely poor leadership is deplorable.

This is clearly [complex](#), as [addressed](#) by the John Jay Studies. Admittedly, it can feel as if there isn't hope—especially with the knowledge that this isn't the first time that we've been reeling from sexual abuse within the Church, and understanding that it likely won't be the last. I've been listening to a variety of solutions and comments made by well-meaning people over the last several weeks (actually, years). Many have been adamant in saying that the fault of abuse falls squarely upon the shoulders of the abusers, and that we, as the laity, are not part of the problem. Of course, there is truth to this statement as the fault of abuse absolutely lies with an abuser, and also the people who directly or indirectly allowed the abuser to abuse. Additionally, in my experience of working in this field of child protection, there are sometimes people who don't do the right thing when faced with suspicions of abuse for a variety of reasons. There are also people I encounter in calls, comments, emails and responses, who make it clear they believe they aren't even a small part of the problem—and yet, if we are honest, they are, because they aren't open to being a part of the solution.

People in leadership, by the very nature of their leadership positions, clearly have the main responsibility for the welfare of the lambs in their flocks. Good leadership accepts

responsibility and leads others by appropriate actions and proper behavior. There's no doubt about it, Church leadership must be held accountable, as do the Bishops and Church leaders. But, in a smaller, more particular way, it's also my unique responsibility to contribute to the safety of children—it's yours, too. We are *all* called to protect the children in our care. We are all required morally, regardless of our role within the Church, or our jobs or even our "parental" status, to protect the vulnerable around us. Please recognize that this article is NOT saying that we, as the laity, must carry the entire responsibility of protecting children. Of course not! Rather, we have a unique ability to provide care and a safe haven for them that is incredibly needed.

As the laity, we have tremendous power! I am greatly encouraged by the immense effort on behalf of caring adults—all of you—who work diligently to "do the right thing." It is at this level that we will protect the most amount of children, all of us working together.

Protocols for safe environments in the Church in the United States exist and are protecting the vulnerable, this was admitted and addressed in the latest grand jury report for Pennsylvania. This being said, there is *always* room for improvement. Many of these practices became more publicized per the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which was a result of the abuse cases uncovered by the Boston Globe in 2002 and illustrated by the movie *Spotlight*. While the VIRTUS® Programs were already in place prior to this timeframe, per the 2002 Charter (of which you can read more about [here](#)), each diocese must have safe environment training programs and protocols to protect children and adults.

So now what? How can we use the energy of our emotions and reactions to drive us to do something constructive when so many of us are reeling? St. Augustine of Hippo said, *"Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain as they are."* It takes courage for all of us to become protectors who are looking out for the safety of children and their best interests. You are already a part of this effort—but there are some people in your cohort who probably need additional help with this. There's no one-size-fits-all solution to address the issue of child sexual abuse in the Church (and we certainly don't have space to enumerate them all here), but there are a variety of practical actions that each of us can do to help from a person-to-person perspective.

- **Invite a friend.** If you have a friend who is struggling with knowing what to do about the issue, share the facts and tangible action items that you learned in your awareness session. If your friend is complaining about having to attend in the first place, help them to know the value of such a training.
- **Inventory your behavior, and ensure that you know what the safe environment procedures are for your program.** Your behavior should be above reproach for two reasons—so that potential abusers can't blend in, and so that children aren't conditioned to inappropriate behavior. Also, take a closer look at the code of conduct and procedures within your specific program at your individual parish and school, and ensure they're in line with

the arch/diocesan policy. If they aren't appropriate, raise the issue with someone who can address them. You could also apply this action to non-church affiliated environments, too.

- **Implement safe environment procedures consistently.** We are committed to creating safer environments to both proactively prevent abuse from happening in the first place, and when that isn't possible, to respond appropriately to address abuse if it is occurring. In our PGC training, we learn how to have a healthy awareness of abuse, risky behavior, proper control access procedures, warning signs and how to have courage to report what we see when something is of concern. From our perspective, we constantly profess that if you are only doing one of the steps of the PGC program, it will likely be ineffective—all need to be working simultaneously, in conjunction with one another. Where there is a hole, something is going to "fall through the crack."
- **Express compassion for victims.** They have likely experienced people attempting to discredit their experience, who have treated them with hostility and disbelief, and who have ostracized them during an extremely vulnerable time. Sharing about sexual abuse takes a tremendous amount of courage. Even if the abuse happened long ago, it can have long-lasting effects on survivors that can endure for many years.
- **Be a trusted adult.** Let children know that when it comes to their safety, you will protect them and they won't get into trouble with you. If you have the privilege of being a child's trusted adult and they disclose abuse to you, do the right thing!
- **Speak up!** If you see something contrary to the code of conduct, or that makes you feel uncomfortable, or that's inappropriate, speak up! Talk to a supervisor about it. More importantly, if you suspect or know of any type of abuse, you must call the [child protective services in your state](#). If your suspicion involves a member of the clergy or an employee/volunteer in the church or school, the next communication is to your arch/diocese so that they can remove the person from public ministry if necessary while the investigation is conducted.

I know the topic is hard to discuss, and challenging to hear. However, we believe that when our VIRTUS training is done well and the action items are implemented by caring adults such as you, it makes a tremendous difference for the protection of children.

These types of scenarios are going to continue to come to light. And, as painful as they are for us and especially for survivors, the revelation of abuse is a good thing. It

means we get to root out the issues (and people) and [\*cull the wheat from the chaff\*](#), allowing us to modify and solidify our procedures, policies, screening practices, monitoring and general checks and balances so that we can aid in the delivery of the gospel of the Immaculate Church that Christ put on this earth.

Thank you for all that you're doing to protect children in the environment of the Church, and in other environments as well—especially those environments that aren't as highly scrutinized. Take courage and stay the course! There is hope! You are forming this moment in Church history and will be remembered for your empathy for victims and your commitment to keep youth safe while on your "watch."