Guidelines for the protection of minors and vulnerable adults



Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus

« If one member suffers, all suffer together with it" (*1 Cor* 12:26). These words of Saint Paul forcefully echo in my heart as I acknowledge once more the suffering endured by many minors due to sexual abuse, the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clerics and consecrated persons. Crimes that inflict deep wounds of pain and powerlessness, primarily among the victims, but also in their family members and in the larger community of believers and nonbelievers alike. Looking back to the past, no effort to beg pardon and to seek to repair the harm done will ever be sufficient. Looking ahead to the future, no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening, but also to prevent the possibility of their being covered up and perpetuated. The pain of the victims and their families is also our pain, and so it is urgent that we once more reaffirm our commitment to ensure the protection of minors and of vulnerable adults.

(Pope Francis,
Letter to the People of God, 20th August 2018)

The Metaphor of the House

In almost every culture, a house represents an intimate place where people weave deep relationships and bonds of trust that endure over time. It is a place that must be protected and cared for. We considered it appropriate to use this metaphor of the house in drafting these Guidelines, as it helps illustrate the structure of the document.

The Gospel of John says: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (*Jn* 1:14). The presence of God in Jesus Christ became a home: God made His dwelling among us.

In first-century Christianity, the house is the place where new life originates: the Gospel is proclaimed, the community is formed, and the fullness of baptism is embraced. It is the place where Christian life is born and where the message of the Gospel is witnessed through signs of sharing, hospitality, and mutual service. The house, therefore, is a place of prayer, spirituality, and evangelization.

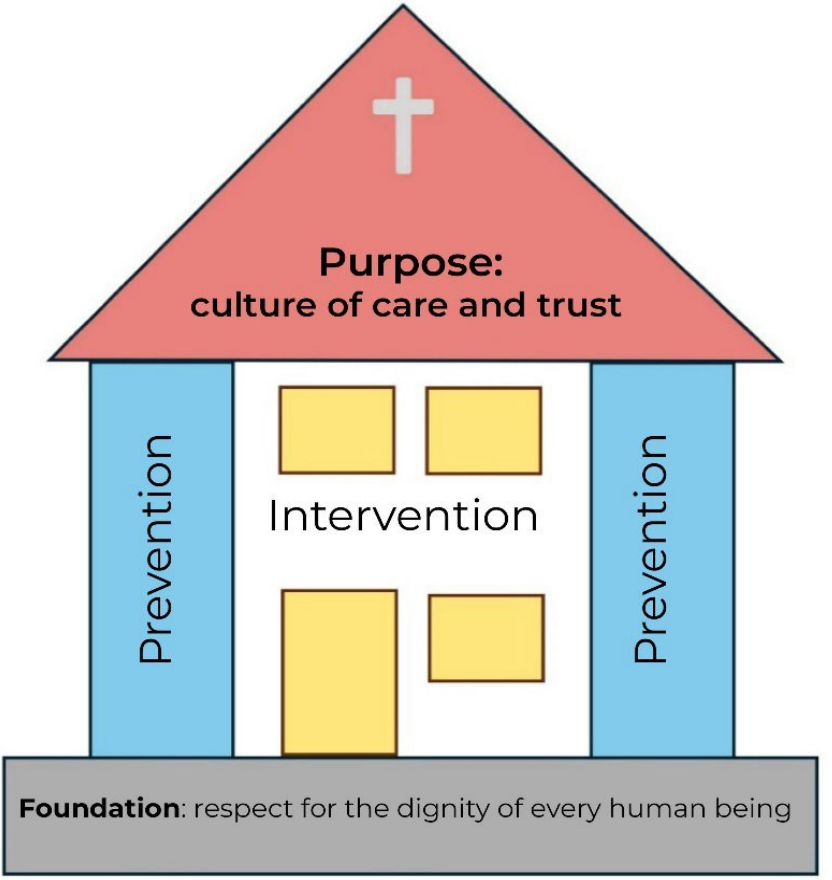
The individual parts of a house, taken together, create a safe environment in which all people—especially minors and vulnerable adults—can live protected. Since we are a religious and missionary Institute, **the Cross of Jesus Christ** stands on the façade of this house. Likewise, this document concludes with a **prayer**.

Th**e foundations** of a building provide the supporting base for a stable, safe, and lasting structure. We are convinced that the dignity of every human person—based on being created in the image and likeness of God (*Gen* 1:27), and therefore to be respected and protected—constitutes one of the **guiding principles** (I) of our document.

The measures and procedures of these Guidelines aim to establish and maintain an environment that is respectful of and attentive to the rights and needs of minors and vulnerable adults. The roof holds together the various elements that form the house, but to protect its "inhabitants" adequately, it must be maintained or even renewed; in the

same way, our document is not a 'finished' work, but should be integrated into a process of continuous development in order to foster an ever-deeper **culture of care and trust**.

Just as **load-bearing walls** support a building, **prevention (II), protection (III)**, and participation ensure that the entire 'house' is strengthened and remains stable. The more participation there is, the more stable the house becomes. Prevention is also a load-bearing wall in the safeguarding of minors and vulnerable adults, as it aims to minimize risks and to make the very structure a safe place. Therefore, it is not only a protective measure but also includes the creation of a culture of formation that makes us



aware of the forms of violence and the risk factors present within a community setting.

Various people enter a house through its **door.** It is important to ask: who is entering? A **window** offers the possibility of letting in fresh air and gaining new perspectives. Through regular formation and ongoing training, the inhabitants become more aware of how to address forms of violence and how to receive new knowledge, for example in the area of digital violence.

Naturally, clear structures and procedures must be established for dealing with acts and suspicions of abuse in all its forms. **With reporting and case management (IV)**, everyone has the possibility to present complaints or notifications.

To ensure certainty and clarity in handling a suspected case, clear procedures and appropriate plans may be implemented in accordance with the Guidelines outlined in the following pages. In drafting this text, we have drawn inspiration from various documents, which are listed at the end of this work.

PREAMBLE

Since our Institute already has a *Code of Conduct (CC)*, these *Guidelines for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Adults* are not merely a legal requirement that imposes an organizational safeguarding model, but are intended to be a true instrument of reflection and formation — a shared path within the Congregation of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus to protect minors and persons in situations of vulnerability. We are aware that this journey of growth in awareness and attention to these realities remains always incomplete and continually challenges us on both a personal and institutional level.

From its beginnings, the Institute of the Comboni Missionaries has promoted the care of the poorest and most abandoned through pastoral, educational, and charitable works. In the context of the fight against abuse, the Institute has always committed itself to promoting appropriate procedures. With this document, therefore, the Institute wishes to comply with what the Holy Father has requested, in order to ensure the highest possible level of protection for minors and vulnerable adults. The Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* defines the purpose of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, whose task is to "develop appropriate strategies and procedures, through Guidelines, to protect minors and vulnerable persons from sexual abuse, and to provide an adequate response to such misconduct by clergy and members of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, according to canonical norms and taking into account the requirements of civil law" (Pope Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, Art. 78 §§ 1–2).

This document is based, first of all, on the need to express our firm commitment to building safe and preventive environments, acting as much as possible on the causes that generate situations of abuse; secondly, we wish to highlight the guiding principles that St. Daniel Comboni handed down to us from the beginning of his missionary work in the Church: these principles will help us to live our missionary vocation today with ever greater coherence.

I) GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Christian Vision of the human person

At the foundation of these *Guidelines* — almost like the base of a house — lies the Christian vision of the human person. As a religious and missionary congregation, we are committed to living the Gospel and its values. We are convinced that the dignity of every human person is rooted in being created in the image and likeness of God (*Gen* 1:27) and must therefore be respected, safeguarded, and preserved. We actively commit ourselves to contributing to the holistic development of people and to building an ever more humane society. We show respect, appreciation, and trust toward the people we meet and/or with whom we work. Any form of abuse represents a grave offense against the dignity of those who suffer it.

Saint Daniel Comboni invites us to be examples of radiant virtue and holiness, bearing concrete witness to the Gospel among the poorest and most abandoned. Our lives will have no meaning unless they are deeply rooted in Christ, as the branch is united to the vine. For the missionary who desires to make of his life a total offering, it is essential to remain united to the person of Jesus, the one true vine. We are therefore called, in our mission, to be witnesses of the 'style of God', remaining in Christ as the point of departure and arrival of the mission: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (*Jn* 15:5; *CC* 18).

2. Culture of respect and trust

Saint Daniel Comboni desired missionaries who were "holy and capable". Today the Church invites us to strengthen the protection and care of minors and vulnerable persons as an integral part of the Gospel message: "A continuous and profound conversion of hearts is needed, attested by concrete and effective actions involving everyone in the Church, so that personal holiness and moral commitment may help promote the full credibility of the Gospel proclamation and the effectiveness of the Church's mission" (Apostolic Letter issued *motu proprio* by the Supreme Pontiff Francis, *Vos estis lux mundi – VELM,* Introduction).

The measures and procedures contained in these directives aim to help establish and maintain an environment that is respectful of and attentive to the rights and needs of minors and vulnerable adults (cf. *VELM*, art. 1 §1, a), in order to avoid risks of exploitation, abuse of any kind, and mistreatment in activities carried out within the Institute and in the apostolic and pastoral works entrusted to the individual circumscriptions and each member. These indications are addressed to all confreres, particularly to those who exercise authority. The directives concern the relationship of the members of the Institute with all persons who require special protection and respect, namely:

a) *"minor":* a person under eighteen years of age;
b) *"a person who habitually lacks the use of reason":* someone for whom this condition is certified by an appropriate psychiatric evaluation or who is legally subject to a guardian;
c) *"vulnerable adult":* a person who is infirm, differently abled, or deprived of personal liberty — all factors that, in fact, limit even occasionally the person's ability to understand or to consent, or in any case to resist harm.

3. Purpose of the document

These *Guidelines* of our Comboni Institute represent a concrete expression of our commitment to the care and safeguarding of the most vulnerable. Some of the objectives we aim to achieve are:

- to promote awareness of and respect for the rights and needs of minors and vulnerable persons, and to provide appropriate training for their protection;
- to prevent any form of violence: physical, psychological, or spiritual abuse, neglect, abandonment, mistreatment, or exploitation;
- to raise awareness of the obligation to report abuse to the competent authorities and to cooperate with them in prevention activities;
- to pursue every act of abuse or mistreatment against minors and vulnerable persons;
- to provide victims and their families with adequate pastoral care, as well as, if necessary, appropriate medical, psychological, and legal support.

Although the *Guidelines* provide explicit and operational instructions, their primary purpose is to orient and guide all persons involved in our activities, so that each one can experience positive, respectful relationships that nurture both humanly and spiritually. The ecclesial institutions where we Comboni missionaries work must become increasingly safe environments, capable of fostering growth, maturation, and responsible freedom, in which everyone can feel welcomed, valued, and accompanied with respect and care.

II) PREVENTION

1. Rules of Behavior and Conduct

The members of the Comboni Institute, in their activities of evangelization, education, and service in situations of human and social vulnerability, commit to ensuring a safe environment for personal growth, lived with serenity and joy. To safeguard the integral development of every person, the leaders of local communities are required to exercise careful oversight, so as to protect the dignity of each individual. Some binding and specific rules of conduct may concern:

- the structuring of the proximity–distance relationship;
- language, choice of words, and non-verbal interaction;
- the appropriateness of physical contact;
- respect for privacy and intimacy;
- the management and use of media and social networks.

In apostolic activities with minors and vulnerable adults, Comboni missionaries and their collaborators (educators, catechists, teachers, our trainees, etc.) must:

- be prudent and maintain a respectful relationship with them;
- offer positive and morally impeccable role models;
- always remain in view of others when in their presence, avoiding being alone with them;

- inform superiors and the person responsible for safeguarding minors of any potentially dangerous behavior observed;
- respect the confidentiality of these persons, avoiding intrusive questions about their private lives;
- inform parents or guardians about the planned activities and methods;
- exercise the utmost caution in communication with them, including by phone and on social networks, avoiding ambiguous messages and photos, as well as the sharing of pornographic images;
- avoid any inappropriate and unnecessary physical or verbal contact that could be misinterpreted (e.g., careless, unjustified, or potentially misunderstood caresses, kisses, or hugs).

Comboni missionaries and their collaborators are prohibited, in the context of apostolic works involving minors and vulnerable adults, from:

- inflicting any form of corporal punishment and/or addressing them in an offensive manner;
- establishing a preferential relationship with persons to whom these norms apply;
- leaving any of these persons in a situation potentially dangerous to their physical or mental safety;
- engaging in or participating in inappropriate or sexually provocative conduct;
- discriminating against a person or group of persons covered by these norms;
- asking any of them to keep secrets about their relationship with adults;
- giving any person covered by these norms exclusive gifts, alcoholic beverages, or narcotic substances;

- transporting any of these persons alone by car;
- photographing or filming any person to whom these norms apply; if necessary, written consent from parents or guardians must be obtained;
- publishing or sharing, via the Internet or social networks, images in which any person covered by these norms can be identified; if necessary, written consent from parents or guardians must be obtained.

Any inappropriate or harassing behavior toward persons covered by these norms, even if it does not constitute abuse, must be reported to a superior for careful, prudent, and delicate evaluation, informing the persons concerned.

2. Safeguarding Officer for Minors and Vulnerable Adults

The Safeguarding Officer for Minors and Vulnerable Adults is appointed by the local superior with the consent of the members of his council, to whom he must report on his work. He is responsible for coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the *Guidelines*, so that the Comboni Institute is always respectful and aware of the rights and needs of minors and attentive to preventing all forms of violence or abuse. His specific duties include:

- promoting and coordinating, through appropriate means and initiatives, all activities for the safeguarding of minors and vulnerable adults within the pastoral contexts entrusted to the Institute, so that these can be safe environments for the entire People of God, especially for the most vulnerable;
- ensuring that victims of abuse are received with respect and due attention, providing them with transparent and reliable procedures;

- proposing resources and training programs to the entire Institute that deepen the theological, pastoral, and Comboni dimension of listening to victims and safeguarding minors and vulnerable adults.

The Safeguarding Officer for Minors and Vulnerable Adults, in dialogue with his local superior, is supported by local experts. The 2022 General Chapter of the Comboni Missionaries requested: "All circumscriptions should establish, in line with the *motu proprio Vos estis lux mundi*, no. 13, a commission of experts — both religious and lay — to help address any cases of abuse, according to the indications of the *Code of Conduct*, in full respect of the laws of the Church and of their own country. Where such commissions already exist in a country where we are present, the Chapter encourages making use of them, in collaboration with the local Church and religious associations" (*AC* '22, 45.2).

3. Participation

All confreres, employees, and persons who accompany and support us are called to provide the Safeguarding Officer for Minors and Vulnerable Adults with *feedback* arising from direct dialogue with the persons entrusted to them, in order to adapt the Prevention guidelines. This ensures that the concept is developed continuously and responsibly and remains always up to date. The Safeguarding Officer also submits the *Guidelines* to persons affected by any type of abuse for evaluation and updating. Principles are followed in the selection of our collaborators to ensure safe recruitment.

4. Qualified Training

We are aware of our responsibility to ensure that prevention and intervention measures are observed in the long term and become an integral part of the culture of our Institute from the initial formation of our candidates.

Prevention and intervention in cases of any type of violence require proper training. The training courses particularly address the following topics:

- Appropriate proximity and distance
- Communication and conflict-resolution skills
- Personal emotional and social competence
- Psychodynamics of affected persons
- Strategies of offenders
- (Digital) media as a zone of protection and risk / media literacy
- Dynamics in institutions with asymmetrical power relationships and favorable institutional structures
- Crimes and criminological approaches, as well as other relevant legal provisions
- Necessary and appropriate support for affected persons
- Sexual violence by minors and vulnerable persons against other minors or vulnerable persons
- Education in sexuality and cultural sensitivity
- Opportunities for professional networking.

III) PROTECTION

1. Forms of Violence

Violence can be caused by negligence, psychological, spiritual, physical, or sexual abuse, as well as structural violence. Violence also occurs extensively through digital media (abusive sexting — the exchange of texts, images, or videos with explicit sexual content via digital tools; online grooming; cyberbullying; exposure to pornographic images; child pornography; etc.).

- **Negligence** refers to the omission or failure to meet basic physical, emotional, medical, educational, or even spiritual needs by the person or persons responsible.
- **Psychological violence** refers to emotional abuse, including intimidation, insults and verbal abuse, humiliation, pressure, threats, isolation strategies, etc.
- **Spiritual violence** occurs when pressure, lack of freedom, and/or dependency are created and/or exploited through religious content or by invoking personal, spiritual, or institutional authority, and when the right to spiritual self-determination is limited.
- **Physical violence** includes all forms of physical abuse such as hitting, slapping, striking in the face, strong shaking, etc.
- **Sexual violence** includes sexualized and offensive language, sexualized terms or names for persons,

indecent touching of another person's body, and even rape, mutual masturbation, or sexual acts in the presence of a minor or vulnerable adult.

- **Structural violence** includes various forms of violence — based on power and authority relationships within institutions or society — that hinder or harm people in their development.

2. Degrees of violence

Violations of boundaries, aggression, and abuse are classified according to their severity.

a) Boundary-violating behavior

Each of us has a "perceived" boundary around ourselves that is considered protective and necessary. This boundary is individual and can vary throughout the day or depending on the environment. A boundary violation occurs when people cross another person's personal boundaries through words, gestures, or behaviors. Boundary violations can also occur unintentionally. Examples include public exposure, accidental contact, or an inappropriate comment/joke. The personal experience of the affected person is decisive in determining whether a boundary violation has occurred. For example, if someone feels hurt, humiliated, or devalued, the boundary has been crossed. To prevent a "culture of boundary violation," which could be exploited by potential offenders, boundary violations must be recognized as such, addressed, and corrected.

b) Aggressive behavior

Aggressive behavior is deliberate and intentional and occurs when people do not change their behavior and repeat it intentionally. Harassing

behavior is not random and does not take into account the defensive reactions of the person affected. Behavior is considered harassing even the first time it occurs if it constitutes more than a minor boundary violation in terms of scope. Abusers tend to minimize and trivialize their behavior, even when third parties address or criticize it.

c) Criminal offense
Criminal offenses include all episodes of negligence, psychological, spiritual, physical, sexual, or structural violence in which a serious violation of boundaries occurs, with legal consequences.

4. Analysis of Risk and Protective Factors

To protect minors and vulnerable adults, it is first necessary to identify potential risks. The analysis of these risks aims to maximize the safety of all who visit or live in the facility, as well as of all who work there and hold responsibilities. It is essential to pinpoint the "vulnerable" areas of an institution and determine which protective measures can be effective. Risk analysis — in structural, spatial, and personal domains — addresses, among other issues, the following questions:

- Which individuals are particularly at risk?
- Which situations in daily work life require attention to respect boundaries and protect against abuse?
- Which situations/procedures could be exploited by offenders to plan or carry out their intentions?
- Are the application and selection procedures designed to discourage potential offenders?

- In which locations and environments must particular attention be paid to the safety of minors and vulnerable adults?
- Are there transparent rules for managing proximity and distance?
- Is there a functional reporting procedure for allegations?
- Is there an intervention procedure that can be activated quickly?
- What forms of participation exist for minors and vulnerable adults?

Risk analysis also includes examining the degree of susceptibility or vulnerability, for example within hierarchical structures and leadership. The results of the risk analysis form the basis for developing a safeguarding policy as customized as possible for the institution in question.

IV) INTERVENTION – MANAGEMENT OF REPORTS

Information regarding sexual and/or spiritual abuse must be reported. Those who declare, in writing or verbally, that they have been victims of sexual abuse, as well as their families, have the right to be received and heard. The confrere listens to them and reassures them regarding the canonical procedures established by the Church, our Rule of Life, and the Code of Conduct, safeguarding their good reputation and the confidentiality of personal data.

The local superior and the Safeguarding Officer for Minors and Vulnerable Adults may entrust the spiritual accompaniment of the alleged victims to a qualified person and, if necessary, provide medical and psychological assistance, giving all necessary information regarding canonical procedures.

Confreres and their collaborators who have knowledge of or a well-founded suspicion that someone may be a victim of abuse must inform the competent superior, without violating the sacramental seal.

The local superior and the Safeguarding Officer, after evaluating the credibility of the report of abuse against minors, may adopt appropriate precautionary measures (cf. *CIC*, canon 1722), including removing the accused from pastoral activities until the conclusion of the proceedings.

It is strictly forbidden to dissuade the alleged victim or their family from reporting to civil authorities. The confrere responsible for the case must inform the alleged victim or their parents or guardians of this right and duty, and encourage them to exercise it, ensuring that this is

documented in a written statement signed by the parties involved. In this matter, major superiors must comply with the provisions of the applicable local legislation.

"In respect of the mutual autonomy of ecclesiastical and civil jurisdictions, as well as canon, civil, and concordat law, significant cooperation with the State judicial authorities is intended in factfinding, with a view to the common pursuit of the good of vulnerable persons, truth, and the restoration of justice, if violated" (*Guidelines for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Adults*, CEI and Italian Conference of Major Superiors, 2023, p. 15).

CONCLUSION

The Institute of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus is called to carry out in the world "the evangelizing mission of the Church" (RV 13), proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus *ad gentes*. Each of its members voluntarily and publicly commits to living in harmony and coherence with this vocation, with a life consecrated to God for the mission, through the religious vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience.

For this reason, we are invited to implement serious prevention and fraternal support so that such situations do not recur in society, in the Church, or within our Institute. To prevent them, it is necessary to live the mission ever more responsibly, using the tools recommended by the Church and the Institute, such as prayer, spiritual direction, specialized accompaniment, and a healthy community life, so as to help one another remain faithful to our religious and missionary consecration.

We are all invited AYER be more humble, to recognize our fragility, weaknesses, and sin, aware that we carry the treasure of our ministry in clay jars (cf. 2 *Cor* 4:7). We all need help, both personally and communally, and we are called to bear one another's burdens, thus fulfilling the law of Christ and living in fraternity (cf. *Gal* 6:2; AC '22, 16).

PRAYER

Father, source of life,
with humility and contrition we entrust to you
the shame and remorse for the suffering cause
to the youngest and most vulnerable of humanity,
and we ask for your forgiveness.

Lord Jesus, Son who came to reveal the mercy of the Father,
we entrust to you all those who have suffered abuses of power,
spiritual and of conscience, physical and sexual;
may their wounds be healed by the balm
of your and our compassion,
may they find welcome and fraternal support,
and may their hearts be enveloped in tenderness
and filled with hope.

Holy Spirit, fire of love,
we pray for our ecclesial communities
and for our Comboni Institute,
called to engage in deep discernment
on our omissions and failures.
May our homes be welcoming and safe,
and may the commitment of all be strengthened
to protect the youngest and most vulnerable.

Holy Trinity, source of communion and tenderness,
help us break the chains of violence and guilt,
tear open our silences and make us hear the cries of pain

of the victims of abuse and their families;
help us accompany them in pursuing truth to the fullest
along the path of justice and reparation,
so that even from the darkness of the world, threatened by sin,
but surrounded by the light of Easter,
seeds of healing and renewal may sprout.
So that the life of the Kingdom may be revealed in us. Amen.

Final Note on the Importance of Contextualizing this Document

Each circumscription is called to contextualize the guidelines presented in this document, taking into account the variety of contexts in which we work (cf. *CC* 9).

The norms and procedures contained herein apply to the entire Institute. However, they provide a general framework. It is therefore evident that they must be updated and contextualized at the level of each circumscription, considering the particular social, ecclesial, and cultural situation of each country, and in particular the civil codes of the nations in which we are present (cf. *CIC* 22).

The value of what is described here does not lie primarily in the details of each individual provision or procedure (especially regarding matters within the competence of civil authorities), but rather in the necessity of providing common guidance on how to understand and live the mission, fraternal communion, and responsibility toward the people to whom we are sent (*RV* 104.1 and 131).

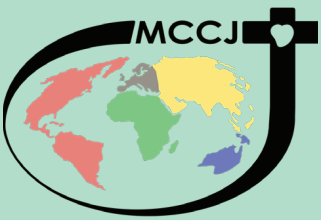
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Approval and Dissemination

The Superior General, Father Luigi Fernando Codianni, with the consent of his Council, approves and disseminates this document, which will come into effect on October 10, 2025.

List of Main Reference Documents

1. Apostolic Letter in the form of a *motu proprio* of His Holiness Pope Francis, *Vos estis lux mundi* (*VELM*), Rome, 7th May 2019, updated edition of 25th March 2023.
2. Pope Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, Rome, 5th June 2022.
3. Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter in the form of a Motu Proprio *On the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons*, Rome, 26th March 2019.
4. *Guidelines for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Adults* (Italian Episcopal Conference and Italian Conference of Major Superiors; Rome, 24th June 2019; updated to current legislation, November 2023).
5. *Framework Regulation – Prevention of Sexual Violence Against Minors and Vulnerable Adults within the German Bishops' Conference* (Würzburg, 18th November 2019; updated 2021).
6. *Rules for Addressing Sexual Abuse of Minors and Adults in Need of Protection or Assistance by Clerics and Other Church Employees* (Würzburg, 18th November 18, 2019; updated on 24th January 2022).
7. *Safeguarding Children: Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland*, 2016.
8. *Code of Canon Law* (CIC), 1983; with the new version of Book VI (in force since 8th December 2021).
9. *Rule of Life* (*RL*) of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus (Rome, 1988).
10. *Code of Conduct* (*CC*) of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, revised edition, Rome, in force from 1st January 2026.


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