



Breaking the Culture of Silence: Clerical Abuse and Safeguarding in Ghana, A Practical-Theological Reflection in Global Context

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Manson Anane Adjei *

* Corresponding Author



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Abstract

This study offers a practical-theological reflection on clerical abuse, cultural silence, and safeguarding within the Ghanaian Catholic Church in dialogue with Western experiences, particularly in Chicago. It explores how reverence for clerical authority, family honor, and communal shame sustain a “culture of silence” that hinders justice and healing. Through qualitative interviews, field observations, and comparative analysis, the research situates abuse as a moral and theological crisis that demands institutional conversion and pastoral accountability. By examining canonical developments, Vatican reforms, and local safeguarding policies, it proposes a contextual theology of safeguarding grounded in truth, justice, and mercy. The paper argues that authentic prevention requires not only policy but formation, cultivating affective maturity, transparency, and co-responsibility across Church life. Ultimately, safeguarding is presented as a Gospel imperative and act of evangelization, calling the Ghanaian Church to move from silence to solidarity and from secrecy to conversion.

Keywords: Clerical abuse, culture of silence, Ghanaian Church, practical theology, safeguarding

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1. Introduction: From Anecdote to Practical-Theological Inquiry

When I reflect on my early encounters in Ghana about the scandals in North America, I remember the silence surrounding clerical abuses, stories whispered, often about priests long deceased. It puzzled me how accusations could emerge against the dead. Who verifies such claims? Could they be genuine, or could they also be false? My skepticism grew from cultural and moral reasoning: in a society that reveres religious authority, how do we balance truth, memory, and justice?

That perception shifted when I arrived in Chicago. I began receiving emails, text messages, and phone calls from law firms inviting potential claimants to report clerical abuse for compensation. Their advertisements promised justice and money for those who would “come forward.” The language was persuasive, legalistic, and transactional: “Have you ever been abused by a clergy? Report it, we will represent you, and you will win amount.” This experience exposed me to a different cultural and legal world where clerical abuse is not only a moral or pastoral issue but a highly litigated one, deeply intertwined with the public’s trust and the Church’s credibility.

The situation raised profound theological and pastoral questions in me: How can the Church discern the truth, do justice, and heal wounded communities in contexts where “cultures of silence” collide with fragile safeguarding systems? How can it uphold both mercy and accountability? And how might these lessons from the West inform emerging realities in Africa, especially Ghana, where silence, reverence, and stigma still inhibit disclosure?

In this section, I situate the discussion within a practical-theological framework that moves from anecdote to structured inquiry. The essay (a) examines the Ghanaian experience within

a broader ecclesial and legal horizon; (b) constructs a framework grounded in pastoral accompaniment, justice, and reparation, and institutional conversion; and (c) proposes field-based pathways, through interviews, conversations, and pastoral engagements, to generate empirical insights for the Ghanaian Church.

This reflection builds upon canonical norms, the U.S. Church’s safeguarding architecture (particularly the Chicago experience under Cardinal Bernardin), and the recent Vatican updates on accountability and the protection of minors.¹²³ In adopting this lens, I aim to move beyond mere lamentation to discernment, inviting both Church and society in Ghana to break the silence, seek restorative justice, and reimagine safeguarding as an act of evangelization.

2. Naming the Silence: Ghanaian Social Dynamics and Disclosure Barriers

In Ghana, as in many African societies, silence operates as both a moral code and a cultural defense mechanism. My early interviews and informal conversations revealed that abuse, especially of a sexual or ethical nature, is rarely discussed publicly, not because it is absent, but because the social and religious fabric discourages its disclosure. In most local settings, the idea of exposing wrongdoing

¹Francis, “Vos Estis Lux Mundi: Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio by the Supreme Pontiff Francis” (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), https://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_vosestisluxmundi2023_en.html.

²United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People: Including Essential Norms and Statement of Episcopal Commitment” (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018), <https://www.usccb.org/offices/child-and-youth-protection/charter-protection-children-and-young-people>.

³Francis, “Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: For a Synodal Church—Communion, Participation, Mission” (Vatican City: General Secretariat of the Synod, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), <https://www.synod.va/en/news/final-document-of-the-synod-2024.html>.

by a cleric or elder is perceived not as a pursuit of justice but as a challenge to authority, faith, and family honor.

The voices of some of my interlocutors, *Yaa, Mary, and Mansah*, embody this culture of concealment. Yaa confided that when she tried to tell her mother about what had happened to her, she was instructed never to mention it to anyone, “not even to your father.”⁴⁵ Mary’s case was more severe; she was accused by her family of having “seduced the culprit,” and was even punished for “bringing shame” upon the family.⁶ Mansah recalled similar treatment.⁷ Their stories represent a tragic intersection between patriarchal family systems, religious reverence, and communal shame, all of which create formidable barriers to truth-telling.

2.1. The Culture of Silence as a Theological Problem

Within African moral anthropology, silence is often valorized as a form of discretion or respect for authority (*obu titiriw*). Yet in cases of abuse, this cultural virtue becomes a pastoral vice, a silence that sustains impunity and multiplies trauma. From a practical-theological perspective, this silence is not a mere absence of speech but a *sign of social brokenness*, a symptom of spiritual woundedness within the Body of Christ. Theologians such as Emmanuel Katongole⁸ and Mercy Amba Oduyoye⁹ remind us that any theology that ignores the suffering of the silenced betrays the gospel’s call to truth and healing.

Thus, naming the silence is a theological act: to break it is to confront systems that confuse respect with fear, piety with passivity. The “culture of silence” must be re-read in light of Vatican II’s call for dialogue and synodality, which envisions the Church as a community of truth-telling, not concealment.

2.2. Family and Clerical Authority: The Dual Burden of Fear

My field observations confirm that families themselves often reinforce the structures of silence. Parents fear social shame, public gossip, and the stigma of being known as “the family whose child was defiled by a priest.” Some even perceive clerics as beyond reproach, *the Lord’s anointed*. The oft-quoted phrase “touch not my anointed”¹⁰ is misused to shield abusers, creating a sacralized impunity. This interpretation not only distorts Scripture but also betrays the Church’s moral witness.

In many instances, the victims’ first experience of betrayal comes not from the clergy but from their own families and parish communities. Their pain becomes internalized, resulting in depression, mistrust, and what trauma theology calls disenchantment with the sacred.¹¹

2.3. Contextual and Empirical Corroboration

Recent Ghana-based research affirms this pattern. Acquaye et al., describe “multi-layered silence” in cases of sexual abuse, in which victims internalize trauma due to family pressure, reverence for elders, and the fear of disbelief.¹² Similarly, Rohn et al., find that

survivors of sexual violence in Ghana hesitate to seek help because of fear of stigma and the perception that justice systems favor the powerful.¹³ The same dynamics are evident within Church structures: clergy are often regarded as moral exemplars, and confronting them seems tantamount to confronting God.

The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM) has identified this trend globally, particularly in the Global South, where underreporting remains endemic. Its 2024 Pilot Report and 2025 Second Annual Report emphasize that safeguarding must not only protect minors but also empower local Churches to break cultures of silence through contextual education and survivor-centered policies.¹⁴

2.4. Toward a Listening Church

Theologically, silence must be transformed into listening. The *listening Church* (*Ecclesia audiens*), a phrase often invoked in synodal theology, calls the community to create safe spaces for survivors to speak, to be heard, and to be believed. This involves independent and transparent reporting mechanisms at the diocesan and parish levels, combined with trauma-informed pastoral accompaniment. It also demands catechetical re-education that challenges clericalism and promotes shared responsibility between clergy and laity.

In this light, the Church’s mission is not simply to protect itself from scandal but to model what Pope Francis calls “*a field hospital where wounds are treated, not ignored*.” The Ghanaian Church, therefore, stands at a decisive crossroad: either perpetuate a legacy of silence or embody a pastoral conversion that aligns with the universal Church’s safeguarding vision.¹⁵

3. Awakening and Accountability: What Changed, and What Didn’t, in the West

When I relocated to Chicago, I found myself in a church environment where clerical abuse was not hidden in silence but actively confronted, debated, and even litigated. The level of transparency shocked me, coming from a Ghanaian context where such matters are still whispered about in private corners. Here, victims were not only speaking; they were being heard. Law firms, survivors’ networks, diocesan review boards, and the media had all become part of a complex ecosystem of accountability. Yet, beneath this openness, I sensed another kind of wound, the wound of institutional shame and the struggle for moral credibility.

3.1. The American Awakening: From Denial to Structural Reform

The Archdiocese of Chicago, where I now study and serve, was among the first to confront the scandal systematically. In 1992, under Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the diocese established an independent Commission on Clerical Sexual Misconduct with Minors, whose findings set the foundation for later national reforms.¹⁶ Bernardin’s vision was rooted not merely in legal

⁴⁵Susan James, “The Question of Personal Identity,” ed. Keya Maitra and Jennifer McWeeny, *Feminist Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford University Press, July 7, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190867614.003.0009>.

⁵Yaa, personal communication with the researcher, March 2024.

⁶Mary, personal communication with the researcher, May 2024.

⁷Mansah, personal communication with the researcher, August 2024.

⁸Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2017).

⁹Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, vol. 3 (Ocms, 2002): 46, 54.

¹⁰Ps. 105:15

¹¹Katongole, *Born from Lament*, 25, 98.

¹²Garnet Linda Naa Adukwei Acquaye et al., “Child Sexual Abuse in Ghana: A Multi-methods Exploratory Study,” *Children & Society* 38, no. 5 (2024): 1654–75.

¹³Emmanuel Rohn and Eric Y Tenkorang, “Motivations and Barriers to Help-Seeking among Female Victims of Intimate Partner Violence in Ghana,” *Violence against Women* 30, no. 2 (2024): 524–50.

¹⁴E Giribaldi, “Protection of Minors: Second Report Proposes Restorative Measures against Abuse,” *Vatican News*, 2025, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-10/pontifical-commission-protection-minors-second-annual-report.html>.

¹⁵Francis, “Vos Estis Lux Mundi.”

¹⁶J Dempsey et al., “Report to Joseph Cardinal Bernardin: The Cardinal’s Commission on Clerical Sexual Misconduct with Minors” (Chicago, IL: Archdiocese of Chicago, 1992), <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/reports/1992-06-BernardinReport/bern-fullreport.pdf>.

compliance but in pastoral realism, the conviction that justice and compassion could coexist. His approach anticipated the 2002 USCCB Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which institutionalized diocesan review boards, reporting protocols, victim assistance programs, and annual audits. The U.S. bishops' Charter, revised in 2018, remains a global model of episcopal accountability.¹⁷

It created mandatory background checks, clear reporting procedures, and lay oversight structures, policies that other local churches, including those in Africa, continue to study.¹⁸ At the heart of these reforms lies a practical-theological insight: that the credibility of the Church's proclamation depends on the integrity of its ministers. When the Church becomes the cause of trauma, evangelization itself is wounded.

3.2. The Financial and Spiritual Cost of Disclosure

The consequences of this awakening were staggering. By 2025, major dioceses such as Los Angeles,¹⁹ New Orleans,²⁰ and Chicago had paid hundreds of millions of dollars in settlements. Some dioceses even declared bankruptcy to fund reparation programs. These financial losses, though painful, opened doors to truth-telling and transparency that had long been sealed. The Church in the West, forced by legal systems and survivor advocacy, was compelled to confess, not only in words but through institutional repentance.

However, this public reckoning also revealed tensions between justice and image management. Some bishops treated settlements as a way to silence rather than heal. Others, like Bernardin and his successors in Chicago, understood reparation as a sacramental act, a visible sign of repentance and moral renewal. The theological challenge, therefore, is not only how to pay but how to convert, how to move from denial to accountability, from secrecy to communion.

3.3. Ongoing Gaps: Transparency and the Limits of Reform

Even with these reforms, complete healing remains elusive. The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM), in its 2024 and 2025 annual reports, acknowledges that many dioceses still struggle with consistent implementation, data transparency, and survivor-centered engagement.²¹ Safeguarding policies exist on paper but often fail in practice due to bureaucratic inertia, fear of scandal, and clerical defensiveness. The Vatican's ongoing review of episcopal accountability under *Vos estis lux mundi* seeks to close these gaps, requiring that even bishops be subject to investigation.²²

From a practical-theological standpoint, these developments embody what theologian Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder call "prophetic dialogue."²³ The Church must listen to victims and the world's outcry as prophetic voices calling her to conversion. The response to abuse, then, is not only a juridical task but an

ecclesiological vocation: to rebuild credibility through truth and humility.

3.4. Lessons for the Ghanaian Church

The Ghanaian Church stands at a point where it can learn from both the strengths and the mistakes of the Western response. The American awakening teaches that silence delays justice but never prevents exposure. The question is not whether the truth will come out, but how the Church will face it when it does. Ghana can avoid repeating history by acting preemptively, establishing independent safeguarding structures, publishing diocesan policies, and engaging in open dialogue among clergy, laity, and victims.

In our context, this means cultivating what Pope Francis calls a *culture of care and accountability*, not one of fear and concealment.²⁴ The moral credibility of the African Church, often celebrated for its vitality and vocations, depends on its ability to integrate safeguarding as a **spiritual discipline** rather than merely a bureaucratic requirement. The wounds of the West need not be replicated in the Global South if we choose courage over silence and prevention over reaction.

4. Canon Law Today: What the Church Can, and Cannot Do

In the pursuit of justice and reform, the Church's credibility depends not only on pastoral goodwill but also on the integrity of its juridical framework. Canon Law, though often misunderstood as distant or rigid, is one of the Church's most pastoral tools when properly applied. It exists not to protect the institution at the expense of the wounded, but to ensure that truth, mercy, and justice remain held in sacred tension.

4.1. Evolving Canonical Landscape

Since the 2021 revision of *Book VI* of the *Code of Canon Law* on penal sanctions, the Church has clarified offenses, sanctions, and investigative procedures.²⁵ This reform emerged from decades of painful experience and now names sexual abuse explicitly as a grave delict. Complementing this, as already indicated above, Pope Francis's *Vos estis lux mundi* has established universal norms for reporting, accountability, and the investigation of bishops and religious superiors. These updates mark a transition from fragmented local handling to a global, consistent standard.

In practice, the new canonical system recognizes abuse as both a sin and a crime, requiring ecclesiastical and, where necessary, civil cooperation. The goal is not only punishment but *restoratio iustitiae*; the restoration of justice, healing, and credibility within the Church.

4.2. The Challenge of the Deceased Accused

One of the most complex pastoral and canonical questions I encountered in my reflections concerns accusations against deceased clergy. Canon law does not impose posthumous penal sanctions; death ends juridical action (*mors extinguat personam*).²⁶ Yet this does not close the Church's moral duty. Transparency and acknowledgment remain essential. Dioceses may publish investigative findings, open archives for research, and offer public apologies and

¹⁷Bishops, "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

¹⁸Archdiocese of Chicago, "Policies and Procedures" (Chicago, IL: Archdiocese of Chicago, 2025), <https://www.archchicago.org/about-us/policies-and-procedures>.

¹⁹Dietrich Knauth, "Los Angeles Archdiocese Reaches \$880 Million Sex Abuse Settlement," 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/legal/los-angeles-archdiocese-reaches-880-million-sex-abuse-settlement-2024-10-16/>.

²⁰Ramon Antonio Vargas and David Hammer, "New Orleans Sexual Abuse Victims Approve \$230 m Catholic Church Settlement," 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/oct/30/new-orleans-sexual-abuse-victims-catholic-church>.

²¹Giribaldi, "Protection of Minors: Second Report Proposes Restorative Measures against Abuse."

²²Francis, "Vos Estis Lux Mundi."

²³Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Orbis Books, 2011).

²⁴Giribaldi, "Protection of Minors."

²⁵Holy See Press Office, "New Book VI of the Code of Canon Law" (Vatican City: Holy See Press Office, November 5, 2021), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/06/01/210601b.html>.

²⁶Holy See, *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition (Canons 1717-1731; 1395 §3; 1728 §1)* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983), https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_index_en.html.

support for survivors. The healing owed to the victims transcends the death of the perpetrator.

As Cardinal Cupich has recently observed, “Even when the accused is gone, the community must still reckon with what has been done.”²⁷ In such cases, canonical restraint must be accompanied by pastoral courage, truth-telling, remembrance, and the assurance that justice is not confined to the living.

4.3. Pastoral Implications for Ghana

For the Ghanaian Church, these developments are both instructive and urgent. Canon law must not be viewed as foreign bureaucracy but as an expression of communion and accountability. Implementing local safeguarding policies, training canonical officers, and integrating civil cooperation with institutions like DOVVSU can ensure that justice is pursued with both competence and compassion. The Church’s witness in Ghana depends on this integrity.

In the end, canon law must serve not only as a legal instrument but as a spiritual pedagogy of justice, a means of conversion that mirrors the mercy of God while affirming the dignity of every person harmed by the Church’s ministers.

5. Ghana’s Emerging Safeguarding Framework

The conversation about clerical abuse in Ghana is still in its infancy. The “culture of silence” that has long characterized Ghanaian social and ecclesial life continues to obstruct transparency and justice. Yet there are signs of awakening, a gradual recognition that safeguarding is not merely a Western import but a pastoral necessity for the credibility and holiness of the African Church.

5.1. National and Ecclesial Initiatives

The Ghana Catholic Bishops’ Conference (GCBC) has taken an important step by issuing a National Child Protection Policy (CPCB), outlining the Church’s commitment to the safety of minors and vulnerable adults.²⁸ This policy, though commendable, requires broader implementation at the diocesan and parish levels. Its existence must be accompanied by education, training, and effective enforcement mechanisms. Parish priests, catechists, and lay pastoral agents must not only know the policy but internalize it as part of their pastoral identity.

To make safeguarding credible, dioceses must establish independent safeguarding offices staffed with trained professional canonists, social workers, and lay experts. Collaboration with civil authorities such as the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU)²⁹ and the Department of Social Welfare would ensure that ecclesiastical investigations complement state procedures rather than compete with them.³⁰

5.2. Contextual Challenges and Opportunities

While Ghana has not yet faced the massive legal or financial crises seen in the West, the potential risks are real. Clergy misconduct, if left unaddressed, could gravely harm both victims and the Church’s

moral authority. Financial compensation systems like those in the United States may not be feasible in the Ghanaian context, but pastoral reparation, public apology, community reconciliation, and survivor accompaniment can serve as locally grounded models of justice.

Moreover, the Synod on Synodality calls for *co-responsibility and participation*, urging every diocese to become a “listening Church.”³¹ In Ghana, this can mean empowering lay safeguarding committees, training formators in seminaries to integrate affective maturity into priestly formation, and developing culturally relevant educational materials in local languages. The task is not simply institutional but spiritual, to form consciences capable of protecting the vulnerable and confronting wrongdoing without fear.

5.3. Toward a Contextual Theology of Safeguarding

In practical-theological terms, safeguarding in Ghana must evolve from policy to culture. It must become an expression of discipleship, not merely compliance. This requires a theological reorientation, from protecting the Church’s image to protecting God’s children. When seen this way, safeguarding becomes a form of evangelization, a witness to the Gospel’s demand for truth, mercy, and justice.

As I have argued throughout, the Church in Ghana stands at a critical threshold: the choice between inherited silence and transformative accountability. By integrating canonical norms, local collaboration, and pastoral empathy, the Church can preempt a future crisis and model a distinctly African theology of healing and justice, rooted in the Gospel and enriched by communal solidarity.

6. Methodology

The methodological framework of this study was grounded in a qualitative, semi-structured interview and observational approach rooted in practical and contextual theology. It was designed to complement theological reflection with lived experience while maintaining the confidentiality of participants who requested privacy. The fieldwork focused on selected ecclesial and civic actors in Ghana and a smaller comparative group and situations in Chicago. Interviews were conducted with individuals directly involved in safeguarding formation, pastoral leadership, and survivor accompaniment, alongside select professionals working in legal, social, and therapeutic contexts. Participation was voluntary, and strict confidentiality was maintained throughout. The interviews were conducted both in person and virtually, recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically to identify key patterns of silence, accountability, and institutional reform. Data were supplemented by a thorough review of existing literature from both Ghana and the United States, allowing for a comparative analysis of ecclesial safeguarding frameworks and their practical-theological implications.

Ethical integrity remained central to the process. All interviews followed trauma-informed protocols to ensure psychological safety, anonymity, and respect for personal boundaries. Pseudonyms were used where appropriate, and identifiable details were omitted to protect participants’ privacy. Listening was understood not simply as data collection but as a pastoral act of accompaniment, an exercise in theological attentiveness to wounded voices. The interview questions invited reflection on disclosure barriers,

²⁷Devin Watkins, “Cardinal Cupich: Pope’s ‘Vos Estis’ Update Seeks to Give Justice to Abuse Victims,” 2023, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-03/cardinal-blase-cupich-pope-francis-vos-estis-updated-text.html>.

²⁸Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Ghana, “Child Protection Policy: Booklet (Signed Version)” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Ghana, 2023), <https://www.cbcgha.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Child-Protection-Policy-BOOKLET-signed.pdf>.

²⁹Ghana Police Service, “Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU),” Ghana Police Service, 2025, <https://police.gov.gh/en/index.php/domestic-violence-victims-support-unit-dovvsu/>.

³⁰Children and Social Protection (MoGCSPP) Ministry of Gender, “Acronyms and Terms” (Accra, Ghana: Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2025).

³¹Francis, “Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: For a Synodal Church—Communion, Participation, Mission.”

cultural factors, and perceptions of justice and reparation within the Church. The findings were interpreted through theological and sociocultural lenses, integrating insights from the field with relevant academic and ecclesial literature. This methodology thus provided a contextual and comparative foundation for analyzing safeguarding practices in Ghana and Chicago, serving as an empirical bridge between the study's theological framework and its practical conclusions

7. Discernment of False Allegations without Re-traumatizing Survivors

In both Ghana and the wider Church, one of the most delicate pastoral and moral tensions concerns the balance between protecting the innocent and believing the wounded. My own skepticism when I first heard accusations against deceased clergy reflected a legitimate concern about truth and justice, but with time, I came to recognize that the greater danger often lies in silence, disbelief, and institutional defensiveness.

7.1. The Ethical and Pastoral Balance

False allegations are real and can destroy reputations, ministries, and lives. Yet, as I observed in the United States, we are where we are not because of falsehood but cover-up. A theology of safeguarding must therefore operate with two convictions: that *truth liberates*³² and that *justice belongs to both the accused and the survivor*. Canon Law and papal norms such as *Vos estis lux mundi* emphasize this dual obligation, preserving due process while ensuring compassionate, survivor-centered care.

From a practical-theological perspective, discernment is not merely juridical but spiritual. It calls for prudence, justice, mercy, and fortitude, virtues that prevent the Church from reacting either with suspicion or naivety. The goal is neither to defend the institution at all costs nor to accept every claim uncritically, but to create a transparent process where truth can emerge through fairness and compassion.

7.2. Trauma-Informed Ecclesial Processes

Investigations must proceed with empathy. Survivors should never be re-traumatized through disbelief or hostile questioning. Likewise, accused clergy must be treated with dignity until guilt is proven. This balance requires trained investigators, pastoral counselors, and safeguarding officers capable of both legal competence and pastoral sensitivity.

Dioceses should establish independent review boards, composed of canonical, legal, and psychological experts, including lay representation, to evaluate claims objectively and confidentially.³³ Chicago's model demonstrates that such structures can protect both survivors and the falsely accused through transparent procedures and documented findings.³⁴ In Ghana, adapting this model through collaboration with DOVVSU and trained pastoral teams can prevent the twin evils of unjust accusation and institutional silence.

Ultimately, discernment of allegations is not only about investigation but about *conversion*. It demands a renewed moral imagination within the Church, one that replaces fear with faith, and secrecy with solidarity. The measure of the Church's maturity will not be in how few scandals it reports, but in how truthfully it

handles them when they arise. A culture of safeguarding, therefore, is inseparable from a culture of repentance and renewal.

8. Formation and Prevention: Culture Change in Practice

Preventing abuse in the Church requires far more than well-drafted policies; it demands deep moral and spiritual formation that transforms attitudes, habits, and culture. Safeguarding must become integral to the Church's identity, shaping the way ministers, catechists, and communities understand discipleship and human dignity. This approach calls for an interior conversion, a formation that goes beyond compliance to nurture empathy, prudence, and pastoral responsibility. In this sense, safeguarding is not a bureaucratic exercise but a moral imperative that expresses the Church's vocation to protect the vulnerable as a reflection of Christ's own care for the least among His people.

Within Ghana, priestly formation should adopt sustained programs focusing on affective maturity, healthy boundaries, and pastoral ethics. The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*³⁵ already highlights holistic human formation as the foundation of priestly life. Seminaries and religious houses must therefore embed safeguarding education throughout their curricula, across philosophy, theology, and pastoral practice, so that future priests view accountability as an essential dimension of discipleship. At the parish level, continuous training for clergy, catechists, and lay volunteers is equally vital. Locally adapted modules inspired by Chicago's VIRTUS: Protecting God's Children program,³⁶ translated into Ghanaian languages and rooted in local culture, could ensure broader understanding and accessibility. Regular retraining, transparent reporting systems, and background screening will gradually institutionalize vigilance and mutual trust within communities.

Ultimately, authentic prevention requires cultivating humility, transparency, and shared responsibility. A Church that forms its members to see safeguarding as a shared vocation begins to heal from within. This transformation reflects what Pope Francis calls "*co-responsibility in holiness*,"³⁷ a reminder that holiness and accountability are inseparable. When pastors, parents, and parishioners recognize their duty to protect, the Church becomes not only safer but also more credible, renewed as a living sacrament of God's justice, mercy, and compassionate love for all.

9. Recommendations for the Church in Ghana (Actionable)

The safeguarding of minors and vulnerable persons within the Church must move from policy to practice. The Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference (GCBC) has already taken an important step through the publication of its *Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy*, yet implementation across dioceses remains uneven. Every diocese should therefore institutionalize safeguarding structures, appoint trained safeguarding officers, and publish annual reports that document progress and accountability. This visibility would not only prevent misconduct but also build public trust in the Church's commitment to justice.

³⁵Congregation for the Clergy, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis: The Gift of the Priestly Vocation* (Vatican City: L'Osservatore Romano, 2017), <https://www.clerus.va/content/dam/clerus/documenti/ratio-2026/Ratio-EN-2017-01-03.pdf>.

³⁶Archdiocese of Chicago, "Safe Environment Office: Compliance Resources," 2025, <https://protect.archchicago.org/compliance-resources/safe-environment-office>.

³⁷Francis, "Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly, §§ 36, 48, 77-80."

³²In 8:32

³³Bishops, "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

³⁴Chicago, "Policies and Procedures."

To ensure fairness and professionalism, each diocese should also establish independent review boards composed of canonical, legal, and psychological experts, including lay and survivor representation. These boards can serve as transparent mechanisms for evaluating allegations and advising bishops on appropriate action. Furthermore, the Church must collaborate closely with state institutions such as the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) and the Department of Social Welfare. Such cooperation ensures that ecclesial investigations complement, rather than replace, civic justice, demonstrating that the Church stands not above the law but with the vulnerable.

Integral to prevention is formation. Safeguarding and affective maturity should be central to seminary and ongoing priestly formation. Courses on human development, ethical boundaries, and pastoral integrity must be reinforced through continuous education for clergy, catechists, and Church workers. In this way, the Church not only enforces compliance but cultivates a new moral imagination in which the care of the vulnerable is understood as a sacred vocation.

Equally vital is the establishment of pastoral care structures for survivors. Each diocese should have a liaison office dedicated to trauma-informed accompaniment, counseling, and reparative support. Public acknowledgment of harm, days of prayer, and community-based rituals of healing can help the Church move from silence to solidarity. Transparency is not a threat to faith but a witness to it, an expression of the Church's willingness to stand in the light of truth.

In conclusion, the future of the Church in Ghana depends on its courage to listen, protect, and heal. What began for me as skepticism about historical accusations has matured into a conviction that truth-telling is an act of faith. The experiences of the Church in Chicago, the Vatican's canonical reforms, and emerging local initiatives in Ghana all point to the same truth: safeguarding is not a bureaucratic obligation but a Gospel imperative. To protect the innocent and to acknowledge the wounded is to participate in Christ's own ministry of reconciliation. Suppose the Church in Ghana embraces this vision. In that case, it will not only avert future crises but also become a model of pastoral integrity and hope, a Church credible in mercy and steadfast in justice.

10. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that clerical abuse and the cultures of silence surrounding it cannot be understood merely as moral failings or institutional crises but as profound theological challenges that demand conversion, dialogue, and contextual discernment. In examining both the Ghanaian and Western experiences, it became evident that silence, whether rooted in reverence, shame, or fear, has sustained impunity and wounded the very body of Christ. The comparative reflections between Ghana and Chicago revealed how different socio-cultural, legal, and ecclesial contexts shape the Church's capacity to listen, protect, and heal. While the American Church has moved, often painfully, toward transparency, legal accountability, and survivor advocacy, the Ghanaian Church stands at a pivotal moment to learn proactively from these experiences. The task ahead is not simply to import policies but to inculturate safeguarding as a pastoral and spiritual discipline within the African ecclesial imagination. By grounding reform in the lived experiences of survivors, pastoral leaders, and faith communities, this research affirms that safeguarding is an expression of discipleship, not bureaucracy, a manifestation of the Gospel's call to justice, mercy, and truth.

Ultimately, the path toward healing requires both institutional courage and theological humility. The Church in Ghana, like the universal Church, must become a community that listens before it speaks, repents before it defends, and restores before it forgets. The journey from silence to safeguarding is, therefore, a journey of conversion, personal, communal, and ecclesial. It calls for formators who shape conscience, bishops who model transparency, and faithful who embody co-responsibility in holiness. When the Church protects the vulnerable, believes survivors, and confronts wrongdoing with integrity, it mirrors Christ's own compassion and justice. Thus, the future credibility of the Church does not rest on its perfection but on its willingness to tell the truth, seek forgiveness, and begin again. In embracing this vocation, the Church in Ghana can become a beacon of hope, a listening, learning, and healing Church that bears credible witness to the reconciling love of God in our age and culture.