



## SAFEGUARDING MINORS AND VULNERABLE ADULTS IN THE NIGERIAN CHURCH: CANONICAL AND LEGAL PERSPECTIVES

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the complex issue of sexual abuse with particular focus on the Nigerian Church, integrating canonical, theological, and legal perspectives to propose a comprehensive safeguarding framework. Drawing on foundational Church documents such as Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela and Vos Estis Lux Mundi, as well as Nigerian statutes like the Child Rights Act (2003) and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015), the study examines the intersection of ecclesiastical and civil accountability in addressing abuse. Biblical principles, such as those found in Isaiah 1:17 and Matthew 18:6, provide the moral foundation for the Church's mandate to protect the vulnerable, while Canon Law underscores the imperative for transparency and justice. The paper critically evaluates forms of abuse – sexual, emotional, psychological, and neglect – highlighting their profound impacts on victims and the Church's moral credibility. It also addresses systemic challenges, including cultural stigmas, resource limitations, and enforcement gaps, which undermine the effectiveness of existing safeguards. The study proposes actionable recommendations, including collaboration between Church and civil authorities, investment in theological education, mechanisms for addressing historical abuse cases, and the implementation of cultural re-education initiatives. This new vista that integrates transparency, accountability, and care, gives the Church a platform to fulfill its dual mission of pastoral healing and moral leadership. In this way, this interdisciplinary approach affirms the Church's commitment to justice and underscores the urgency of*



*safeguarding the dignity and rights of all individuals.*

**Keywords:** Sexual Abuse, Minors, Vulnerable Adults, Canon Law, Theology

## **Introduction**

Sexual abuse within faith communities signifies a profound violation of trust and moral responsibility, particularly in institutions like the Catholic Church, where spiritual leadership is entrusted with safeguarding the dignity and well-being of all individuals, especially the vulnerable (Warner, 2019). The Nigerian context, shaped by unique cultural, legal, and ecclesiastical dynamics, presents distinct challenges in addressing this pervasive issue. Despite the implementation of canonical, ecclesiastical, and legal frameworks, including *Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela* and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015), the effective prevention and redress of abuse remain hindered by systemic barriers such as cultural stigmas, resource limitations, and inconsistent enforcement (Msughter, et al. 2024).

In the light of the above, this paper seeks to examine the issue of sexual abuse within the Nigerian Church from an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating canonical, theological, and legal insights to propose a holistic safeguarding approach. Canon Law, with provisions such as Canon 1395 §2, emphasizes accountability and moral integrity, mandating severe penalties for clergy guilty of grave offenses. Complementing this ecclesiastical mandate, Nigerian statutes criminalize abuse and provide legal recourse for victims, affirming the shared responsibility of Church and civil institutions to uphold justice. Biblical imperatives, such as Isaiah 1:17's exhortation to "seek justice" and "defend the oppressed," serve as the ethical foundation for these interventions, aligning safeguarding measures with the Church's spiritual mission.

Additionally, the paper analysis various forms of abuse – sexual, emotional, psychological, and neglect – underlining their impact on victims and the broader faith community. It situates the Nigerian Church's response within a global framework. In this way, the paper evaluates the implementation of key safeguarding policies, such as the Nigerian Catholic Bishops' Conference's *Call to Love* and *Guidelines for Processing Cases of Sexual Abuse*. It also explores systemic challenges and proposes practical recommendations to enhance transparency, accountability, and pastoral care. This study underscores the urgency of safeguarding as a moral and theological imperative, calling for collaboration between ecclesiastical and civil authorities. By prioritizing justice, healing, and prevention, the Church can reaffirm its commitment



to protecting the vulnerable, restoring trust, and upholding its mission as a beacon of hope and compassion in society.

## 1. Clarifying the Issues

### 1.1. *Canonical Framework: Norms for Grave Delicts*

The Catholic Church has taken significant steps to address the grave issue of sexual abuse, implementing norms that reflect its theological and canonical commitments (Hille, 2011). The Apostolic Letter *Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela* (SST), promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 2001, and Pope Francis' *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* (2019) represent cornerstones of the Church's response to grave delicts. These documents establish stringent canonical measures, particularly concerning offenses against minors and vulnerable adults. Canon 1395 §2 mandates dismissal from the clerical state for any clergy member guilty of sexual offenses involving minors, underscoring the Church's zero-tolerance policy. Beyond punishment, the norms direct the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) to oversee cases of grave delicts, ensuring centralized and consistent enforcement. For example, SST reserves specific grave offenses – such as the abuse of minors, solicitation during confession, and other violations of the Sixth Commandment – to the jurisdiction of the CDF.

In *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* (2019), Pope Francis expanded safeguarding measures, emphasizing the accountability of Church leaders, including bishops and religious superiors. The document mandates that allegations of abuse or negligence by bishops be reported and investigated without exceptions. This ensures transparency and aligns with the biblical principle found in Isaiah 1:17: “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed.” The document further emphasizes collaboration with civil authorities to protect victims and pursue justice. The Nigerian Catholic Bishops' Conference (CBCN) has contextualized these global directives through its guidelines, such as *Call to Love* and *Guidelines for Processing Cases of Sexual Abuse*. These frameworks provide detailed procedures for addressing abuse allegations, highlighting the importance of training, transparency, and care for victims (Obiodu, 2023).

Accordingly, the CBCN's initiatives align with the broader goals of safeguarding articulated in Canon Law while addressing specific cultural and legal realities in Nigeria. For instance, the CBCN emphasizes collaboration with local laws like the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015), which criminalizes abuse and provides stringent penalties. The Church's comprehensive approach reflects its dual commitment to justice and pastoral care. Through canonical and pastoral measures, the Church demonstrates its resolve to address abuse while



nurturing a safe and just environment for all.

### **1.2. Scriptural Alignment**

The biblical imperative to uphold justice and defend the vulnerable forms the moral foundation for the Church's mandate to combat abuse and protect the oppressed. Isaiah 1:17 declares, "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed." This directive underscores the responsibility to act with integrity and compassion, especially toward those who cannot defend themselves. In the New Testament, Jesus exemplifies this mission through His ministry, particularly in His treatment of children and the marginalized. In Matthew 18:6, He warns, "If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." This teaching highlights the grave consequences of harming the vulnerable and reinforces the Church's obligation to safeguard minors and other at-risk individuals.

Additionally, Psalm 82:3-4 exhorts believers to "Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." Such scriptural principles resonate with the Church's role as a protector and advocate, ensuring justice for victims while addressing the moral failures of perpetrators. The alignment between scripture and canonical measures, such as those outlined in *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* and *Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela*, reflects a holistic commitment to justice. These documents echo the biblical call to protect the vulnerable, restore dignity to victims, and hold offenders accountable. This rooting of safeguarding measures in scripture, demonstrates the Church's affirmation of its mission to embody Christ's compassion and righteousness in addressing the grave issue of abuse.

## **2. Forms of Abuse: Canonical, Theological and Legal Perspectives**

### **2.1. Sexual Abuse**

Sexual abuse, involving the exploitation of minors or vulnerable adults for sexual purposes, is a grave violation of both ecclesiastical and civil laws (O'Brien, 2020; Kanu et al., 2024). Its profound impact extends beyond physical harm to inflict deep psychological trauma and societal alienation on victims. The Church and civil authorities share a critical responsibility to prevent such abuse, provide justice for victims, and ensure accountability for perpetrators. Canon Law places a strong emphasis on moral integrity and the protection of the vulnerable. Canon 277 requires clerics to observe perpetual celibacy and maintain high moral standards,



reflecting their sacred commitment to God and the community they serve. For cases involving sexual offenses against minors, Canon 1395 §2 prescribes severe penalties, including dismissal from the clerical state, highlighting the Church's commitment to justice and the sanctity of its mission. These provisions underscore the moral obligation of clergy to exemplify Christ-like behavior and safeguard the dignity of every individual (Usman, & Paul, 2024).

On the civil side, the Nigerian Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015) criminalizes all forms of sexual violence, including rape. It prescribes strict penalties, such as life imprisonment, for offenders. By codifying these offenses, Nigerian law affirms its dedication to protecting vulnerable individuals and ensuring that justice is served. The Act also provides avenues for victims to seek redress and support, emphasizing a survivor-centered approach to addressing sexual violence. Biblical wisdom provides further insight into the devastating effects of sexual violence. The story of Tamar's assault by Amnon in 2 Samuel 13:6-14 portrays the profound emotional and social repercussions of such acts. Tamar's experience of betrayal, humiliation, and isolation serves as a sobering reminder of the need to prioritize prevention, justice, and healing. Her story compels believers to advocate for the protection of the vulnerable and to nurture environments where such violations are unthinkable.

To address sexual abuse, the Church must combine its spiritual mandate with practical action. This includes implementing robust safeguarding policies, conducting regular training for clergy and staff, and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability. Civil authorities must ensure the effective enforcement of laws, while collaborating with faith communities to promote awareness and provide comprehensive support for survivors (Kanu & Paul, 2024). Together, these measures reflect the shared commitment of Church and society to defend the dignity of every person, prevent abuse, and uphold justice.

## **2.2. Emotional and Psychological Abuse**

Emotional and psychological abuse, marked by coercion, manipulation, and patterns of demeaning behavior, inflicts profound and enduring harm on an individual's mental and emotional well-being (Ministry of Justice, 2020). These forms of abuse can undermine a person's self-esteem, disrupt their relationships, and lead to lasting psychological challenges (Einarsen et al., 2004; Kanu et al., 2024). Recognizing the gravity of such offenses, both Canon Law and Nigerian legislation emphasize the importance of safeguarding individuals from these harms. Canon Law addresses the



moral implications of emotional and psychological abuse, underscoring the Church's responsibility to protect individuals from harm and uphold their dignity. This aligns with the Church's broader mission to reflect Christ's compassion and care for the well-being of all. Similarly, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015) in Nigeria explicitly criminalizes emotional and psychological abuse, offering victims legal protection and recourse. The codification of these offenses, is substantiated by the law acknowledging their severe impact and provides mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable.

The moral dimensions of this issue are also reflected in Scripture (Eph 6:4), which highlights the ethical responsibility to nurture and guide individuals with love and patience, and thereby nurturing environments that support emotional health and growth. It calls for an approach rooted in understanding and care rather than harm or coercion. To combat emotional and psychological abuse, it is essential to prioritize education and awareness. The Church, in collaboration with civil society, can lead initiatives to train caregivers, clergy, and community members to recognize the signs of abuse and respond effectively. Support systems, including counseling and advocacy services, should be established to help victims recover and rebuild their lives. In this way, the church and the broader community promote a culture of respect and compassion, while upholding the biblical and moral mandate to protect the vulnerable and nurture emotional well-being.

### **2.3. Neglect and Exploitation**

Neglect, characterized by the failure to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, education, or emotional care, constitutes a profound violation of human dignity and well-being (Avdibegović & Brkic, 2020; Committee on Child Maltreatment Research, 2014). Both Canon Law and Nigerian legislation highlight the gravity of such behavior and the obligation to protect those who are vulnerable. Canon Law underscores the Church's moral and spiritual responsibility to safeguard the vulnerable, particularly children and those unable to advocate for themselves. This is not merely an administrative duty but a reflection of the Church's commitment to embodying Christ's care and compassion. The Nigerian Child Rights Act (2003) reinforces this principle in legal terms, mandating care and protection for all children and holding caregivers accountable for neglectful behavior. It provides a framework for legal recourse, ensuring that those responsible for neglect face consequences and that the rights of the child are preserved.

Biblical wisdom, also offers a compelling call to action, namely to be to be voice of the voiceless and pen of the “penless” as it were (Pro31:8-9). This



exhortation serves as both a moral imperative and a spiritual guide for believers, aligning with the Church's mission to defend the voiceless and care for the vulnerable. The Church's role extends beyond advocacy and spiritual guidance to active intervention. Programs and initiatives to address neglect must prioritize education, awareness, and support systems for both caregivers and victims (Committee on Child Maltreatment Research, 2014). Through this a culture of responsibility and compassion, the Church and its members fulfill their divine mandate to ensure that the rights and dignity of all individuals, particularly the most vulnerable, are upheld (Kanu, Paul & Omenukwa, 2024).

#### **2.4. Legal Responses in the Nigerian Context**

Nigerian law provides a comprehensive legal framework to combat abuse, emphasizing the protection of children and vulnerable individuals (Kanu et al., 2024). The Child Rights Act (2003) criminalizes all forms of child abuse, encompassing physical, sexual, and emotional harm. Similarly, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015) introduces stringent measures, including life imprisonment for rape and severe penalties for other sexual offenses. This legislation also covers emotional and economic abuse, offering victims avenues for legal recourse and safeguarding their rights (Green et al., 2009). However, the efficacy of these laws is undermined by several persistent challenges. Enforcement gaps often arise from limited resources, which hinder the ability of law enforcement agencies and judicial systems to respond effectively to cases of abuse. Cultural barriers further exacerbate the problem, as societal stigmas and taboos discourage victims from reporting abuse, perpetuating cycles of silence and impunity. Additionally, lack of public awareness about these legal protections leaves many victims and their families uninformed about their rights or the processes for seeking justice (Chanda, 2024).

To address these deficiencies, it is imperative to promote greater collaboration between civil institutions and Church authorities. The Church, as a trusted community institution, can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between victims and the legal system (Pilani, 2023). Joint efforts could include awareness campaigns to educate the public about abuse and available legal protections, capacity-building initiatives for law enforcement and Church personnel, and the establishment of referral systems to connect victims with the necessary support services (Dopke, 2002; Pilani, 2022). When the Church and civil authorities work together, they can enhance the implementation of legal safeguards, ensuring that justice is accessible to all and that vulnerable individuals receive the protection they deserve.



### **2.5. Canonical-Parochial Interventions**

Canon Law and Nigerian legal frameworks work in tandem to address abuse, focusing on justice, accountability, and the care of victims (Foua & Diriwari, 2020). Canon 1395 mandates the Church to take firm and decisive action against clerics involved in abuse, which includes imposing penalties such as dismissal from the clerical state for grave offenses. This ensures that justice is served while safeguarding the integrity of the Church and its mission. The Church's response is deeply rooted in its pastoral mission, emphasizing prevention, healing, and accountability. Pastoral interventions aim to promote safe environments and provide victims with the necessary support to rebuild their lives (Code of Canon Law, 1983). These efforts are guided by documents such as the Nigerian Catholic Bishops' Conference's *Call to Love and Guidelines for Processing Cases of Sexual Abuse*. These guidelines emphasize transparency in handling allegations, justice for victims, and accountability for perpetrators, reflecting a commitment to upholding the dignity and well-being of all individuals.

Such measures align with the aforementioned biblical mandate of Isaiah 1:17. This scriptural call to defend the oppressed underscores the Church's moral obligation to stand with victims and enhance a culture of accountability and transparency. Together, Canon Law and the Nigerian legal principles, give the church grounds not only to fulfill its spiritual and ethical responsibilities but also strengthens its role as a moral leader in society. This approach reflects a commitment to justice, healing, and the protection of the vulnerable, ensuring that the Church remains a beacon of hope and compassion for all.

## **3. Safeguarding Standards: A Canonical and Theological Model**

### **3.1. Creating Safe Environments**

Establishing and maintaining safe environments is a cornerstone of the Church's mission to protect minors and vulnerable adults. This responsibility encompasses proactive measures to nurture, guide, and safeguard all individuals in the Church's care. Safe environments are not merely physical spaces but cultural ecosystems that promote the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of every person. To achieve this, the Church must implement clear and comprehensive guidelines on appropriate conduct (Obiodu, 2023). These policies should detail acceptable and unacceptable behavior for clergy, staff, and volunteers, particularly during Church-related activities such as catechism classes, youth retreats, and liturgical functions. Rigorous background checks are essential to identify potential risks, ensuring that all personnel are suitable for their roles. These checks should include the disclosure of any past



criminal convictions or allegations of misconduct.

Anti-bullying and harassment policies are vital to encouraging mutual respect and safety. These policies should address behavior among both children and adults, creating a culture where everyone feels valued and protected (Kingfisher Professional Services, 2024). To ensure accountability, whistleblowing mechanisms must be established, offering confidential and accessible channels for reporting concerns about inappropriate behavior or potential abuse without fear of retaliation. Organizing activities safely is another critical component. Policies should ensure that all events, such as camps, choir practices, and youth gatherings, are well-supervised by trusted adults adhering to child protection protocols (FAME Foundation Child Protection Policy, 2023). Through the adoption of these measures, the Church fulfills its moral and biblical mandate to protect the vulnerable, ensuring its spaces are sanctuaries of safety and spiritual growth. These actions also reinforce the Church's credibility and commitment to Christ-like care.

### **3.2. *Recognizing and Reporting Abuse***

Timely recognition and reporting of abuse are essential to safeguarding vulnerable individuals and ensuring justice (Wade, 2020). James 1:27 highlights the Church's duty to care for those in distress, emphasizing the moral imperative to protect the most vulnerable among us. Recognizing and addressing abuse is a sacred responsibility that requires vigilance and decisive action. Comprehensive training programs are critical for equipping clergy, staff, and volunteers to identify signs of abuse – whether physical, emotional, sexual, or psychological. These programs should incorporate practical tools such as case studies, role-playing exercises, and guidance on recognizing behavioral indicators of abuse in children and adults. Clear and confidential reporting channels play a vital role in addressing concerns promptly and effectively. Research has shown that designated safeguarding officers in institutional settings like parishes, schools, and diocesan offices provide crucial points of contact that victims and witnesses can trust. These designated officers help initiate timely follow-up actions and investigations when issues arise (Burback, 2024).

Awareness campaigns play a key role in educating the Church community about the importance of recognizing and reporting abuse. These initiatives should challenge common misconceptions about abuse, reduce stigma, and empower individuals to come forward. Safeguarding policies must also mandate reporting suspected or confirmed abuse to both Church authorities and civil law enforcement, ensuring legal compliance and justice for victims. When abuse is reported, a compassionate response is



vital. This includes immediate steps to ensure the victim's safety, emotional support, and a transparent process for investigation and resolution (Diocese of Salford, 2024; Pilani, 2024). Through this culture of vigilance and equipping its members with the tools to recognize and report abuse, the Church fulfills its biblical calling to protect the vulnerable and uphold justice.

### **3.3. Pastoral Care for Victims**

Providing pastoral care to victims of abuse is a sacred obligation that reflects the Church's commitment to compassion, justice, and healing (Diocese of Salford, 2024). Psalm 34:18 affirms God's closeness to the brokenhearted, inspiring the Church to embody this divine care for those who have suffered harm. Victims often carry deep emotional, physical, and spiritual wounds, and the Church has a critical role in addressing these complex needs. Pastoral care begins with compassionate listening, as research has consistently shown that victims must feel heard, valued, and understood, free from judgment or skepticism (Gamino et al., 2009). Studies indicate that priests, lay counselors, and pastoral workers must undergo specialized training to provide empathetic support in a safe and confidential space. Access to professional counseling is another essential aspect of care, with research supporting that diocesan policies should ensure survivors have access to tailored psychological and spiritual support.

Spiritual healing represents a vital dimension of recovery for many victims. Through structured interventions like prayer services, retreats, and spiritual direction, the Church can offer opportunities for reconciliation and restoration of faith. Justice and advocacy are also integral to pastoral care, as demonstrated by multiple studies on institutional accountability. Research emphasizes that the Church must ensure transparency in investigations, hold perpetrators accountable, and collaborate with civil authorities (Dubnick, 2003). Community support has been identified as crucial to combating the isolation many victims experience. Studies show the Church should encourage networks of care within its community, ensuring victims feel a sense of belonging and support. Practical steps, such as establishing diocesan victim-support teams and offering financial assistance for therapy or legal representation, have proven effective in supporting recovery. Evidence suggests that regular evaluation and feedback from survivors can help improve pastoral care initiatives. By prioritizing pastoral care, research indicates the Church can better reflect Christ's compassion and healing while restoring dignity to those affected (Mateer, 2015).



### **3.4. Accountability for Accused Individuals**

Accountability mechanisms are critical for addressing abuse allegations with fairness, transparency, and justice. Fair and thorough investigations are essential to maintaining justice. Allegations must be examined impartially, safeguarding the dignity and rights of both victims and accused individuals (Holder & Dearing, 2024; Kanu et al., 2024). Canon Law provides clear directives for handling clerics guilty of grave offenses, including dismissal from the clerical state under Canon 1395 §2. Collaboration with civil authorities is equally important. Allegations must be reported in compliance with local laws, reflecting the Church's commitment to justice and accountability. Support for accused individuals during investigations is also necessary. While prioritizing the safety and dignity of victims, the Church should ensure that accused individuals receive pastoral care and supervision, recognizing their inherent dignity (Visser, 2012).. By enforcing accountability mechanisms, the Church upholds its commitment to justice, transparency, and the safeguarding of all individuals, reaffirming its role as a moral and spiritual leader.

### **3.5. Education and Training**

Education and training are indispensable for creating a vigilant and caring Church environment that prioritizes the protection of the vulnerable. Canon 231 underscores the necessity of proper formation for all Church personnel, stating, "Lay persons who are permanently or temporarily employed by the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation." This canonical directive highlights the Church's responsibility to ensure that all individuals involved in its mission are adequately equipped to fulfill their roles in safeguarding. To achieve this, the Church must establish and sustain comprehensive training programs. Regular workshops and seminars should be designed to equip clergy, staff, and volunteers with the skills and knowledge needed to recognize, respond to, and prevent abuse. These sessions should cover practical aspects of safeguarding while incorporating examples that resonate with the specific contexts in which Church personnel operate.

Additionally, integrating safeguarding training with spiritual and theological formation can significantly enhance its effectiveness. The inclusion of the responsibility to protect the vulnerable alongside biblical teachings and the Church's moral mission, there is a deeper commitment to safeguarding as a core aspect of ministry. Tailored curricula are also essential to address the diverse responsibilities within the Church. For instance, parish priests, catechists, and lay volunteers often encounter different challenges, necessitating specialized training (Kanu et al., 2024). When programmes are customized to meet these unique needs, the Church



can ensure that every individual is well-prepared to contribute to a culture of safeguarding. Prioritizing education in this way builds awareness, competency, and accountability across all levels of Church leadership and service.

### **3.6. *Communication and Awareness***

Transparent and effective communication of safeguarding policies is vital for building trust and ensuring widespread awareness within the Church community. When policies and procedures are clearly articulated and accessible, they empower clergy, laity, and the wider community to take collective responsibility for the safety of vulnerable individuals (Russell & Higgins, 2020). Safeguarding guidelines must be simple, clear, and readily available to all Church members. These guidelines should be prominently displayed in parishes, schools, and other Church-run institutions, making them an integral part of the Church's operational framework. Accessibility ensures that everyone understands the policies and knows how to report concerns or incidents.

Engaging awareness campaigns play a crucial role in emphasizing the Church's commitment to protection and justice. Regular workshops, homilies, publications, and social media outreach can be used to promote safeguarding measures and encourage a culture of vigilance. Such efforts should aim to educate the community on recognizing signs of abuse and understanding the procedures for reporting it, ensuring that no one feels isolated or powerless in addressing these issues. Creating feedback mechanisms is equally important. Encouraging dialogue within the Church community allows for the identification of gaps in safeguarding practices and offers an opportunity to refine policies based on real-world challenges and insights. Through transparent communication and open feedback, the Church demonstrates its dedication to accountability and its unwavering mission to protect the vulnerable (Russell & Higgins, 2020).

### **3.7. *Monitoring and Evaluation***

To ensure that safeguarding measures remain effective and adaptable, the Church must commit to ongoing monitoring and evaluation of its practices (FAME Foundation Child Protection Policy, 2023). As stewards of trust and care, the Church is called to maintain the highest standards of accountability and protection. Regular audits are a critical component of this commitment. Annual reviews of safeguarding practices, including inspections of Church-run institutions, ensure adherence to established policies and allow for the identification of areas that require improvement. These reviews should be thorough and systematic, addressing all aspects of safeguarding implementation.



Incorporating external oversight further enhances the credibility and impartiality of the evaluation process. Partnering with independent organizations or agencies to conduct audits not only reinforces the Church's commitment to transparency but also builds trust among the faithful and the wider community. Finally, based on the findings of these evaluations, the Church must develop and implement actionable strategies to address any weaknesses identified. These action plans should be forward-thinking, focusing on continuous improvement in safeguarding policies and practices. The Church reinforces its dedication to protecting the vulnerable, maintaining integrity, and fulfilling its moral and spiritual responsibilities, by committing to rigorous monitoring and evaluation.

#### **4. Challenges**

##### **4.1. *Cultural Stigmas and Silence Surrounding Abuse***

Sexual abuse remains a taboo subject in many cultures, often surrounded by stigmas that hinder open discussion and reporting. In societies where such abuse is considered shameful, victims frequently fear ostracism, blame, or even retaliation. This fear prevents many from coming forward, leaving perpetrators unpunished and abuse unaddressed. The silence around these issues perpetuates a cycle of suffering and injustice, further alienating victims from the support they need. (Schomerus et al., 2021; Fontes & Plummer, 2010). The Church, while positioned as a moral authority, is not immune to the impact of these cultural barriers. Its hierarchical structure sometimes unintentionally exacerbates this silence, as both clergy and laity might view acknowledging abuse as a threat to the Church's reputation (O'Hanlonz, 2010). This mindset often leads to a culture of denial or concealment, which undermines trust and justice. Pope Francis has called for a "continuous and profound conversion of hearts" to address this deeply entrenched issue. The Church must model transparency and compassion, showing that protecting victims and ensuring accountability takes precedence over institutional reputation (Beste, 2021).

##### **4.2. *Limited Resources for Implementing Safeguarding Policies***

Implementing effective safeguarding measures requires substantial investment in both human and financial resources (Gray, 2025). However, many dioceses, particularly in resource-constrained regions like Nigeria, struggle to meet these demands. Pope Francis's (2019) *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* highlights a critical gap in training and awareness among clergy, volunteers, and staff. Without proper education on recognizing, responding to, and preventing abuse, even the best-intentioned policies are



unlikely to succeed (Baker et al., 2016). Furthermore, the infrastructure needed to create and sustain safe environments often remains inadequate. Regular audits, risk assessments, and the establishment of safeguarding protocols demand dedicated personnel and funding, which are frequently unavailable. This lack of resources poses a significant barrier to progress, leaving vulnerable individuals without adequate protection and the Church exposed to ongoing risks.

#### **4.3. Weak Enforcement of Civil and Ecclesiastical Laws**

Although Nigeria has enacted robust laws like the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act to address abuse, enforcement remains inconsistent. Victims frequently encounter systemic challenges, including corruption within the legal system, societal stigma, and a lack of access to legal support. These obstacles often discourage victims from seeking justice, perpetuating cycles of abuse and impunity. Within the Church, Canon Law provides strong provisions against abuse, such as Canon 1395, which prescribes penalties for clergy who commit sexual offenses. However, the enforcement of these ecclesiastical laws has been uneven. In this regard, Pope Francis's (2019) *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* underscores the importance of accountability among Church leaders, noting that bishops and superiors who fail to act responsibly in abuse cases risk removal from office. This highlights the urgent need for consistent application of Church laws to ensure justice and deter misconduct. The concept of vicarious liability further underscores the stakes for the Church. This legal principle holds the Church accountable for abuses committed by its clergy or volunteers in the course of their duties (Schmitt, 2019; Rainer, 2019). Without robust safeguarding measures and strict enforcement, the Church risks not only moral and spiritual failure but also significant legal and financial liabilities. This dual vulnerability makes it imperative for the Church to adopt proactive measures that protect individuals and uphold its credibility as a moral institution.

#### **Recommendations**

- i. To effectively address the challenges of abuse and safeguard the vulnerable, it is essential to strengthen collaboration between the Church and civil authorities. This collaboration should ensure justice is served by leveraging the strengths of both ecclesiastical and legal systems. Civil authorities must be engaged in implementing laws that protect minors and vulnerable adults, while the Church must demonstrate transparency in reporting and addressing abuse cases. Such partnerships can create a unified front against abuse and reinforce the credibility of both institutions.



- ii. Investment in theological education is another critical recommendation. By aligning safeguarding measures with scriptural principles, the Church can instill a deeper understanding of the moral, spiritual, and ethical obligations of protecting the vulnerable. Theological training programs should integrate safeguarding policies into the broader framework of Church teachings, emphasizing the sacred duty to uphold human dignity and justice. This approach ensures clergy and Church workers are well-equipped to recognize and prevent abuse while adhering to biblical and moral values.
- iii. Mechanisms for addressing historical cases of abuse must also be established. These mechanisms should include safe and confidential avenues for victims to report past abuses, with clear guidelines for investigating and providing redress. The Church should adopt a pastoral approach to support survivors, combining legal accountability with compassionate care. By addressing historical cases openly and fairly, the Church demonstrates its commitment to justice and healing, fostering trust among the faithful.
- iv. Cultural re-education within the Church is vital for combating the stigmas surrounding abuse. The Church must actively work to create an environment of openness and support for victims, challenging harmful cultural norms that perpetuate silence and shame. Educational campaigns, homilies, and community outreach can help reshape attitudes, emphasizing that seeking justice for abuse is not an attack on the Church but a step toward its renewal and integrity.
- v. Adequate resource allocation is imperative for the success of safeguarding initiatives. The Church must prioritize funding and training to build the infrastructure necessary for creating safe environments. This includes training clergy, staff, and volunteers in safeguarding protocols, conducting audits, and providing the necessary human and financial resources to implement policies effectively. Investing in these areas reflects the Church's dedication to the well-being of the vulnerable and the credibility of its mission.
- vi. Lastly, it is essential to strengthen accountability mechanisms to ensure justice and prevention. This involves rigorous enforcement of both civil and ecclesiastical laws, holding perpetrators accountable, and ensuring that Church leaders act responsibly when addressing allegations. Accountability measures must be clear, consistent, and widely communicated, creating a culture of zero tolerance for abuse. By taking decisive action against negligence and misconduct, the Church can restore trust and demonstrate its commitment to protecting



the vulnerable and upholding its moral and spiritual responsibilities.

### Conclusion

The issue of sexual abuse within the Church underscores a critical intersection of theology, canon law, and civil legal frameworks. This paper has demonstrated that safeguarding vulnerable individuals is not merely an administrative obligation but a profound moral and theological imperative, deeply rooted in the Church's mission to embody Christ's compassion and justice. By integrating canonical provisions, such as those outlined in *Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela* and *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, with Nigerian laws like the Child Rights Act (2003) and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015), the Church is equipped to address abuse comprehensively. The analysis highlights the devastating impact of abuse on victims and the broader faith community, emphasizing the need for robust safeguarding measures that prioritize prevention, accountability, and healing. While significant progress has been made through initiatives like the Nigerian Catholic Bishops' Conference's *Call to Love* and *Guidelines for Processing Cases of Sexual Abuse*, persistent challenges – such as cultural stigmas, enforcement gaps, and resource constraints – must be addressed to achieve meaningful reform.

This study proposes actionable strategies, including promoting collaboration between Church and civil authorities, aligning safeguarding measures with biblical principles, addressing historical abuse cases, and investing in education and cultural re-education. These efforts must be underpinned by a commitment to transparency and accountability, ensuring that justice is served, and victims are supported in their journey toward healing. By and large, the Church's response to abuse must reflect its dual mission of pastoral care and moral leadership. By strengthening safeguarding structures and promoting a culture of vigilance and compassion, the Nigerian Church can uphold its responsibility to protect the vulnerable, restore trust, and serve as a witness to the transformative power of justice and mercy. This approach not only fulfills the Church's spiritual and ethical mandate but also reinforces its credibility as a moral beacon in society.

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