

Contemporary Developments in Catholic Safeguarding and Their Significance for Carmelite Ministry

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Abstract

Recent developments in Catholic safeguarding have reshaped the Church's understanding of ministry, authority, accountability, conscience and pastoral care. This article examines reform in canon law, survivor participation, national and universal safeguarding standards, recognition of spiritual and conscience abuse, trauma-informed ministry and organisational learning. Drawing on a range of Catholic and interdisciplinary scholars, it argues that safeguarding is not merely regulatory compliance but a continuing pastoral, theological and institutional conversion. A concluding section applies these insights to Carmelite ministry through the themes of truthfulness, humility, contemplative attention, freedom of conscience and reverence for the person.

Introduction

Safeguarding is now a central concern for Catholic ministry worldwide. Earlier approaches often concentrated on procedural compliance and risk management. Recent reforms place greater emphasis on culture, the responsible exercise of power, survivor participation, transparent governance and the quality of pastoral response (Faggioli, 2019; Zollner, 2019).

This article draws on a broad body of Catholic and interdisciplinary safeguarding scholarship. Fernández examines abuse of conscience and institutional responsibility; Demasure explores how coercive spiritual relationships can erode identity and faith; Oakley, Kinmond and Humphreys identify the characteristics of spiritual abuse and the cultures that sustain it; de Weger and Death analyse the misuse of professional and spiritual power; and Faggioli presents the abuse crisis as a theological and ecclesiological challenge. Zollner contributes a child-centred theological perspective and a global analysis of safeguarding culture. Read together, these scholars show that safeguarding concerns personal conduct, institutional

systems, pastoral relationships and the meanings attached to religious authority (de Weger and Death, 2017; Oakley, Kinmond and Humphreys, 2018; Faggioli, 2019; Zollner, 2019; Fernández, 2021; Demasure, 2022).

Faggioli's argument provides an important frame for the discussion that follows. Writing after the renewed global reckoning of 2018–2019, he contends that the crisis cannot be understood only as a matter of individual wrongdoing, criminal investigation or administrative failure. It has also unsettled Catholic accounts of Church history, sacramental and liturgical authority, episcopal governance, reform, lay participation and the relationship between ecclesial and civil jurisdiction. On this reading, safeguarding reform is theological as well as procedural: it requires the Church to examine how authority is imagined, how institutional memory is constructed, how trust is sustained, and how responsibility is shared across the whole ecclesial community (Faggioli, 2019).

The discussion is organised around seven connected themes: canonical accountability, listening to those harmed, national standards, global safeguarding principles, spiritual abuse, trauma-informed ministry, and learning through audit and case-based practice. A separate section then considers how these developments can inform Carmelite ministry.

Canon Law Reform and Accountability

The most significant recent canonical development has been the establishment of permanent procedures through *Vos estis lux mundi*. These reforms strengthened mechanisms for reporting abuse, provided protections for those reporting concerns, explicitly recognised vulnerable adults within safeguarding frameworks, and extended accountability beyond clerics to include relevant lay leaders of associations recognised by the Holy See (Francis, 2023).

These developments represent a substantial shift in ecclesial thinking. Accountability is no longer confined to the actions of individual perpetrators but extends to systems, governance structures and leadership cultures (Faggioli, 2019; Fernández, 2022).

The Vatican established a joint working group in November 2024 to study whether “spiritual abuse” should be classified as a distinct offence in canon law, with its chairmanship confirmed in October 2025 (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith,

2024; Ambrose, 2025). Unless and until a specific delict is created, safeguarding and canonical processes should identify the conduct involved and apply existing norms rather than assume that the descriptive term itself establishes liability. Legal reform is therefore necessary but insufficient: accountability also depends on transparent decision-making, scrutiny of leadership and a culture in which concerns can be raised without retaliation (Fernández, 2022).

Listening to Those Harmed

Contemporary safeguarding gives greater priority to the voices of people who report harm. Good practice requires more than correct procedure: those affected should be heard with respect, offered appropriate pastoral support and, where they wish, involved in shaping policy, training and institutional improvement (Fernández, 2022; Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, 2026a).

The Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency's 2026 thematic review organised survivor experience around several critical areas, including the initial response to disclosure, continuing support, communication, power imbalances and governance. It also highlights the need for consistent written standards, dependable information management, inclusive practice and survivor participation in organisational learning. Institutions should therefore test not only whether policies exist, but whether their everyday responses are accessible, trustworthy and humane (Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, 2026a).

Listening must move beyond passive consultation. Survivor accounts can reveal patterns of behaviour, barriers to disclosure and institutional blind spots that policy review alone may miss. Survivors should be regarded not only as recipients of care but, where they choose, as partners in policy development, formation and institutional learning. This approach is supported across the literature: Demasure centres the effects of coercion on the person, while Fernández insists that responsibility must not be displaced onto those harmed (Demasure, 2022; Fernández, 2022).

CSSA Standards and Local Accountability

The Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency has established eight safeguarding standards that now shape expectations across dioceses and religious life groups in England and Wales (Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, n.d.a). These standards address:

- Leadership and culture
- Communication
- Care for those harmed
- Allegations management
- Respondent support
- Human resources
- Training
- Quality assurance

The standards are significant because they address organisational culture as well as procedural compliance (Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, n.d.a).

Standard Three, which concerns care for those harmed, is particularly important. It recognises that safeguarding systems should be evaluated not only by whether procedures are completed, but also by the quality of care experienced by those who disclose harm (Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, n.d.a).

Global Safeguarding Principles and the Pontifical Commission

The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors has developed a Universal Guidelines Framework to support safeguarding across diverse ecclesial and cultural settings; as of 2026, the consolidated framework remained provisional pending submission for approval (Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, 2026).

The framework sets out principles, criteria and indicators intended to provide minimum expectations while allowing responsible adaptation to local circumstances (Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, 2026).

Its value lies in encouraging movement from fragmented local responses towards shared safeguarding expectations. Implementation requires more than technical compliance: it depends on an ethos of dignity, accountability and transparency that can be expressed appropriately in different cultures. Global guidance should therefore complement, rather than replace, national standards and local responsibility (Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, 2026).

Spiritual Abuse and the Misuse of Authority

Recognition of spiritual abuse is one of the most important contemporary developments in safeguarding. It concerns the misuse of religious authority, spiritual practices, obedience, formation or theological language to manipulate, control, silence or exploit another person (Oakley, Kinmond and Humphreys, 2018; Fernández, 2021; Demasure, 2022).

A useful definition treats spiritual abuse as a patterned use of religion rather than as a label for every theological disagreement or pastoral error. Its central features are a faith context, an imbalance of power, sustained or systematic conduct, the use of sacred language or practice to secure compliance, and actual or foreseeable harm. This conduct-based approach protects procedural fairness while recognising that religious authority can intensify psychological, emotional, relational, sexual, financial or institutional injury (Oakley, Kinmond and Humphreys, 2018; Demasure, 2022; Hürten *et al.*, 2025).

For assessment purposes, the conduct can be considered across five domains: misuse of power and authority; coercive use of doctrine, Scripture, prayer, confession or claims of divine sanction; restriction of autonomy and excessive accountability; isolation, secrecy and community control; and emotional, psychological or identity-based harm. No single indicator proves spiritual abuse. A sound assessment considers the overall pattern, the context and power relationship,

the methods used, the impact, corroborating evidence and any overlap with established safeguarding categories (Oakley, Kinmond and Humphreys, 2018; Oakley and Humphreys, 2019).

Fernández places abuse of conscience at the centre of the Catholic dimension of this problem. It arises when ecclesial mediation exceeds its proper limits and an authority figure substitutes personal judgement for another person's discernment while claiming to express God's will. The institutional setting is crucial: ordination, religious profession, vows of obedience, sacramental ministry, canon law and formation structures can lend authority credibility and deepen dependency. Responsibility must therefore be examined at the level of governance, supervision and culture, not reduced to one minister's intentions or to assumptions about a victim's vulnerability (Fernández, 2021; Fernández, 2022).

Safeguarding must therefore address both misconduct and the conditions that allow it to occur. Religious communities require particular vigilance because authority and obedience are embedded in their spiritual language. Practices intended to support growth can become harmful when they are separated from accountability, proportionality and respect for personal freedom (Fernández, 2021; Demasure, 2022; Oakley, Kinmond and Blundell, 2024).

Warning signs include pressure to disclose intimate material without a clear formative purpose; the transfer of information from spiritual direction into suitability decisions; the interpretation of disagreement, distress or trauma responses as evidence of pride or lack of vocation; discouragement from consulting family, therapists, canon lawyers, safeguarding personnel or independent spiritual advisers; demands for exclusivity; and retaliation when a person changes director, ends direction or reports a concern (Oakley and Humphreys, 2019; Fernández, 2021; Oakley, Kinmond and Blundell, 2024).

Formation and spiritual direction are especially sensitive because they combine disclosure, trust, obedience, discernment and vocational dependency. Safe practice requires clear criteria, competent supervision, documented decisions and genuine routes of appeal. It should also protect the distinction between the internal forum of confession or spiritual accompaniment and the external forum of governance and suitability assessment; separate accompaniment from evaluation wherever possible;

manage conflicts of interest and dual roles; prohibit retaliation; and provide independent access to safeguarding advice. Healthy accompaniment proposes, clarifies and supports discernment; it does not dictate, invade, threaten or appropriate conscience (Apostolic Penitentiary, 2019; Fernández, 2021; Demasure, 2022).

Several scholars illuminate different dimensions of this problem. Fernández explains abuse of conscience and the institutional responsibilities that accompany ecclesial authority (Fernández, 2021; Fernández, 2022). Demasure describes how control, intrusion and dependency can produce loss of self and damage faith (Demasure, 2022). Oakley and colleagues offer definitions and practical guidance for identifying spiritually abusive cultures (Oakley, Kinmond and Humphreys, 2018; Oakley and Humphreys, 2019). De Weger and Death show how professional and spiritual roles may combine to intensify power, while Faggioli locates safeguarding failure within a wider theological and ecclesiological crisis (de Weger and Death, 2017; Faggioli, 2019). Zollner's contribution is best understood alongside these perspectives: his child-centred theology, attention to the spiritual wounds of abuse and global concern with safeguarding culture emphasise both the dignity of the person and the Church's responsibility to learn (Zollner, 2018; Zollner, 2019). No single account is sufficient; together, they connect theology, survivor experience, psychology, governance and safeguarding practice.

Trauma-Informed Ministry and Pastoral Care

Trauma-informed ministry recognises that trauma can affect memory, trust, disclosure, participation, relationships and spiritual experience. Safeguarding processes can therefore support recovery or unintentionally compound harm. The task is not to diagnose trauma or prejudge allegations, but to design responses that promote safety, clarity, choice and trustworthy communication (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014; Turnbloom *et al.*, 2022; Durkin *et al.*, 2025).

SAMHSA's framework gives organisational form to this pastoral insight. A trauma-informed Church seeks to understand trauma's possible effects, recognise signs

without diagnosing or prejudging allegations, incorporate that knowledge into policy and practice, and avoid re-traumatisation. Its principles include safety, trustworthiness, transparency, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, voice, choice and attention to cultural and historical context. These principles require changes in governance and process, not simply sensitivity in individual encounters (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

In practice, this means explaining confidentiality and decision-making authority; offering choices about communication and support; assessing the risk of retaliation; allowing factual records to be corrected; avoiding forced confrontation or premature reconciliation; and ensuring that investigations are not controlled by associates of the respondent. Trauma-informed practice complements rather than replaces evidence, due process, canon law and specialist clinical care (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014; Oakley, Kinmond and Blundell, 2024).

Learning from Audit and Case-Based Practice

Audit is an important means of organisational learning and accountability in Catholic safeguarding, particularly where institutions must identify recurrent gaps between formal commitments and the experience of those who depend on them (Smith and Freyd, 2014; Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, 2026a).

A well-designed audit examines safeguarding culture, governance, leadership, survivor engagement and the effectiveness of systems. Its purpose is not merely to confirm that policies exist, but to identify the gap between formal expectations and lived practice (Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, n.d.a; Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, 2026a).

Audit should function not merely as quality assurance but as a catalyst for institutional learning. Policies must be tested against practice, findings converted into accountable action plans and repeated weaknesses monitored over time. This requires leaders who can receive criticism without treating scrutiny as a threat to reputation (Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, n.d.a; Faggioli, 2019).

Case-Based Learning and Safeguarding Competence

Anonymised safeguarding vignettes are valuable because competence develops through applied judgement as well as theoretical knowledge (Oakley, Kinmond and Humphreys, 2018; Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, n.d.a).

After each vignette, participants should be encouraged to identify:

- What concerns are present?
- What risks might exist?
- What safeguarding indicators can be observed?
- What further information is required?
- What actions or referrals may be necessary?

The aim is not to solve complex cases instantly but to strengthen recognition, reflection, escalation and professional judgement. Case discussion should attend to power dynamics, uncertainty, immediate safety, referral thresholds, the limits of participants' roles and the need for specialist advice. Research on case-based learning suggests that realistic cases help learners connect theory to practice, engage actively with uncertainty and develop problem-solving and decision-making skills (McLean, 2016).

Carmelite Safeguarding: A Coherent Pastoral Framework

The Carmelite tradition offers a language of human dignity, truthfulness, humility, self-knowledge, contemplative attention and freedom before God. These values support safeguarding only when they take institutional form through accountable governance, sound formation, supervision and accessible routes for challenge (Teresa of Ávila, 1980; Fullam, 2014; John of the Cross, 1991).

Teresa of Ávila's emphasis on humility, consultation and honest self-knowledge challenges leadership that confuses authority with control or the protection of institutional reputation. Her image of the person as sacred interior space provides a

theological basis for respecting dignity, privacy and conscience (Teresa of Ávila, 1980; Fullam, 2014). John of the Cross's warnings against possessive spiritual direction similarly support accompaniment that helps a person become freer before God rather than dependent upon a human guide (John of the Cross, 1991).

In practice, this means separating spiritual accompaniment from suitability assessment wherever possible; preserving the distinction between internal and external forums; supervising directors and formators; documenting significant decisions; using plural decision-making; managing conflicts of interest; and providing independent reporting, support and appeal routes. It also means prohibiting retaliation and ensuring that distress, disagreement or a decision to change spiritual director is not treated as evidence of deficient faith or vocation (Apostolic Penitentiary, 2019; Oakley and Humphreys, 2019; Fernández, 2021).

Carmelite safeguarding materials already connect the creation of sacred and safe spaces with leadership, survivor response, policy, training and guidance for spiritual directors. This provides an organisational foundation for a distinctively Carmelite safeguarding culture, provided that spiritual language is matched by transparent practice, independent scrutiny and a willingness to learn. Research on institutional betrayal reinforces the importance of supportive responses and institutional courage where people depend upon religious organisations for protection, identity and belonging (Smith and Freyd, 2014; Goertzen and Yancey, 2025).

Conclusion

Catholic safeguarding now extends well beyond the administration of allegations. Reform in canon law, survivor participation, safeguarding standards, global guidance, recognition of spiritual and conscience abuse, trauma-informed practice and audit all point towards a culture in which authority is transparent, reviewable and accountable.

The scholarship is strongest when read as a conversation rather than through one dominant voice. Zollner contributes a child-centred theology and a global account of safeguarding culture (Zollner, 2018; Zollner, 2019). Fernández clarifies abuse of conscience and ecclesial responsibility (Fernández, 2021; Fernández, 2022). Demasure describes the erosion of identity and faith (Demasure, 2022). Oakley and

colleagues translate research on spiritual abuse into practice guidance (Oakley, Kinmond and Humphreys, 2018; Oakley and Humphreys, 2019; Oakley, Kinmond and Blundell, 2024). De Weger and Death analyse professional and spiritual power, while Faggioli identifies the theological and ecclesiological scale of reform (de Weger and Death, 2017; Faggioli, 2019). Survivor-informed and trauma-informed evidence tests all these accounts against lived experience (Smith and Freyd, 2014; Durkin *et al.*, 2025).

For Carmelite ministry, safeguarding is therefore not an external requirement added to spiritual life. It is a practical expression of humility, truthfulness, reverence for conscience and compassionate accompaniment. Its credibility will be shown in structures that protect freedom, welcome scrutiny, learn from those harmed and ensure that pastoral authority serves rather than possesses the person.

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