



# **The Tripod of Relational Safety Model: Building a Safeguarding Culture in the Church**

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## AUTHORS' NOTE

In 2017, Dr. Gabriel Dy-Liacco, then a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors and presently the president of the Catholic Safeguarding Institute (CSI), observed a gap in the work of safeguarding. Prevailing intellectual discussions, although critical, did not guarantee action on the ground.

While there seemed to be a general agreement on the need for changes in the Church, the challenge seemed to lie in this: How do we move people and institutions to live out safeguarding of vulnerable persons?

Clearly, understanding and propagating a safeguarding perspective required a formative approach, beyond discussions on guidelines and structures. This was the context when Carmen first conceptualized the Tripod of Relational Safety Model in 2017, as a contribution to the developing body of knowledge in the field of safeguarding.

Since then, the model has been employed in the safeguarding work of CSI and further articulated in the different aspects of our work, such as sexuality and affectivity, formation, communities, ministries, spirituality of safeguarding, by colleagues at the Institute.

Coleen has worked with this model since 2019 and later introduced the concepts of Safe Workforce and Safe Workspace as hand-in-hand in Safe Ministry.

We are both alumnae (Carmen in 2017 and Coleen in 2023) of the Diploma in Safeguarding of Minors at the Pontifical Gregorian University.

This framework paper describes our understanding of the sexual abuse crisis within the Catholic Church and broader society, and introduces the Tripod of Relational Safety Model, the safeguarding framework that grounds CSI's work. CSI hopes to publish further articles building on the foundations laid out here.

# CONTEXT

## History

In recent decades, sexual abuse within the Catholic Church has drawn intense attention, especially after prominent media reports in the 1980s (De Boer, 2019; Park, 2017). The scale of cases is staggering and widespread. Yet sexual abuse, whether in society or the Church, is not new; it has existed throughout history (Dy-Liacco, personal communication, 2020). Clerical sexual abuse, likewise, dates back to the Church's earliest days (Child Rights International Network, 2014). Church laws addressing sexual misconduct go as far back as the 4th century, prohibiting disordered sexual behavior, imposing disciplinary sanctions, restricting offenders' ministry and access to minors, and encouraging collaboration with civil authorities (Dy-Liacco, personal communication, 2020).

Beyond the abuse of minors, however, the issue has broadened to include adults, who are likely abused within pastoral settings (Liemgruber, 2022), and in recent years, to women religious (Winfield & Muhumuza, 2018; Gonzalez Casas, 2025). In 2019, Pope Francis became the first pope to publicly acknowledge the sexual abuse of nuns by clergy (Lavanga & Siemaszko, 2019).

History reveals sexual abuse as both a global and systemic Church problem. If it were isolated, it could have been eradicated early. Instead, it persisted, enabled by the misuse of power and trust vested in clergy and the institution. Investigative research, such as The Boston Globe's reporting in 2002, suggests why: the Church's response focused on self-protection through denial, secrecy, cover-up, legalism, and silencing victims (Rezendes, 2002). By prioritizing its reputation and assets much like a business organization, it ignored the gravity of abuse and neglected victims' healing, causing further harm (National Review Board, 2004, as cited in Barth, 2010; Driscoll, 2021; Rosetti, n.d.). Ultimately, in protecting itself, the Church abandoned its primary role as guardian of the spiritual and human well-being of its people, especially the vulnerable (Barth, 2019; Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse [IICSA], 2020).

When it comes to women in this issue, research also presents a complex picture. McPhillips and McEwan (2022) report that women religious have been "subjected to significant levels of widespread sexual abuse by clerical perpetrators across the globe for most of the 20th century." Yet, they also note that women religious were also instrumental in facilitating networks of clerical perpetrators. The scope of the women religious as perpetrators remains difficult to determine (McPhillips & McEwan, 2022). There is "often incredulity when it comes to believing that women religious could perpetrate abuse." (McPhillips & McEwan, 2022)

With all this, further analysis points to the root of sexual abuse by clergy and religious and inaction against it: clericalism. It is a culture of excessive deference to priests and religious, and their disproportionate privilege and authority that diminishes the status and agency of the laity they ought to serve (Barth, 2019; Rubio & Schutz, 2022). Pope Francis (2018a, para. 6) has repeatedly warned against this:

***“The lack of consciousness of belonging to God’s faithful people as servants, and not masters, can lead us to one of the temptations that is most damaging to the missionary outreach that we are called to promote: clericalism, which ends up as a caricature of the vocation we have received. A failure to realize that the mission belongs to the entire Church, and not to the individual priest or bishop, limits the horizon, and even worse, stifles all the initiatives that the Spirit may be awakening in our midst.”***

Moreover, scholars emphasize that clericalism is a structural reality shaped by dynamics of sex, gender, and power (Rubio & Schutz, 2022). Historically, a lack of sexual integration among priests, combined with assumed male dominance and unchecked authority tied to the ordained status, created a toxic mix fueling abuse and its perpetuation (Rubio & Schutz, 2022).

As these offenses accumulated over decades, the underlying issues of the church came to the fore as it lost sight of its theological and pastoral role (Barth, 2010). Pope Francis cautioned against this narrow-mindedness of reducing clergy sexual abuse to a mere organizational problem that is to be solved by management reforms alone. Instead, it demands conversion reflected in how the Church and its people pray, handle power and money, exercise authority, and relate to others. Only through organizational efforts led by evangelical power can the Church become a “credible witness” of the Gospel.

### **Beginning of Change**

In the wake of its institutional failures in addressing sexual abuse, the Church has recently taken significant steps to prevent abuse and safeguard the welfare and dignity of all who come to it, especially minors and vulnerable adults. Pope Francis (2018b, para. 6) affirmed this commitment, stating:

***“If, in the past, the response was one of omission, today we want solidarity, in the deepest and most challenging sense, to become our way of forging present and future history.”***

In 2014, Pope Francis established the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors to guide Church structures in developing proactive and appropriate measures for safeguarding vulnerable persons (Francis, 2014). In 2019, an unprecedented Vatican summit gathered all heads of bishops' conferences worldwide to listen to victims' testimonies and set global guidelines for addressing and combating sexual abuse (Held & Poggioli, 2019). By 2021, changes to Canon Law explicitly criminalized clerical sexual abuse, extended the statute of limitations, mandated reporting of cases by all clergy and religious, and imposed penalties on superiors and bishops negligent in handling cases (BBC, 2021). The Church also issued detailed procedures for reporting, investigation, and victim support. All dioceses were required to establish systems for receiving and managing abuse reports, leading most to create dedicated safeguarding offices.

These measures aim to ensure that every allegation, without exception or favor, is taken seriously. The Church has begun dismantling structures of misplaced power and privilege that caused grave harm, and demonstrating its solidarity with victims and survivors.

Since his succession to Pope Francis, Pope Leo XIV has continued to express the call to safeguarding. In September 2025, he directed 192 new bishops to confront clergy sexual abuse and not hide allegations of misconduct (Wooden, 2025). To the National Safeguarding Conference of the Philippines in October 2025, he sent a message relaying this commitment:

***“The Church is our spiritual home, as such every parish and pastoral activity is meant to be a space in which we glorify God and care for others, especially children and the vulnerable. In this regard, I renew my appeal that there can be no tolerance for any form of abuse in the Church.”***

(Message of the Holy Father to the Delegates of the National Safeguarding Conference 2025 – Catholic Safeguarding Institute, 2025)

Yet, these efforts remain subject to criticism for being slow and uneven as sexual abuse persists. Implementation varies widely, and many argue that more must be done. Still, given its global reach, the Catholic Church remains a leading institution confronting this urgent issue that demands a meaningful and comprehensive response.

This article presents one such response: a safeguarding framework specifically designed to address sexual abuse. Grounded in Gospel values, it acknowledges cultural challenges within the Church while remaining adaptable across diverse contexts. Developed by the Catholic Safeguarding Institute (CSI), it is called the **Tripod of Relational Safety Model**.

Understanding this model first requires examining the problem of abuse, as discussed in the next section.

# UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

## Contexts of Vulnerable Persons

Safeguarding begins with understanding who is vulnerable to sexual abuse, particularly minors and vulnerable adults, and the circumstances that heighten their risk. This is critical because sexual abuse does not occur in isolation; it arises from an interplay of factors.

Vulnerable persons live within interconnected subsystems: individual, family, school, workplace, church, and society. While they may possess strengths and resources, they often face forces beyond their control. These subsystems must therefore provide the necessary support for at-risk individuals and communities to thrive despite their vulnerabilities. Sexual abuse is not merely a personal failing but a structural problem. It is not about a few “rotten apples” but a flawed “apple barrel” – a system that fosters a culture of abuse.

The situation becomes even more complex when it comes to women religious who find a dual reality – at once as vulnerable persons or victims and, in other cases, as perpetrators.

Addressing sexual violence requires safeguarding that operates on multiple fronts and transforming the structures that enable predatory behaviors, thus ensuring that vulnerable persons are protected and empowered across all dimensions of life. In the case of women religious, for example, there is a need to protect those who they minister, while they also protect themselves and their communities.

## The Current Gap in Safeguarding

Institutionally, the Catholic Church reveals gaps that have created space for sexual abuse. The crisis exposes its long-standing failure as a guardian to minors and vulnerable adults under its care. Victims and survivors have endured victim-blaming and the indignity of the Church’s self-protective response where perpetrators and those with responsibility and authority have evaded accountability.

Why has the Church failed as guardian of those entrusted to its care? What in its environment fosters insecurity and enables a culture of abuse? Root causes identified include clericalism, misuse of power, patriarchy, superficial faith life, distorted bureaucracy, poor leadership, lack of transparency and accountability, secularism, and issues of sexuality.

This is a complex problem with no easy solutions. Its interwoven factors are difficult to define, incomplete, and constantly shifting. Spiritually, it is a sin – both personal and social – whose roots are manifold. Therefore, addressing sexual abuse demands a comprehensive approach.

# SAFEGUARDING AS A RESPONSE

## 1. Comparative Frameworks

Addressing abuse requires solutions that are nuanced, thorough, and multifaceted. Here, we discuss two such frameworks that have helped unravel the complex factors behind abuse and guide strategies for prevention and may be comparable to the safeguarding model later presented in this article.

The first is the **Social-Ecological Model**, widely applied by policy and development institutions to inform abuse prevention approaches. The second is the **Offending Moment Model**, designed to understand and prevent sexual abuse, particularly in pastoral ministry settings.

### a) Social-Ecological Model

The Social-Ecological Model depicts the individual at the center of nesting circles to illustrate how various systems shape a person's development and well-being (Kilanowski, 2017; UNICEF, n.d.). These levels of influence are: **individual, relationship, community, and societal** (Figure 1). Each level contains multiple factors that interact and affect one's quality of life.

These levels of influence are characterized as follows (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025):

- i. **Individual** - factors in one's biology, ethnicity, personal history, socio-economic status
- ii. **Relationship** - relationships with one's inner circle such as family, friends, peers, and partners
- iii. **Community** - environments where social relationships are formed such as schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, recreational and faith groups
- iv. **Societal** - social and cultural norms, public policies and social services in areas such as health, education, and livelihood that shape quality of life

Applied to abuse prevention, this model posits that risk for abuse is shaped by these same factors. Therefore, effective prevention requires action across all levels—reducing risk factors and strengthening protective factors in each level of influence, from individual circumstances and family resources to socio-economic structures, socio-cultural norms, and policies (CDC, 2025).

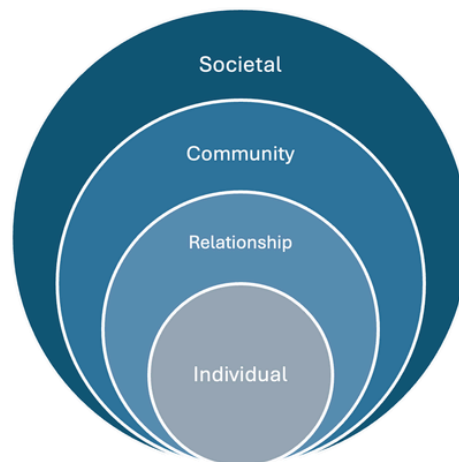


Figure 1. The Social-Ecological Model

### a) Offending Moment Model

According to Friberg & Laaser (1998), the Offending Moment Model identifies three risk factors that co-exist for sexual misconduct to occur:

- i. **The state of the offender** – traits or circumstances such as addiction, sexual immaturity, psychological or behavioral issues
- ii. **The vulnerability of the victim** – such as emotional distress, financial instability, or social isolation
- iii. **Stressful environment conditions** – such as unhealthy family dynamics, institutional neglect, or social conditions that either fail to protect the victim or enable the offender to act without intervention|

The “offending moment” occurs when these factors exist and intersect (Figure 2). A perfect storm happens when an offender targets a vulnerable person in an environment unable to protect the latter.

Of note, while vulnerability conditions can be identified, predicting behavior remains difficult. However, the model suggests that the greater the presence and weight of these factors, the higher the likelihood of sexual abuse.

Like the Social-Ecological Model, these contributing factors must be addressed collectively. In ministerial formation, for example, prevention should include thorough assessment of psychological and spiritual maturity, timely intervention, education on ministerial responsibility and power, and strategies to manage environmental risks.

### Building Towards a Safeguarding Model

Both frameworks deepen the understanding of violence and sexual abuse. The safeguarding model we present next builds on these concepts to offer a distinct proposal: that safeguarding makes a unique call to not just address abuse in an organizational manner but in a way that is transformative of persons, institutions, and society, is culture-shaping, and rooted in human dignity as proclaimed by the Gospel. The next section explores this perspective.

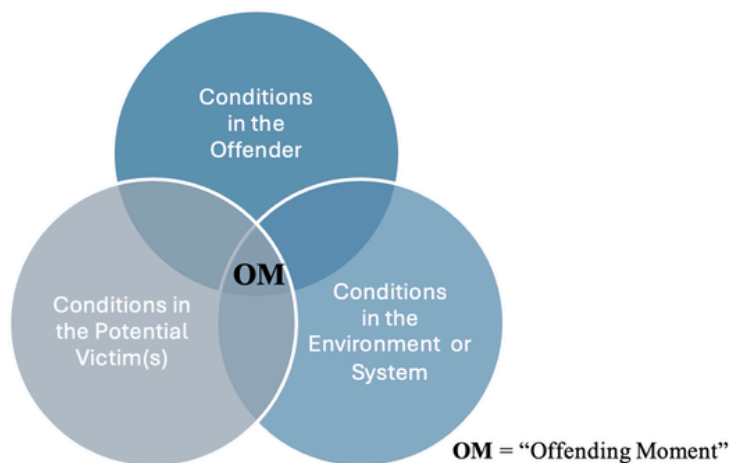


Figure 2. The Offending Moment Model (Friberg & Laaser, 1998)

## 2. Understanding Safeguarding

In the face of the reality of abuse of vulnerable persons, safeguarding emerges as an essential response with the aim to make the Church “the safest place on earth.”

To understand safeguarding, we begin with the familiar concept of **child protection**, which includes protecting vulnerable adults. Child protection focuses on actions taken when harm occurs or is imminent. Safeguarding’s scope, however, is wider: it addresses both **prevention** and **intervention**. Prevention involves measures to reduce or eliminate risk, while intervention refers to actions taken when harm is occurring or likely to occur.

In effect, safeguarding refers to actions undertaken to create and maintain safe environments. It must also be an institutional function, not just the responsibility of one or a few, because factors that contribute to abuse lie not only in the offenders but also in systems and environments.

This article proposes that safeguarding must be as nuanced as the risks it seeks to address. Safeguarding recognizes that sexual abuse is complex, like a multi-headed monster that must be fought in multiple fronts. These include the personal, familial, cultural, legal, spiritual, organizational, environmental, and political. Engagement across these domains involves interactions at various relational levels –personal, interpersonal, organizational, and societal –and must prioritize relational safety that ensures that individuals can work securely and meaningfully toward shared goals.

Building on this understanding, the Tripod of Relational Safety Model offers a safeguarding approach that fully embraces the complexity of abuse by engaging across all domains – personal, interpersonal, organizational, and societal – through a comprehensive framework rooted in relational safety. Moreover, aware of the pain caused by the Church’s previous self-protective stance, the Tripod fosters a listening Church, one that hears and responds to the cries of its people and moves decisively toward accountability, trust, and healing. It also emphasizes that sexual abuse not just a social issue but a spiritual sin that demands conversion and not just mere policy reform. The Tripod also appreciates existing prevention models but includes a distinct perspective that understands the spiritual dimension of the Church’s approach to social issues such as sexual abuse. In doing so, it offers a proactive, Gospel-centered framework that transforms safeguarding into a culture-making mission and lived expression of faith and solidarity.

# A SAFEGUARDING FRAMEWORK: THE TRIPOD OF RELATIONAL SAFETY MODEL

The **Tripod of Relational Safety Model** – or **Tripod Model** – is a comprehensive, integrated, faith-based safeguarding framework designed to promote a safeguarding culture within the Catholic Church and society. Its goal is to foster mutual care where human dignity is upheld at every relational level, enabling vulnerable persons to thrive and remain safeguarded from abuse, especially sexual abuse.

Rooted in relational safety, the model rests on three interdependent pillars: **Safe Self**, **Safe Community**, and **Safe Ministry**, all anchored in **Safe Spirituality**. Together, these elements form an orienting system, a witnessing presence, a process of becoming, and an adaptable pastoral approach. Because sexual abuse is complex and systemic, no single pillar suffices; all must work in synergy to create safe and healing environments. This section outlines the conditions that enable a safeguarding culture when these elements align.

## THE TRIPOD OF RELATIONAL SAFETY MODEL



## Relational Safety

Within the Tripod Model, relational safety refers to a condition where individuals feel secure to engage in respectful, meaningful, and appropriate ways that affirm the dignity of every person across all levels of relationship – personal, communal, institutional, and societal. Marked by trust, Relational Safety empowers authentic communication and participation, free from fear of judgment or humiliation (Bonterre, 2025), enabling collaboration toward shared goals.

## Affirming Human Dignity

Pope Leo XIV underscores the importance of honoring the dignity of every person, especially the most vulnerable. “Dignity is a gift from God, who created the human being in his own image and semblance (cf. Gen 1:26),” he said, emphasizing that it is a gift that cannot be earned or imposed. “It is a gift that goes before us: it is born of the look of love with which God wanted us, one by one, and continues to want us. On every human face, even when it is marked by fatigue or pain, there is the reflection of the Creator’s goodness, a light that no darkness can erase.” (Leo XIV, 2025, para. 2)

Pope Leo XIV reminds us that the mission of safeguarding is not merely about rules or procedures; it is about cultivating relationships rooted in respect, care, and attentiveness to the vulnerable. Safeguarding, therefore, is intertwined with the Church’s mission in the world (Leo XIV, 2025).

## Elements of the Model

### 1. Foundations

The Tripod Model stands on a foundation affirming the intrinsic worth of each person. Rooted in the Gospel, safeguarding views every individual as a beloved child of God, deserving dignity, rights, and protection. Principles and practices reinforce this foundation, making safeguarding not just a policy but a core mission of the Church. More than compliance to policies, it demands a committed faith life shaped by Gospel values, such as love, justice, and mercy.

### Reflection Questions:

- What beliefs and values guide your safeguarding efforts?
- How are vulnerable persons valued in your setting?
- How is safeguarding formation integrated into your personal and institutional life?
- How committed is your leadership to safeguarding?

Here are the core principles upheld by the Catholic Safeguarding Institute:

- Rooted in the Gospel, safeguarding gives meaning to life and guides it toward salvation
- Prioritizes a victims-first approach over institutional self-protection
- Embraces multi-disciplinary and collaborative efforts
- Ensures transparency and accountability to prevent abuse of power
- Maintains zero tolerance for sexual abuse
- Stays proactive in prevention and intervention

## 2. Safe Self

The first pillar of the Tripod Model is Safe Self. It refers to a person's capacity to relate authentically with oneself and meaningfully with others by developing body, mind, and spirit toward maturity. It has two key components: Affective Maturity and Psychosexual Maturity (Gascon, personal communication, 2022).

### Affective Maturity

Similar to emotional competence or emotional intelligence (Kappler et al., 2020), affective maturity is the ability to respond positively in relationships with self, others, environment, and God. It reflects growth in "true and responsible love," supports psychosexual maturity, and promotes healthy relationships (Gascon, personal communication, 2022). Though distinct, affectivity and sexuality are interrelated because sexuality, an integral part of identity, develops over time and influences all relationships (Gascon, personal communication, 2022).

Affective maturity is critical for a Safe Self. Research on Church sexual abuse offenders (Kappler et al., 2020) shows deficits in this area were linked to boundary violations. Offenders often exhibit poor affective maturity, impairing relational awareness, judgment, and behavior, with warning signs minimized or spiritualized. Personality styles reliant on external validation – such as histrionic, narcissistic, or dependent – struggle with emotion regulation, boundaries, entitlement, and unmet relational needs, often resulting in isolation and unhealthy relationships.

### Psychosexual Maturity

Psychosexual maturity involves acknowledging, accepting, and integrating one's sexuality in a healthy, authentic way (Kappler et al., 2020). It develops from human sexuality – a force within seeking total, pleasurable union (Gascon, personal communication, 2022) – which reflects our need for physical and spiritual connection. This expresses God's intention for us to discover, through relationships, what it means to be human and spiritual, consistent with our vocation (Gascon, personal communication, 2022).

Papal documents emphasize that psychosexual maturity, including psychosexual maturity, which includes a healthy sexual identity, is essential for priestly formation (Kappler et al., 2020). Embracing chaste celibacy becomes meaningful when rooted in a positive sexual identity, free from internalized ridicule, shame or fear (Kappler et al., 2020). Conversely, silence around sexuality or homophobia can hinder development, leading to an unintegrated psychosexual identity. This may cause confusion between sexuality and intimacy, age-inappropriate relationships, or rigid self-judgment projected onto a victim that endanger boundaries.

A Safe Self cannot thrive in restrictive environments; open, non-judgmental ministerial and formation contexts foster well-being and healthy, responsible celibate lives (Kappler et al., 2020).

### Implications

Affective and psychosexual maturity are vital for a Safe Self. Individuals secure and authentic with themselves naturally create safe, respectful connections with others. Without a Safe Self, no genuine safeguarding culture can exist.

A Safe Self involves acceptance of one's sexual identity, the ability to form enriching relationships, honesty, self-compassion, and openness to seek and offer help. It reflects an identity rooted in spiritual and core values. Cultivating these qualities, individuals grow in humility, integrity, and openness to discern and collaborate toward shared goals.

Conversely, an unsafe self poses risks to oneself and others. The self is our primary vehicle for connecting with life. What safety can truly offer others if we do are not safe with ourselves? Poor emotional or sexual regulation compromises judgment and boundaries, increasing the potential for harmful behaviors, including boundary violations and abuse.

Safe Self is the foundation of any safeguarding culture. It empowers individuals to be a positive presence and inspire hope by showing that change is within reach, beginning with oneself. The Safe Self is also the most credible and closest to the Lord. As Pope Francis (2019) states:

***“Credibility is born of trust, and trust is born of sincere, daily, humble and generous service to all, but especially to those dearest to the Lord’s heart.”***

(cf. Mt 25:31-46)

### **Reflection Questions:**

- What does a Safe Self mean to me?
- How do I relate to my body, sexuality, relationships, and boundaries? What values guide me?
- When am I most vulnerable to losing my Safe Self? How do I handle triggers? Do I make things worse?
- What gives my life meaning and purpose?
- How central is my faith life to living out my Safe Self? Is it integrated or disconnected from other parts of my life?
- Do I seek help to live out my Safe Self, or do I hide my struggles?

### **3. Safe Community**

The second pillar of the Tripod Model, Safe Community, recognizes that Safe Self cannot exist in isolation. As relational beings, we grow and thrive in connection with others. A Safe Community serves as a relational home base where individuals feel secure to be their authentic selves, find support for personal and communal growth, and share responsibility for caring for others (Macalalad, personal communication, 2022).


A community includes primary groups individuals identify with and feel they belong to – family, presbyterium, religious communities, and close friendships. Within this home base, individuals experience a social laboratory (Macalalad, personal communication, 2022) where they and the community continuously shape one another toward personal and communal growth.

## Personal Growth


In a climate of trust and respect, individuals let down their guard without fear of judgment. This environment fosters identity formation, spiritual growth, and ethical decision-making, helping individuals shape themselves into a meaningful presence in the world. Relationships thrive on honest dialogue, acceptance, and mutual respect, where differences are honored, mistakes met with dignity, and confidences protected. Here, individuals learn emotional and social skills – such as setting boundaries, practicing empathy, and expressing emotions – while grieving losses and celebrating victories together.

## Communal Life

A Safe Community forms individuals in communal living. Bonds rooted in trust and dignity create order and stability. By intimately knowing one another, members learn to embrace both strengths and flaws while remaining sensitive to the vulnerabilities of others. Shared norm and rules guide behavior and interactions for navigating life. They learn about roles, responsibilities, power dynamics, communication, and collaboration, enabling effective group functioning. In times of challenge, the community remains steadfast, discerns collectively, and responds according to God's plan. Pope Francis (2019) reminds us:



***"(T)he Lord was well aware that, at the hour of the cross, lack of unity, division and dispersion, as well as attempts to flee from that hour, would be the greatest temptations faced by his disciples – attitudes that would distort and hinder their mission... (W)e want to learn from him and, with firm resolve, to begin this time of...dialogue and communion, of listening and discernment. In this way, we will allow him to conform our hearts to his image and help us discover his will."***



## Haven

A Safe Community is also a haven, a place of rest, refuge, and renewal from external demands. This rest provides both physical and emotional relief, allowing for reflection and restoring balance. Reenergized, individuals reengage with the world with clarity, resilience, and purpose.

## Implications

A Safe Community is essential for safeguarding. It is the fertile ground where the Safe Self takes shape, an identity rooted in care for both self and others: *I am, and I belong*. Here, individuals learn to give and receive love. Here, they gain courage to dream a purposeful life. "The beginning of change starts when we recognize our need for others" (Masculino, personal communication, 2022b). Here, safeguarding takes root.

For clergy and religious, a Safe Community provides a space where charity and fraternity can grow:

***"Priestly fraternity is an expression of the law of charity and, far from being little more than a mere sentiment, becomes ... an existential remembrance of Christ and apostolic witness of ecclesial communion."***

(Masculino, personal communication, 2022b)

Pope Francis expands this vision:

***"No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us... How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Let us dream, then, as a single human family... each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions... brothers and sisters all."***

(Francis, as cited in Macalalad, personal communication, 2022)

Over time, the values of a Safe Community embed in structures and relationships, creating a shared culture (Macalalad, personal communication, 2022) that flows into society. Indeed, a safeguarding culture begins with the Safe Self nurtured within a Safe Community.

### Reflection Questions:

- How do I relate to my communities? Do I help make them caring and responsible?
- Do I feel proud to belong? Do we share clear boundaries?
- How does my community nurture a Safe Self?
- How do we handle conflicts?
- What binds us together, and how do we celebrate it?
- What protects or threatens our community's safety?
- Do we seek help when needed?

#### 4. Safe Ministry

The third pillar, Safe Ministry, builds on Safe Self and Safe Community. Individuals formed in these contexts pursue their mission with integrity, commitment, and responsibility for safeguarding.

Unlike secular organizations, faith-based ministries serve not just material, but ultimately spiritual ends. A Safe Ministry creates and sustains relationally safe environments through compassionate, competent, and credible pastoral care that upholds dignity of every person. This safety permeates all levels of engagement – personal, communal, ministerial, and societal – thus transforming organizational systems into expressions of relational safety.

As such, safeguarding must intentionally cultivate two key elements within the institutional culture: a Safe Workforce and a Safe Workspace (Ramirez-Panahon, personal communication, 2022).

##### Safe Workforce

The backbone of Safe Ministry, a Safe Workforce, rooted in servant leadership, prioritizes care and respect for personnel. In God's vineyard, they minister with love, ensuring their personal life reflects the same integrity as their service. Personnel are carefully screened, oriented to mission and norms, and supported through fair compensation, work-life balance, and opportunities for growth. In this environment, they develop healthy ministerial relationships that sustain them throughout their mission.

Psychological safety is essential. Edmondson's theory emphasizes the belief that one can speak up without fear of punishment or humiliation and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking, a principle embedded in successful teams (Janse, 2025). When personnel feel safe to voice ideas and take risks, they serve with confidence, compassion, and a willingness to go the extra mile.

##### Safe Workspace

A Safe Workspace fosters a responsive, welcoming environment where compassionate, competent service is the norm. Relational Safety is embedded in structures, policies, procedures, and behaviors, reflecting transparency, accountability, and responsibility. Codes of conduct reinforce healthy boundaries and zero tolerance for abuse, while the ministry's engagement with vulnerable communities extends this culture beyond the office.

##### Organizational Dynamics

Yet, a Safe Ministry must also address complex organizational dynamics – power imbalances, clericalism, and gender inequality – that can undermine Relational Safety and contribute to a culture of abuse. When personnel can speak freely without fear of retribution, they can challenge excesses of a hierarchical and leader-centered culture. Yet, this openness is necessary to cultivate a genuinely listening and humble Church, one whose culture naturally supports a victim-first approach to safeguarding and strengthens its credibility as a witness to the Gospel.

#### Reflection Questions:

- How does safeguarding shape our mission and values?
- How do we ensure recruitment aligns with safety and mission?
- Does our ministerial environment foster trust, respect, and collaboration?
- Do our policies provide clear structures for safety, accountability, and response?
- How do we promote healing and accountability in pastoral care?
- How do we ensure inclusion and dignity for all?
- Do our physical spaces reflect safety and dignity?
- How do we sustain safeguarding through ongoing formation and conversion?

Pope Francis (2019), affirms this vision:

The "culture of abuse" and the crisis of credibility cannot be addressed by organizational solutions alone. The Church, like weavers, is called to repair a living fabric that has come undone, requiring it to be in a "constant state of missionary and pastoral conversion." Hence, a community must forge bonds and create safe spaces that are healthy, respectful, and dignified for each person. It must embark on a change in mind-set (metanoia) in the way we pray, handle power and money, exercise authority, and the way we relate with one another and the world. An ongoing conversion - lived out at every level of human relationship - must take place for a safeguarding culture to emerge.

## 5. Safe Spirituality

Safe Spirituality is the foundation of the Tripod Model, it is where Safe Self, Safe Community, and Safe Ministry converge. It defines the model's functions as:

- An **orienting system** grounding safeguarding in faith
- A **witnessing presence** to God's love
- A **process of becoming** through conversion
- An **adaptable pastoral approach** to diverse issues

At its core, Safe Spirituality springs from the experience of being a beloved child of God and created in His image and held in unconditional love. This encounter with **Relational Safety** transforms individuals, enabling them to rise above limitations through self-giving love and allowing even fragile relationships to become channels of God's faithful care.

## Orienting System

Spirituality - our "search for the sacred" (Pargament, 1997) - functions as an orienting system shaping worldview and guiding responses to God's call to care for the vulnerable. It grounds all three pillars in a spiritual path focused on what truly matters. This path involves **conversion (metanoia)**: letting go of anything that hinders clear witness to the Gospel so we can listen to God's Word and the pain of His people (Francis, 2019).

Trauma, such as sexual abuse, can shake this inner compass. Victims-survivors may wrestle with agonizing questions: *"Why me? Why am I blamed while the perpetrator walks free?"* Spiritual struggle often follows - questioning God's love, wrestling with good and evil, contending with justice, and grappling with meaning, feeling hurt by the Church, and experiences guilt over moral shortcomings (Pargament & Exline, 2020). Meanwhile, perpetrators who deny responsibility may also experience moral confusion: *"I'm not guilty; it was consensual!"* Both reflect ruptures in moral and spiritual worldview.

While trauma can shake or break faith, spirituality can also be a profound path to healing - helping victims make sense of suffering, not by excusing it, but by placing it within Christ's redemptive plan revealed in the Paschal Mystery. This journey can lead to growth, deeper healing, renewed faith, and restored hope (Pargament & Exline, 2020).

Healing acknowledges humanity's capacity for both good and evil and that even people of the Church can choose to cause harm. This hard truth can bring a more honest, deeper understanding of human nature, justice and divine love, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39).

## A Witnessing Presence

Safe Spirituality animates a witnessing presence to God's love. Relational Safety manifests through:

- **Safe Self** – authentic self-acceptance and caring relationships
- **Safe Community** – a home base for deep bonds and self-giving presence
- **Safe Ministry** – environments marked by dignity, compassion, and competence

Fulfilling this disposition comes with challenges. Institutions often prioritize what they do over how they do it, deliverables over processes. Under the pressures of work, staff may overlook Relational Safety, leaving service recipients to feel unseen or disrespected. Many view safeguarding as another responsibility to an already full workload. However, safeguarding is not an add-on task but a way of service that unites what we do with how we do our work. Pope Francis stresses:

***“Only when the programmatic aspect of our activity is joined with the paradigmatic aspect that brings out its underlying spirit and meaning will Church efforts demonstrate its evangelical power.”***

(Francis, 2019)

A trauma-informed safeguarding office embodies this principle, responding with compassion and acknowledging the courage it takes for survivors to seek help from an institution that may have harmed them. Staff members may also encounter their own unresolved wounds; their responses, ranging from indifference or judgement to compassion, are often shaped by the role spirituality plays in their lives. A witnessing presence transforms personal pain into shared, redemptive service.

## Process of Becoming

The Tripod Model is an ongoing process of becoming that places strong emphasis on people's active involvement in safeguarding. The Church cannot be held hostage by one position or another, but must begin where the vulnerable are (Francis, 2019). This approach ensures that all actions respect human dignity, build trust, and contribute to a shared safeguarding culture.

To be in process is to accept incompleteness. It is a journey in which individuals grow into a Safe Self, communities into a Safe Community, and ministries into a Safe Ministry. The movement toward a Safe Self involves personal maturity and spiritual growth, expressed through authentic engagement with life. A Safe Community is a dynamic space where individuals and the group grow together, learning to relate responsibly to one another and to the wider world. A Safe Ministry is the ongoing commitment to creating and sustaining relationally safe environments for both service recipients and staff.

This multi-level process of becoming strengthens safeguarding practitioners. By intentionally fostering personal growth within supportive environments, safeguarding equips them to meet the demands of ministry. Mission and personal growth are inseparable; practicing a Safe Ministry is inherently linked to nurturing a Safe Self in relationship with others within a Safe Community.

Differences are natural in this journey. While often challenging, relational safety honors diversity and resists alienation from one another. Concerns are addressed with care, courage, and timeliness, even as change unfolds freely and in its own time – *kairos*. Because safeguarding is complex, no one holds all the answers. It therefore requires humility: acknowledging limitations, seeking guidance, practicing collective listening, and discerning together toward collaboration. The role of humility in safeguarding cannot be underestimated.

Safeguarding calls for a robust faith life and an ongoing process of conversion, a continual turning toward God and toward the protection of each person's dignity. In this way, individuals and communities find courage and hope to respond to the vulnerable, offering voice and care despite their own frailty. As Pope Francis reminds us, this mission is sublime, not diminished by our limitations, for God bends down and uses us to be His love and compassion in the world (Francis, 2019). Ultimately, safeguarding is participation in God's saving plan, especially for the most vulnerable.

### **Adaptable Pastoral Approach**

The Tripod Model offers flexibility for addressing various issues. Regardless of the task at hand, Relational Safety will always be an essential companion to effective service. Its welcoming and responsive atmosphere fosters sensitivity, listening, and meaningful participation, allowing a witnessing presence to emerge in service and engagement. The Tripod Model may be employed on its own or as a supplement to other models, guaranteeing that Relational Safety is integrated throughout their implementation.

### **Reflection Question:**

- How do our safeguarding initiatives support spiritual growth among our personnel and those we serve?

In sum, the Tripod of Relational Safety Model affirms that safeguarding is more than compliance with rules of policies. It is a way of life, a calling inviting individuals and communities to come in ministry that genuinely cares for the vulnerable. Rooted in an inner desire to respond to God's plan, safeguarding invites each person to live out a Safe Self, nurtured within a Safe Community, towards a Safe Ministry for the People of God.

# APPLYING THE TRIPOD OF RELATIONAL SAFETY MODEL

## 1) The Tripod in Formation and Education

Since its establishment in 2017, CSI has focused on safeguarding formation and education to cultivate a culture of relational safety within the Catholic Church and beyond. While this vision of culture-making may seem immense, the Tripod Model serves as the Institute's anchor and roadmap toward this goal.

One flagship CSI program is the Basic Orientation Workshop on Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons (BOWS). Conducted for diverse audiences such as presbyteriums, congregations, seminarians, teacher networks, and mixed groups from the public, BOWS follows the Tripod framework, adopting its three pillars and the spirituality that encompasses them. This structure allows BOWS to adapt to participants' varied contexts while remaining grounded in essential safeguarding principles.

BOWS' approach is formative and emphasizes that safeguarding is not merely drafting policies or listing do's and don'ts. It calls for living out safeguarding at the personal, community, and ministerial levels – the three legs of the Tripod: Safe Self, Safe Community, and Safe Ministry.

## Training Design Based on the Tripod

BOWS begins by orienting participants on the reality of sexual abuse—from the global picture to the Church's specific context. It then invites participants into a personal journey of understanding their stake and responsibility in safeguarding. This is where the workshop traces the Tripod's structure and elements:

### **Safe Self**

Participants begin close to home and explore topics such as childhood experiences, cultural context, relationships, boundaries, sexuality, emotional maturity, and self-compassion through a safeguarding lens. These reflections foster a deeper knowledge of oneself and the areas needing growth to become a Safe Self – for oneself and others. Through an integrated approach, BOWS provides the necessary space for pause, self-reflection, and renewal amid daily demands.

### **Safe Community**

The training then expands to the communal level—the environment where individuals grow and relate. Inspired by Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti* ("Brothers and Sisters All") that calls all to encounter others as brothers and sisters, BOWS highlights fraternity and healthy relationships marked by mutuality, openness, compassion, and charity. For clergy and religious, discussions also include fostering ecclesial communion, unified commitment to ministry, and integrating safeguarding into initial and ongoing formation. For all audiences, the workshop examines safeguarding in families, youth contexts, and the online world – everyday spaces where dynamics affecting minors and vulnerable persons are ever-evolving and indicative of the distinct need for their care and protection.

### **Safe Ministry**

Finally, the workshop addresses safeguarding in ministry through two dimensions: prevention and intervention. Prevention is tackled by examining structures, procedures, and practices that create a safe working or ministerial environment. Attention is also given to ways to ensure that interactions with vulnerable persons at work or ministry remain safe. On the other end, intervention is undertaken by equipping participants to handle reports, cases, and victim care. Related topics include the impact of abuse, signs and indicators of abuse, attending to victims, red flags and risk factors among perpetrators, reporting protocols, and legal aspects under civil and canon law.

### **Spirituality as the Thread**

The entire workshop is woven together by the spirituality of safeguarding. Participants explore theological foundations and discern their personal response to the call of the safeguarding mission. Daily prayer and reflection and a dedicated session on spirituality, create spaces for connecting the internal and external movements in the practice of safeguarding: the internal conversion of recognizing oneself as a beloved child of God and as a guardian of the other, and the external action of ensuring others are valued and treated with dignity, love, and care.

### **2) Complementing Existing Prevention Frameworks with the Tripod**

Several violence and abuse prevention models have been developed and applied across sectors. Nevertheless, even when these frameworks are in place, the Tripod Model adds distinctive value by ensuring preventive strategies are implemented within a relationally safe environment.

One example is the **Universal Guidelines Framework (UGF)**, recently released by the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM) under Pope Francis's Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (2022). The UGF sets safeguarding standards for the universal Church to protect children and vulnerable persons (PCPM, 2024). It outlines 10 guidelines, each with principles, criteria, and indicators. Designed for contextual adaptation, the UGF avoids a "one-size-fits-all" approach, encouraging local cultural integration. The UGF is predominantly preventive and focuses on mitigating risk factors and strengthening protective factors.

## UGF's 10 Guidelines (PCPM, 2024):

1	<b>Committed Leadership and Culture</b> – Safeguarding children and adults is embedded in the church's leadership, governance, and culture
2	<b>Safe Environments</b> – Physical and online environments promote safety and contain appropriate safeguards to minimize the opportunity for harm to children and adults
3	<b>Partnering with survivors, families and communities</b> – Accompaniment to victims/survivors, their families, and communities affected by abuse is prioritized, and the church body actively reaches out to engage with the church community in safeguarding efforts
4	<b>Response and Management of Complaints/Allegations</b> – Procedures for raising concerns and complaints are responsive, accessible, and understood by children, adults, families, carers, communities, and personnel
5	<b>Culturally Responsive</b> – Safeguarding policies and procedures are contextualized to the culture of the local church
6	<b>Policies and procedures support the safety of children and adults</b> – Policies and procedures document how the Church is safe for children and vulnerable adults
7	<b>People Management</b> – People working with children and adults are suitable, informed of their obligations, supervised, and supported to reflect safeguarding values in practice
8	<b>Ongoing Education and Formation</b> – Personnel are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and awareness to keep children and vulnerable adults safe through information, ongoing education, and formation
9	<b>Informed and Empowered People</b> – Children and vulnerable adults are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them, and are taken seriously
10	<b>Continuous Improvement</b> – The Church regularly reviews and improves its systems for safeguarding children and adults

## Applying the Tripod Model to the UGF

The UGF provides strong markers for institutionalizing safeguarding. The Tripod Model complements these by asking *how* practices are implemented – not just *what* is done – so that these are implemented within a relationally safe atmosphere. Relational safety ensures that safeguarding measures are carried out with dignity, respect, and compassion.

After comparing a ministry's initiatives to the UGF, the following **Tripod-based questions** guide reflection:

- **Orienting System:** Do our efforts help vulnerable persons make sense of their trauma and lead them toward healing, renewed faith, and hope in God?
- **Disposition of Presence:** Do minors and vulnerable adults feel God's love through our care?
- **Process of Becoming:**
  - **Safe Self:** What support do personnel and service recipients need to feel safe as we perform our services?
  - **Safe Community:** How does our ministry ensure personnel feel supported by peers and the institution?
  - **Safe Ministry:** How do policies and programs guarantee that vulnerable persons feel, safe, respected, and listened to when they come to us?
  - **Safe Spirituality:** What spiritual and pastoral support should we provide so that our personnel grow in faith and mission and those seeking our assistance feel genuinely welcomed, valued, and cared for?

By framing these questions, the Tripod Model can deepen intention and reflection in the implementation of safeguarding frameworks such as the UGF. It ensures that safeguarding is not only systematic but also relational, embedding safety, compassion, and dignity at every level.

## 3) The Tripod in Ministry and Organizations

Safeguarding principles are now becoming widely recognized as essential in all organizations, religious or secular. In any setting, a workplace grounded in relational safety enables individuals to feel protected, supported, and free to flourish. Here, respect for human dignity, especially of the vulnerable, takes precedence. Institutional structures must reinforce this purpose so that systems and the spirit of safeguarding work together for effective ministry or mission.

### What does a Safe Ministry or Organization look like?

Below are core organizational elements viewed through a safeguarding lens. This checklist can guide the development of safeguarding guidelines and procedures:

#### a. Theological & Personal Understanding

Safeguarding, as a spiritual and formational priority, shapes mission, values, and meaning of ministry.

- Safeguarding is central to the Church's authentic mission
- Safeguarding is integrated into clergy, religious, and lay formation
- The theology and spirituality of the ministry are aligned with the safeguarding mission
- A true Safe Self – spiritually, psychologically, and physically – is nurtured in individuals and communities

### **b. Recruitment & Staffing**

Effective recruitment ensures personnel screening, alignment, and readiness to carry out the mission safely.

- Professional recruitment processes are in place
- Applicants are screened for safeguarding history
- Candidates are assessed for affective and psychosexual maturity
- Orientation of recruits is aligned with mission and safeguarding policy
- Expertise is sought to build a Safe Workforce

### **c. Ministerial Environment**

The ministerial environment sets the tone and culture for trust, respect, and collaboration.

- Atmosphere of trust and safety is maintained
- Roles are designed for collaboration among clergy, religious, and laity
- A culture that counters clericalism, sexism, and abuse drivers is cultivated
- Listening is upheld as a core stance

### **d. Safeguarding Policies and Systems**

Clear structures ensure safety, accountability, and response.

- Policies on behavior, ethics, and boundaries are established and upheld
- Prevention measures are institutionalized
- Intervention and reporting protocols are widely known
- Communication promotes accountability, transparency and responsiveness

### **e. Pastoral Care**

Pastoral care addresses harm, ensures accountability, and promotes healing.

- Justice and compassionate care for victims/survivors are provided
- Fair treatment and support for accused are provided while ensuring safety
- Opportunities for offender repentance are offered within managed boundaries
- Lay empowerment through mature discipleship

### **f. Relational Culture and Inclusion**

Relational culture ensures dignity, voice, and protection for all.

- Rights and dignity of all are respected
- All voices are heard and valued
- Dignity and well-being of Church Workers is supported, including decent compensation and healthy work-life balance

### **g. Physical Environment**

Spaces designed and maintained for safety and dignity.

- Ministry spaces, including worship spaces, offices, meeting rooms, and rectories, are designed and maintained to be safe, welcoming, visible and with appropriate privacy.

#### **h. Ongoing Commitment**

Ongoing formation and reflection sustain safeguarding culture.

- Safeguarding values are embedded in organizational culture beyond written policies
- Ongoing safeguarding formation is prioritized
- Continuous reflection and conversion are embraced to sustain relational safety
- Affective communion and trust are cultivated, especially with those hurt

As shown by the examples above, the Tripod Model proves to be useful in various ways. While it is deeply spiritual, it does not mean that the Tripod is abstract. In fact, it is a practical tool that can be easily adapted to advance the safeguarding mission.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Tripod of Relational Safety Model outlines essential conditions for a safeguarding culture to flourish in the Church. It protects vulnerable persons through Relational Safety, expressed in three pillars – Safe Self, Safe Community, and Safe Ministry – converging in Safe Spirituality. Rooted in faith, the model serves as an orienting system, a witnessing presence, a process of becoming, and an adaptable pastoral approach conducive to creating safe spaces for everyone, especially the vulnerable.

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