

## INTERVIEW WITH FR. HANS ZOLLNER, PROFESSOR AT THE GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon*

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### EXCERPTS:

- “The Church has, throughout history, helped children, but members of the Church have also abused children. So, it is up to us to take up the task of working to protect children. I find I am just one part of a very big movement within the Church working to reach this goal.”
- “In order to truly be effective in protecting children from abuse, one cannot simply memorize facts and then check a box, considering it a mission accomplished. The knowledge must be relayed between the head and the heart. It has to be a deeply felt mission to do everything possible to protect [children].”

**Dear Fr. Hans, you teach at the Gregorian University. Could you tell us a bit about the university's history and its role today?**

The Gregorian University has its origins in a school founded by St. Ignatius in 1551. Over the years it became the Roman College and official first Jesuit university. The university is now the namesake of Pope Gregory XIII who truly laid the foundations of the new Roman College. This was the moment when theological and philosophical studies truly became pillars of the school's academic design. The location has only been at Piazza della Pilotta since 1930, expressly granted in the Lateran Treaty.

Today, there are almost 3,000 students each year that come from about 120 countries around the world. These students can enroll in a faculty or institute of their choice: theology, canon law, philosophy, history and cultural heritage of the Church, psychology, etc. The school has a history of educating many leaders of the Church worldwide.

#### Box 1: Interview Series

**What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website?** The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

**Why a series of interviews?** Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

**What is the focus of this interview?** In this interview, Fr. Hans Zollner, SJ, Professor at the Gregorian University and President of its Centre for Child Protection, discusses policies and programs for the prevention of sexual abuse.

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**One of your main areas of work relates to the protection of children against sexual abuse. Why did you choose that field?**

As a Christian, I deeply feel Jesus' calling to protect and care for the most vulnerable in this world. Jesus himself said "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." He then blesses each child. Jesus knew the importance of children; He deeply cared for them. It is up to every Christian to relate with children as Jesus Himself did. The Church has, throughout history, helped children, but members of the Church have also abused children. So, it is up to us to take up the task of working to protect children. I find I am just one part of a very big movement within the Church working to reach this goal.

**What are some of the programs that work to protect children from abuse? And what does not seem to work well?**

In order to truly be effective in protecting children from abuse, one cannot simply memorize facts and then check a box, considering it a mission accomplished. The knowledge must be relayed between the head and the heart. It has to be a deeply felt mission to do everything possible to protect those who are most vulnerable.

Constructive programs come in many forms: local workshops or workshops held for Bishops' Conferences, seminaries, and colleges; global conferences which bring together experts from various fields like the 2017 Child Dignity in the Digital World; collaboration and open dialogue with tech companies, NGO's, international charities, programs and governments; educational programs like our Centre for Child Protection's Licentiate (Master) in Safeguarding, Diploma in Safeguarding, and our blended learning program (e-learning plus onsite teaching). The latter is accessible to all kinds of students and learners around the world.

**The Centre for Child Protection that you manage recently became an Institute. Apart from the recognition that this change denotes, what are some of the opportunities that the change may generate?**

We are incredibly grateful to have been granted this opportunity to have a more robust academic standing. Part of that change means we will be able to have our own full-time faculty, we will be able to take part in research as partners on par, and we will be able to offer a doctorate in anthropology.

Beyond these academic opportunities, I foresee more networking opportunities being possible. Already as a center, we have been involved in and organized international conferences, congresses, etc. which have dealt with various topics regarding abuse, safeguarding,

child dignity online, etc. As an institute, we will continue to host events which help to further connect everyone who shares in our mission to protect human dignity and enhance care for all human beings.

**How much progress is the Catholic Church making in protecting children against sexual abuse?**

The February 2019 summit on the protection of minors held in the Vatican brought about several concrete changes: norms on accountability of bishops and other Church leaders, including according to the new law *Vos estis lux mundi*, the elimination of the pontifical secret in relation to cases of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults, as well as greater involvement of the laity in criminal proceedings within the Church. Then, in July 2020, a *Vademecum* was published, detailing procedural issues surrounding cases of sexual abuse of minors committed by clerics, in order to better interpret canon law and push for concrete action.

I have seen a very strong push in every part of the Church I have encountered to create safe spaces for children, to create regulations and policies regarding the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable people, and to educate their employees on procedures to follow in the case abuse is reported. Beyond this, there has been a major shift in how the church speaks about abuse: it is a topic of conversation that has become much more in the open in recent years. Not only has the church started to confront the reality that abuse of minors has been happening, but members are also dealing with the fact that there have been many cases of cover-up surrounding abuse that has taken place. Accompanying those who have come forward with their stories is essential to the healing process for both victim-survivors and the church as a whole as well as preventing further abuse from happening. It is not something that is done once, checked off a list, and set aside; rather, it is an ongoing process, a commitment that should span lifetimes in order to bring about deep long-lasting change and healing.

At this point, it is key to keep this conversation going; to educate as many as possible about abuse, how to prevent it, and how to intervene when it does happen; to push even the most closed cultures to confront this harsh reality that abuse of children has taken place in their midst. Thanks to movements like #MeToo, the Church, like many other institutions, has made progress to squash abuse when it is spotted and bring justice to victim-survivors who seek it. Certainly, as of late, prevention of abuse and safeguarding in general have become tasks that involve the entire ecclesial community – not just a few experts.

**Are Catholic primary and secondary schools doing enough in this area or should they be doing more? Does this vary between countries?**

It certainly varies between countries. Some countries have very strict rules in place to protect minors from abuse within schools, churches, or other organizations, while other cultures still normalize child-brides and female genital mutilation. So clearly, there is a huge gap in beliefs, laws, and standards surrounding child abuse. Cultural differences are not absent in the universal Catholic Church.

However, my sincere belief is that Catholic parishes, schools and social organizations are doing much to create a universal standard of protection for children who are a part of their institutions. In every country I've visited – now more than 70 – I have found bishops, men and women religious, and Catholic lay people all very enthusiastic about and intent on making spaces safe for minors.

**What is your advice for students or others who may be Catholic and are contemplating doing graduate work or specializing in this area?**

Everyone is most welcome and encouraged to join a greater mission that has become critical to the future of our Church and the well-being of all those who belong to it. If a student is interested in following a course or completing a degree in this field, I encourage them to reach out to others who do work in the field already to learn more about programs available to them and what sort of opportunities they might have in the future. Many of the Centre for Child Protection's alumni return home and write safeguarding policies, review protection measures for minors and other vulnerable people in their congregations, schools, parishes, etc. Others work as Safeguarding Officers who deal with abuse reports specifically and lead formation programs and workshops to educate others about how to identify, intervene, and prevent abuse. There are many possibilities for those who are steadfast in their mission to see a safer Church and world.

**Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?**

I belong to the Society of Jesus, which I came to know through a retreat during my years in the seminary in my hometown of Regensburg in Bavaria. Their spiritual life – including the prayers, meditations, spiritual exercises, etc. – was quite compelling to me, as well as the theology behind it. I had moved on to the University of Innsbruck to finish my theology degree when I became a Jesuit. The Pontifical Gregorian University, being Jesuit itself and based in Rome, was the logical next step in my educational journey, so I enrolled there and completed a degree in psychology and trained in psychotherapy. My

doctorate years took me back to the University of Innsbruck where I graduated with a PhD in Theology.

These years studying theology and psychology became the bedrock of my professional endeavors, bringing me to teach at the Institute of Psychology in 2003. In 2010, I was appointed to a Scientific Working Group of the German federal government called the "Round Table on Child Abuse," and I was a part of this network of experts in psychiatry, pedagogy, and social sciences in the field of safeguarding for two years. This brought about the beginning of the Centre for Child Protection (CCP) in 2012, starting with the launch of a blended learning program on safeguarding in partnership with the Archdiocese of Munich. Just two years later, in 2014, I was appointed to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM).

Over the years, my work as both the President of the CCP and as a member of the PCPM have continued. I have found that there is just as much need for theological reflection on the topic of abuse in the Church as there is need for attention to the psychological and juridical side of things. My job brings me to travel a lot, leading workshops and conferences on the topic of the double crises of abuse and its cover-up in the Church. My travels have shown me that the Church, in every country I have visited around the world, has been making progress on the front of safeguarding all vulnerable people – especially minors.

**Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?**

I'm often asked how I am able to keep working in the field of safeguarding, considering abuse can be such a heavy topic. For me, going into nature and spending time with good friends are essential to keeping me grounded. As a Bavarian myself, I find the Bavarian Alps most comforting. The flora and fauna found there are quite unique, and through them I always find the presence of God. In the stillness of His creation, in nature, I am able to contemplate my own faith and spirituality and work through the more difficult things in life. Strong friendships are also key to keeping my spirits up and my soul rooted. In spending time with friends and family, I'm able to enter into their own worlds and be a part of something bigger than myself.