

Magisterial Teachings on the Protection of God's Children

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Why is it important to know the specifics of the Magisterial Teachings of the Catholic Church on child sexual abuse?

One out of every five female children and one out of every six male children will be sexually abused before they reach eighteen years of age. Sexual abuse occurs to approximately 18% of all children and youth in the United States of America. The whole of society is affected by the pain of sexual abuse of minors.

Knowing what the Magisterial Teaching actually says and that it applies to all children and youth, offers validation to those who have been abused. It also allows the voice of the Church, the teachings of the Church, to be clearly heard.

Since the Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children and Youth was written in 2002 there has been much work in education and prevention efforts concerning sexual abuse of minors. The basis of the Charter is found in the Magisterial Teachings of the Catholic Church.

Where can I find the Magisterial Teachings on Child Sexual Abuse and what do they say?

You can find specific teachings about child sexual abuse and the need to treat children with respect in a number of sources.

The church document "*Familiaris Consortio*" #26 validates the necessity of treating children and youth with respect, something that is profoundly missing when one is sexually abused. The title is *The Rights of Children*: "Special attention must be devoted to the children by developing a profound esteem for their personal dignity, and a great respect and generous concern for their rights. This is true for every child, but it becomes all the more urgent the smaller the child is and the more it is in need of everything, when it is sick, suffering or handicapped."

Further, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, under #2356, states: "*Rape* is the forcible violation of the sexual intimacy of another person. It does injury to justice and charity. Rape deeply wounds the respect, freedom, and physical and moral integrity to which every person has a right. It causes grave damage that can mark the victim for life. It is always an intrinsically evil act. Graver still is the rape of children committed by parents (incest)

or those responsible for the education of the children entrusted to them." (found in the index of the Catechism of the Catholic Church under violence)

The Office of Child and Youth Protection already provides training of adults and children regarding safety of children and youth.

How does knowing the Church's teachings on child sexual abuse interface with the Charter?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states "It causes grave damage that can mark the victim for life." and is analogous to the Charter statement.

The charter states: "The damage caused by sexual abuse of minors is devastating and long-lasting."

The Charter already states the Church teachings in so many words. Why emphasize the Magisterial Teachings?

Knowing these teachings exist along with the Charter offers validation to survivors of sexual abuse. Reminding ourselves as Catholics that these teachings exist is also an expression of respect for those who have been harmed by sexual abuse regardless of the source of the abuse.

Openness in presenting the Magisterial Teachings also recognizes the right of all people to be treated with respect and the harm done in the loss of this right.

The Magisterial Teachings also note that sexual abuse of minors is an act of violence. Unlike other sexual sins such as fornication, sexual abuse of minors is the sin of the adult person perpetrating this form of violence, not the victim.

Child sexual abuse in any form is also always an “intrinsically evil act”.

“By acknowledging and teaching the existence of intrinsic evil in given human acts, [as in sexual abuse of minors] the Church remains faithful to the integral truth about [all humanity], she thus respects and promotes the person in their dignity and vocation.”
Veritatis Splendor #83

Essentially, the teaching is written so that children are supported to grow in a loving and safe manner. All efforts to provide for the emotional, spiritual and physical well being of a child will allow God gifts to be available to enrich the whole Church and the wider world.

What are some ways Catholics could live out the teachings in relating to survivors of sexual abuse?

- Become aware of how adults and children who are survivors of sexual abuse are treated in faith environments. Are they welcomed and invited to be participants of the community?
- Avoid generalizing what you have heard about the aftermath of sexual abuse. Listen openly to the singular experiences of survivors of sexual abuse. Remember that each person who has been sexually abused is a unique individual created by God.
- Keep in mind that preventing child sexual abuse helps carry out the teachings of the Church. Make use of the Office of Child and Youth Protection materials for abuse prevention.
- Promote safe environment programs that educate both our children and adult Catholics to observe for signs of abuse in children and youth.

What is appropriate in considering the good of children in regards to preventing and intervening in child sexual abuse?

“We must provide acceptance, love, esteem, emotional, and spiritual concern for every child that comes into this world”
Familiaris Consortio #26

Teaching all to respect minors and that it is their right to live in safe environments is part of Church teachings. When implemented, these teachings provide safety for minors and the respect due to those who have already experienced the trauma of sexual abuse.

Through scripture and Catholic teachings we are all called to protect the life and dignity of all human persons. Preventing child abuse is a necessary response to what we are called to do as Church, God’s Church.

References:

Catechism of the Catholic Church #2356
Veritatis Splendor #83
Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II Familiaris Consortio #26
Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II
Holy Scripture Matthew 19:14
Charter for Protection of Children and Youth at usccb.org