

# INTRODUCTION

“My peace I give to you,” Christ assured his early followers as they struggled in the darkness of the post-resurrection community. *“How can there be peace?”* these early Christians may have wondered. *“All we ever believed in seems to be lost.”* In this time of the crisis in the Church about the sexual abuse of children by Church leaders, let us remember again that Christ is the light of the world, a light no darkness can overcome. Let us work together to make this into a moment of grace.

## **An elephant in the living room**

The sexual abuse crisis is rather like the proverbial elephant in the living room. Nobody wants to talk about it, but we all know it’s there. It’s very hard for parish leaders to know what to say. How do you speak about it without offending someone or making it worse? How can we make this difficult moment in our history an actual moment of grace, allowing good to emerge from the ashes of our problems?

- Pastors struggle because so many of the abusers were, in fact, fellow priests. It’s tough to stand up and speak about this crisis unless you’ve carefully considered what you plan to say. This resource is designed to help you do that.
- Parish staff and volunteers need to be able to speak about this to family groups gathering for formation, or even to young students themselves. This resource is designed to help you do that.

In February 2019, the Church gathered many of its leaders at a meeting in Rome in order to talk about this elephant and resolve to 1) admit the depth of the problem, 2) ask for forgiveness and make restitution, 3) put in place transparent structures to prevent this from occurring ever again, and 4) pray for mercy. As you read and discuss the Acts of that meeting, this guide will help you integrate the results.

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# How to use this Study Guide

## FIVE SMALL GROUP SESSIONS

**Gather.** Welcome everyone to your group. Offer a special welcome to participants from other faith traditions who may join you. Ask participants to introduce themselves if needed.

As your class or group session gets underway, always begin with the Sign of the Cross and a brief opening prayer.

**Read.** Read the designated section of the Acts aloud in the group. Rotate readers every four or five sentences. Participants should read the adjoining material on their own before the session.

**Discuss and Pray.** When you come to the group process notes, move around the group at random, discussing as the notes direct. Use our suggestions as a starting point and add your own questions, prayers, or action plans.

### **Five sessions:**

*Session one:* Admit the offenses

*Session two:* Be accountable

*Session three:* Be transparent

*Session four:* Make a plan

*Session five:* Move forward

**Finish.** As you come to the end of your process, invite participants to identify one or two large ideas that they hear in that segment of the document. Each participant may hear the text differently; there are no “correct” answers.

Conclude your session with a brief prayer and hospitality.

### **Also for your use** in this kit:

- Talking points to help you discuss the abuse crisis throughout the parish
- A prayer for the victims that can be widely shared or posted to your website
- A healing liturgy, including a rite of anointing

# Guide for the facilitator

## REGARDING DIALOGUE ABOUT DIFFICULT TOPICS

...the ties that unite the faithful together are stronger than those that separate them:  
*let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything!* ARTICLE 92, THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD (ITALICS ADDED)

As you gather, choose someone in the group to serve as a facilitator. It's important to allow all to speak and be heard. In your discussions about this topic, some participants may express strong feelings such as anger and frustration. Others may share their own stories of pain and difficulty. Disagreements about this situation in the Church may arise. Here are some guidelines to help make your discussion fruitful.

**1. Always begin in prayer.** You may use this prayer or something similar:

*O God, we know that you are with us and that you behold all we are about to do. Now grant that, by the light of the Holy Spirit, we might be earnest in our search for truth and fair in our judgments of others. We pray, through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**2. You may wish to read aloud the quotation above** from the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*.

**3. In your discussion, seek to find those values, virtues, beliefs, and practices on which all agree.** When conflicts arise, it is helpful to prevent them from turning into arguments by allowing each party to express a point of view. One strategy to help make that happen is to move around the circle in order, allowing each to speak in turn.

**4. Remind participants that disagreement does not equal conflict.** Thus, you will avoid judging one another. Encourage the group members to have open minds and open hearts in their dialogue with each other. It helps to remind people that at the table with you in dialogue are people who have had life experiences that differ from one another.

**5. Allow each participant to speak.** Gently invite anyone who tends to dominate the group to use charity in listening to others as well as in expressing his or her own point.

**6. In your discussions, seek common ground** even among those who may disagree.

# Admit the offenses

## 1. Read on your own, making notes in the space provided below.

- The introduction (pages 1-2)
- The opening remarks of Pope Francis (page 5)
- The points for reflection (pages 6-8)
- The five testimonials of victims (pages 11-16)

## 2. The Smell of the Sheep by Cardinal Tagle (pages 19-26)

**Read aloud** the section “Those sent must be in touch with wounded humanity” on pages 20-21 (making notes in the space provided below), rotating readers as you proceed. Read the rest of this article on your own.

**Discuss...** Why is it important for us Christians to address the wounds caused by this crisis? Why do some people prefer to try to hide or ignore this crisis?

What is your response to the words of Msgr. Tomas Halik (page 21): “Our world is full of wounds. It is my conviction that those who close their eyes to the wounds in our world have no right to say, ‘My Lord and my God’”?

### **3. Taking Responsibility by Archbishop Scicluna** (pages 27–36)

**Read aloud** the section entitled “The prevention of sexual abuse” beginning on page 33 to the top of page 35 (making notes in the space provided below).

**Discuss...**

How can the Church successfully prevent sexual abuse from occurring?

### **4. The Church in a Time of Crisis by Cardinal Gómez** (pages 37–44)

**Read aloud** the section beginning on page 37 entitled “Introduction and context” (making notes in the space provided below).

**Discuss...** How does clericalism contribute to the secrecy and sense of privilege needed for a sexual abuse crisis like this to prosper?

**Read aloud** point #1 in the next section, beginning on page 38 and ending on page 40 (making notes in the space provided below).

**Discuss...** What is your response to the following statement?

*“We have to recognize this crisis in its full depth, to recognize that the damage is not done by outsiders but that the first enemies are within us, among us bishops and priests and consecrated persons who have not lived up to our vocation. We have to recognize that the enemy is within.”*

**Read aloud** the “Conclusion” on page 44 (making notes in the space provided below).

**Discuss...**

What hope do you have that the Church will be “holier” because of this crisis?

### **5. The Bridge that Made the Difference** (pages 49–51)

**Read aloud** this poem as part of your closing prayer.