



## **ORDO FRATRUM MINORUM TUTELA DEI MINORI E DEGLI ADULTI VULNERABILI**

Curia Generale dei Frati Minori (OFM)

Via di Santa Maria Mediatrice 25, 00165 Roma - Italia - eMail: tutela@ofm.org

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### **Letter concerning abuse of authority and power in the Order**

Dear brothers,

May the Lord give you peace!

Over the past two decades, we have all learned of very disturbing behaviour and grave scandal on the part of some clergy and religious.

It has been noted that sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults is a manifestation of a deeper abuse, that of authority and power. Those who suffered abuse found themselves in a position of serious vulnerability with respect to those who perpetrated the abuse.

The use of power as such is an unavoidable element in all human interactions. The gospels, however, offer an alternative point of view to power considered as power over someone. As outlined in the Instruction “The Service of Authority and Obedience”, power is to be exercised in service, following the example of the Lord Jesus who washed the feet of his disciples, in order that the community in its turn might be at the service of the Reign of God (cf. Jn 13:1-17)<sup>1</sup>.

However, when the use of power and authority involves sexual abuse or violence, the perpetrator does not serve the needs of the other but his own needs, and in this process damages the other profoundly. This is why many victims of sexual abuse have expressed how powerless and vulnerable they felt for years, how radically disempowered by what these perpetrators had said or done to them.

Notorious cases of abuse demonstrate ways in which the flow of information was manipulated. As well as highly visible and widely reported cases, there are other more widespread and subtle potential forms of abuse of authority and power that are found within the structures of the Church and even within our Order.

The risk of an abuse of authority and power is very high in some relationships, for example:

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<sup>1</sup> Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, The Service of Authority and Obedience, nr. 17.



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- a. The relationship between a confessor and a penitent: the advice the confessor gives can have a powerful effect on the penitent, sometimes a very negative effect.
- b. The same is true for the relationship between a spiritual director and a member of the faithful seeking counsel and advice.
- c. The relationship between young men in initial formation in the Order and their formators and superiors is fraught with danger, especially at the times when votes are taken for profession and sacred orders.
- d. The relationship between solemnly professed friars and their Ministers and Guardians can also become one of abuse of authority and power, especially at times of major decisions within the Province or the house.
- e. Within communities, relationships between friars can also degenerate into a form of abuse of authority and power: this can happen where there is a difference in the age profile of the friars, where there are older and sick friars, where there are friars of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

In these situations, it can happen that one brother seeks to dominate, manipulate and control another brother or a lay person, even inadvertently sometimes. Nevertheless, all such forms of abuse are to be rejected as utterly contrary to our vocation to be brothers to all.

The Catholic Church, through its universal and particular legislation, and our Order, through the directives of the General Chapter 2021, have striven to put in place structures, policies and procedures to deal with the reality of such abuse and to ensure that safeguarding young people and vulnerable adults is an integral part of our life and mission.

St Francis wished that the brothers should go about the world in gladness and joy, as servants and subjects of all, peaceful and humble of heart. In this way, they would be true followers of Jesus Christ who came to serve and not to be served and they would be faithful to their calling to be Lesser Brothers in fact and not just in name.



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Not only within the brotherhood but towards all people, brothers should exercise no violent or degrading form of power.

Once again, the members of the Commission for Safeguarding in the Order thank you for your efforts in this field. We remain at your service should you seek further information or clarification.

In this most holy season of Advent, we pray that God may bless your gospel way of life, that you may spread the Good News of the Lord, and that the New Year of 2024 may find you renewed in hope and faith.

Peace and every good!

Aidan McGrath, ofm

Sig.ra Anne Peach

Joseph Cavoto, ofm

John Paul Tan, ofm

Teofil Czarniak, ofm

Albert Schmucki, ofm  
President of the commission

General Curia O.F.M.

3 December 2023, First Sunday of Advent

