April marks Child Abuse Prevention Month for the nation. This annual commemoration reminds us of an essential element in our efforts of child and youth protection. To use a phrase from our moral tradition, we call this element “right relationship.” Its principles inform interactions across all ages and situations. The development of right relationships between the people in the pews and their clergy is vital to creating a safe environment. The clergy, especially pastors, have the most influence in effectuating The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People by requiring that all volunteers, employees, and minors are safe environment trained. The program and methods of implementing such a requirement are chosen by the local bishop. Since the Charter was enacted in 2002, on average 2 million adults and 4 million children annually have been safe environment trained.

Safeguarding the young is an explicit Church core value. This requires right relationships to be formed between pastors and their congregations. Pastors set the tone for their parish. If they maintain child and youth protection as a core value, their parishioners will as well. The pastor's personal, public communication is essential to ensure that parishioners understand why safe environment training is necessary -- to protect children from those who would take advantage of their vulnerability. Coupled with their endorsements regarding training, pastors should encourage those in the pews to connect with diocesan resources, such as their local Victim Assistance Coordinator or Safe Environment Coordinator, to find out what local resources are available and to partner with them in healing and prevention. Trust between pastors and parishioners depends on periodic pulpit endorsement of safeguarding policies and training. This does not have to be elaborate, but it does have to come from our own lips with a promise to support parish staff and volunteers who execute local policies.

Another expression of right relationship happens between parent and child. Parents are the first educators of their children. Children will emulate the priorities and core values that their parents model within their household. If safe environment training for both themselves and their children is not the subject of family conversation, children will assume that it is not a priority. Parents can partner with their parish and local diocese to find resources for talking about safe environment training. Parental confidence is augmented by communication from the pulpit. Bulletin announcements and wall posters are necessary but not sufficient for an effective approach.

Right relationships are the bedrock of the Church’s child and youth protection structure. 2020 marks eighteen years since the Charter was created by the bishops. This April we remember with sorrow and compassion, those who have been sexually abused, including their families. Prevention begins in our parishes, schools, religious education, and youth ministries. During this Child Abuse Prevention Month, I invite you to use the resources provided by the USCCB and your diocese. Communicate with your congregations in order to sustain the conversation about child and youth protection. Provide resources to any who might feel that this topic is too uncomfortable to talk about. Remind everyone that fostering a culture of protection and healing deserves active support by each Catholic. Please know of my prayers for you during this upcoming Easter season.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Timothy L. Doherty
Bishop of Lafayette-in-Indiana
Chairman, Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People