Voices of Sisters
Ministry



Pictured are worshippers holding candles in this 2012 photo. Church leaders have a crucial role and duty in rebuilding trust after the sexual abuse scandals involving clerics and other church representatives, writes Sr. Matilda Owolagba. (CNS file/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Sr. Matilda Owolagba

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April 16, 2025

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As a canonist, currently pursuing my doctorate in canon law at St. Paul University in Ottawa, Canada, I have had the opportunity to reflect deeply on how trust can be restored in our church. In November 2024, I attended an international conference at the university titled "Shall we talk about trust? How to restore trust in the Catholic Church after its betrayal in the abuse scandals?"

There, I presented a paper on "The Role of Church Leadership in Building Trust — A Necessity in a Synodal Church." Taking time to reflect, I realize I do believe we can still talk about trust after the abuse scandals — but only if church leadership puts in place measures to ensure that trust is never again betrayed as it was in the past.

Church leaders have a crucial role and duty in rebuilding trust after the sexual abuse scandals involving clerics and other church representatives. Many leaders have learned from past failures and are intentionally making efforts to restore trust in communities. Pope Francis has also called for a more participatory and listening church through the Synod of Bishops on synodality. Trust-building is an essential part of synodality. We cannot walk together or relate authentically as a people if trust is lacking.

Building trust is not optional — it is a necessity for church leadership today, including the pope, leader of the universal church in communion with the college of bishops. It also includes diocesan bishops and their equivalents, who lead dioceses and other particular churches, as well as heads of church institutions and institutes at various levels.

Speaking from my experience and observations in two dioceses — one in Nigeria and the other in Canada — I believe we can still talk about trust. However, this trust does not extend to dioceses or institutions that do not have enough measures in place to prevent abuse.



This photo illustration shows a priest preparing to distribute Communion during Mass. "Speaking from my experience and observations in two dioceses ... I believe we can still talk about trust," writes Sr. Matilda Owolagba. "However, this trust does not extend to dioceses or institutions that do not have enough measures in place to prevent abuse." (OSV News/Bob Roller)

I served as a member of the Committee for the Safeguarding of Minors and Vulnerable Persons in the Catholic Diocese of Ijebu-Ode in Ogun State, Nigeria, and I am currently the parish coordinator for safe environment at Canadian Martyrs Parish in Ottawa, Canada. From this firsthand experience, and in witnessing the efforts of Pope Francis and local churches, I see the issue of trust being actively addressed — especially through the development of new norms and procedures.

In *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* ("You are the light of the world"), a 2019 document issued by Pope Francis, he mandated all dioceses and institutions to establish safeguarding policies. In response, the bishop of Ijebu-Ode formed a committee of experts — including canonists, theologians, civil lawyers, psychologists, medical doctors and

other professionals — to review existing safeguarding policies. He then organized a mandatory workshop on safeguarding for all priests, deacons and religious working in the diocese to raise awareness and prevent abuse of minors and vulnerable persons.

The Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall also has strong safeguarding policies in place for clerics and volunteers involved in pastoral work. These include a code of pastoral conduct for priests, deacons, seminarians, employees and volunteers. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops developed a policy titled "Protecting Minors from Sexual Abuse: A Call to the Catholic Faithful in Canada for Healing, Reconciliation, and Transformation." This document invites the broader church community to participate in efforts to prevent abuse and protect minors and vulnerable people.

My own institute, the Sisters of St. Louis, has policies at various levels for safeguarding minors and vulnerable persons. Institutions we operate have child protection guidelines to be followed by sisters, staff and collaborators. In 2021, the Nigeria Province reviewed its safeguarding policy. A child protection office monitors each institution to ensure policies are followed, and all institutions are expected to have safeguarding representatives.

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During my presentation, I shared with the group that through my ministry and studies, I have come to see that restoring and building trust must involve deliberate, concrete actions. Some of the most effective ways include:

- Acknowledging past mistakes, taking responsibility, and offering sincere apologies;
- Ensuring accountability at all levels of church leadership;
- Creating and maintaining credible reporting systems in every diocese and institution;
- Promoting transparency in decision-making and communication;
- Enforcing existing safeguarding laws and procedures;
- Mandating ongoing safeguarding workshops for clergy and church personnel.

I believe that formation for future clergy and religious is not the sole responsibility of seminaries and formation houses. Trust can also be built through Christian formation

in the family, and through programs that promote human dignity and healthy boundaries. Policy enforcement, safety measures, ensuring justice when boundaries are crossed, and encouraging the active participation of the faithful — especially through listening — are all vital steps.

I also believe we must make reparation to those who were wrongly accused and later found innocent after thorough civil and canonical investigations.

There are many barriers to building trust which include lack of openness and a reluctance to listen among some church leaders, clericalism, inadequate application of laws and procedures, and pervasive secularism, along with fear and shame.

I have experienced many of the obstacles to building trust, but I have also witnessed and been part of sincere efforts that foster healing. Trust-building leads to more cordial relationships, peaceful coexistence, the repair of broken bonds, and progress toward a healthier church and society.

It is so important for church leaders to recognize that their role in building trust is needed today more than ever. Leadership must go beyond issuing policies — it must ensure those policies are being followed and the necessary actions are taken. Without this commitment, words remain empty, and trust cannot be restored.

The attitude and disposition of church leadership matter immensely. A posture of humility, accountability and authentic listening is essential in rebuilding the credibility of the Church.

I also want to acknowledge the efforts of some church leaders in recent decades — those who have taken courageous steps to address past scandals, prevent abuse, and ensure safe environments for minors and vulnerable persons. As more leaders follow their example, I remain hopeful: we *can* still talk about trust in the church.