

# Durham University PhD Studentship on Contextual Safeguarding in Catholic Church Contexts



DO YOU BELIEVE THAT SAFEGUARDING IN FAITH CONTEXTS NEEDS TO PRIVILEGE THE  
VOICES, EXPERIENCES, AND WISDOM OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?  
DO YOU WANT TO CONTRIBUTE TO CREATING SAFE AND HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND  
LIFE-GIVING ENVIRONMENTS IN CATHOLIC CHURCH CONTEXTS?  
DO YOU HOLD A GOOD MASTERS DEGREE (or equivalent)?

IF YOU ANSWERED YES TO THESE THREE QUESTIONS WE COULD HAVE THE PERFECT POST-  
GRADUATE OPPORTUNITY FOR YOU.

The Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University is inviting applications from individuals to undertake a fully funded 3-year PhD on the topic of Contextual Safeguarding in Catholic Church Contexts. The post is jointly hosted between the Centre for Catholic Studies and the new Global Centre for Contextual Safeguarding (Department of Sociology), both based at Durham University. The post is funded by Porticus UK.

The successful candidate will undertake a PhD program related closely to the work being carried out in the *Conversations, Culture and Communion* project based at the Centre of Catholic Studies: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/research/boundary-breaking-/conversations-culture-and-communion/>

They will work under the supervision of the Research Lead on this project, Professor Clare Watkins, with co-supervision from Professor Carlene Firmin, the Director of the Global Centre for Contextual Safeguarding (GCCS), and one other scholar from the GCCS.

**Funding:** Subject to eligibility, the scholarship covers UK / EU tuition fees and a grant towards living expenses of £20,780 in the first year, with small annual increases into the second and third years (pro rata for part-time study). Funding for an additional 6 months of living expenses is available if needed.

Successful applicants will also have access to a small travel grant, and will be supported to deliver their PhD within the active research culture of the Centre of Catholic Studies, Department of Theology and Religion, in partnership with the GCCS.

**Hours:** Full time or Part time

**Starts:** 1<sup>st</sup> Oct 2025

### **The Project**

Safeguarding is high on the agenda of churches as they work to respond to disclosures of abuse and their mishandling that have come to light in recent decades. Case Studies from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) in Britain demonstrated significant failure in both Anglican and Roman Catholic communities in this area, with the wider ranging IICSA report - "Child protection in religious organisations and settings" (2021) - identifying particular characteristics of faith contexts which might impede reporting and adequate response. Whilst the churches in Britain have made advances in safeguarding practice and policy, what has remained lacking is the participation and effective agency of children and young people themselves in shaping environments in which they are not merely objects for safeguarding, but co-producers of contexts of safety, which enable healthy relationships for their flourishing. As recognised by the recent research report into sexual abuse in the Catholic Church of England and Wales – *the Cross of the Moment*<sup>1</sup> – in clear resonance with IICSA's own observations, what is now needed is work towards cultural and contextual change in church life and thought which can enable such life-giving safe environments. To bring about such change, the voices and experiences of children and young people, too often neglected, will be essential.

This doctoral post will be designed to contribute constructive responses and insight to much-needed ecclesial culture change. The supervision and support for the doctorate will be shared between the Centre for Catholic Studies (CCS) and the Global Centre for Contextual Safeguarding both at Durham University. In particular, the doctoral student's research will be closely linked to the CCS project – *Conversations, Culture and Communion: networking for church vitality and health* – and reflect that project's commitments to participative research, shared learning, and the generation and dissemination of knowledge and practice through existing ecclesial networks. It will also build upon work to explore contextually safe environments for young people in youth, sports and faith settings as part of the Contextual

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Boundary Breaking Project, Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University:  
<https://www.dur.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/research/boundary-breaking/>

Safeguarding [Towards Safety](#) project. Contextual Safeguarding offers a way to conceptualise and implement safeguarding practices that go beyond policy and process, centre young people's views, and shape the culture of organisations in which young people spend their time. At the same time, the locating of this doctoral work primarily within the Department of Theology and Religion at the university, ensures that these questions and practices can be read afresh theologically, and, in turn, contribute to renewing such understanding.

As supervised through, and linked to, both the Centre for Catholic Studies' *Conversations, Culture and Communion* project and the Global Centre for Contextual Safeguarding, the doctoral work will be strongly positioned to integrate multi-disciplinary perspectives. In particular the doctoral candidate will be well-placed to integrate theological and pastoral thinking and practice with the insights and practices of social work, psychology, and youth studies. The research will be primarily focused on Catholic sites of research, but could have the potential to benefit Christian communities more widely, together with the many young people with whom they work.

## Eligibility

The ideal candidate must have:

- Honours degree, preferably (though not essentially) in one of the following subjects: theology, philosophy, sociology, youth and community work. Ordinarily a minimum degree grade of 2:1 would be expected.
- A good Masters degree in a related subject area
- An interest in the faith life and development of children and young people
- An active concern for renewed theology and practice within the Catholic Church, especially relating to children and young people

It is also desirable that they have experience of Catholic Church life and / or Christian ministry among children and young people.

## How to apply

Applicants need to apply both for the PhD programme and the scholarship as follows:

The PhD application should be made via the Durham University online application system: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/study/pg/apply/> quoting program code **V8A001**

Please state on your PhD application under the section on Finance and Funding which scholarship you are applying for – please state **CCS-PORTICUS**.

In addition, please send a copy of your application details, supporting documents, and references to : [ccs.admin@durham.ac.uk](mailto:ccs.admin@durham.ac.uk), for the studentship application. The granting of this studentship is dependent on successful application for PhD study.

The awarding of the studentship will be based on application documents and interview.

Supporting Documents:

- 1) A 3-page (maximum) proposal for a doctoral research project related to Contextual Safeguarding in Catholic Church Contexts. This should include (i) A short section on why you are interested in conducting research in this area, (ii) A longer research proposal identifying – at least in a preliminary way – the key research question(s) that will form the focus of the work, and anticipated methods. This part of the proposal should include reference to key relevant literature, a rationale for why this work is needed, aims, anticipated study design, and expected outcomes. You may include figures, diagrams, or tables to illustrate any aspects of study if you feel it is helpful.
- 2) An example of previously written work (e.g. Dissertation / Written coursework, Published Paper, Report).
- 3) Two letters of references – at least one from an academic source
- 4) CV (no more than 2 pages).
- 5) For candidates where English is not their first language, we require English Language Evidence – please refer to following web page for details of accepted evidence <https://www.dur.ac.uk/learningandteaching.handbook/1/3/3/3/>
- 6) Enquiries regarding the application process should be forwarded to [theopgresearchadmissions@durham.ac.uk](mailto:theopgresearchadmissions@durham.ac.uk) . Applicants are encouraged to contact Prof. Clare Watkins for conversation about this opportunity. Clare will also be happy to assist with drafting a proposal. [Clare.Watkins@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Clare.Watkins@durham.ac.uk).

**Closing Date: July 4<sup>th</sup> 2025**

**Interview Date: July 17<sup>th</sup> 2025**