

Vatican suggests bishops report abuse to police

By NICOLE WINFIELD, Associated Press

VATICAN CITY – The Vatican told bishops around the world Monday that it was important to cooperate with police in reporting priests who rape and molest children and said that the prelates should develop guidelines for preventing sex abuse by next May.

But the suggestions in the letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are vague and nonbinding and contain no enforcement mechanisms to ensure bishops actually draft the guidelines or follow them.

That is a significant omission given the latest scandal in the United States involves allegations Philadelphia's archbishop left accused priests in ministry despite purportedly tough U.S. guidelines, and evidence that Irish bishops were stonewalling an independent board overseeing compliance with the guidelines of the church in Ireland.

The document marks the latest effort by the Vatican to show it's serious about rooting out priestly pedophiles and preventing abuse following the eruption on a global scale of the abuse scandal last year with thousands of victims coming forward.

But it failed to impress advocates for victims who have long blamed the power of bishops bent on protecting the church and its priests for fueling the scandal. Without fear of punishment themselves, bishops frequently moved pedophile priests from parish to parish rather than reporting them to police or punishing them under church law.

"There's nothing that will make a child safer today or tomorrow or next month or next year," said Barbara Dorris, outreach director for the main U.S. victims group Survivors Network for Those Abused by Priests.

Critically, the letter reinforces bishops' exclusive authority in dealing with abuse cases. It says independent lay review boards that have been created in some countries to oversee the church's child protection policies and ensure compliance "cannot substitute" for bishops' judgment and power.

Recently, such lay review committees in the U.S. and Ireland have reported that some bishops "failed miserably" in following their own guidelines and had thwarted the boards' work by withholding information and by enacting legal hurdles that made ensuring compliance impossible.

"Our central concern is that bishops and religious leaders retain enormous discretionary powers to decide if an allegation is credible," said Maeve Lewis, executive director of the Irish victims group One in Four.

"Clergymen do not have the skills or expertise to make sound decisions in this regard: that is a matter for law enforcement and child protection specialists," Lewis said, calling the Vatican letter "dangerously flawed."

The Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said the document's emphasis on the central authority of bishops was not a negative commentary on the role of lay review boards but rather a reminder of the "great responsibility" bishops have in dealing with abuse cases as heads of their dioceses.

In the letter, the Vatican told the bishops "it is important to cooperate" with civil law enforcement authorities and follow civil reporting requirements, though it doesn't make such reporting mandatory. The Vatican has said such a binding rule would be problematic for priests working in countries with repressive regimes.

The letter told the bishops' conferences to draft guidelines for preventing abuse and caring for victims and report them back to the Congregation by May 2012, and to consult with superiors of religious orders to do so. It said bishops should be prepared to listen to victims, to create "safe environment" programs for minors and to better screen seminarians and ensure they receive proper training about celibacy and the damage done to victims of sex abuse.

It did not mention possible financial compensation for victims.

Lombardi stressed that such measures are to be taken up in individual bishops conferences, noting that in many case payments are decided by civil courts anyway.

He emphasized that the letter issued Monday was never designed to offer specific, binding recommendations to bishops since their situations are all different. Rather, the aim was to offer a "common, substantial denominator of fundamental principles and observations that everyone can take into account in making policies that are adapted for their situations."

Many bishops conferences have already drafted guidelines, but one glaring example of a country that hasn't is Italy, home of the Vatican, where just Sunday the country's top cardinal informed the faithful of his diocese that their longtime pastor had been jailed for allegedly abusing a 16-year-old boy and giving him drugs.

Lombardi said he expected the Italian bishops conference to now come up with conference-wide guidelines.

The letter stresses that accused priests are presumed innocent until proven guilty.

That too is the case of the U.S. norms, which were enacted after the abuse scandal exploded in Boston in 2002. But the United States norms nevertheless bar credibly accused priests from any public church work if sufficient evidence is found that they abused a minor. Clergy found guilty are permanently barred from public ministry and, in some cases, ousted from the priesthood.

The guidance given to bishops in the letter Monday makes no mention of removing priests but reminds bishops that they are "always able to limit the exercise of the cleric's ministry until the accusations are clarified."

The U.S. norms were approved by the Vatican and are church law in the U.S. The Vatican said Monday that the other bishops' conferences could seek Vatican approval as well, though Lombardi suggested that some bishops conferences may find they can be more flexible and responsive to changing needs if the norms don't go through the tedious process of being approved by the Vatican as church law.

The letter is being issued at a time when the U.S. norms have been put into question after a Philadelphia grand jury earlier this year indicted a high-ranking church official on child endangerment charges for allegedly transferring predator priests. Four co-defendants — two priests, an ex-priest and a former Catholic school teacher — are charged with raping children.

The grand jury found "substantial evidence of abuse" committed by at least 37 other priests who remained in active ministry at the time of the report. Philadelphia's archbishop, Cardinal Justin Rigali, initially insisted that no archdiocesan priests in ministry had an "admitted or established allegation" against them. But he later suspended two dozen of the 37 priests.

The scandal exposed some of the loopholes in the Vatican-approved U.S. norms that leave it entirely up to bishops to determine the credibility of allegations; the new Vatican instruction confirms that by both reinforcing bishops' responsibility and authority and seemingly diminishing the importance of lay review boards in checking their compliance.

Last week, the head of the Philadelphia archdiocese's lay review board publicly accused Rigali and his bishops of having "failed miserably at being open and transparent" because they prescreened which cases the board reviewed and left out crucial information for some priests they did review.

And last week, Ireland's National Board for Safeguarding Children, a church-appointed independent panel overseeing compliance with Ireland's guidelines, said it had been prevented from fulfilling its mandate to review diocesan responses to abuse cases by bishops' legal concerns about the priests' privacy.

On Friday, Amnesty International listed the Vatican in its annual report of global human rights abuses, citing revelations of clerical abuse around the world and the "enduring failure" of the church to address the crimes properly.

Copyright © 2011 Yahoo! Inc