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# Vatican Revises Abuse Process, but Causes Stir

By RACHEL DONADIO

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican issued revisions to its internal laws on Thursday making it easier to discipline sex-abuser priests, but caused confusion by also stating that ordaining women as priests was as grave an offense as pedophilia.

The decision to link the issues appears to reflect the determination of embattled Vatican leaders to resist any suggestion that pedophilia within the priesthood can be addressed by ending the celibacy requirement or by allowing women to become priests.

The overall document codified existing procedures that allow the Vatican to try priests accused of child sexual abuse using faster juridical procedures rather than full ecclesiastical trials. The Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said the changes showed the church's commitment to tackling child sexual abuse with "rigor and transparency."

Those measures fell short of the hopes of many advocates for victims of priestly abuse, who dismissed them as "tweaking" rather than a bold overhaul. The new rules do not, for example, hold bishops accountable for abuse by priests on their watch, nor do they require them to report sexual abuse to civil authorities — though less formal "guidelines" issued earlier this year encourage reporting if local law compels it.

But what astonished many Catholics was the inclusion of the attempt to ordain women in a list of the "more grave delicts," or offenses, which included pedophilia, as well as heresy, apostasy and schism. The issue, some critics said, was less the ordination of women, which is not discussed seriously inside the church hierarchy, but the Vatican's suggestion that pedophilia is a comparable sin in a document billed a response to the sexual abuse crisis.

**"It is very irritating that they put the increased severity in punishment for abuse and women's ordination at the same level," said Christian Weisner, the spokesman for "We Are Church," a liberal Catholic reform movement founded in 1996 in response to a high-profile sexual abuse case in Austria. "It tells us that the church still understands itself as an environment dominated by men."**

The reaction among American Catholics could be measured in some degree by comments from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl of Washington, a top official in the group, called the document a "welcome statement" even as he took pains to praise the role of women in the church. "The church's gratitude to women cannot be stated strongly enough," he said at a news conference in Washington. "Women offer unique insight, creative abilities and unstinting generosity at the very heart of the Catholic Church."

Still, the archbishop added. "The Catholic Church through its long and constant teaching holds that ordination has been, from the beginning, reserved to men, a fact which cannot be changed despite changing times."

At a news conference at the Vatican, Msgr. Charles J. Scicluna, the Vatican's internal prosecutor in charge of handling sexual abuse cases, explained the change on women's ordination in technical terms. "Sexual abuse and pornography are more grave delicts, they are an egregious violation of moral law," Monsignor Scicluna said in his first public appearance since the sex abuse crisis hit. "Attempted ordination of women is grave, but

on another level, it is a wound that is an attempt against the Catholic faith on the sacramental orders.”

The revision codifies a 2007 ruling that made attempting to ordain women an offense punishable with excommunication. The new document said that a priest who tried to ordain a woman could now be defrocked.

For more than two decades, polls have shown that large majorities of American Catholics favor allowing women to be ordained as priests, despite the lack of support for it among church leaders. The latest poll of American Catholics by The New York Times and CBS News, released in May, showed that 59 percent favored ordaining women, while 33 percent were opposed.

“I think they see us as their worst nightmare and they’re doing as much as they can to stop it,” said Bridget Mary Meehan, one of five American women who say they have been ordained as bishops as part of a tiny movement of women in Europe and the United States who claim to have been ordained as bishops, priests and deacons.

The movement, called Roman Catholic Womenpriests, now claims that 100 women have been given ordination ceremonies as priests, deacons or bishops, and 75 of those are Americans, Ms. Meehan said.

At the news conference here unveiling the changes, Monsignor Scicluna said that rules on their own could not eradicate priestly abuse but that the church now had better tools to work toward that. “This gives a signal that we are very, very serious in our commitment to promote safe environments and to offer an adequate response to abuse,” he said. “If more changes are needed, they will be made.”

In addition to making the faster administrative procedures for disciplining priests the rule, not the exception, the new norms also added possession of child pornography and sexual abuse of mentally disabled adults to the list of grave crimes.

The Vatican also doubled the statute of limitations for abuse cases to 20 years from the victim’s 18th birthday. After that, a priest could be removed from the ministry but not defrocked unless the Vatican lifted the statute of limitations in the case, a right it reserves on a case-by-case basis.

Many victims have said they did not feel able to come forward until long after abuse took place.

Critics immediately said the revisions did not go far enough.

“Given his authority, Benedict could implement meaningful change,” Bishopaccountability.org, which tracks cases of sexual abuse by priests worldwide, said in a statement, referring to Pope Benedict XVI. “He could direct bishops to report every allegation of child sexual abuse to the police, regardless of whether civil law requires them to do so. He could threaten punishment of any bishop or church official who enables or fails to stop a child-molesting priest.”

For years, bishops complained to the Vatican about confusion over how to handle sexual abuse cases. In 2001, Pope John Paul II issued a document saying all credible allegations of abuse by priests should be reported to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. But the document was not widely circulated, and the confusion remained.

In April, the Vatican for the first time published online guidelines that it said it advised bishops to follow in handling abuse, including reporting all sexual abuse cases to the Vatican and to civil authorities in countries that required mandatory reporting of crimes. But those guidelines do not hold the force of law.

The new document did not change that. "It's not for canonical legislation to get itself involved with civil law," Monsignor Scicluna said.

Laurie Goodstein contributed reporting from New York, and Gaia Pianigiani from Rome.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/16/world/europe/16vatican.html?src=me>

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