

Vatican tries to tamp down abuse letter to Irish bishops

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Vatican on Wednesday (Jan. 19) tried to tamp down allegations a controversial 1997 letter to Irish bishops was meant to discourage prelates from reporting sexual abuse cases to police or prosecutors.

The Vatican's top spokesman said the letter from the Vatican's ambassador to Ireland was meant to ensure the application of the Catholic Church's internal disciplinary procedures against pedophile priests.

The letter, signed by Archbishop Luciano Storero, was made public for the first time on Monday (Jan. 17) in a television documentary broadcast on the Irish network RTE.

Storero told bishops the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy had expressed "serious reservations of both a moral and a canonical nature" about a 1996 draft policy for the Irish church calling for "mandatory reporting" of sex abuse claims to civil authorities.

Advocates for sex abuse victims quickly pointed to the letter as evidence the Vatican had prevented bishops from turning pedophile priests over to the police.

"A key Roman Catholic figure basically tells bishops that church policy trumps criminal laws and that church officials, not secular officials, get to quietly handle child molesters `in house,'" said a statement from the U.S.-based Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests.

But according to the Rev. Federico Lombardi, head of the Vatican press office, Storero's letter was intended only to guarantee the rigor of the church's own internal measures against pedophile priests.

"The letter correctly insists on the importance of always respecting canon law, precisely in order to ensure that the guilty have no basis for an appeal" that could lead to overturning their penalties, Lombardi said in a statement.

In the letter, Storero quoted a statement from the Congregation for the Clergy warning that certain "procedures and dispositions" in the proposed Irish policy "could invalidate the acts of the same bishops who are attempting to put a stop to these problems."

Jeffrey Lena, an American lawyer representing the Vatican in sex abuse cases, said in a statement the 1997 document "has been deeply misunderstood."

"The letter nowhere instructed Irish bishops to disregard civil law reporting requirements," Lena said, and was intended mainly "to help ensure that bishops who discipline their priests for sexual abuse did so in a manner that would ensure that the priest not avoid punishment based upon technical grounds."