

Vatican gives bishops one year to set abuse policies

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May 16, 2011

VATICAN CITY (RNS) The world's Catholic bishops have one year to set national policies on clerical sex abuse of minors, the Vatican said on Monday (May 16), but such policies may vary significantly in each country, and will not be binding on individual bishops.

All national bishops' conferences are to prepare "guidelines" on preventing abuse, caring for victims, disciplining abusive priests, and reporting suspected abuse to local police, according to a letter from Cardinal William Levada, head of the Vatican's doctrinal office.

Levada, a former archbishop of San Francisco and one of the highest ranking Americans in the Vatican, said the national guidelines must be submitted to the Vatican by the end of May 2012.

Vatican spokesman the Rev. Federico Lombardi called the May 2012 deadline a "very strong and eloquent statement" on the need to address sex abuse "promptly and effectively" around the world.

The Vatican's suggestions for national guidelines are, in many respects, less aggressive than the get-tough rules U.S. bishops adopted in 2002, which many have criticized for not holding bishops accountable, especially after three dozen accused priests recently were found on active duty in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

U.S. bishops are scheduled to review their 2002 abuse policies during their summer meeting in Seattle, but it remains unclear what, if any, action the American bishops will take.

A prominent American advocate for abuse victims swiftly dismissed the Vatican's latest measure as toothless.

"There's no enforcement here," said Barbara Dorris of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "There's no 'zero tolerance' or 'mandatory reporting' requirement here. There's nothing that will make a child safer today or tomorrow or next month or next year."

Demand for a universal church policy on sex abuse has mounted since controversies over pedophile priests broke out in a number of European and South American countries in early 2010.

Last July, church officials increased the statute of limitations for abuse cases under canon law by 10 years, to 20 years beyond the victim's 18th birthday, with possible extensions for victims who come forward later in life.

Levada's May 3 letter includes "general themes for (bishops') consideration" in drafting national guidelines, but allows for significant variation by country, and leaves much to the discretion of individual bishops.

The new Vatican directives say bishops must "always" report sex abuse of children by priests and other church employees to the civil authorities, but only if required by local law.

"One must collaborate with the situation that applies in each country," Lombardi said. "If there are laws, then the laws should be observed. If there are no laws, it is not for us to make them."

(In an interview with an Italian newspaper last year, the Vatican's chief abuse investigator, Monsignor Charles J. Scicluna, said his office does not "force" bishops to turn in their priests, but encourages them "to contact the victims and invite them to denounce the priest by whom they have been abused.")

Levada's letter stresses that the responsibility for dealing with sex abuse lies with individual bishops and heads of religious orders, and notes that national guidelines will not have the binding force of church law unless approved by the Vatican -- a process that can take years.

While Levada's letter reminds bishops they are "always able" to suspend or restrict the movements of suspected abusers during an investigation, it leaves those decisions up to each bishop.

By contrast, the U.S. bishops' 2002 policies state that a bishop "shall" take such "precautionary measures" once "there is sufficient evidence that sexual abuse of a minor has occurred."

Unlike mere guidelines, the U.S. bishops' policies were approved by the Vatican as binding legal "norms" in the U.S. church, said Nicholas P. Cafardi, a professor at Duquesne Law School who helped develop the policies.

Yet a recent grand jury report that suspected abusers were allowed to remain on active duty in Philadelphia duty shows that even church-approved norms -- much less guidelines -- are no guarantee of effectiveness, Cafardi said.

"The big problem is how can we make sure the bishops are complying?" Cafardi said. "Until we figure out how to discipline bishops who keep sex-abusive priests in ministry, we really have a problem."