

Vatican says new guidelines will combat global abuse scandal

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Vatican announced on Friday (Nov. 19) that it is preparing international guidelines to prevent the sexual abuse of children by Roman Catholic clergy, a long-awaited response to a scandal that has seeped into countless corners of the church.

Cardinal William Levada, head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, announced the plan to the assembled College of Cardinals on Friday evening (Nov. 19).

Levada, a former archbishop of San Francisco who is one of the highest-ranking Americans at the Vatican, told the cardinals that his office was preparing a letter to national bishops' conferences offering guidelines "for a coordinated and efficacious program" on clerical sex abuse.

The forthcoming guidelines will include "collaboration with the civil authorities," and "careful selection and education of future priests and religious," the Vatican said.

Demand for a unified Vatican policy on sex abuse has mounted since controversies over pedophile priests broke out in a number of European and South American countries earlier this year.

In July, as part of the most significant overhaul of canon law in nine years, church officials increased the statute of limitations on abuse cases from 10 years to 20 beyond the victim's 18th birthday, with possible extensions for victims who come forward later in life.

Practice varies widely from country to country. The Vatican has told bishops that they must inform civil authorities of sex abuse cases only where local laws require it.

Friday's announcement came during a day-long meeting of the world's cardinals, who were summoned by Pope Benedict XVI to discuss major topics of concern to the church the day before he adds 24 men, including two Americans, to their number.

The Vatican said the cardinals agreed to encourage national bishops conferences to develop "efficacious, timely, detailed, complete and decisive plans for the protection of children ... even in countries where the problem has not manifested itself in as dramatic a manner as in others."