

Church must act decisively on sexual abuse, says pope

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#) with contributions from [Kevin Eckstrom](#)

This article appears in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue.

Pope Francis has called for strong, specific worldwide measures for the Roman Catholic Church to act “with determination” against the clergy sexual abuse scandal that has rocked the church for more than a decade.

It is one of the first actions on a major issue in Francis’s weeks-old papacy, one that has been marked chiefly by attention to his humble, low-key style.

After he met April 5 with the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Mueller, the Vatican said in a statement: “The Holy Father recommended that the congregation continue the line sought by Benedict XVI, to act with determination in regard to cases of sexual abuse.”

Francis cited measures to protect minors, help victims of sexual violence, and take necessary action against perpetrators and emphasized that drafting and implementing directives by bishops’ conferences around the world is important to the credibility of the church.

Francis concluded by saying, “Victims of abuse are present in a particular way in his prayers for those who are suffering,” according to the Vatican press office.

U.S. victims of clergy sexual abuse have demanded swift and bold actions from the new pontiff. In Argentina, where the former cardinal Jorge Bergoglio was archbishop of Buenos Aires, he won praise for his simple lifestyle and focus on the poor but was criticized for failing to meet with abuse victims.

The April 5 actions also contain another clue to how Francis will be pope: he calls on the various national bishops’ conferences around the world to step up in disciplining priests and serving victims, a possible indication that he will move from a strongly

centralized government of the church to one that places increased authority locally.

In another signal, Francis did not emphasize the doctrinal issues that were behind a crackdown on American nuns and the disciplining of rogue theologians, which characterized the office under Pope Benedict XVI.

The abuse crisis exploded on the world stage in Boston in January 2002; by June that year, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops led the world in establishing a zero-tolerance policy for abusive priests, removing them from ministry and reaching out to victims.

But the leading group of victims in the U.S., the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), was not mollified by this sign of action. “A good sign doesn’t keep one child safe. Not one,” said SNAP executive director David Clohessy in comments on the papal statement.

The pope, he said, “is a man who has shown that he understands the power of gesture. And yet, within hours of becoming pope, he met with Cardinal (Bernard) Law, perhaps the most discredited bishop on the planet.”

Law was driven to resign as archbishop of Boston when it came to light that the archdiocese had protected and promoted predators and shuffled them among parishes. In the week before Easter, Law, who now lives in Rome, and Francis met at one of the churches where Francis came to pray.

Clohessy said the pope could have taken much sharper action, including calling on all bishops to give all of their files on known abusers to law enforcement and “sit down with secular lawmakers and work for better child safety laws.” —*USA Today*
/RNS