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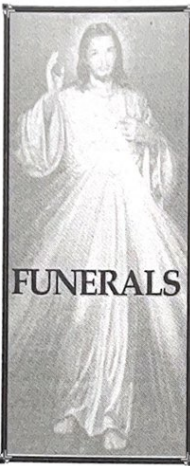


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Pope Simplifies Norms For Sex Abuse Cases

▲ by John Thavis

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — A leading Vatican official said Pope Benedict XVI's approval of revised norms on clerical sex abuse sent a clear signal that the Church is serious about protecting children and punishing abusive priests. At the same time, the official said, the Vatican norms alone cannot resolve the problem of sexual abuse, which will require a continued and coordinated effort at every level of the church.

Msgr. Charles Scicluna, the promoter of justice at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, made the comments at a briefing for reporters on the revised norms, which simplified and streamlined many of the Church's procedures in dealing with priests accused of sexual abuse of minors.

Msgr. Scicluna said the doctrinal congregation was grateful to the pope for transforming into universal church law a number of practices aimed at dealing more quickly and efficiently with priest abusers.

"I think it gives a signal that we are very, very serious about our commitment to promote safe environments and to offer an adequate response to abuse," he said.

"This is a very important step from the technical viewpoint of canon law. But a document is always a document — it does not solve all the problems. It's a very important instrument, but it's the way you use the instrument that's going to have the real effect on the life of the Church," he said.

Msgr. Scicluna was asked why the

revised norms, like the previous ones, impose "pontifical secrecy" on the Church's judicial handling of priestly sex abuse.

He said a better term was "confidentiality," and that it was desirable above all to protect the dignity of everyone involved, including the victim, the accused, their families and their communities.

He also noted that in some cases, for example, a priest's dismissal from the priesthood — bishops are authorized to divulge the decision and the reasons behind it if this is seen as necessary for the common good of the Church.

"So the value of confidentiality is important, but it is not absolute. Confidentiality of a process that has been completed, either with a sentence of condemnation or a finding of innocence," he said.

Likewise, Msgr. Scicluna said the Church's insistence on confidentiality has limits in the relationship with civil authorities. Bishops are required to comply with civil law that requires reporting of abuse accusations, he said.

"Confidentiality of canonical proceedings is never an impediment to the duty to denounce (crimes), and in civil law," he said.

Msgr. Scicluna made it clear that Pope Benedict had made the changes in the norms, and in doing so the pope respected his area of competence, he said.

New Norms at a Glance

The revised Vatican norms dealing with sexual abuse of minors by priests and other "more grave crimes" against Church law contain several changes from the previous version published in 2001.

The main provisions of the revised norms:

- Extend the statute of limitations from 10 to 20 years after a sex abuse victim's 18th birthday.
- Include use of child pornography as a type of sexual abuse of minors.
- Establish parity between abuse of mentally disabled people and that of minors.
- Confirm the right of the Vatican's doctrinal congregation to ask the pope to laicize an abusive priest without a Church trial, in the most serious and clear cases.
- Confirm that the doctrinal congregation can use an "extra-judicial" process to quickly remove an accused priest from active ministry.
- Confirm the practice of allowing qualified lay Catholics, and not only priests with doctorates in canon law, to serve on tribunals that deal with sex abuse cases.
- Confirm the doctrinal congregation's competency to judge cardinals, patriarchs and bishops accused of "more grave crimes."
- Lists "attempted sacred ordination of a woman" among the "more grave crimes" reserved to the doctrinal congregation.
- Makes it a grave crime to record confessions with modern technology.