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Australians protest clergy sexual abuse outside St. Mary's Cathedral in Sydney during Pope B

Australians protest clergy sexual abuse outside St. Mary's Cathedral in Sydney during Pope Benedict XVI's visit to celebrate World Youth Day in 2008. He met with the victims of abuse in Australia and in the U.S. that year. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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Rome — March 25, 2023
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Pope Francis on March 25 made permanent his 2019 experimental law on clergy sex abuse, which was established to hold bishops and religious superiors accountable for abuse that they commit or cover up, and extended the law to now include lay leaders who head international associations recognized by the Vatican.

The norms were first published in a 2019 apostolic letter titled *Vos estis lux mundi* ("You are the light of the world"), and for the first time in the church's history, mandated that all priests and members of religious orders worldwide are obligated to report any suspicions of abuse or its cover-up.

Now, after a four-year experimental period and consultation with bishops and Vatican officials, Francis has revised the legislation and made it definitive, effective

April 30.

In addition to expanding the law to hold lay leaders of Vatican-approved associations accountable, the updated version clarifies that dioceses and eparchies must have an "organization or office" for cases to be reported (rather than the 2019 requirement of a "stable system"). The revised law also extends the protection of those who file reports to both the individual alleging abuse and those who witnessed the alleged offense.

The initial norms came on the heels of Pope Francis' historic February 2019 summit on abuse, where he summoned the presidents of every episcopal conference from around the world to Rome following mounting fallout from clergy abuse scandals involving a number of high profile cases of abuse and cover-up from prominent bishops in the United States, Chile and in Europe.

At the time, the law was praised as "revolutionary" and a major step forward in turning a corner on clergy sexual abuse and its cover-up. In recent years, however, both accountability organizations and close papal advisers have admitted that its implementation lacked consistency and transparency.

Vatican's quiet reprimand of US bishop raises concerns about pope's clergy abuse law

An editorial in Vatican News, the church's official news platform, published on March 25 said the updated norms evidence the "Church's desire to continue to combat crimes of sexual abuse."

One of the most notable changes of the new text includes a clarification of how abuse victims are defined.

While the original norms covered abuse or cover-up against minors and vulnerable persons, the new law has been revised to specify "a minor, or with a person who habitually has an imperfect use of reason, or with a vulnerable adult."

German Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, director of the Institute of Anthropology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, had previously criticized the language of "vulnerable persons" as too broad.

"Do you really want to be a 'vulnerable person' because you are a woman and because you are a parishioner? I don't think so," remarked Zollner during a March 2 dialogue with abuse survivors.

In addition to mandating that priests, bishops, religious superiors and now the leaders of some 120 lay associations recognized by the Vatican report abuse, the new *Vos estis* makes clear that anyone, "especially lay believers holding offices or exercising ministries in the Church," can submit reports of abuse.

The law continues to rely on the same framework of utilizing metropolitan archbishops to examine accusations made against bishops in their regions.

Once a report is submitted, the metropolitan must request approval from the Vatican to conduct an investigation, according to the norms. The Vatican is required to receive an update every 30 days on the status of the investigation, and once it is concluded, must receive the final results and the opinion of the investigator, before the Vatican issues a final ruling.

Since its implementation in 2019, the process has been used in at least 40 cases, including 11 in the United States and 16 in Poland. Advocacy and accountability groups, however, have lamented the lack of transparency in knowing the full number of cases, as well as the status of the investigations underway.

Under the new revisions to the law, the norms note that "it is the duty of the Ordinary [bishop] of the place where the events allegedly occurred to proceed in accordance with the law as provided for each specific case."

In an interview with Vatican News, Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich, who serves as a member of the Vatican's task force for the protection of minors, said the revision "puts a priority in cooperating with local law enforcement and following the laws of the land."

"This is not just a Church matter. This is not just a matter of a sin. This is a crime. And it recognizes that these crimes have to be adjudicated by law enforcement in each locality," said Cupich.

Upon news that Francis had made permanent the norms, Zollner's safeguarding institute issued a statement praising the revisions, which they stated "better define the responsibilities of those in authority and extend norms to include lay leaders of

international associations of the faithful, are a welcome addition to the procedures aimed at preventing abuse."

Anne Barrett Doyle, co-director of BishopAccountability.org, called the new law a "big disappointment" as it failed to correct what she described as the "crippling weaknesses" in its original form.

"*Vos estis* remains self-policing packaged as accountability. It keeps bishops in control of investigating and judging allegations against fellow bishops. It omits any requirement to inform the public. It tells bishops that they do not have to report child molestation to civil authorities unless they are mandated to do so under local law. And it limits lay involvement to roles that are fragmented and powerless," she said in a statement.

"Far more must happen if victims are to heal and children are to be safer inside the Catholic Church," Barrett Doyle concluded.

This story appears in the **Abuse** feature series. View the full series.