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The door into the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. (NCR /Joshua J. McElwee)

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In cases of a cleric sexually abusing a "vulnerable adult," the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith investigates and judges only cases involving "persons who habitually have an imperfect use of reason," the dicastery said in a note published Jan. 30.

Other cases involving vulnerable adults, including those in situations where their ability "to understand or will or otherwise resist the offense" is temporarily limited, should be referred to other offices of the Roman Curia, the clarification said.

While church documents issued in the past 15 years have included "vulnerable adults" as a special category in need of protection from clerical sexual abuse, questions have been raised about whether those persons should always be treated in church procedures in a way equivalent to children under the age of 18. For example, many asked, is a religious sister vulnerable to a priest who is her spiritual adviser in the same way that a person with a developmental disability would be.

In his 2001 document, "*Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela*" ("Safeguarding the Sanctity of the Sacraments"), St. John Paul II reserved to the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cases involving the sexual abuse of minors by members of the clergy. In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI updated the document to include "a person over 18 years of age who is developmentally disabled."

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Pope Francis' 2019 document, "*Vos Estis Lux Mundi*" ("You are the Light of the World"), on the responsibilities and accountability of bishops and superiors of religious orders indicated two separate categories, saying "'minor' means: any person under the age of 18, or who is considered by law to be the equivalent of a minor; 'vulnerable person' means: any person in a state of infirmity, physical or mental deficiency, or deprivation of personal liberty which, in fact, even

occasionally, limits their ability to understand or to want or otherwise resist the offense."

The doctrinal dicastery's late January clarification said while the church recognizes the special attention needed toward vulnerable adults, the definition of vulnerable adult in recent church documents is broader than the cases over which the doctrinal dicastery has jurisdiction.

The dicastery's investigative responsibility, it said, "remains limited, in addition to minors under the age of 18, to those who habitually have an imperfect use of reason."

The cases of other vulnerable adults being abused, it said, other Vatican offices would be responsible, depending on the alleged perpetrator. Those dicasteries could include: the Dicastery for Bishops, for Evangelization, for Clergy or for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.