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Pope Francis faces and stands in front of a group of men wearing cardinals' cassocks

Pope Francis meets members of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Jan. 26, 2024. In the front row from left are: Cardinals Christoph Schönborn, Robert Prevost, Seán P. O'Malley, Peter Turkson, Victor Manuel Fernández, Claudio Gugerotti, Marc Ouellet, Fernando Filoni, John Onaiyekan and Stephen Mulla. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Legislative Texts are setting up a working group to study how "spiritual abuse" can be defined and punished in church law, a note from the doctrinal office said.

With the approval of Pope Francis Nov. 22, the note said, Archbishop Filippo Iannone, prefect of the office dealing with church law, will set up the working group with members nominated by his office and the office of Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the doctrinal dicastery.

The doctrinal dicastery's norms for discerning and making judgments about alleged supernatural phenomena, which were published in May, included a line saying, "The use of purported supernatural experiences or recognized mystical elements as a means of or a pretext for exerting control over people or carrying out abuses is to be considered of particular moral gravity."

The new note, published on the doctrinal office's website in late November, said that statement already allows for the misuse of spirituality to "be evaluated as an aggravating circumstance if it occurs together with delicts" or crimes, such as sexual abuse.

In recent years, several clerics and leaders of Catholic movements who were accused of sexual and physical abuse — including the former Jesuit Father Marko Rupnik, leaders of the Peru-based Sodalitium Christianae Vitae and Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche — were accused of misusing spirituality or even "false mysticism" to facilitate or excuse their abuse.

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"It is possible to classify a delict of 'spiritual abuse,'" the November note said, although it urged people to avoid using "the overly broad and ambiguous expression of 'false mysticism.'"

"The term 'false mysticism' appears in the regulations of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) within a very specific context: namely, issues related to spirituality and alleged supernatural phenomena, which now are handled by the Doctrinal Section," the note said. The office's disciplinary section deals with allegations of sexual abuse.

Alleged examples of "false mysticism" in the dicastery's regulations include "problems and behavior connected with the discipline of the faith, such as cases of pseudo-mysticism, alleged apparitions, visions, and messages attributed to supernatural origin," the note said.

"In this context, 'false mysticism' refers to spiritual approaches that harm the harmony of the Catholic understanding of God and our relationship with the Lord," it continued. Currently "there is no delict in Canon Law classified by the name 'false mysticism,' even though canonists occasionally use the expression in a manner that

is closely tied to crimes of abuse."