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Vatican guidelines seek consistency on sex abuse

by John L. Allen Jr.

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In an effort to promote a uniform global standard in response to the clerical sexual abuse crisis, the Vatican today issued a set of "guidelines" for bishops' conferences around the world, and instructed conferences which don't yet have policies on sex abuse to draft them by May 2012.

Critics of the Vatican's response to the crisis have long pointed to what they regard as a serious lack of global consistency. Priests are subject to a tough "zero tolerance" policy in the United States, for instance, meaning permanent removal from ministry for even one act of sexual abuse of a minor, but that's often not the case in other parts of the world.

While the new guidelines do not impose "zero tolerance" around the world, they do aim to promote a more coordinated global approach.

The Vatican guidelines do not, however, impose a single global rule for cooperation with civil authorities, they do not clarify what should happen in the case of a priest who commits abuse in one jurisdiction but relocates to another, and they insist that independent lay review boards "cannot substitute" for the authority of individual bishops.

The Vatican today claimed that the guidelines represent a "very important new step" towards regaining "full credibility," while a statement from the Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests denounced them as a PR exercise which "will change little" in part, according to SNAP, because the guidelines do nothing to curb "the virtually limitless power of bishops."

"This isn't decisive action," the SNAP statement said. "This is yet another unenforceable recommendation" that gives untrustworthy bishops continued power to abuse their power."

†The guidelines, released today in the form of a circular letter from Cardinal William Levada, an American who heads the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, direct bishops' conferences to give priority to five areas:

- Listening to the victims of abuse and offering "spiritual and psychological assistance".
- Creating "safe environment" programs to prevent future abuse.
- Promoting "a healthy human and spiritual formation" of future priests, including "an appreciation of chastity and celibacy." The guidelines also call for "an exchange of information" when candidates transfer from one seminary to another, or between dioceses or religious orders.
- Upholding the presumption of innocence when a priest is accused, yet conforming that a bishop or religious superior "is always able to limit the exercise of the cleric's ministry" while the case is investigated.
- Stressing that "the prescriptions of civil law regarding the reporting of such crimes to the designated authority should always be followed."

Importantly, the guidelines insist that lay review boards, which have been created in nations such as the United States and Ireland to coordinate the church's response, "cannot substitute" for the discernment and authority of individual bishops.

That's likely to be a bone of contention as the guidelines are studied around the world. Many experts say the review boards established in the United States and Ireland have impressive track records in establishing benchmarks for combating abuse. Yet both a recent Grand Jury report in Philadelphia, and the pending "Cloyne report" in Ireland, both seem to illustrate instances in which individual bishops haven't consistently applied those benchmarks, leading critics to suggest a need for new accountability mechanisms.

On the question of cooperation with civil authority, the Vatican has long been hesitant to impose a single global standard, given that there are nations living under repressive regimes which are more or less openly hostile to the church. The new guidelines say "it is important to cooperate" with police and prosecutors, but also acknowledge that "relations with civil authority will differ in various countries."

†One contentious question not directly addressed by the guidelines concerns priests accused of abuse in one nation who subsequently relocate to another. Should those priests be compelled to return to the country in which the abuse occurred, in order to face both the ecclesiastical and civil procedures in that country?

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†That question was at issue, for instance, in the case of Fr. Joseph Palanivel Jeyapaul, an Indian priest accused of abusing two teenage girls while serving in a Minnesota parish in 2004-2005. As the charges surfaced, Jeyapaul returned to India, where his local bishop conducted a church trial and imposed some restrictions on Jeyapaul but allowed him to remain in ministry.

†There's nothing in today's guidelines that would directly address cases such as that of Jeyapaul.

Procedurally, Levada directed each bishops' conference in the world to send a copy of its policies to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith by the end of May 2012. Levada also asked that the superiors

of religious orders in the bishops' territory be involved in drafting the policies.

The question of involving religious orders in the policies adopted by national conferences of bishops could raise some question marks, since in the past religious orders have insisted upon their autonomy under the law of the church.

The official English translation of the circular letter may be found **here**.

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