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Vatican prepares document on clergy-laity relationship

by John Thavis by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican is studying a possible document on the relationship of clergy and laity, which touches on the sensitive issue of the administration of the church's goods, Vatican sources said.

The sources denied an Italian report that the document will issue instructions on the reorganization of U.S. dioceses that face financial pressures in the wake of the sex abuse scandals -- in particular regarding parish closings.

The sources, who spoke to Catholic News Service June 28, said the document under preparation only marginally touches on the topic of parish closings and, if published, will be directed at the universal church. The form of the document has not yet been determined; it may be an instruction or a less formal circular letter, they said.

"The main topic here is the respect of norms regarding the nature of the priesthood in collaboration with laypeople, especially as it is affected by the restructuring of parish life," said one source familiar with the draft document.

"In some countries, new forms of parish structures have been created in which the priestly ministry appears weakened -- in practice, the priest's role risks being reduced to that of a celebrant of the sacraments, while teams of laypeople are put in charge of management. But the office of governing is part of the priestly ministry," he said.

The preparation of the document is being guided by the Congregation for Clergy because it has competence over matters pertaining to the administration of ecclesiastical goods. In that sense, the sources said, the document will touch on the matter of parish closings, which often involve the loss or redistribution of the church's assets and properties.

In the United States, parish closings have sometimes prompted protests among the faithful. In several recent cases, the Vatican has upheld mergers of parishes but said that church buildings that were closed must be reopened and "used in some manner as determined by the bishop."

Vatican officials have privately expressed reservations about some of the parish closings and the way they were handled.

One Vatican official said, however, that the document under consideration would not seek to emit specific norms for the United States.

"If that were the purpose, we would have talked to the (U.S.) bishops' conference," he said.

"The focus of this study is much wider. In the United States, there is the issue of parish closings. In Europe, there are other problems tied to a lack of clergy. The situations are diverse, and the Holy See wants to give a universal response," he said.

The sources said the clergy congregation had been studying these issues for several years. They said it was still too early to say when -- or if -- a document would be published.

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