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PR win slips away from Vatican

NCR Staff | Aug. 3, 2010

Erin Saiz Hanna, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference (AP/Pier Paolo Cito)

Church officials, especially those with Vatican offices, have faced stiff criticism since announcing last month revisions to the church laws that govern the handling of clerical sexual abuse cases and updates to its list of the ?grave crimes,? which includes for the first time the ?attempted sacred ordination of a woman.?

The highlight of the news conference called to make the announcement July 15 was to have been the revisions to the clergy sex abuse norms. Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi said the changes are ?a contribution to clarity and certainty ... in a field [clergy sex abuse] in which the church is strongly committed today to proceeding with rigor and transparency.?

The revised procedures give church officials stronger tools for aiding victims of sex abuse and for disciplining wayward priests, Bishop Blase J. Cupich told a parallel news conference in Washington July 15.

Cupich, the chairman of the U.S. bishops? Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People, said now bishops around the world have definitive rules for handling abuse cases and other serious violations of church law under the procedures, known as norms in church parlance.

These changes, which consolidated existing practices, include:

- Speeding up the process of ?laicization,? or formal removal from the priesthood;
- Allowing laity to serve as judges and lawyers on church tribunals in sex abuse cases, and waiving the requirement of a doctorate in canon law;
- Extending the statute of limitations for sex abuse cases from 10 to 20 years, with the possibility still in force to waive it altogether on a case-by-case basis;
- Adding the acquisition, possession or distribution of child pornography as a ?grave crime? under church law;
- Specifying that the same penalties for the sexual abuse of minors also apply to developmentally disabled

adults;
- Clarifying that even ?cardinals, patriarchs, legates of the Apostolic See and bishops? are subject to the jurisdiction of the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on matters related to sexual abuse.

David Clohessy, director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP, described the revisions as ?a tiny step closer to action? against abusive priests on the part of the church. He said the church?s approach needs ?massive overhaul, not mere tweaking.?

Other observers welcomed the revisions, saying that they formalize practices already followed by the church. They said the revisions will help the church in handling allegations of abuse and other serious violations of canon law.

?It?s a natural development,? said Mercy Sr. Sharon Euart, executive coordinator of the Canon Law Society of America in Washington. ?When the norms were first promulgated in 2001, it was clear they would have to be revised and considered over time.

?This is ... consistent with the seriousness with which the [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith] takes the implementation of these norms,? she added.

Diane M. Knight, who chairs the National Review Board, which oversees the U.S. bishops? compliance with the national sexual abuse and child protection policies they adopted in June 2002, called the revisions ?a big step forward.?

?Here in the U.S., the bishops had the ?Essential Norms? to guide them,? she told Catholic News Service from Milwaukee. ?But there was not that kind of clarity for other bishops around the world.

?This shows that child sexual abuse is a major crime under church law as well as civil laws,? she said.

At the Vatican, Lombardi had said that while the Vatican norms do not directly address the reporting of sex abuse to civil authorities, it remains the Vatican?s policy to encourage bishops to report such crimes wherever required by civil law.

?These norms are part of canon law; that is, they exclusively concern the church. For this reason they do not deal with the subject of reporting offenders to the civil authorities. It should be noted, however, that compliance with civil law is contained in the instructions issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as part of the preliminary procedures to be followed in abuse cases,? he said.

Grave crimes

As expected, the Vatican also updated its list of the ?more grave crimes? against church law, called *delicta graviora*. These included:

The attempted or simulated celebration of the Eucharist;
Any attempt to hear confession when one is unable to give valid sacramental absolution;
The recording of a confession or its ?malicious diffusion? through any means of social communications.

But what captured the most media attention was the adding to this list ?attempted sacred ordination of a

woman.? In such an act, the Vatican said, the cleric and the woman involved are automatically excommunicated, and the cleric can also be dismissed from the priesthood.

Many criticized the Vatican for putting clergy sex abuse of minors and women?s ordination in the same category of sin.

Erin Saiz Hanna, executive director of the Washington-based Women?s Ordination Conference, called the decision ?appalling, offensive? and ?a scare tactic to already ?excommunicated? women and those who support them.?

In his online column July 16 [1], *NCR* senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. wrote that putting the issues together was guided by bureaucratic logic. ?As it happens, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is responsible both for the canonical dimension of the sexual abuse crisis and for serious offenses against the sacraments, including Holy Orders. Since the congregation was revising its rules on sex abuse, it used the occasion to bring the law up to date on matters pertaining to the sacraments as well. ...

?Msgr. Charles Scicluna, a Maltese priest who serves as promoter of justice in the congregation, gave a press briefing in Rome [July 15], and he insisted that the Vatican is not actually comparing women?s ordination to sexual abuse. Ordaining a woman, Scicluna said, is a ?sacramental? crime, while sex abuse is a ?moral? crime,? Allen wrote.

?Be that as it may, many observers couldn?t help feeling that at the very least, the appearance of lumping women?s ordination in with the sexual abuse crisis underscored the Vatican?s ongoing PR problems,? Allen wrote. ?On a day when it should have had a clear PR win -- ?Church tightens rules on sex abuse? -- the Vatican managed, according to many media watchers, to step on its own story once again. Surely, such observers said, the Vatican could have rolled out the new rules on sex abuse separately, then waited a few days before quietly promulgating the other changes.?

The U.S. bishops did in fact hold separate media briefings. Cupich addressed the revised abuse norms, and Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, who chairs the U.S. bishops? Committee on Doctrine, addressed the other revisions.

The revised norms ?contain a variety of different elements,? and holding separate news conferences was one way to distinguish between the elements, Wuerl said.

He said that declaring the attempted ordination of women a major church crime reflects ?the seriousness with which it holds offenses against the sacrament of holy orders? and is not a sign of disrespect toward women.

Noting that women hold a variety of church leadership positions in parishes and dioceses, Wuerl said, ?The church?s gratitude toward women cannot be stated strongly enough.

?Women offer unique insight, creative abilities and unstinting generosity at the very heart of the Catholic church,? he said. But, he said, ?the Catholic church through its long and constant teaching holds that ordination has been, from the beginning, reserved to men, a fact which cannot be changed despite changing times.?

[Reporting from John L. Allen Jr., *NCR* senior correspondent, and Catholic News Service correspondents contributed to this article.]

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