

Revised Vatican norms to cover sex abuse, attempted women's ordination

VATICAN CITY - The Vatican is preparing to update the 2001 norms that deal with priestly sex abuse of minors, in effect codifying practices that have been in place for several years.

At the same time, it will include the "attempted ordination of women" among the list of most serious crimes against church law, or "delicta graviora," sources said.

Sexual abuse of a minor by a priest was added to the classification of "delicta graviora" in 2001. At that time the Vatican established norms to govern the handling of such cases.

The revisions of those norms have been in the pipeline for some time and were expected to be published in mid-July, Vatican sources said. While the changes are not "earthshaking," they will ultimately strengthen the church's efforts to identify and discipline priests who abuse minors, the sources said.

The revisions will be published with ample documentation and will be accompanied by a glossary of church law terms, aimed at helping nonexperts understand the complex rules and procedures that the Vatican has in place for dealing with sex abuse allegations.

The revisions were expected to extend the church law's statute of limitations on accusations of sexual abuse, from 10 years after the alleged victim's 18th birthday to 20 years. For several years, Vatican officials have been routinely granting exceptions to the 10-year statute of limitations.

The revisions also make it clear that use of child pornography would fall under the category of clerical sexual abuse of minors. In 2009, the Vatican determined that any instance of a priest downloading child pornography from the Internet would be a form of serious abuse that a bishop must report to the doctrinal congregation, which

oversees cases of sexual abuse.

In addition, the revisions will make clear that abuse of mentally disabled adults will be considered equivalent to abuse of minors. In the law on the sexual abuse of minors, the term “minors” will include “persons of who suffer from permanent mental disability,” sources said.

When Pope John Paul II promulgated the norms on priestly sex abuse in 2001, he gave the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith juridical control over such cases.

The revisions incorporate changes made by Pope John Paul in 2003; those simplified some of the procedures and gave the doctrinal congregation the power, in some “very grave and clear cases,” to laicize without an ecclesiastical trial priests who have sexually abused minors.

In April, the Vatican placed online a guide to understanding the church’s provisions for sex abuse cases. That guide mentioned the revisions under preparation and said those revisions would not change the basic procedures already in place.

The sources said the Vatican was not preparing to publish other documents on priestly sex abuse. Although some have argued that some of the strict sex abuse norms adopted by U.S. bishops in 2002 should be universalized, the sources said there was no imminent plan to do that.

Pope John Paul’s 2001 document distinguished between two types of “most grave crimes,” those committed in the celebration of the sacraments and those committed against morals. Among the sacramental crimes were such things as desecration of the Eucharist and violation of the seal of confession.

Under the new revisions, the “attempted ordination of women” will be listed among those crimes, as a serious violation of the sacrament of holy orders, informed sources said. As such, it will be handled under the procedures set up for investigating “delicta graviora” under the control of the doctrinal congregation.

In 2008, the doctrinal congregation formally decreed that a woman who attempts to be ordained a Catholic priest and the person attempting to ordain her are automatically excommunicated. In 1994, Pope John Paul said the church’s ban on

women priests is definitive and not open to debate among Catholics.