Vatican offers online summary of clerical sex abuse procedures

VATICAN CITY – The Vatican has placed online a summary of its procedures for handling sex abuse allegations against priests, in order to illustrate the church's commitment to protecting children and punishing offenders.

The online "introductory guide" lists the investigative steps, trial options and possible penalties for clerical sex abuse of minors, including dismissal from the priesthood. It underlines the local bishop's responsibility to follow civil law in reporting such crimes to the appropriate authorities.

"This is to help the public understand how we facilitate, how we proceed. This is transparency, transparency of the Vatican. We have nothing to hide," Passionist Father Ciro Benedettini, a Vatican spokesman, said April 10.

The move came after a spate of articles portrayed Vatican officials, including Pope Benedict XVI when he was the Vatican's top doctrinal official, as slow to act on allegations of sex abuse by priests. Church officials have said many of the published reports exhibited a lack of knowledge about the current procedures and how they work.

The online guide explains the practices adopted in the wake of a 2001 papal document that established strict universal norms for handling cases of sexual abuse by priests against minors and placed these cases under the authority of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The guide confirmed that the Vatican was currently updating the norms to reflect some changes over the last nine years, but said the modifications would not change the basic procedures.

The Web page highlighted several essential steps in investigating and processing abuse cases.

First, it said, the local diocese is to investigate every allegation of sexual abuse of a

minor by a cleric. If the allegation has a “semblance of truth,” the case is referred to the Vatican’s doctrinal congregation.

During this preliminary stage, the local bishop may restrict the activity of a priest as a precautionary measure, in order to protect children. “This is part of his ordinary authority, which he is encouraged to exercise to whatever extent is necessary to assure that children do not come to harm,” it said.

The doctrinal congregation then studies the case presented by the local bishop. It has a number of options at its disposal:

– Penal processes. The doctrinal congregation may authorize a judicial penal trial at a local church tribunal, or it can authorize the local bishop to conduct an “administrative penal process.” Under either procedure, if a cleric is judged guilty he is subject to a number of possible penalties, including dismissal from the priesthood. Appeal can be made to a tribunal of the doctrinal congregation or to the congregation itself.

– Cases referred directly to the pope. In “very grave cases” where a civil criminal trial has found the cleric guilty of sexual abuse of minors or where the evidence is overwhelming, the doctrinal congregation can take the case directly to the pope and request the offender’s dismissal from the priesthood. There is no recourse to such a penalty.

The congregation also takes to the pope requests by priests who acknowledge their crimes and asked to be dispensed from the obligation of the priesthood. The pope grants these requests “for the good of the church,” it said.

– Disciplinary measures. In cases where the accused priest has admitted his crimes and has accepted to live a life of prayer and penitence, the local bishop can issue a decree prohibiting or restricting the public ministry of the priest. If the priest violates the terms of the decree, possible penalties include dismissal from the priesthood. Recourse against such decrees is made to the doctrinal congregation, whose decision is final.

The Guide to Understanding Basic CDF Procedures Concerning Sexual Abuse

Allegations is available in English at: www.vatican.va/resources/resources_guide-CDF-procedures_en.html.