

Vatican revising canon law on abuse penalties, cardinal says

By Cindy Wooden

Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY – Church law has procedures and penalties for effectively dealing with allegations of clerical sexual abuse, but the Vatican is working to revise a section of the Code of Canon Law to make those norms and procedures clearer and, therefore, more effective, said the president of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts.

“We want to make this delicate material more accessible, more understandable and easier for bishops to apply,” Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio, council president, told the Vatican newspaper.

In the interview published July 24 in *L’Osservatore Romano*, the cardinal said his office has been working since 2008 to revise “Book VI: Sanctions in the Church,” a section of the Code of Canon Law.

The penalties and punishments offered by church law should be applied, he said.

“In the face of a negative action, which harms the good of a person and therefore the good of the church, penal law expects a reaction, that is the pastor inflicting a canonical penalty,” the cardinal said.

If a bishop does not react by imposing a punishment on a priest guilty of the crime of sexual abuse, he said, “in some way that would be, or would seem to be, consenting to the evil committed. A negative act necessarily must be condemned; it requires a reaction.”

At the same time, he said, the bishop must recognize that the infliction of a penalty is ultimately for the good of the abuser as well. Penalties in canon law are designed to “encourage the conversion of those who commit crimes.”

In a May 2013 interview with Catholic News Service, Bishop Juan Ignacio Arrieta, council secretary, also spoke of the work of revising that section of canon law.

Bishop Arrieta had said the current Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1983, was written with such an emphasis on the role of the individual bishop in his local diocese that each bishop bore the full weight of deciding when and how to intervene and what sort of sanction or punishment to impose on the guilty.

The law ended up being too vague, and church sanctions were being applied so haphazardly, that the church appeared to be divided, he said.

The two chief concerns in the revised section, as in all church law, Bishop Arrieta said, are “to safeguard the truth and protect the dignity of persons.”

At the same time, the rules are more stringent — “if someone does this, he must be punished,” the bishop said. While it withdraws the discretionary power of the bishop in certain cases, he said, “it is for the good of the bishop.”

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