

From  
STATEMENT ON CHILD ABUSE

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The problem of priests and child abuse is a serious one, but not a very common one. Seen in proportion, it is in fact quite uncommon. Several such cases have been reported widely by the media in recent years, but those accounts need to be seen in comparison to the 53,000 priests in the United States. The vast, vast majority of priests are living exemplary lives in service to God and their people, in fidelity to their commitments.

Child abuse is, of course, not a church or a clerical problem exclusively, but one which plagues secular groups as well--including those involved in education and child care. Sadly, the most frequent offenders are found among individual parents and step-parents. But the Church can take no comfort from the fact that many groups in society are affected, nor from the fact that the relative incidence of child abuse among clergy is very low. Even a single case is one too many--which is why the Church views even a rumor of such an occurrence with intense concern. Church leaders are advised to investigate immediately, to remove a priest rapidly where the evidence warrants it, to seek appropriate treatment for the offender and to extend pastoral help to the victim of such a tragedy and to the victim's family.

However such cases may have been handled in past decades--when psychology was less sophisticated and when child abuse may have been viewed as simply a moral failing for which one should be repentant, rather than a psychological addiction for which treatment was mandatory--today things are different. The hint of such a case is viewed by a bishop with alarm.

The attached statement, issued by the United States Catholic Conference in 1988, reflects the consistent approach by the Conference over several years. The statement indicates the seriousness with which the Church views the problem of child abuse and the steps it is taking to address it.