

# Statement on Priests and Child Abuse

*The "problem of priests and child abuse is a serious one" and "even a single case is one too many." But given the fact that there are 53,000 U.S. Catholic priests "it is in fact quite uncommon," the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Administrative Committee said in a statement Nov. 5. Allegations that a U.S. bishop committed pedophilia with a youth in his diocese prompted the statement. "The understanding of our conference is that these allegations have been made by the same individuals before, that they have been examined by church authorities and that they have been determined to lack substance," the committee said. The accusations were made at a Nov. 5 press conference in Baltimore sponsored*

*by a group called Catholics for an Open Church, which also said some bishops are failing to appropriately handle pedophilia cases that involve priests (see the marginal note on page 393). But, said the Administrative Committee, today the very "hint of such a case is viewed by a bishop with alarm." Attached to its Nov. 5 statement was a 1988 U.S. Catholic Conference statement indicating "the seriousness with which the church views the problem of child abuse and the steps it is taking to address it," said the committee. (That statement appeared in Origins, vol. 17: no. 36.) The complete text of the Administrative Committee's statement follows.*

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

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The attached statement, issued by the U.S. 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.

As to the specific charges made today accusing a member of the hierarchy of sexual offenses, the understanding of our conference is that these allegations have been made by the same individuals before, that they have been examined by church authorities and that they have been determined to lack substance. ■