Bishops Seek Easier Dismissal of Priests

Religion: Vatican asked to change church laws to help stem sexual abuse of minors. And a message to families urges equality and time with children.

By LARRY B. STAMMER TIMES RELIGION WRITER

WASHINGTON—In a new move to stem sexual abuse of minors by clergy, the nation's Roman Catholic bishops on Wednesday urged the Vatican to approve changes in church law to make it easier to defrock guilty priests.

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops, at their annual fall meeting here, also approved by acclamation a message on the family that encourages husbands and wives to approach each other as equals, share housework and try to spend more time with the children. Couples, the bishops said, should "move beyond gender stereotypes."

The conference also approved a statement on world peace, urging the United States to avoid isolationism and "unwise" interventions abroad, while reshaping its foreign aid program to fight poverty and encourage development abroad.

On the issue of sexual abuse, the bishops, in a nearly unanimous vote, asked Rome to extend the five-year statute of limitations in church law for filing charges against suspected offenders in the priesthood.

They also asked the Vatican to raise the age of minors in canon law to 17 from 15 to give local bishops greater leeway to bring charges when allegations are made years after the suspected abuse occurred, and to limit an accused priest's right to bypass the local appeals process and take his initial conviction in a church court di-

rectly to Rome.

The latter change in church law is critical because a priest cannot be removed from the priesthood until two courts have found him guilty. By appealing to the Vatican, priests have been able to drag out the process for years.

Priests found guilty would be "removed from the clerical state," meaning they would no longer be allowed to function as priests, although they would remain priests forever and continue to be bound

by such vows as celibacy.

The action comes at a time of increasing activism by U.S. bishops to address a problem that Pope John Paul II said has scandalized the church and as those who say they are victims step up demands that the church support them and punish the guilty.

It was not known how long Rome would take to respond to the recommendations, which resulted from a commission of Vatican and U.S. bishops appointed by the Pope, but officials here said approval is likely. They also noted that the Pope wants to move promptly.

In a June letter to the U.S. hierarchy, the Pope said: "I fully share your sorrow and your concern, especially your concern for the victims so seriously hurt" by the sexual misconduct of some clerics.

The proposed changes fell short of what U.S. bishops had hoped the joint U.S.-Vatican commission would recommend. American prelates asked for authority to remove priests from their duties administratively instead of going through a church judicial process.

This is only going to help a little bit," Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua of Philadelphia told reporters after the vote. "A judicial process is never as rapid as a non-judicial [administrative] one."

Nonetheless, the proposals were welcomed, drawing applause from bishops after the recommended

changes won approval.

Church law says that charges must be filed no later than five years after the most recent act of sexual abuse. However, under the recommended changes, there would be two exceptions.

The first is that older charges could be brought as long as the victim does so before his or her 23rd birthday, which would enable prosecution in cases where the abuse was not reported until the victim became an adult.

Another proposal says that if more than five years has passed since the most recent act of sexual abuse and the victim is older than 23, a diocesan bishop could still take action within two years after hearing a credible accusation.

Jason Berry, who has written a book on the issue, estimated that the church spent \$400 million from 1984 to 1992 to settle cases involving 400 priests.

Father Andrew M. Greeley, a sociologist and author, has estimated that at least 2,500 priests nationwide have victimized 100,000 children in the past 20 years.

On Wednesday the bishops also received an update from their Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse from Bishop John F. Kinney of Bismark, S.D. Kinney promised detailed recommendations within a year on how bishops can strengthen their responses to sexual abuse cases.

Since his June appointment to the committee, Kinney said that he has become acutely aware of the "anguish" in the church over the controversy. The anguish has been made more acute by the molestation allegations in a civil lawsuit filed last week against Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago.

Bernardin has categorically denied the accusation of a former seminarian that he abused him 20 years ago, while the plaintiff was a teen-ager.