The problem of priests and child abuse is a serious one, and even a single case is 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. See 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 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.

U.S. Bishops’ Meeting

Resolution on Abortion

The U.S. bishops reaffirmed their conviction “that all human life is sacred, whether born or unborn” in a resolution on abortion approved Nov. 7 during their meeting in Baltimore. Commenting on the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent “Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services” decision (Origins, vol. 19: no. 9), the bishops said it indicates that a “state’s interest in protecting life might well exist throughout pregnancy, not only after viability.” They added, “We are encouraged by this.” In their resolution, the bishops summarize their long- and short-range public policy goals regarding abortion, which include: 1.) constitutional protection for the right to life of unborn children to the maximum degree possible; 2.) federal and state laws and administrative policies that restrict support for the practice of abortion; 3.) continual refinement and ultimate reversal of Supreme Court and other court decisions that deny the inalienable right to life; 4.) supportive legislation to provide morally acceptable alternatives to abortion.” The complete text of the resolution follows.

The decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services provides reason to hope that our nation is moving toward a time when unborn children will again enjoy the protection of law. The court recognized states’ legitimate interest in protecting prenatal life and their authority to adopt laws favoring childbirth over abortion. The court indicated that a state’s interest in protecting life might well exist throughout pregnancy, not only after viability. We are encouraged by this.

Yet abortion on demand remains our nation’s legal policy because the 1973 Supreme Court decisions that legalized abortion throughout pregnancy have not been overturned. Because of those decisions many citizens believe that women have a moral right to abort their unborn children. This has led to erosion of respect for the right to life, which is bestowed by the Creator and cannot legitimately be denied by any nation or court. More than 1.5 million unborn children in the United States continue to die each year by abortion, and increasing numbers of women suffer abortion’s physical, emotional and spiritual pain. Often they suffer alone, deserted by men unwilling to acknowledge their own responsibilities as fathers.

Most Americans believe that abortion should be illegal except in certain limited circumstances; an overwhelming majority agrees that unmarried minors should not obtain abortions without parental knowledge or consent. Nonetheless, pro-abortion or so-called “pro-choice” groups have mounted a campaign to convince legislators and others that Americans want abortion on demand. These organizations have formed new political arms and have intensified efforts to defeat politicians who do not support permissive abortion.

Because of the critical importance of the issue and the need for a timely response, we wish to reaffirm our conviction that all human life is sacred whether born or unborn. With the Second Vatican Council we declare that “from the moment of conception life must be guarded with the greatest care, while abortion and infanticide are ‘unbreakable crimes’ (Gaudium et Spes, 5).”

As leaders of the Catholic community in the United States we acknowledge our right and responsibility to help establish laws and social policies protecting the right to life of unborn children, providing care and services for women and children, and safeguarding human life at every stage and in every circumstance.

At this particular time, abortion has become the fundamental human rights issue for all men and women of good will. The duty to respect life in all its stages and especially in the womb is evident when one appreciates the unborn child’s membership in our human family, and the grave consequences of denying moral or legal status to any class of human beings because of their age or condition of dependency.

We who revere human life as created in the image and likeness of God have all the more reason to take a stand. For us abortion is of overriding concern because it negates two of our most fundamental moral imperatives: respect for innocent human life and preferential concern for the weak and defenseless. As we said three years ago in reaffirming our “Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities”: “Because victims of abortion are the most vulnerable and defenseless members of the human family, it is imperative that we, as Christians called to serve the least among us, give urgent attention and priority to this issue. Our concern is intensified by the realization that a policy and practice allowing over 1.5 million abortions annually cannot but diminish respect for life in other areas.” No Catholic can responsibly take a “pro-choice” stand when the “choice” in question involves the taking of innocent human life.

We therefore call upon Catholics to commit themselves vigorously to the implementation of all three elements of the pastoral plan — an education and public information effort, pastoral care...