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'Notorious' priests must go

But church's sex abuse proposals are vague regarding coverups

By Marco R. della Cava
USA TODAY

ROME — The Roman Catholic Church's top U.S. leaders said Wednesday that they've outlined a policy to rapidly oust "notorious" priests guilty of "serial, predatory sexual abuse of minors" and send alleged new offenders to civil authorities and lay-led review boards.

But they stopped short of calling for a "zero-tolerance" policy for offenders and alluded to "spiritual atonement" for cardinals and bishops accused of covering up the actions of predatory priests.

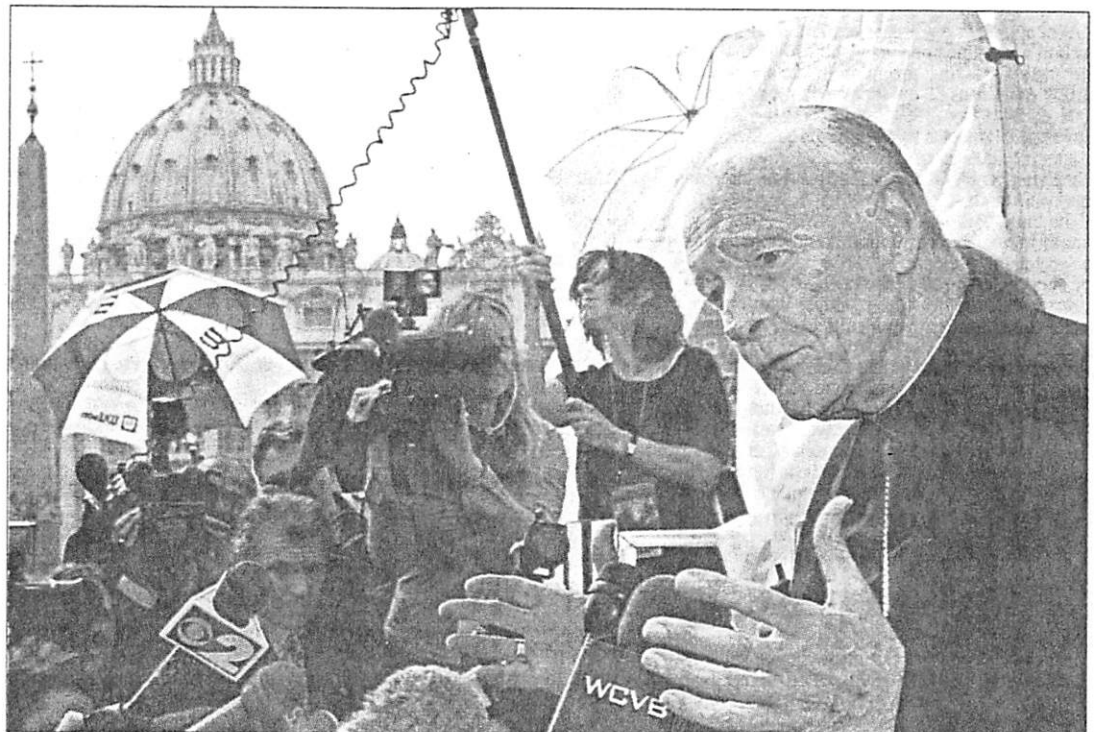
The statements, in a three-page communiqué and a six-paragraph letter to priests, came at a news conference after two days of crisis meetings with Pope John Paul II and Vatican officials.

The U.S. clerics promised to send the Vatican — after the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops meets in June — a set of "national standards" for dealing with other cases of sexual abuse among priests.

"As the Holy Father said a few days ago, there is no place in the priesthood for abusers," said Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C.

Although McCarrick and Bishop Wilton Gregory, head of the U.S. bishops' conference, have both called for a "one strike, you're out" policy for defrocking sex abusers, McCarrick said consensus on that has not been reached.

"If someone came to me, who was a good man, saying he had a problem 30 years ago, I'd have to pray on that," McCarrick said.



By Luca Bruno, AP

In Rome: Washington Cardinal Theodore McCarrick briefs the news media on the church's proposed policy regarding sex offenders.

"This issue will be hotly debated in June," Gregory added.

The group also called for a process to remove priests who are "not notorious" but whose bishops consider them a threat to minors, and a re-examination of entry requirements for seminaries.

The church leaders reaffirmed priestly celibacy, saying no link has been "scientifically maintained" between the

practice and pedophilia.

A hint of an apology came in the priests' letter: "We regret that episcopal oversight has not been able to preserve the Church from this scandal."

"They're admitting they screwed up," says John Allen, Vatican correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*. "It's

Gay Catholics
fear 'witch
hunt,' 9D

tame, but still an admission."

Boston Cardinal Bernard Law, accused of covering up pedophile priests, was absent from the briefing, as were others. Initially, the entire U.S. delegation was to be present.

When asked why Law was not present, Gregory said Law had made plans "he could not

get out of." Although a group of bishops was reportedly pressing for Law's resignation before the summit began, the matter was "between the cardinal and the Holy Father," Gregory said.

Though troubles in the U.S. led to the meeting, several cardinals said it was not only a U.S. problem. Recent scandals have hit the church in Austria, Ireland, France, Australia and the pope's native Poland.

“There is no evidence whatsoever that [men] who are homosexual are any more a threat to boys than [men] who are heterosexual are a threat to girls....

Pedophilia is not something that is caused by, or related to, either heterosexuality or homosexuality.”

—Fred Berlin, MD