

## Paedophile priests are damned, says Pope

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THE Pope has admitted that Roman Catholic priests have committed "shocking" crimes of sex abuse against children and said they face damnation.

In a letter to American bishops published yesterday, the Pope announces the setting up of a commission to study clerical paedophilia in the United States, where the Catholic Church has spent an estimated £200 million in compensation and fees arising from crimes committed by priests and other religious.

He quotes St Matthew's Gospel on the terrible punishment awaiting those who harm children. "How severe are Christ's words when he speaks of such scandal; how great must be that evil if for him who gives scandal it would be better to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

Although directed at America, the Pope's words will strike a chord with the Catholic Church in Britain, where a recent rash of convictions has led dioceses to consider taking out insurance against damages awarded to victims.

In the US, more than 300 clerics have been convicted of sex crimes in recent years.

The letter announces the setting up of a joint committee of experts from the Holy See and the American bishops' conference which has been establishing how Church law can be applied to "the particular situation of the United States".

According to Roman Catholic officials, the commission will discuss lifting the Church's five-year statute of limitations to make it easier to dismiss priests charged with sex offences.

It is also to consider raising the age at which young people can be considered minors from 16 to 18, and whether priests can be dismissed even if their behaviour stems from mental illness.

Although the Pope's letter speaks of sex abuse with undisguised horror, it gives warning of the dangers of sensationalism and speaks of a fundamental right not to be "easily exposed" to ridicule.

"There is already sufficient proof that the prevalence of violence and impropriety in the mass media has become a source of scandal. Evil can indeed be sensational, but the sensationalism surrounding it is always dangerous for morality."