

# POPE SAYS BISHOPS MUST ACT FIRMLY IN CASES OF ABUSE

## REAFFIRMS CELIBACY RULE

On Eve of U.S. Cardinals' Visit,  
He Tells Nigerian Bishops  
of Need for 'Openness'

By MELINDA HENNEBERGER

ROME, April 20 — Pope John Paul II extensively addressed sex scandals involving priests today, ordering bishops to "diligently investigate accusations" against those who break their vows of celibacy and chiding any who might see the priesthood as an easy life.

The pope did not single out the American church in today's remarks, which were directed to a group of visiting Nigerian bishops, who have also grappled with scandals involving sexual misconduct by priests.

But the remarks were his most direct on the subject of misconduct by priests since the sex abuse scandal began convulsing the church in the United States. The comments amounted to a forceful reaffirmation of the Vatican's call for renewed discipline and moral rigor in the priesthood, and were made just a day before American cardinals were to start arriving here for meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday to discuss clerical sex abuse.

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles said last week that he planned to throw open at the meet-

ings the issue of whether priests should be allowed to marry.

But the pope made clear today, as he has in the past, that celibacy is not up for discussion, either during the meetings or at any other time.

"The value of celibacy as a complete gift of self to the Lord and his church must be carefully safeguarded," he said. "The life of chastity, poverty and obedience willingly embraced and faithfully lived confutes the conventional wisdom of the world and challenges the commonly accepted vision of life."

Several American cardinals have spoken out on the abuse issue in recent days, acknowledging that they are on a mission to restore their credibility and bolster their moral leadership, though none but Cardinal Mahony have addressed doctrinal issues. [Page 30.]

On the eve of his departure for Rome, Cardinal Edward M. Egan of New York issued a letter to be read this weekend in parishes throughout the archdiocese. In it, he acknowledges for the first time that mistakes may have been made in the handling of sexual abuse cases in New York and in Bridgeport, Conn., when he served as bishop there. [Page 31.]

Some Vatican officials have also said celibacy should be discussed at the meetings, but only in the sense that the reasons for and roots of

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# Pope Calls for New Diligence In Investigating Allegations

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clerical celibacy should be better communicated to seminarians as part of their training.

The pope also told bishops that they should address accusations of misconduct aggressively.

"Behavior which might give scandal must be carefully avoided," he said, "and you yourselves must diligently investigate accusations of any such behavior, taking firm steps to correct it where it is found to exist."

In an apparent answer to criticism that the scandals have been worsened by the tendency of church leaders to keep problems quiet, the pope suggested today that the church should strive to be more open. "It is of the utmost importance that openness, honesty and transparency should always be the hallmark of everything that the church does," he said.

The pope indicated, too, that a new emphasis on seminary training was necessary in addressing problems. "Seminary formation is very important," he said, "for the convictions and practical training imparted to future priests are essential for the success of the church's mission."

"As true fathers, then, the spiritual renewal and growth of your priests must be among your top priorities," he said.

In unusually direct language, the pope warned priests that their lives were not supposed to be easy.

"The priesthood must never be seen as a means for improving one's lot in life or in terms of gaining prestige," he said.

Many at the Vatican see the sex abuse scandals as a result of morally lax attitudes, and say some priests need to be reminded that they are called to live in austerity. The pope took up that theme when he said: "Priests and candidates for the priesthood often live at a level both materially and educationally superior to that of their families and the members of their own age group. It is therefore very easy for them to succumb to the temptation of thinking of themselves as better than others."

"When this happens," he told the bishops, "the ideal of priestly service and self-giving dedication can fade, leaving the priest dissatisfied and disheartened."

He said priests must instead imi-

tate Christ's "complete self-giving for the sake of the flock and the advancement of the Kingdom."

He weighed in far less directly on the sex abuse issue a month ago, in a pre-Easter letter to priests in which he said "a dark shadow of suspicion" had been cast over all priests by "some of our brothers who have betrayed the grace of ordination" and succumbed to evil.

A week later, he referred to the subject even more delicately, in a homily at St. Peter's: "We pray for those priestly brothers of ours who have not lived up to the commitments they made when they were ordained, or who are going through a period of difficulty and crisis."

George Weigel, the pope's American biographer, saw today's re-

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## *A declaration that the issue of clerical celibacy is not open for discussion.*

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marks as part of "an ongoing theme of this pontificate that has obviously reached a new level of urgency" in light of the scandals.

In his speech to the bishops, the pope also specifically addressed several problems facing the African church, telling the bishops to "investigate ways of making the church's participation in the battle against AIDS ever more active and visible" and to "dialogue with the followers of African traditional religion and with Islam."

He told Nigerian Catholics to stand up against Islamic fundamentalists.

"I must also raise an important issue which I know is a source of grave concern to you and your people," he said. "There are certain parts of the country where proponents of Islam are acting with ever greater militancy, even to the point of imposing their understanding of Islamic law on entire states within the Nigerian Federation and denying other believers the freedom of religious expression. I strongly encourage and support your every effort to speak out courageously and forcefully in this regard."