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Women priests and sex abuse not equal crimes: Vatican

By Philip Püllella

VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - The Vatican on Friday denied accusations that it viewed the ordination of women as priests and the sexual abuse of minors by clerics as equally criminal.

On Thursday, the Vatican issued a document making sweeping revisions to its laws on sexual abuse, extending the period in which charges can be filed against priests in church courts and broadening the use of fast-track procedures to defrock them.

But while it dealt mostly with pedophilia, it also codified the "attempted ordination of a woman" to the priesthood as one of the most serious crimes against Church law.

The inclusion of both issues in the same document caused a stir among some groups around the world, particularly those favoring a female priesthood.

"The Vatican's decision to list women's ordination in the same category as pedophiles and rapists is appalling ...," Erin Saiz Hanna, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference said. She called the decision "mediaeval at best".

But Monsignor Charles Scicluna, an official in the Vatican's doctrinal department, said there was no attempt to make women's ordination and pedophilia comparable crimes under canon (Church) law.

"This is not putting everything into one basket," Scicluna, the Vatican's internal prosecutor for handling sexual abuse cases, told Reuters in a telephone interview.

"They are in the same document but this does not put them on the same level or assign them the same gravity," said Scicluna, who helped formulate the revisions.

The document was an attempt to update norms concerning "three sets of canonical crimes that are distinct," and whose jurisdiction is reserved to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's doctrinal department, he said.

CRIME AGAINST MORALITY

While sexual abuse was a "crime against morality," the attempt to ordain a woman was a "crime against a sacrament," he said, referring to Holy Orders (the priesthood). The revisions also updated crimes against the faith such as heresy.

"This should not be interpreted as considering all these crimes to be equal," he said. "They are crimes of a different nature".

The Catholic Church teaches that it cannot ordain women as priests because Christ chose only men as his apostles. Proponents of a female priesthood reject this, saying he was only acting according to the norms of his times.

Some dissenters saw the placing of the two in one document as an attempt by the Vatican to respond to criticism by those who say the cause of at least some sexual abuse can be found in the Church's insistence on a male, celibate priesthood.

"Sexuality is so denied in our Church," said Christian Weisner, a spokesman for the "We Are Church" liberal Catholic reform movement. "The Roman Catholic Church has to revise its sexual teachings because I think that this is the root of pedophile crime," Weisner told Reuters.

Jon O'Brien, president of the U.S.-based group Catholics for Choice, said the Vatican "feels threatened" by a growing movement in the Church that is in favor of a female priesthood.

O'Brien, whose group favors a female priesthood, said that while he understood the technical distinction of different types of Church crimes, putting the two together was another example of what he called bungled communications.

"If there is an opportunity for authorities in the Vatican to shoot themselves in the foot, they do so in both feet," O'Brien told Reuters. (Editing by Philippa Fletcher)

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