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Pope condemns sex abuse in U.S. Catholic churches

By Patricia Montemurri
Knight Ridder Newspapers

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II sent a message Tuesday to U.S. Catholics disheartened and disgusted by reports of priests who molested minors and superiors who protected them.

Such abuse "is rightly considered a crime by society ... an appalling sin in the eyes of God," the pontiff told 12 American cardinals. "The abuse which has caused this crisis is by every standard wrong," the pope said in his 30-minute meeting with the prelates.

"To the victims and their families, wherever they may be, I express my profound sense of solidarity and concern," the pope said, according to the official English text of the speech released by the Vatican.

The urgently assembled summit, called by the pope just eight days ago, brought together the leaders of major U.S. dioceses with top Vatican officials to chart a course for dealing with the exploding sex-abuse scandal.

"People need to know that there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young," said the pope at the start

of two days of talks.

Meeting participants interviewed Tuesday did not share summaries of what each U.S. cardinal contributed to the discussion, but top church officials said the pope pledged support for swiftly removing priests accused of abuse from ministry.

Church officials said discussions touched on strengthening celibacy in the priesthood, rather than allowing priests to marry. And concerns apparently were raised about the number of homosexual priests.

Detroit Cardinal Adam Maida would not give details about his presentation at the meeting, citing the confidential nature of the talks.

"I'm not privy to mention what I said and what others said," he said.

"We all talked from our experience, and the way I saw the crisis from Detroit is what I could share. And, of course, my experience goes beyond Detroit."

Maida, who is both a civil lawyer and church lawyer, has worked with other U.S. dioceses on issues such as due process for priests accused of wrongdoing. Part of his mission at the Vatican, he has said, is to work on resolving disputes between how church law treats clergy and how

civil law treats lawbreakers.

"The canons I worked on for 20 years are in question now," said Maida, adding that it would take time to make changes and refinements.

Asked whether the subject of homosexual priests was discussed, Maida avoided a direct answer. He said the meeting focused on priests who sexually abuse children and youth, and he reiterated that homosexuality is not exclusively linked to pedophilia, the sexual abuse of children.

At a briefing for hundreds of journalists, Bishop Wilton Gregory of Belleville, Ill., who leads the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, made a startling statement, considering the church's perceived intolerance of homosexuals and its teaching that gay sex is a sin.

"There does exist within American seminaries a homosexual atmosphere or dynamic that makes heterosexuals think twice about entering the priesthood," Gregory said. "It is an ongoing struggle to make sure the Catholic priesthood is not dominated by homosexual men."

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