

Rome still studying charter

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

KRAKOW, Poland — The Vatican is still reviewing the charter on sex abuse adopted by U.S. bishops in June and hopes to issue its response sometime "soon," a Vatican spokesman said.

The spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, made the comments to reporters Aug. 17 during Pope John Paul II's visit to Poland. He was reacting to a published report that said the Vatican was about to issue a negative response to the norms.

"No decision has been taken yet because the document is still being evaluated. We hope to be able to communicate soon to the bishops the answer to their request," he said.

At their meeting in Dallas last June, U.S. bishops overwhelmingly adopted a "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" as a binding policy for all U.S. dioceses. The charter included provisions for mandatory reporting of clerical sex-abuse allegations to civil authorities, removal from ministry of any cleric guilty of a single act of abuse against a minor, and the implementation of proceedings for dismissal of offenders from the priesthood.

The charter needs Vatican approval before it can be considered binding in all U.S. dioceses. The Vatican was expected to examine closely the canon-law aspects of the charter, especially as it would affect the rights of accused priests to defend themselves from forced laicization.



Reuters/CNS

During Pope John Paul II's trip to Poland, a Vatican official said the U.S. bishops' charter to protect children from sexual abuse by priests was still being reviewed.

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12 PAGES

Inside This Week



Bishop dedicates Fairport church
Members celebrate new renovations
— Page 3



WYD pilgrims gather at reunion
Young adults recall their time in Toronto
— Page 7

Notre Dame head pens reflections
Fr. Edward Malloy shares his stories
— Page 8



Fighting for drug-law reform

When Kevin Muscoreil was 19, he tried cocaine for the first time — and he liked it.

Kevin, who grew up in Wilson, N.Y., near Niagara Falls, had received the drug from his estranged paternal grandfather, and was soon addicted to it. And it didn't take long before he had his first felony drug conviction on his record, having been found guilty of selling a half-gram of cocaine. He didn't get any prison time, but was fined and placed on probation.

After being kidnapped by a Buffalo gang to which he owed drug money, Kevin decided it was time to turn his life around. He landed a good job and sought drug treatment, but the tragic murder of his grandmother contributed to his return to his former ways. At age 22, he was arrested for possessing 4.5 ounces of cocaine — roughly equal in size to a can of tuna fish. Convicted under New York's stringent Rockefeller Drug Laws in 1993, Kevin was sentenced to a mandatory term of 15 years to life in prison.

Today, a repentant Kevin is 33 and has served nearly 10 years of his sentence. He is also drug-free and a model inmate at Orleans Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in Albion.

According to advocates who want to reform the state's drug laws, Kevin's story, as told to the *Courier* by his father, James Muscoreil Sr., is not out of the ordinary. Advocates say thousands of inmates in

New York's prison system are serving long mandatory prison terms after being convicted of low-level, non-violent drug offenses under the Rockefeller Drug Laws. And, they say, nearly 30 years of such convictions is enough.

The history

The so-called Rockefeller Drug Laws were enacted in May of 1973, under the administration of Republican Gov. Nelson Rockefeller. Among the most severe in the nation, the laws were intended to deter people from using or selling drugs. The laws established mandatory prison sentences for unlawful possession of four ounces or for selling of two ounces of such narcotic drugs as heroin or cocaine. The penalties apply without regard to the circumstances of the offense or an individual's character or background.

According to the New York State Catholic Conference, more than 23,000 of the state's 71,000 inmates are serving time for non-violent drug felonies. Of those 23,000, 80 percent have substance-abuse problems. African Americans and Hispanics make up a disproportionate percentage — 94 percent — of those imprisoned under the laws. About 70 percent of women now being sent to prison are convicted of drug offenses; two-thirds of them have dependent children.

Continued on page 10

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