

Unity complicates ruling on norms

John Thavis/Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — As the Vatican debates how it will respond to U.S. norms on clerical sex abuse, it is not only dealing with the finer points of church law. It is also confronting larger issues of church communion — the particular ties that exist between a bishop and a priest and those between the pope and the bishops.

At the end of September, those bonds of communion seemed to be pulling Vatican officials in somewhat different directions.

Some spoke passionately about the risk of destroying the special trust that should mark the bishop-priest relationship. In their view, the U.S. norms would transform bishops from spiritual guides into reporting agents and sever this bond of trust just when a priest may need it most.

But others are just as concerned that the bonds of communion between Pope John Paul II and U.S. bishops could suffer serious damage if the norms are rejected. The bishops overwhelmingly approved the norms in June, and a Vatican “no” could appear to signal lack of papal confidence in the bishops as pastors and as teachers — with far-reaching

repercussions among U.S. Catholics.

All this helps explain the quandary faced by a cluster of Vatican offices as they weighed the legal and pastoral effects of their decision.

Some were pushing for a type of conditional approval that would allow the norms to be used on an experimental basis. Others believed firmly that the Vatican should invite the bishops to change some key elements deemed “incompatible with the church’s universal law.”

As September drew to a close, the “experimental” route appeared the most likely, according to a senior Vatican official. Other sources said the delicate debate was still simmering and predicted it could go on longer than expected.

The pope was to review the final recommendation; he was not taking a direct role in the preliminary meetings. But the relationships between bishops and priests, and between pope and bishops, were clearly on his mind.

Addressing Brazilian bishops making their *ad limina* visits to the Vatican, the pope emphasized the unique communion that should exist between bishops and the pope and said this “unity of pastors” was es-

sential if the church wants to respond credibly to modern cultural challenges.

In other words, any clear divergences between Rome and local bishops can only weaken the church’s voice.

A few days later, talking to an international group of bishops, he reminded them of their special bond with priests. When ordained, the young priest entrusts himself to the bishop, and the bishop “becomes responsible for the fate of those hands which he grasps in his own,” the pope said.

Among the Vatican’s experts in church law, one of the more subtle arguments — and perhaps least understood by the public — is that the U.S. norms would poison this trust

by forcing bishops into an antagonistic legal relationship with any accused priest.

“The bishop has a pastoral responsibility for his priest, even if the priest is guilty. The priest can eventually repent and seek forgiveness, and the bishop should in fact be working for this, trying to recover him spiritually. But many of these norms instead seem designed to cut the priest off,” said one Rome canonist.

Some experts worried that the accepted definition of sexual abuse has become too elastic in the United States. They see it as based too much on the subjective feelings of a victim rather than objective behavior and believe this principle should not find its way into church law.

House lauded on vote

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Catholic leaders praised the U.S. House of Representatives for its 229-189 vote Sept. 25 to approve the Abortion Non-Discrimination Act of 2002, designed to protect the conscience rights of health-care institutions that refuse to perform abortions.

“Simply, the passage of this act means hospitals and other health-care providers have a right not to be involved in destroying life,” said Father Michael D. Place, president and chief executive officer of the Catholic Health Association.

Richard M. Doerflinger, deputy director of the U.S. bishops’ Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, said the bill “reaffirms that no health-care provider should be forced to participate in abortions against his or her will.”

“The House has said it will stand against renewed efforts by abortion advocates to force their agenda on conscientiously opposed doctors, nurses and hospitals,” he added. “We urge the Senate to do the same.”

Father Place said the bill clari-

fies conscience legislation passed by Congress in 1996 to make clear that “the existing nondiscrimination protection applies to the full range of health-care entities — including hospitals and individual health professionals — thus protecting these entities from being forced by government bodies to provide abortions or abortion training.”

In a Sept. 20 letter to House members, Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua of Philadelphia, chairman of the bishops’ pro-life committee, said the legislation was needed because of “a growing nationwide effort to attack the conscience rights of Catholic and other health-care providers.”

He cited one instance in which abortion advocacy groups urged the state of New Jersey to require a Catholic health system operating in the state to build an abortion clinic on its premises. In another case cited at a hearing on the House bill, the Alaska Supreme Court forced a community hospital to provide elective late-term abortions contrary to hospital policy and community sentiment.

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