

VATICAN ABUSE NORMS RELEASED

On May 16, the Vatican released its guidelines on how to deal with claims of sex abuse to a mixed reaction. While we found them reassuring and authoritative, there were those, of course, who wouldn't have been happy with anything.

The three most noteworthy features of the Vatican's new guidelines were (a) its commitment to the due process rights of priests (b) its insistence on cooperation with civil authorities and (c) its restatement of episcopal authority in these matters. It was also reassuring to learn that the Vatican said, "The accused cleric is presumed innocent until the contrary is proven." Significantly, the guidelines say that "the prescriptions of civil law regarding the reporting of such crimes to the designated authority should always be followed." It also put the ultimate authority in these matters squarely in the hands of the bishops or major superiors.

The guidelines were respectful of episcopal autonomy and do not attempt a universal template. This was important because cooperation with the civil authorities in some nations is tantamount to suicide: hostile environments for Catholics exist, and any cooperation with the authorities in these nations is bound to come at the expense of justice.

With regard to authority in these matters, the Vatican understands the role that diocesan review boards play, but it also recognizes that they are not a substitute for the authority lodged in the bishop.

The news story by the Associated Press spoke of priests who "rape and molest children," referring to them as "pedophile priests." It was factually wrong: few were raped, most were not children, and pedophilia is not the problem. In fact, the data show that "inappropriate touching" has been the most common form of abuse, and that most of the victims were

postpubescent males, meaning that homosexuality was at work.

Finally, we were disappointed to read that John Allen of the *National Catholic Reporter*, who cited criticism of the guidelines made by SNAP, did not inform his readers that SNAP's comments were made the day before the Vatican's statement was released.