

Vatican defends pope's record on sexual abuse

by [Francis X. Rocca](#) in the [December 28, 2010](#) issue

While still a cardinal, Pope Benedict XVI sought in vain to expedite the process for defrocking priests guilty of grave crimes, according to a 1988 letter published in the official Vatican newspaper. The letter, which appears in the December 2 edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*, could have important implications for the pope's record on child sexual abuse.

The letter appears in an article by Bishop Juan Ignacio Arrieta, the no. 2 official at the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts. Arrieta said the letter recently resurfaced during preparations for a planned revision of the Catholic Church's system of penal law.

Known at the time as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict wrote in February 1988 to the then head of the council seeking a "more rapid and simplified procedure" for removing priests found "guilty of grave and scandalous behavior." Ratzinger, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the time, evaluated requests from ordained men seeking dispensation from their priestly obligations, including celibacy.

Noting that such dispensations were ordinarily considered favors to the petitioners, Ratzinger argued in the letter that, "for the good of the faithful," the dispensation should not be granted to the guilty before they had been convicted and penalized with "reduction to the lay state."

"Given the complexity of the procedure," Ratzinger wrote, it was not surprising that bishops "should encounter not a few difficulties in carrying it

out."

The response, coming three weeks later from Cardinal José Rosalio Castillo Lara, was sympathetic but discouraging. Bemoaning a "relaxation of ecclesiastical discipline," Castillo said the problem lay with bishops, who held responsibility to initiate trials that could lead to defrocking guilty priests. Many bishops, he suggested, preferred instead to let the Vatican dispense such priests without a trial.

The exchange is relevant to a recent controversy over Ratzinger's handling of the case of Stephen Kiesle, a priest who was convicted by a California civil court in 1978 of sexually abusing two young boys. Citing the "good of the church" in a 1985 letter, Ratzinger recommended against granting Kiesle's request for dispensation from his priestly obligations. (It was granted two years later.)

Kiesle's bishop in Oakland, California, had failed to initiate a church trial in his case, which could have provided the prerequisite for dispensation that Ratzinger stipulated in his later letter to Castillo.

The process of laicizing or otherwise disciplining pedophile priests became much speedier after 2001, when Pope John Paul II gave Ratzinger's office jurisdiction over all cases of clerical sexual abuse. —RNS