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HEADLINE: Victim advocates critical of decree on gay priests;
Vatican stance seen as ignoring causes of clergy abuse

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BODY:

The Vatican yesterday released a long-awaited document stating that the Roman Catholic Church will bar openly gay men, or men with marked homosexual tendencies, from becoming priests.

The Vatican believes the proliferation of actively gay priests is one cause of the sexual abuse scandal that has engulfed the church in recent years, because many of the victims were teenagers and not pre-pubescent children.

Phil Saviano, formerly of East Douglas, said the Vatican is merely establishing a "don't ask, don't tell" atmosphere that will allow more cover for abusive priests. Mr. Saviano received a settlement from the Worcester Diocese after he alleged abuse by the Rev. David Holley during the 1960s at St. Denis Church in East Douglas. Rev. Holley is now in jail in New Mexico after pleading guilty to abusing boys in that state.

Worcester Bishop Robert J. McManus, who until coming to Worcester in 2004 was rector of Our Lady of Providence Seminary in Rhode Island, is away this week and was unavailable for comment on the document, according to Raymond L. Delisle, diocesan spokesman.

Bishop William S. Skylstad, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, commented that sexual orientation is now widely discussed and that the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education expressed "Christian realism" about what the church expects in candidates for priesthood. "This realism understands the challenges of our time," he said in a statement.

The bishop said it is "not acceptable if a candidate practices homosexuality or, whether active or not, if he identifies himself principally by a homosexual inclination or orientation." He added that a candidate for priesthood should also not support the "gay culture," or be "so concerned with homosexual issues that he cannot sincerely represent the Church's teaching on homosexuality," he said.

Mr. Saviano, a founder of the New England Chapter of Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests,

said that as a gay man he finds the Vatican's directive "highly insulting."

He said: "The problem to be addressed is not sexual orientation, but bad behavior. And the biggest problem has been bishops who perpetuate the bad behavior by covering it up, instead of enforcing consequences.

"If the Vatican is serious about cleaning house, and sending a positive message to parishioners, it should start with the bishops who coddled and protected abusers for decades and put thousands of children in harm's way."

Mr. Saviano, who has led support groups, said 40 percent of those coming to meetings are female victims of clergy sexual abuse. The number of women and girls abused by clergy has been vastly underreported, he said.

"How will a ban on gay priests protect little girls?" he said. "What is the message to victims of priests like Father Robert Kelley, who admits to having molested over 50 young girls in the Worcester Diocese?"

George "Skip" Shea of Uxbridge, who is married with children, said he will address the "gay issue" in his one-man show called "Catholic (Surviving Abuse and Other Dead End Roads)" scheduled Saturday at the Bowery Poetry Club in New York City.

"How can this be a gay issue? The obvious answer is it isn't a gay issue," he said. He said he has attended support meetings where he was the only man present. The others were women. Mr. Shea settled a lawsuit with the Worcester Diocese within the last year after he made allegations that he was sexually abused starting at age 11 by the Rev. Thomas H. Teczar and Rev. Robert Shauris at St. Mary's Parish, Uxbridge, during the 1970s.

"So if we are going to ban homosexuals from the priesthood, using their logic, I guess we should ban heterosexuals too, as there are a staggering number of female victims.

"And further continuing with their logic, maybe they should just ban men, as that is the only true common denominator, and let women run the church for a while," he said.

The Rev. Richard McBrien, a theologian and professor at the University of Notre Dame, said the causes of the sexual abuse crisis "are far deeper than the existence of gay priests." He described the "two elephants in the living room" as obligatory celibacy for priests and the church's teaching on human sexuality in general.

Bernadette Brooten, Kraft-Hiatt professor of Christian studies at Brandeis University who trained as a Catholic theologian, said the Catholic Church since the Middle Ages has put more weight on same-sex issues, rather than looking at causes or issues related to sexual abuse.

Ms. Brooten said the church has avoided discussion of women who are abused by priests. A vulnerable woman may seek out a priest for counseling that results in an inappropriate sexual relationship.

"The woman has no recourse in the church, and they don't get anywhere in the courts," she said. Such relationships, she said, are dealt with severely by doctors and psychologists.

She said it appears the hierarchy of the Catholic Church is continuing a long-standing pattern of avoiding important issues of abuse, while concentrating on homosexuality.

"Galileo lives," said Boston lawyer Carmen L. Durso, a College of the Holy Cross graduate who has represented clergy sexual abuse victims in Worcester and throughout the state. "Once again the church has decided to ignore science."

Gay men and women do not choose to be homosexual, Mr. Durso said, but they are "destined by their DNA."

He cited an examination of American clergy done by the Rev. Donald Cozzens in his 2000 book, "The Changing Face of the Priesthood." Rev. Cozzens suggested that half of the diocesan priests in the United States are homosexual, while estimates for priests in religious orders are about 60 percent.

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