



Dave West, left, and his brother Larry West, both of Fort Worth, Texas, demonstrate outside the hotel where the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops are meeting in Dallas on June 14, 2002. (AP/Charlie Riedel, File)

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Survivors of clergy sexual abuse urged the Vatican on Monday to expand its zero-tolerance policy that it approved for the U.S. Catholic Church in 2002 to the rest of the world, arguing [that children everywhere](#) should be protected from predator priests.

[The U.S. norms](#), adopted at the height of the abuse scandal there, say a priest will be permanently removed from church ministry based on even a single act of sexual abuse that is either admitted to or established under church law.

That “one strike and you’re out” policy in the U.S. has long stood out as the toughest in the church. It is held up by some as the gold standard, by others as excessive and by still others as imperfect but better than most. It was adopted by U.S. bishops as they scrambled to try to regain credibility following the revelations of abuse and cover-up in Boston documented by the Boston Globe’s “Spotlight” series.

Since then, the church abuse scandal has erupted globally, and survivors from around the world said Monday there’s no reason why the U.S. norms couldn’t and shouldn’t be applied universally. They called for changes in the [church’s in-house canon law](#) and reasoned they could be approved since the Holy See already approved the norms for the U.S. church.

“Despite Pope Francis’ repeated calls for zero tolerance on abuse, his words have yet to lead to any real action,” said Gemma Hickey, a transgender survivor of abuse and the president of the global survivor network Ending Clergy Abuse.

The proposal launched at a press conference was hammered out during an unusual meeting in June in Rome between survivors and some of the Catholic hierarchy’s top priestly experts on preventing abuse. It was described by participants at the time as a “historic collaboration” between two groups that often talk past one another, given victims’ deep distrust of the Catholic hierarchy.

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The priestly participants in that meeting included the Rev. Hans Zollner, who heads the church’s main academic think tank on safeguarding; the No. 2 at the Vatican’s [child protection advisory board](#), Bishop Luis Manuel Ali Herrera; and the Gregorian University’s canon law dean, the Rev. Ulrich Rhode as well as diplomats from the

U.S., Australian and other embassies.

However, there was apparently no one from the Vatican legal office, secretariat of state or the discipline section of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which processes all abuse cases worldwide and largely sets policy on applying the church's canon law — albeit in secret since its cases are never published.

As a result, it was unclear what would become of the proposed policy changes, given the U.S. norms only came about because U.S. bishops pushed the Vatican to approve them, driven by their outraged flocks and insurance companies.

Nicholas Cafardi, a U.S. canon lawyer who was an original member of the U.S. National Review Board that provided input to the 2002 U.S. norms, said globalizing that policy into universal church law “would be one of the logical next steps” for Francis to take to continue the fight against abuse.

But Cafardi, author of “Before Dallas,” about the lead-up to the 2002 Dallas bishops' meeting that approved the norms, said that some bishops today bristle at how the policy limits their authority and freedom. And in a telephone interview, he noted that even in the U.S., the norms are only still in place because the U.S. bishops keep formally asking to keep them, which he acknowledged was a “weakness” in the system.

“It seems to me that a good protection would be ‘Let’s just make it universal law,’” said Cafardi. “Once you have that law, you don’t have to worry about the bishops asking for it in country after country. It’s just the law.”

However, the proposal faces an uphill battle since the Vatican in recent years has repeatedly insisted on “proportionality” in its sentences for abuse, refusing to apply a one-size-fits-all approach and taking into account cultural differences in countries where abuse isn't as openly discussed as it is in the West.

That has resulted in seemingly light punishments for even confirmed cases of abuse which, in the U.S., would have resulted in a priest being permanently removed from ministry.