

Church plea over abuse

VATICAN CITY — Australian Bishop Geoffrey James Robinson today called on the Pope and the Catholic Church to take measures to prevent sexual abuse by priests, the Vatican said.

Bishop Robinson made the call during a synod on Oceania, and asked the church or the Pope, who was present, to address a message to victims of this abuse.

"Sexual, physical and psychological abuse by priests has become a major obstacle to preaching of the gospel in Oceania," said Bishop Robinson, of Sydney.

"The problem is not new, it exists in most countries where the church is present and it has existed for many centuries.

"Victims of abuse and the whole community demand that the church do everything possible to ensure that no one else will be abused in the future.

"They demand that all aspects of the life of priests and religious be studied, and that all attitudes to power and authority be carefully reviewed.

The Bishop's call directly to the Pope follows a rash of stories of sexual abuse by clergy during the 1950s and 1960s emerging over the past decade.

Allegations have particularly concerned boarders at boys' schools, but the church has been criti-



The Pope



Bishop Robinson

cised for being slow to acknowledge the problem.

Investigations have shown that senior church leaders often were alerted to problems but failed to act or allowed Catholic educators to shift offending brothers to new schools in a bid to hide the problem.

It is the first time the issue has been raised directly with the Pope in public.

Bishop Robinson said the victims of past abuse deserved recognition.

"They then demand that the church change everything that might contribute to the problem of abuse.

"Only the universal church has the authority to make such changes and the bishops of Oceania humbly request the universal church to speak directly to victims of abuse, to take all necessary concrete steps to prevent abuse in the future and to become the leader of the local churches in this field."

Other regional Catholic leaders at the synod also expressed concerns over social issues.

Another Australian bishop, Kevin Michael Manning, relayed a request from woman who sought help from the church in their fight for respect and equality between the sexes.

Despite official church documents, the reality is that women are not treated as equal to men in the church and the wider society, he said.

Cardinal Thomas Stafford Williams of New Zealand decried the fact that many Catholics there left the church because remarried divorcees were excluded from the sacraments.

Bishop Owen John Dolan, also of New Zealand, asked if the church should revisit the disciplines which limit priesthood to celibates.

- AFP