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Irish church leaders meet pope about child abuse

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Jun. 5, 2009

Children's beds at the Artane Industrial School in Dublin, Ireland, in this undated photo

VATICAN CITY -- Two top leaders of the Irish church met with Pope Benedict XVI June 5 to discuss a report by an independent commission on child abuse.

The day before, the 18 Irish religious orders implicated in decades of abuse of thousands of children in their care agreed to increase their contribution to the compensation fund for victims.

Following a June 4 meeting with Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowan and other government ministers, the orders also agreed to an independent audit of their assets, so that their ability to pay further compensation can be determined. See full story below.

Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, Northern Ireland, president of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference traveled to Rome to provide Vatican officials with information about the church in Ireland, including the impact of the commission's report, said a June 5 statement by the Irish Bishops' Conference.

Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin joined the cardinal for the June 5 private papal audience.

The standing committee of the Irish Bishops' Conference discussed the report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse May 25, the bishops' statement said.

The independent commission was established by the Irish government in 2000 to hear evidence from anyone alleged to have suffered child abuse at institutions since 1940. These institutions, funded by the state but often run by Catholic religious orders, included schools, orphanages, hospitals, children's homes and other institutions where children were in the care of nonfamily members.

The report, released May 20, said a climate of fear created by pervasive, excessive and arbitrary punishment permeated most of Ireland's institutions for children and all those run for boys. During the period examined, more than 25,000 children were in the care of these institutions.

More than 3,100 people testified before the commission over a nine-year period and more than 800 priests,

brothers, sisters and laypeople were implicated as abusers.

The 2,600-page report said sexual abuse was reported by approximately half of all those who testified before a confidential committee of the independent commission.

The commission of inquiry was chaired by High Court Justice Sean Ryan and included prominent social workers, a pediatrician, a clinical psychologist and a representative of a children's charity.

During the May 25 meeting of the Irish Bishops' standing committee, "Cardinal Sean Brady, Archbishop of Armagh, decided to travel to Rome to provide information to the Holy See on a number of issues regarding the Irish Church, including the impact of the Ryan report," the bishops' statement said.

Cardinal Brady was joined by Archbishop Martin, "who was attending a scheduled meeting as a member of the Council of the Synod, whose purpose is to follow up on the work of the Synod of Bishops in Rome of last October," the statement said.

Irish government push religious for more abuse compensation

By NCR Staff

The 18 Irish religious orders implicated in decades of abuse of thousands of children in their care have agreed to increase their contribution to the compensation fund for victims.

Following a June 4 meeting with Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowan and other government ministers, the orders also agreed to an independent audit of their assets, so that their ability to pay further compensation can be determined.

The audit was a key request of victims groups, whose representatives met with the prime minister and other officials the day before.

The orders in a joint statement following their meeting that they were willing "to make financial and other contributions toward a broad range of measures, designed to alleviate the hurt caused to people who were abused in their care."

"The congregations will contribute toward a trust, proposed by [Cowan], and a process has now commenced to establish how this can be achieved," the statement said. "Each congregation is fully committed to identifying its resources, both financial and other, within a transparent process, with a view to delivering upon commitments made today.

"We agreed to commence this process immediately, and we have also agreed to meet the [prime minister] again in two weeks' time," the statement said.

The government agreed to meet victims' representatives and religious leaders amid growing public outrage following initial public statements that the orders would not renegotiate a controversial 2002 deal in which they received indemnity from being sued by victims who attended the church-run institutions in exchange for contributing to a victims compensation fund.

That deal limited the orders' financial liability to $179 million with the government covering the rest. However, claims against the fund have grown to $1.42 billion.

The Irish Independent reported June 2 that in "a significant hardening of its position" the government "will

demand congregations foot the bill for half of the total paid out."

The push for more funds follows the release of 2,600 report on a nine-year study into sexual and violent crimes committed against thousands of young Catholics who lived in residential schools run by religious orders between 1930 and 1990.

Cowen called the report of the commission on child abuse "one of the most important documents of our time." In a public address May 28, he said the country had been confronted with depravity, adding, "that shame will live with us all." Cowan said, "I am appalled by what I have read and horrified by what the victims have had to endure."

Victims groups, like the Survivors of Child Abuse and the Aislinn Educational and Support Centre, have called for strict and transparent audits of the religious orders to determine the exact resources they have, how much will be given in compensation and how the funds are used.

The Christian Brothers have come under particular criticism because they successfully fought to keep the names of their members out of the report.

The Christian Brothers' leader in Ireland, Br. Kevin Mullan, told The Associated Press that the order fought to keep names secret because "perhaps we had doubts about some of the allegations."

"But on the other hand, I'd have to say that at this stage, we have no interest in protecting people who were perpetrators of abuse," Mullan said, adding that the order will "cooperate fully with any investigation or any civil authority seeking to explore those matters."

However, the Irish Times reported June 3 that the Christian Brothers continued to deny as recently as May 15, five days prior to publication of the report, that there was any abuse in the institutions they ran. In letters to the Residential Institutions Redress Board, the brothers repeatedly insisted that no abuse took place.

The newspaper quoted from a letter from Mullan insisting that the only form of corporal punishment allowed by the congregation was "moderate slapping on the palms of the hands with the approved leather strap ?"

According to the Irish Times, Mullan wrote that the congregation "totally rejects any allegations of systemic abuse ? or that boys were inadequately fed or clothed ? and vehemently repudiates all unsubstantiated allegations of sexual abuse ? or that sexual activity or emotional or physical abuse amongst the boys was facilitated by lack of vigilance on the part of the staff."

Reports commissioned by the U.S. bishops have found nearly 15,000 allegations of sexual abuse have been lodged against U.S. clergy since 1950. The same studies have showed that the church has paid more than $2.5 billion in costs related to clergy sexual abuse since 1950.

[Compiled from wire service reports.]

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