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Dublin's Archbishop Martin, totally exasperated by sex abuse scandal

Tom Roberts | Jun. 24, 2009 NCR Today

Colleague Dennis Coday last week passed on the news of the documentary recently aired by Ireland's TV 3, an hour-long program looking into the circumstances of abuse in the Archdiocese of Dublin, about which a government report is to be issued in the near future.

Perhaps it is an indication that I?ve watched too many sex abuse documentaries or maybe assigned, written and commented on too many stories about the scandal over the past 20 years that when I saw the notice about ?Abuse of Trust: The Sins of Our Fathers [1]," a documentary recently aired by Ireland?s TV 3, my initial reaction was, ?Not another one.?

But there is a stunningly new element to the documentary amid its recounting of the numbingly and disgustingly familiar tales of betrayed trust, abuse of children and cover up by religious authorities. That new element is the attitude displayed by Dublin Archbishop Diarmiud Martin.

I am presuming my initial reaction was based on the experience of sheer frustration and helplessness one feels after viewing a documentary or reading a detailed account of clerical abuse of children. Those feelings arise out of the sad realization acquired over those too many years of chronicling this story that while bishops will make new rules and profess their sorrow that children were brutalized, little about their behavior otherwise suggests that they understand the depth of the destruction that has occurred on an individual level and to the community.

If one can make an assessment across the miles and via the airwaves, Martin seems to understand that. First of all, he bothered to try to read some of the 60,000 documents upon which the government inquiry will be based. He is not, as so many U.S. bishops have done and so many bishops in Ireland before him, attempting to continue to hide the truth, to stonewall the report or to blame the crisis on media and anti-Catholic elements in the general culture. Such a strategy probably would fly less in Ireland, where the country?s identity has been so strongly tied to the church, than in the United States, though it pretty much flopped as a strategy here.

Instead, Martin before the cameras says he has already told some of his priests that he tried to make his way through the documents one weekend, ?and I came to a stage on a Sunday afternoon where I threw them on the ground because I simply couldn?t keep reading.? It is the response of a pastor.

The closest thing we have in the United States to government inquiries are grand jury proceedings like those that have occurred in several locations and court proceedings where documents are accumulated in civil trials.

The examples of hierarchy reaction to such reports in the United States have been attempts to impugn the findings. How many times have we heard a bishop say he?s tried to read through the files that have been locked up in the chancery office much less registering his disgust? How many times has a bishop told his diocese, as Martin did in Dublin, that the forthcoming report will make the church humbler?

Instead we have had a history of bishops stonewalling, denying, blaming the wider culture and countersuing victims while spending millions in some instances trying to keep the records sealed and the truth forever buried.

At another point in the Irish documentary, Martin says: ?This is reality. It can't be hidden and it shouldn't be hidden."

The Irish church, we know, has been devastated by a string of scandals and revelations of horrible behavior by priests and bishops. It may be a long way back to any sense of healing and reconciliation among the various levels of the community. But if Martin?s initial reaction is any indication of the kind of leadership he will provide getting through the ?reality? of the crisis, the Irish church stands a much better chance of achieving accountability and, ultimately, wholeness, than the U.S. Church, where hiding the truth and searching for others to blame remains a strategy of choice for too many in the hierarchy.

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[1] http://www.tv3.ie/shows.php?request=abuseoftrust&tv3_preview&video=10258