

Vatican summit on Irish sex abuse crisis

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 7, 2009 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

The two most senior prelates in Ireland will meet Pope Benedict XVI and top Vatican officials in Rome this Friday, Dec. 11, to discuss what a Vatican statement today called the "painful situation" related to publication of a damning recent report on sexual abuse by Catholic clergy.

Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, President of the Irish bishops' conference, and Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin will meet the pope, along with Archbishop Giuseppe Leanza, the papal nuncio, or ambassador, to Ireland.

Ireland, which is 95 percent Catholic, is currently locked in a national crisis over the Catholic church and sexual abuse, triggered by publication of the "Murphy Report" in late November. That report, authored by a government-created independent commission, examined sexual abuse in the Dublin archdiocese, and it came after completion of a similar study of abuse in Irish schools run by religious orders.

The conclusions in the Murphy Report did not paint church leaders in a positive light, asserting that at least until the mid-1990s, the priorities of the Dublin archdiocese "were the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal, the protection of the reputation of the Church, and the preservation of its assets. All other considerations, including the welfare of children and justice for victims, were subordinated to these priorities."

The report cited one case of a priest who claimed he committed acts of abuse at least 100 times, and another who said that he did so once every two weeks for a period of 25 years. All told, the 720-page report cited 320 victims between 1975 and 2004, and 120 more who have come forward since.

The Murphy Report also asserted that the archbishops of Dublin during the period failed to respond adequately to complaints.

Today's Vatican statement did not offer any details about the agenda for the Dec. 11 meeting. One obvious parallel, however, is to an April 23-24, 2002, summit involving all the American cardinals, along with the officers of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, with senior Vatican officials to discuss the sexual abuse crisis in the United States.

That meeting produced a lengthy communique which, in part, laid the foundation for the response of the American bishops to the crisis. Among other things, it called for a national visitation of seminaries and a new set of norms for dealing with cases of sexual abuse -- both of which came to pass. The heart of those norms is the "zero tolerance" policy, meaning permanent removal from the clerical state for even one act of sexual abuse.

Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, participated in that April 2002 summit as the Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

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Statement of Fr. Federico Lombardi, Vatican Spokesperson

"I can confirm that the Holy Father has invited Cardinal Sean Brady, president of the Episcopal Conference of Ireland, and the Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, for a meeting in Rome, next Friday, Dec. 11, in order to share information and evaluations about the painful situation of the Church in Ireland following the recent publication of the 'Murphy Commission Report.' The responsible officials of the dicasteries of the Roman Curia with competence in the area will also participate in the meeting, as well as the Apostolic Nuncio in Ireland."

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