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Advocates: abusive Irish priests assigned to US

G. Jeffrey MacDonald Religion News Service | Jan. 6, 2010

Roman Catholic priests accused of sexual abuse in Ireland have for decades been getting re-assigned to ministry positions in the United States, according to a church reform group with a new database of names.

BishopAccountability.org, which documents allegations of abuse, last week (Dec. 28) released the names of 70 accused Irish priests who at some point served in the United States. Many on the list (viewable at http://www.bishop-accountability.org/irish--priests--in--us/) are said to have died or no longer serve in the priesthood.

The group acknowledged that its database of accused Irish priests is likely not comprehensive and may not include any priests currently serving in U.S. parishes. Co-director Anne Barrett Doyle called on all U.S. bishops to release names of priests accused in Ireland, where an unfolding clergy sexual abuse crisis has led four bishops to resign in the past month.

"Bishops in Ireland, just like bishops here, have been moving accused priests around even though they know they're dangerous and putting them in populations where they can continue to offend," said Terence McKiernan, co-director of BishopAccountability.org, at a Boston news conference.

"Unfortunately, the places where they put them include our own backyard. And so the Irish crisis basically has become our crisis, too."

BishopAccountability.org is calling on Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen to include names of accused priests in a forthcoming report on the clergy abuse crisis in his country. The group has also asked Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley to set an example for other U.S. bishops by disclosing names of any Boston-area priests facing allegations of abuse in Ireland.

Before any priest gets assigned to the Archdiocese of Boston, his current bishop "confirms that he has not been the subject of any allegation of any inappropriate behavior concerning children," according to a written statement from the Archdiocese of Boston.

Safeguards are in place across the country to make sure parishes aren't assigned any abusive priests, but those standards can be challenging to implement when a priest is coming from another country, according to Sister Mary Ann Walsh, spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"Because of the distance [between countries], you sometimes will have a harder time doing a background check on someone," Walsh said. "That doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. It just means you have to make more effort."

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