

Resignations 'not on agenda' for Vatican sex abuse summit, Irish bishop says

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 12, 2010 NCR Today

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A highly anticipated summit with Pope Benedict XVI next week could help the Irish bishops "recapture the ground we've lost" in public confidence due to that country's sexual abuse crisis, according to one prelate who will take part, but it will likely not produce a sweeping reconfiguration of the Irish church or additional resignations of bishops.

At the same time, this prelate said, all bets may be off, since the Irish bishops have been instructed to be "frank and honest" and to "speak their minds."

Bishop Joseph Duffy of Clogher in Ireland, chair of the Irish bishops' Communications Commission, spoke to *NCR* Friday afternoon by phone.

The bishops of Ireland will be in Rome on Monday and Tuesday for a meeting with Pope Benedict XVI and senior Vatican officials to discuss the crisis which has gripped Ireland since publication of the government-sponsored "Murphy Report" in late November. That report documented hundreds of cases of sexual abuse in the Dublin archdiocese since 1975, and suggested that a string of Dublin archbishops and auxiliary bishops had handled those cases poorly.

To date, four bishops have submitted their resignations in the wake of the report, with one already accepted by the pope and three awaiting action. Another bishop named in the report, Bishop Martin Drennan of Galway, has resisted calls to step down.

Despite media reports of tensions between Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin and other bishops over whether some prelates have been unfairly tarnished, Duffy said that after a recent meeting of Irish prelates, there is "broad harmony and unity" at the senior levels of the Irish church.

Duffy said the Irish bishops have been told that Benedict XVI will be with them both Monday and Tuesday throughout the morning sessions, which Duffy said offers "some indication of how seriously he takes this, since we do realize that we're a small island."

"The pope is not in denial, either directly or indirectly," Duffy said. "He knows how important this is."

Although Benedict XVI has said he plans to issue a pastoral letter to the church in Ireland, Duffy said he's not sure of the status of that document. He said he assumes that Benedict will want to incorporate insights gleaned from next week's meeting before it's released.

The primary aim of the summit, Duffy said, is to discuss how "to offer comfort and serenity" to two groups:

victims and their families, as well as the clergy and the faithful of Ireland.

Beyond that, Duffy said, it's difficult to predict what might result from the meeting, since the bishops have only loosely coordinated what they plan to say. The outcome also depends, Duffy said, on what Benedict XVI latches onto from the discussion.

Unlike a summit in April 2002 on the sex abuse crisis in the United States, Duffy said the Irish bishops are not coming to Rome to flesh out the details of a new sex abuse policy, in part because the Irish church already has what amounts to a "zero tolerance" policy on abuse "or near enough to it not to make any difference," he said.

"We've already got more than sufficient norms," Duffy said. "It's a question of implementing them."

Some in Ireland have suggested that the pope may consider a sweeping overhaul of the Irish church, perhaps reducing the number of dioceses and streamlining authority. Duffy, however, called that "speculation," and said he did not expect any decision to come out of next week's summit.

"I can't see anything as dramatic as that being floated," he said.

On the subject of whether additional Irish bishops named in the Murphy Report should resign, Duffy said the meeting "has nothing to do with that ... it's not on the agenda."

Duffy conceded that Martin's aggressive handling of the crisis has generated "tensions," which he called largely "inevitable." He acknowledged that some Irish Catholics feel that some of the current and former auxiliary bishops in Dublin have been faulted for the church's handling of sex abuse cases, even though in some cases "the auxiliaries may have had very little input into the decisions."

Duffy said that after a "frank exchange of views" at a recent bishops' meeting in Knock, there is now "broad harmony."

Looking ahead, Duffy said he hopes the crisis may stimulate a "renewal in the church."

In the short term, he said the most important outcome of next week's summit would be an impetus to "restore confidence in the pastoral work of our clergy in family life, which is very vulnerable because it's where we've let ourselves down."

"We have to recapture that ground before we can do anything," he said.

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