

Pope to sex abuse victims: 'I am truly sorry'

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 20, 2010



A child shakes hands with Cardinal Sean Brady following St. Patrick's Day Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh, Northern Ireland, March 17. (CNS photo/Cathal McNaughton, Reuters)

In his most comprehensive statement yet on the sexual abuse crisis, Pope Benedict XVI has apologized to victims, called on abuser priests to tell the truth, and charged bishops to cooperate with civil authorities.

The pope also announced plans for a Vatican-sponsored investigation of Irish dioceses, seminaries and religious orders, in response to the massive national scandal that has gripped that once ultra-Catholic nation since release of a government-sponsored inquiry into sex abuse in church-sponsored institutions in the Dublin archdiocese late last year.

Those points came in a pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland, released by the Vatican this morning, March 20. Because the letter concerns Ireland, Benedict did not allude to the other sex abuse scandals spreading across Europe and other parts of the world, or to questions about his own record as archbishop of Munich from 1977 to 1982.

"You have suffered grievously and I am truly sorry," Benedict XVI wrote in a section of the letter addressed to victims and their families in Ireland.

"Many of you found that, when you were courageous enough to speak of what happened to you, no one would listen," the pope wrote, expressing "shame and remorse" in the name of the entire church.

The full text of the letter is here: [Pope's letter to Catholics of Ireland](#) [1]

The pope noted that he has met with victims before -- he did so for the first time in the United States in April 2008 -- and said that he is ready to do so again.

"I have sat with them, I have listened to their stories, I have acknowledged their suffering, and I have prayed with them and for them," the pope wrote.

At the same time, Benedict also insisted that the Catholic church "has done an immense amount of work in

many parts of the world in order to address and remedy" the problem of sexual abuse of children and adolescents by clergy.

Without using the phrase, Benedict effectively endorsed the "zero tolerance" policy pioneered by the Catholic church in the United States with respect to sexual abuse of minors. The pope referred to "current safeguarding practices adopted by local churches," and suggested they may be "a model for other institutions to follow."

The almost 5,000-word pastoral letter to Ireland, issued in English, amounts to Benedict's most extended comments on the sex abuse crisis since his election to the papacy, and comes less than a month before his five-year anniversary on the job.

The pope used strong language in rebuking abuser priests.

"You betrayed the trust that was placed in you by innocent young people and their parents, and you must answer for it before Almighty God and before properly constituted tribunals," he wrote.

Benedict called on priests who have committed acts of abuse to "openly acknowledge your guilt [and] submit yourselves to the demands of justice," trusting in God's mercy.

In speaking to the bishops of Ireland, the pope seemed equally blunt.

"It cannot be denied," he wrote, "that some of you and your predecessors failed, at times grievously, to apply the long-established norms of canon law to the crime of child abuse."

"Serious mistakes were made in responding to allegations," the pope wrote, adding that those mistakes have "seriously undermined your credibility and effectiveness."

The pope gave the bishops a specific charge: "Besides fully implementing the norms of canon law in addressing cases of child abuse, continue to cooperate with the civil authorities in their area of competence," he wrote.

Canon law is the internal body of law for the Catholic church, and in recent years its application to cases of sexual abuse has usually led to formal expulsion from the Catholic priesthood.

At the level of policy, perhaps the biggest news from the letter is that Benedict announced an "apostolic visitation," essentially a Vatican-sponsored investigation, of certain dioceses in Ireland, as well as seminaries and religious orders.

A "visitation," a polite word for an investigation, is a time-tested Vatican means for responding to a crisis. Rather than dispatching Vatican personnel, the pope typically appoints a handful of visitors within the target country or religious order to carry out the investigation under papal authority.

In response to the sexual abuse crisis that erupted in the United States in 2002, for example, a visitation was conducted of all American seminaries and religious houses of formation for future priests.

At present, two other apostolic visitations are underway: one of the Legionaries of Christ, a high-profile religious order which has acknowledged that its founder was guilty of sexual misconduct and other moral failures; and another of women's religious orders in the United States. That second visitation is not related to the sexual abuse crisis, but to declining numbers in women's religious life and perceptions of doctrinal and spiritual difficulties.

Usually visitors are given a year or so to conduct the review, and then forward their conclusions to the relevant Vatican department. That department will, in turn, forward recommendations for action to the pope.

Benedict XVI also recommended a series of spiritual responses to the crisis to Irish Catholics, including asking all Irish Catholics to devote their Friday penances between now and Easter in 2011 to prayer for "an outpouring of God's mercy and the Holy Spirit's gifts of holiness and strength upon the church in your country."

The pope also recommended greater use of the sacrament of penance and eucharistic adoration.

While Benedict's letter to Ireland is striking in both tone and substance, critics will likely also point to what it does not contain. For example, there is no call for bishops who reassigned abuser-priests to resign. Although the pope calls bishops to renew their "accountability before God," he offers no new mechanisms or policies to enforce that accountability.

Benedict also does not allude to suggestions in some quarters that the sex abuse crisis ought to occasion a re-examination of the discipline of priestly celibacy in the Catholic church. One week ago, Benedict XVI reaffirmed the value of celibacy, calling it "the sign of full devotion, the entire commitment to the Lord and to the Lord's business, an expression of giving oneself to God and to others."

Ireland has been gripped by a massive sexual abuse crisis since November 2009, when the government-sponsored "Murphy 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.

Since the Murphy Report appeared, the total number of allegations of sexual abuse against Catholic priests, nuns and other personnel in Ireland has reportedly climbed to nearly 15,000.

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