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English, Welsh Catholics asked to do penance

Simon Caldwell Catholic News Service | Apr. 22, 2010

LONDON -- The bishops of England and Wales are asking Catholics to carry out acts of penance each Friday in May to help atone for clerical abuse crimes.

In a statement to be read at all parishes April 24-25, the bishops assured Catholics that effective child protection procedures are in place. However, they said, it is "time for deep prayer and reparation for atonement" of the sins of priests and other Catholics who have abused children.

"We invite Catholics in England and Wales to make the four Fridays in May 2010 special days of prayer," the bishops said in their statement, released April 22.

They recommended visiting the Blessed Sacrament to pray for victims, their abusers and for church leaders who mishandled cases.

The Catholic Church in England and Wales revised its child protection procedures in 2001 after it emerged that Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, when bishop of Arundel and Brighton in the 1990s, had reassigned Father Michael Hill as chaplain of London's Gatwick Airport, despite receiving credible abuse allegation against him.

Father Hill went on to abuse again, and one of his victims was a 14-year-old boy confined to a wheelchair because he had cerebral palsy. The priest was jailed for five years.

The church in England and Wales claims it has one of the toughest child protection regimes in the world, and numbers of allegations have fallen dramatically in the past five years.

In 2008, 51 allegations were received against 38 priests, religious, lay employees, volunteers and parishioners. Two of these have resulted in prison terms.

In their statement, the bishops reminded Catholics that they are "members of a single universal body" and must atone for such offenses wherever they happen.

"These terrible crimes, and the inadequate response by some church leaders, grieve us all," their statement said.

They also expressed "heartfelt apology and deep sorrow to those who have suffered abuse, those who have felt ignored, disbelieved or betrayed."

"We ask their pardon and the pardon of God for these terrible deeds done in our midst," the bishops said. "There can be no excuses."

They also apologized for the "failings" of some fellow bishops in handling cases of abuse.

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