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Pope outlines scope of Irish abuse probe

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- The Catholic archbishops of New York and Boston will meet personally with victims of abusive priests as part of a Vatican investigation of the Catholic Church in Ireland, the Vatican announced Nov. 12.

Pope Benedict XVI called for the investigation, called an Apostolic Visitation, last March in an open letter to Irish Catholics that addressed a growing scandal over clerical sex abuse of children.

Since 2003, four government-sponsored investigations have revealed widespread child abuse over a period of decades by Irish Catholic clergy. The revelations have led to the resignations of three bishops.

The five-month visitation aims to assess the church's effectiveness in responding to abuse cases, assisting victims and protecting children under the church's care, the Vatican said. It will not investigate or make judgments on particular cases of abuse.

The Vatican statement noted the responsibility of Irish church authorities to investigate abuse charges, and to "inform the competent civil and ecclesiastical authorities, in conformity with the current civil and ecclesiastical laws."

The Vatican emphasized that the visitation "will in no way interfere with the ordinary activity of local magistrates ... nor with the work of any legislative authority, which has competence in the area of prevention of abuse of minors."

Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley of Boston will lead the investigation of the Archdiocese of Dublin and the dioceses in its province. New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan will investigate five Irish seminaries. Sister Sharon Holland, a Michigan-based expert in church law who worked at the Vatican until 2009, is on a four-person team assigned to investigate religious orders in Ireland.

None of the investigators will grant interviews ?during the first phase of the Visitation,? the Vatican said.

The lead investigators will also attend services in each of the country?s four archdioceses as part of ?penitential activities? sponsored by Irish bishops, which include ?prayer, fasting and almsgiving.?

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