

Head of Irish abuse watchdog: Church not cooperative

Michael Kelly | Catholic News Service | May. 13, 2011

DUBLIN -- The head of the Irish church's child protection watchdog said he considered resigning over his irritation at a lack of church cooperation.

Ian Elliott, chief executive of the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church, told Catholic News Service May 11 that he had asked himself "on several occasions" if he should quit, but decided to stay because he believes he is "making a difference for children."

Elliott has worked in the field of child safeguarding for almost 40 years, but he said his current role with the church is "the most challenging situation I have ever been in."

At a news conference to release his board's third annual report, he also said that he has repeatedly expressed his frustration to the pope's apostolic visitors, who are currently undertaking an inquiry into the crisis in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

"I am hopeful that when the report of the apostolic visitation is made available later this year, our discussions will have had a major impact," he said.

Elliott said each Irish parish now has a trained child safeguarding representative, "the essential backbone" of the church's efforts in the sphere.

However, he said that while all allegations of abuse in the church are now being reported to the police and social services, less than 25 percent of cases are being forwarded to his office for inquiry. He said these "reporting deficits" made it difficult for him to report whether bishops and religious superiors are handling abuse properly.

Elliott told CNS that he "expects to receive information on all allegations, concurrent to reporting these to the civil authorities.

Of the 272 allegations of abuse noted in the report, 86 were made against deceased clerics or religious; 174 involved those who are out of ministry, retired, or have been dismissed from the clerical state; and 12 allegations involved those who are in ministry or were returned to ministry after an assessment of the allegations did not warrant another course, according to the report.

Elliott said he was also frustrated that all dioceses had withdrawn cooperation from an audit of how abuse was handled. The dioceses cited concerns about protecting data, but he said those perceived difficulties had now been overcome and he was confident that the audit could proceed.

A similar audit of the Diocese of Cloyne led Bishop John Magee to step aside in 2009 after Elliott's office found that safeguarding policies in place were "inadequate and in some respects dangerous." Bishop Magee resigned in 2010 and is expected to be heavily criticized in a forthcoming report by Judge Yvonne Murphy. Justice Minister Alan Shatter is expected to publish the report in mid-May.

Elliott admitted that his report into Cloyne "undoubtedly had an impact" on the relationship between his office and the Irish church hierarchy. He said "it became obvious to many people within the church that the board was going to be different than it had originally been perceived.

"But that's what we're about, we're about facing up to difficult issues," he said.

Welcoming the report by the national board, the Irish bishops' conference, the Conference of Religious of Ireland and the Irish Missionary Union said it "demonstrates significant progress in many key areas, notably in policy development and training, as well as some important areas of challenge that have yet to be completely resolved."

"As sponsoring bodies, we are fully committed to working with the board to consolidate the progress made to date and to addressing those issues which have been a cause of some frustration to both the sponsoring bodies and the board, particularly around data protection and the sharing of statistics and other specific information with the national office," the statement added.

The board was set up in 2006 and aims, through the development of policies and procedures, to guide all 186 constituent parts of the Catholic Church in Ireland toward the best practice in safeguarding children. It is also empowered to monitor that practice through regular audits and reviews.

The report was issued as the Vatican announced it would publish a letter to the world's bishops aimed at ensuring a "coordinated and effective program" of child protection and of dealing with allegations of clerical sexual abuse.

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