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Vatican insists it didn't torpedo Irish response to abuse crisis

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 3, 2011 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

tIn an unusually detailed response to recent criticism from the Irish government, the Vatican insisted today that it did not subvert efforts by the Irish bishops to report sexually abusive priests to the police, saying that claims to the contrary by Ireland?s Prime Minister are ?unfounded.?

tThe Vatican had earlier recalled its ambassador to Ireland after Prime Minister Enda Kenny on July 20 denounced what he described as ?the dysfunction, disconnection, elitism ? the narcissism that dominates the culture of the Vatican to this day? in the wake of a critical government report on the rural Colyne diocese, which found that abuse allegations had been mishandled as recently as 2009.

tToday?s 11,000-word statement represents the Vatican?s most comprehensive response to date to both the Cloyne report and Kenny?s statement, which found a largely positive echo in scandal-weary Ireland.

tBoth the Cloyne report and Kenny based much of their criticism of the Vatican on a 1997 letter from the papal nuncio, or ambassador, to the Irish bishops, from the Congregation for Clergy in Rome, then led by Colombian Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos. The letter advised the Irish bishops that some elements of a draft set of sex abuse guidelines the bishops developed in 1996, including support for ?mandatory reporter? policies on child abuse, could conflict with canon law.

tThe Cloyne report charged that the letter offered ?cover? for church officials who chose to ignore the new policies on abuse.

tIn effect, the lengthy Vatican response made four core assertions.

First, the Vatican reiterated its ?abhorrence for the crimes of sexual abuse which took place in that Diocese, and indeed in other Irish Dioceses,? adding that ?the Holy See is sorry and ashamed for the terrible sufferings which the victims of abuse and their families have had to endure within the Church of Jesus Christ, a place where this should never happen.?

Second, the Vatican claimed that the 1997 letter was not intended to prevent the Irish bishops from reporting child abuse to the police, but to make sure that possible conflicts with church law would not allow abusers to evade ecclesial punishment on a technicality. Civil law and canon law are two separate systems, it said, and nothing in church law ever prevented a bishop or anyone else from reporting civil crimes to the police.

Third, the statement said the Vatican cannot be faulted for not granting formal recognition to the 1996 policies of the Irish bishops, because the bishops themselves never asked for it.

Fourth, the statement suggested the breakdown in Cloyne was not a problem in church policy, but rather a failure to apply it ? especially new church procedures on abuse adopted beginning in 2001.

After reading the Vatican statement, Irish Foreign Minister Eamon Gilmore said he wasn?t fully persuaded.

?I remain of the view that the 1997 letter from the then-nuncio provided a pretext for some to avoid full cooperation with Irish civil authorities,? he said.

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin also released a statement on Saturday in response to the Vatican response, saying it shows that the focus on the 1997 letter is unwarranted.

tThe letter, Martin said, ?did not impede the Irish bishops in unanimously approving the Framework Document, in applying it and in consistently developing that framework into the current positions of the Irish church.?

tIn truth, Martin said, officials who turned a blind eye to abuse didn?t need any cover.

?The fact is that these same people ? continued to reject the clear norms approved by Pope Benedict when they were published,? he said. ?They were people who regarded only their own views and would take no note of study documents, of Framework Documents or even of approved papal norms.?

?These people may be few but the damage they caused was huge,? Martin said.

That damage, Martin said, illustrates the need for an ?on-going process of independent monitoring and reviewing of day-to-day practice.?

Martin also noted that recent documents from the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on sex abuse mention at least twenty times cooperation between church and state and the importance of respecting national laws on reporting abuse.

One prominent Irish victim, Marie Collins, said the Vatican's defense highlighted the need for Ireland to pass a law making the non-reporting of suspected child abuse a specific crime.

?As long as it?s not there, the church can defend its own actions as the document does,? she said.

The text of the Vatican response can be found here:

RESPONSE TO MR EAMON GILMORE, TÁNAISTE AND MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE OF IRELAND, CONCERNING THE CLOYNE REPORT , 03.09.2011 [1]

The text of Archbishop Martin's comments is here: **Archbp. Martin comments on Vatican response to Irish gov't**
[2]

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