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Ireland: Priests meeting

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In Ireland, the actuality of the Oct. 4-5 annual meeting of the independent Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) may be of more consequence than the agenda -- important though that is.

The Irish priests will be joined by Msgr. Helmut Schüller from Austria and Fr. Bernard Survil from the United States. Minor though such international representation is at present, this initial show of transnational solidarity among priests could have major consequences.

The issues are well-known. Priests are under siege in the media from the sexual abuse crisis, they are alarmed at the trampling of other priests' rights in the rush to judgment, and disgusted at the bishops who have mishandled the issue and continue to do so.

ACP spokesperson, Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery, said the organization has been "inundated with pleas from priests saying their human rights are being walked on in the way in which allegations against them are being treated. For the average priest in the parish, if an allegation is made against him today, by tomorrow morning he is publicly disgraced -- very often even before he knows the nature of the allegation and before he has any chance to defend himself."

Marie Keenan, the ACP's keynote speaker on "Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church," is a psychotherapist who teaches at the University College Dublin School of Applied Social Science. She is on UCD's Institute of Criminology advisory board and chair of the Family Therapy Association of Ireland.

Flannery said he felt that after Keenan's address and the subsequent discussion, the ACP "under certain pressure from media to make a clear statement of our position on the handling of sexual abuse cases, should be clearer on where we stand, and better in a position to defend the priests" who need defending.

Keenan's book, "Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power and Organizational Culture" (Oxford University Press), is to be published this month.

[My 4,000-word report from Ireland will appear in the Oct. 14 print issue of NCR. From two dozen interviews at the pew level with Irish mass-going laypeople (along with nuns and priests), I record their sense of betrayal and their dismay. Aggrieved by bishops who covered up the abuse, disgusted by the abuse itself, they are saddened, if understanding, as family members and neighbors leave church practice while they try to find ways to remain in the church, to refashion it at the parish level.]

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