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Australian bishops meet Vatican officials to discuss removed colleague

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Oct. 18, 2011

Father Jim Cronin (left) and Bishop Bill Morris (right) blessing symbols of Baptism during the Mass opening the Fifth Diocesan Gathering July 12, 2010 in St Patrick's Cathedral Centre, Toowoomba, Australia. The theme of the gathering was "Church in the Third Millennium: Ministry, Mission and Maintenance."

VATICAN CITY -- Australian bishops had a special meeting with top Vatican officials in mid-October to discuss the case of a bishop Pope Benedict XVI removed from office after years of tension with a variety of Vatican offices.

Cardinals Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, and William J. Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, met the Australian bishops to discuss the aftermath of the removal in May of Bishop William Morris of Toowoomba.

The meeting with the cardinals was "an indication of the seriousness with which the Roman authorities in the dicasteries here want to enter into dialogue with the Australian bishops in looking at these issues," said Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide, president of the bishops' conference.

The bishops promised the people of Toowoomba and all Australian Catholics that they would discuss the case with Vatican officials during their "ad limina" visits Oct. 10-22, Archbishop Wilson said.

Australian bishops who spoke to Catholic News Service in October described their "ad limina" visits, which are required of bishops to report on the status of their dioceses, as a prayerful, spiritual group experience. In addition to meeting the pope and Vatican officials, they made a pilgrimage to the Benedictine monastery at Subiaco, had a retreat day and celebrated Mass at the four major basilicas of Rome.

The 38 bishops also dedicated the altar in the chapel of the Domus Australia, a new pilgrim house in Rome, which Pope Benedict was scheduled to inaugurate Oct. 19.

Sharing with Vatican officials and "praying and reflecting on the situation in Australia," the bishops naturally wanted to discuss the situation of Bishop Morris and how to promote healing in his diocese, Archbishop Wilson said.

According to news reports and statements from Catholic leaders in Toowoomba, Bishop Morris was asked to

resign six times by three different Vatican congregations. Over a 10-year period, the officials questioned how liberally he allowed his priests to use general absolution for the forgiveness of sins, but the real tension began in 2006 when he said in a pastoral letter that he would be open to ordaining women and married men if church rules changed to allow such a possibility.

In 2007, the Vatican asked Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, who was archbishop of Denver at the time, to conduct an apostolic visitation of Toowoomba.

Archbishop Wilson said the Australian bishops fully recognize and accept Pope Benedict's ministry of authority over the whole church and they are not second-guessing his action, but they have an obligation to help Toowoomba Catholics move forward and to demonstrate their care for Bishop Morris.

"What we have to do is look at what the consequences have been, what we need to do now to bring healing and guidance to the Catholic people of Australia, do all we can to maintain a proper collegial relationship with Bishop Morris and find ways in which he can continue his ministry as a bishop in our midst, although he's no longer bishop of Toowoomba," the archbishop said.

While no conclusions have been reached, he said Oct. 17, by continuing the discussions in Rome, a whole new dimension has been added.

"We're all here together, we're in a very spiritual situation, we're right at the center of the life of the church, gathered around the tombs of the Apostles," he said.

Bishop Michael Putney of Townsville said Cardinals Ouellet and Levada "were very generous with their time," and the Australian bishops continue to discuss the matter among themselves, "gaining greater understanding of why it happened and ideas to ensure it never happens again."

Bishop Putney said he personally believes "as bishops we need to have intermediate steps in place. When we see a bishop acting in such a way that could lead to censure, we should have a process of mediation in place to intervene in a spirit of affective collegiality."

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