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Poll: Irish Catholics have unfavorable view of church

Michael Kelly | Nov. 1, 2011

Rosaries tagged with Irish flags hang in a religious shop in Knock, Ireland, June 10, 2009. (CNS photo/Cathal McNaughton, Reuters)

DUBLIN, IRELAND -- In yet another sign that the beleaguered Catholic Church in Ireland has a long and arduous road to a brighter future, almost half of Irish people polled say they now have an unfavorable view of the church.

Once famously described by Pope Paul VI as the "most Catholic country in the world," Ireland's church has taken a battering over the past two decades and lost credibility because of the cover-up of clerical sexual abuse.

Twenty-eight percent of those polled said they had a "very unfavorable" view of the church, while 19 percent said their view was "mostly unfavorable." Just 8 percent reported that their view of Catholicism was "very favorable," with 16 percent saying they had a "mostly favorable" view. A quarter had no view either way.

Of those with a negative view, three-quarters cite the abuse scandals as a reason. However, a significant 23 percent say their negative view is due to the church's history and structures.

The poll, conducted for religious think-tank The Iona Institute, also reveals that many people dramatically overestimate the number of Irish priests who have been guilty of child abuse.

Middle-aged Irish people have the most unfavorable view, with 58 percent of those aged 45 to 54 holding such a view compared to 46 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds.

When asked what influenced their negative view towards the church, 56 percent said child abuse and 18 percent said the cover-up of abuse, but 23 percent cited the church's history and structure as the reason for their unfavorable view.

Women are more likely to agree than men that Catholic teaching is still of benefit to Irish society, with 50 percent of women agreeing compared to 43 percent of men. Overall, 55 percent of people agreed that church teaching is of benefit to Irish society.

However, when asked whether or not they would be happy if the Catholic Church disappeared from Ireland completely, just 23 percent of respondents said yes.

Dr. John Murray, a theologian at the Mater Dei Institute in Dublin, said the results represent the public's varied attitude toward the church.

"On the one hand, almost half view the Catholic Church unfavorably at present," Murray said. "On the other hand, a similar percentage believe church teachings are still of benefit to society, despite the scandals."

Murray said the poll shows about a quarter of the population has an unfavorable view of the church, but that doesn't necessarily mean the people in that percentage are anti-Catholic.

"That is quite a high percentage," he said, "but given the huge amount of understandable anger at the church because of the scandals, perhaps it is surprising the number isn't higher than that."

A majority of the public polled overestimate the number of clergy who are guilty of abuse. Three of Ireland's 26 Catholic dioceses have been subject to judicial investigation for the handling of abuse allegations, and about 4 percent of priests have been found guilty of child abuse.

Yet 42 percent of Irish people put the number of priests guilty of child abuse above 20 percent. Of these, 27 percent believe the number exceeds 40 percent, and 18 percent put it above 50 percent.

Five percent of the public believe that between 90 percent and 100 percent of all Catholic priests are guilty of child abuse.

Prof. Patricia Casey of The Iona Institute told NCR that the overestimation should be "a matter of deep concern."

"There has been very deep and completely justified public anger over the scandal of child sex abuse by clergy," she said. "However, only a small minority of priests are guilty of this terrible crime, and in the interests of justice and in fairness to the vast majority of priests, it is essential that fact this becomes universally known among the public at large."

Casey said the Irish media need to adopt a more responsible attitude when it comes to the reporting of abuse allegations against clerics.

"When terrorist atrocities are committed in the name of Islam, responsible media point out that only a tiny minority of Muslims are guilty of these atrocities and that such terrorist attacks are an aberration in Muslim terms rather than a true expression of Islam," she said.

"When cases of clerical abuse are being reported, a similarly responsible attitude should be adopted; that is, the cases should be factually and objectively covered, but it should be made clear each and every time that only a very small minority of Catholic priests are guilty of child abuse," she said.

Irish Catholics await the report of an apostolic visitation ordered by Pope Benedict XVI. Conducted by senior prelates, including Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston and Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, the report, the Vatican says, will "assist the local Church on her path of renewal."

Earlier this year, Dublin's Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, who has won widespread praise for his handling of the abuse crisis, said he was becoming impatient at how slowly the process, which began more than a year ago, was moving.

"The pace of the change in Irish religious culture is such that the longer the delay in advancing the fruits of the apostolic visitation, the greater the danger of false expectations and the greater the encouragement to those who prefer immobilism to reform, and the greater the threat to the effectiveness of this immense gift of the Holy

Father to the Irish church," he said.

The Vatican has announced that it expects to publish an "overall synthesis indicating the results and the future prospects highlighted by the visitation" in early 2012.

Martin's diocese is also to play host to next year's 50th International Eucharistic Congress, which many within the Irish church hoped could make the beginning of a new chapter.

With eight months to go, however, that seems like a large thing to ask, with further audits into the handling of abuse in the 23 dioceses not already subject to state review set to be published in coming months.

Many of the more than 500 priests attending the recent annual meeting of the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) showed little appetite for the congress, with views ranging from the apathetic to downright hostile.

Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery, a member of the ACP leadership team, said he believes bishops and priests taking part in the open-air Mass at the congress should wear "some modern, imaginative equivalent of the 'sackcloth and ashes' of the Old Testament" rather than traditional vestments.

Fr. Flannery said he thinks the congress should "be simple and humble, asking forgiveness not just for the abuse of children, but for the other abuses of power perpetrated by church people in the past."

The ACP is currently looking at the prospect of holding a national synod of the Church in Ireland to bring together laypeople, religious and priests to chart a new way forward. The hierarchy is skeptical and the Vatican is likely to want to pour cold water on such a move.

[Michael Kelly is deputy editor of The Irish Catholic, an independent, lay-owned weekly newspaper. Follow him on Twitter [2].]

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