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Ireland abuse audit: Recent improvements after years of neglect

Michael Kelly Catholic News Service | Dec. 5, 2011

DUBLIN, IRELAND -- Audits of six Irish Catholic dioceses reveal ?a marked improvement? in how the church is handling clerical abuse allegations.

However, the reviews, carried out by the independent National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church and released Nov. 30, also show that, in the past, too much emphasis was put on the rights of accused priests and protecting the reputation of the church. Each review found evidence that insufficient attention was paid to the suffering of victims and the long-term consequences of abuse.

Ian Elliott, chief executive of the board, said the audits show that ?reporting allegations to the statutory authorities [now] occurs promptly and comprehensively.? He said that ?represents a major development, as past practice did not always reflect this commitment.?

He also said that ?the need to create and maintain a safe environment for children in the church is comprehensively accepted and implemented.?

The audits recommend that the practice of a priest acting as the designated person to whom abuse allegations are made be discontinued.

John O?Donnell, an abuse survivor, dismissed the report as ?an exercise in going through church paperwork.?

?The real story of what happened in Raphoe to hundreds and hundreds of victims will, in my opinion, only come out when there is a full garda [police] investigation or judicial inquiry,? he said.

Retired detective Martin Ridge, who investigated a prominent clerical abuse case, said, ?This audit will do nothing for the victims, as far as I can see.?

Of the 85 priests accused of abuse from 1975-2010 only eight have been convicted.

Overall the six audits, which cover the dioceses of Ardagh, Raphoe, Derry, Dromore, Tuam and Kilmore, confirm the findings of previous judicial reports in Ireland, which said priests accused of abuse were not robustly challenged or adequately managed and problems were often ?handled? by moving the accused to positions elsewhere.

The Raphoe audit notes that ?it is a matter of great regret to Bishop [Philip] Boyce that his focus on victims? needs was not greater in the past, and he now acknowledged that he has a very different appreciation of his safeguarding responsibilities? than when he first came into office in 1995, a year before the bishops? conference implemented comprehensive guidelines.

The review praised the Kilmore diocese as a ?model of best practice.? The report examined allegations received against seven priests since 1975 and found that current practice in the diocese, where Bishop Leo O?Reilly took

over in 1998, is of ?a consistently high standard.? The audit also found clear procedures in the dioceses of Derry and Ardagh.

The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church is conducting audits into all 188 dioceses, religious congregations and missionary societies in the Irish Catholic church and plans to publish six more audits in mid-2012. The entire process is expected to take two more years.

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