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Ireland assembly of religious and laypeople calls for open church, re-evaluation

by Michael Kelly



Cardinal Seán Brady of Armagh speaks to members of the media May 2 outside the Armagh cathedral in Northern Ireland. (CNS/Reuters)

DUBLIN, Ireland -- An assembly of the entire church in Ireland took one step closer Monday with an overflow meeting that saw more than 1,000 priests, religious and laypeople gather to discuss the future of the church.

Organizers say they expected about 200 participants to attend the event, which the Association of Catholic Priests sponsored. However, Dublin's Regency Hotel was packed to capacity, with many at the event forced to stand.

Speaker after speaker pleaded for a more open church centered around a spirit of dialogue. Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery, who was recently forbidden to write by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, maintained a discreet presence and was greeted by many well-wishers.

The priests association now represents about 25 percent of Irish priests in active ministry and has called for a re-evaluation of the church's teaching on sexuality and a "re-designing" of ministry "to incorporate the gifts, wisdom and expertise of the entire faith community, male and female." The group also wants local involvement in the appointment of bishops.

Participants pointed to the report of the recent Apostolic Visitation of the Irish church, which criticized a "fairly widespread" tendency among Irish Catholics to hold views contrary to the teaching of the church as an indication that Irish Catholics are itching for reform.

Speaker after speaker at the event called the hierarchy to open up structures of dialogue with lay Catholics about the future of the church.

Fr. Gerry O'Hanlon, a former Jesuit provincial, said the clerical child sexual abuse crisis and its serious mishandling by church leaders has revealed wider and deeper fault lines in the national and universal church.

He described the event as a "wonderful sign of hope" for the future of the church in Ireland. He said the event was "trying to get a group together who really feel strongly about the crisis in the church and want to offer constructive hope and help.

"It's about looking to a new church where the voice of the faithful, the voice of the laity, is heard more clearly as the Second Vatican Council wanted to happen," O'Hanlon said.

Asked whether he thought the Vatican was willing to listen to the voices calling for change around the ordination of women and an end to mandatory celibacy, he said "without trying we'll never know."

He said the vision of Second Vatican Council had to be fully realized: "If you have co-responsibility, you have to have some power. You can't ask people to be responsible without power.

"In the Catholic church, we've been bad enough about living out the dream of Vatican II and listening closely to the voice of the faithful and giving them a say in the formation of teaching and governance," he said.

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Fr. PJ Madden, a member of the leadership team of the Association of Catholic Priests, said it was vital that lay Catholics become more involved.

"In today's world, an educated people have a right to have a voice," he said. "That voice has a right to be heard. If it leads to newer decisions that challenge present institutions, that's what we call progress."

Phil Dunne, a former member of the now-disbanded Dublin Diocese Women's Forum, said there could be no return to the church of the past.

"I see no reason to go back to the institution I see imploding: an institution that has rolled back on Vatican II, an institution that silences rather than dialogues," he said.

Cathy Molloy, a theologian, told the event it was "high time" the church began to practice "some of what it asks of the world."

"The church rightly advocates before the world for human rights," she said, "but the church must now learn some of these lessons within the church and open up dialogue."

O'Hanlon said the crucial thing about the event "is that we're trying to model a different type of church and say to the bishops: 'This is the way forward, you don't have to fear this. This is people who are very well-disposed who want to help this present crisis.' "

He said "no individual or small group can handle it. We need everyone on board."

The event took place as pressure mounted on Primate of All-Ireland Cardinal Seán Brady to resign after fresh revelations that he was aware of the activities of a notorious abuser Fr. Brendan Smyth in 1975 and did not pass the information on to the civil authorities.

Brady insisted that while he accepted he had failed in the past, he did not believe it was a resigning matter. However, he also said while had no indication the Vatican wanted him to resign, he hoped the pope would soon appoint a coadjutor bishop to his Armagh diocese who would eventually replace him as Primate.

Organizers of the event insist it should not be seen as a challenge to the Holy See. However, given the agenda and the repeated calls for a change to thinking around human sexuality and the ordination of women, it will be hard for the event not to be characterized as throwing down the gauntlet to the Vatican.

[Michael Kelly is deputy editor of *The Irish Catholic*, an independent, lay-owned weekly newspaper.]

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