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Irish eyes aren't smiling over New York cardinal's seminary probe

David Gibson Religion News Service | Jun. 19, 2012

Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York addresses pilgrims April 6 at St. James Cathedral Basilica in Brooklyn, N.Y. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

NEW YORK -- Cardinal Timothy Dolan loves to play up his Irish roots, which is no surprise given Dolan's famous Gaelic gregariousness and his role as spiritual leader of such a prominent community of Irish-American Catholics.

But in the wake of Dolan's scathing verdict on the orthodoxy of a major Irish seminary and the sharp pushback by Ireland's leading bishops, America's best-known churchman might want to stick to his throne at St. Patrick's Cathedral and steer clear of the old sod for a while.

Dolan's report on the flagship Irish seminary in Rome -- contained in a review commissioned by the Vatican -- was marked by "a deep prejudice" that "led to the hostile tone and content of the report," Ireland's four archbishops said in the draft of a joint reply to the Vatican.

The reply, published by *The Irish Times* on Friday, also said Dolan's report contained "significant errors of fact."

In 2010, as revelations of the widespread sexual abuse of children by clergy rocked deeply Catholic Ireland, Pope Benedict XVI asked Dolan to a lead a team that would inspect Ireland's Catholic seminaries to make sure they were preparing men properly for the priesthood. (The pontiff also named Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley and other churchmen to review Ireland's four archdioceses.)

The Irish Times obtained a copy of Dolan's report on the Irish College in Rome, which was sent to the Vatican earlier this year, and it was forceful in its criticisms: The review accused Ireland's archbishops of being "disengaged from college governance" in their role as trustees and said the "general rule of governance is 'Let's keep doing what we have been for the last 35 years.'"

The report, which cited only criticisms from seminarians and provided no input from faculty or administrators, charged that the seminary's staff were "critical about any emphasis on Rome, tradition, the magisterium, piety or assertive orthodoxy." It said teachers were failing to prepare priests who have "a vibrant fidelity to Jesus and the teaching and tradition of His church."

Dolan's report also said the seminary "suffers from the reputation of being 'gay friendly,' however unjust such a reputation might be." Dolan said in the report that he "did not find any evidence of rampant immorality or a homosexual subculture."

While it was unclear if their draft response was the final version sent to Rome, the four Irish archbishops nonetheless denounced Dolan's report for stressing "its own view of orthodoxy, priestly identity, separation and devotion" and said its "harsh judgments on staff members" were "unsupported by evidence."

Dolan fired back, saying that he stood behind "the accuracy of the data we found," while ripping those who leaked the report and the response from the Irish prelates.

"While obviously others do not consider themselves bound by the promised confidentiality -- so necessary and understandable to assure a fair and honest gathering of information ... I certainly do," Dolan said in a brief statement, declining to elaborate further.

The four priests who were on staff have left the Irish College since Dolan's report went to the Vatican. That prompted a national group of Irish priests to blast the Dolan report for relying on the comments of disgruntled students and for focusing on accusations of widespread homosexual activity despite a lack of evidence.

"If the accusations were not substantiated, why not just say so?" asked the Association of Catholic Priests. "Is this just incompetence or perhaps homophobia?"

The Irish priests said the Dolan report "has effectively destroyed the reputations of priests, who have given lifelong service to the Irish Catholic Church, without giving them a right of reply to the allegations made against them."

"It is unacceptable that a report to the Pope, on a sensitive issue, should be conducted in such an incompetent fashion," the priests group said. "No court of law would treat people in such a way. Is it too much to expect even minimal rights in law for priests in the Roman Catholic Church?"

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