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Ireland confronts its sex abuse crisis

Tom Roberts | Dec. 30, 2009

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, Ireland and Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, Northern Ireland, address the media just outside St. Peter's Square in Rome Dec. 11. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Analysis

The recent government investigation into clergy sex abuse in Ireland, which produced a scathing critique of church officials and their role in attempting to protect the reputation of the institution at the expense of young victims, has resulted in the resignation of four bishops and sparked calls for cutting the number of dioceses in Ireland and for deep reform of the hierarchical culture.

The report of the government commission, headed by Judge Yvonne Murphy, severely criticized the church for being preoccupied with ?the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal and the preservation of its assets.

?All other considerations,? said the report, ?including the welfare of children and justice for victims, were subordinated to these priorities. The archdiocese did not implement its own canon law rules and did its best to avoid any application of the law of the state.?

The Murphy Report, which covers the period from 1975 through 2004 in the Dublin archdiocese, is the latest of at least three government investigations that together paint a sordid picture of widespread clerical sex abuse in Catholic institutions throughout Ireland.

While the accounts of abuse and cover-up by the hierarchy are similar in many ways to the scandal that has plagued the church in the United States since the mid-1980s, the situation in Ireland is different in several key respects:

- Four Irish bishops have already resigned or have submitted their resignation letters to the pope as a result of the scandal: Dublin Auxiliary Bishops Eamonn Walsh and Raymond Field, and Bishops Donal Murray of Limerick and James Moriarty of Kildare and Leighlin. They were all named in the Murphy Report. A fifth bishop named in the report, Martin Drennan of Galway, has refused to resign, but according to press reports faces increasing pressure to step down. By contrast, in the United States, no bishops have resigned

because of their role in covering up abuse or shuffling priests from parish to parish. Cardinal Bernard Law was forced out of the Boston archdiocese, but he was reassigned to Rome, where he continues to hold positions on some of the most powerful Vatican agencies, including the congregation responsible for appointing bishops.

- All of the investigations in Ireland, unlike those in the United States, have been conducted by independent, national government agencies. Ireland?s latest, the Murphy Report, was a judicial proceeding done under legislation that provided investigators with full judicial power, including the power to subpoena documents. In the United States, only in a few instances ? Boston, Philadelphia, Rockville Centre, N.Y., and Bridgeport, Conn., among them ? did investigations go deeper than the data self-reported by church authorities. In those cases, the revelations came about only after pressure by media, local grand jury investigations or protracted legal battles.
- Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, unlike members of the U.S. hierarchy, cooperated with the investigation and handed over thousands of pages of documentation. In an April sermon, he described how the church would be humbled by the revelations. In an interview before the report was published, he spoke of reading the files over a weekend and becoming so disgusted with the contents that he threw them to the floor.
- Ireland, unlike the United States, is a predominantly Catholic country, so the hierarchy is unable to blame the scandal, as is the case with a number of U.S. bishops, on anti-Catholic media or an anti-Catholic culture.
- In the case of Ireland, Pope Benedict XVI has acted immediately. Following a Dec. 11 meeting with the country?s Catholic leadership, Benedict expressed the ?outrage, betrayal and shame? he shared with Irish Catholics over the scandal. He has promised a pastoral letter on the crisis early in 2010. In contrast, the late Pope John Paul II largely ignored the crisis for most of his tenure and even celebrated the late Fr. Marciel Maciel, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, who had been repeatedly accused by former members of the order for abusing young seminarians.

Perhaps in a sign of how thoroughly the persistent scandal has worn away the normal rationales advanced to explain the crisis, Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, former master general of the worldwide Dominican order and a highly regarded religious leader in the British Isles, recently told a two-day gathering of Dublin priests: ?I?m convinced this whole sexual abuse crisis is deeply linked with power and the way power operates in the church at all levels, from the Vatican to the parish sacristan. Often, it is not the power of Jesus who is gentle and humble of heart.?

According to a report of his talk in *The Irish Catholic*, a national, independent newspaper, Radcliffe said the church ?has been infected by the same culture of control? as that found in the wider society. The scandal, he said, was ?much more than a crisis about sexual abuse; it is a crisis of a clerical culture,? one that elevates clergy to ?our high towers? and involves an ?understanding of priesthood so often in terms of power.?

?Most priests are holy, humble, unpretentious people, but this is often in the face of a clerical culture, fighting against a clerical culture which values high titles and positions ? Your Eminence, all these ridiculous distinctions, right reverend, very reverend ? this crisis may be the beginning of a profound renewal of the church.?

Some, like Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, one of the few U.S. priests to be critical of the church?s handling of the crisis since it first surfaced in the early to mid-1980s, thinks the Irish version of the scandal will not change much in the structure that he considers at the heart of the issue. While he generally admires Martin as being ?more forthright than I?ve ever seen in any other bishop,? he was highly critical of an initial reaction from the archbishop when he said that he had written to bishops implicated in the scandal, asking them to use their consciences in deciding whether they should resign. ?That?s gibberish,? said Doyle, a canon lawyer who has aided lawyers for plaintiffs in hundreds of cases in the United States. ?They had no conscience or they wouldn?t

be where they are. The Vatican should mandate that anyone involved in a cover-up should be forced to resign.?

Regarding implications of the crisis, Doyle said, ?What will happen is what?s been happening: dissolution, corrosion of the ecclesiastical kingdom. People will continue to walk away from the institutional church; there will be a continual rise in anticlericalism of the Irish people.

?What it shows is that in spite of the stranglehold the church had over the government, it didn?t save them from these awful revelations. What was severely lacking in the church was Christianity. Something was radically missing. The church concentrated on myth and rituals and forgot the essentials,? Doyle said.

Author Jason Berry, whose reporting in the mid-1980s broke the story nationally in the United States and who has been covering aspects of the scandal ever since, said: ?The core problem is that Vatican justice, such as it is, has an inherent double standard. Bishops and high church officials are not held to the same standards as ordinary priests.?

When the U.S. bishops were forced by revelations in 2002 to come up with guidelines for handling abusive priests, he said, ?the system was unable to include bishops under the rubric of investigation by a lay review board. The Vatican insisted that bishops not be included in the same level of scrutiny.?

Ultimately, he said, what happens will depend somewhat on how much attention the Irish press can train on the Vatican. He said that Benedict ?incrementally has done vastly more than John Paul and is yet constrained by many of the internal restraints of the [hierarchical] culture.?

The Irish Catholic has been reporting on the scandal since the early 1990s and the most recent revelations have caused a deep revulsion among ordinary Catholics, said Michael Kelly, deputy editor. In a recent telephone interview he told *NCR* that there is now ?massive agitation ? a seething anger among traditional, ordinary Catholics.? He said that a priest who made a pilgrimage from the south of Ireland to Dublin reported that the people who were most annoyed were not those ?agitating for women priests and other reforms? but ordinary Catholics ?coming out to pray the rosary with him. They are at their wits? end, they?ve had enough.? After ?20 years of mismanagement, they are looking for some kind of meaningful reform.?

The disturbance over the scandal cuts across the normal conservative-liberal divides, said Kelly. Some very traditional theologians in Ireland are calling on bishops to resign, he said. ?That points to how deep this crisis is.?

?A lot of the anger is obviously directed at the abuse, but coming from different sources. It?s coming from the woman with eight children already who?s told she can?t use contraception. Or the young gay man who sees a rot at the heart of the very church telling him there?s no place for him.?

Kelly said the church is fortunate that Martin, a veteran Vatican diplomat, was sent back to Ireland as archbishop in 2004. ?More than any other bishop, he has the credibility to reform. He is enormously popular,? said Kelly. ?This is five to midnight in the church of Ireland. If it weren?t for Diarmuid Martin, it would be midnight.?

Martin can be effective, said Kelly, because ?he has no fingerprints on this crisis. He has the credibility to lead some kind of reform.?

When Martin and Cardinal Sean Brady met with the pope, they kept emphasizing, ?It is the grandmothers of Ireland ? the devoted and faithful Catholics who are upset.?

One of the reforms being advanced in some quarters, said Kelly, is a reduction in the number of Ireland's

dioceses, some of them with very small populations,from 26 to at least half that number.

If substantial reform occurs in the church, said Kelly, it will be in part due to the fact that the crisis is felt more acutely in Ireland than elsewhere because of the importance the church has held in the wider culture. ?There is a massive symbiosis between Irish Catholicism and Irish nationalism. To be Irish is to be Catholic,? he said. Because the church wielded such influence and power in Irish society, its institutions are part of the national fabric, so politicians ?have no appetite to remove church from those institutions. In that regard, the church is very lucky. Politicians have not been very opportunistic about the sins of the Catholic church,? said Kelly.

Yet how those sins are dealt with in society, who is held accountable and the consequences of that accountability could have implications far beyond Ireland. If Irish bishops are expected to resign because of their roles in covering up decades of abuse against children it remains an open question whether the same will be expected of bishops in other countries. What is clear is that Ireland, in investigating the crimes committed by clergy, publishing the results and demanding the resignations of at least four bishops, has set a new standard for transparency and accountability.

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