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With much anticipation, Europe awaits papal sex abuse letter

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 19, 2010

Munich City Center

Editor?s note: NCR?s Tom Fox is in Munich reporting on the developing German sex abuse story.

Munich, Germany -- Few papal statements in recent memory have stirred more anticipation than the one to be released tomorrow by the Vatican, as Pope Benedict addresses the clerical sex abuse scandal in a pastoral letter aimed at the Irish faithful.

The pope reportedly signed off on the papal letter today. The Vatican has confirmed it will be released tomorrow to be read at masses throughout Ireland on Sunday.

Meanwhile, there is hope here and in other European nations the papal remarks will extend beyond Ireland.

In the past month, the focus of the clergy abuse scandal has shifted from Ireland to Germany where some 300 abuse cases have been reported and where the pope has become personally embroiled for his handling of a sex abuse case when he was archbishop of Munich in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

From the vantage of Munich, a letter addressed to the Irish faithful with scant or no mention of the deep pain felt here in the German church is likely to be disappointing.

?It?s been reported that the letter will be released in English and Italian and this is disappointing,? said Christian Weisner, head of the German division of We are Church, the church reform organization. ?We had hoped the letter would also be released in German.?

Weisner explained that when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict, was elected pope nearly five years ago, German Catholics, particularly those from the Bavaria region in which the Munich archdiocese is located, were elated. ?A local had been elected pope.?

Five years later, with the church receiving new reports of sex abuse almost daily in the press, the mood has shifted from celebration to depression, Weisner said.

?German Catholics have been hoping for a word of empathy from Pope Benedict, but so far there has been nothing and the crisis only seems to be growing.?

It is not known if, and to what extent, the sex abuse crisis in Germany will find its way into the papal pastoral letter, which was originally intended exclusively for the Irish faithful.

The letter will offer a Vatican reflection on a problem which in recent months has damaged the Catholic Church not only in Ireland and Germany, but also in Austria, Brazil, Italy and the Netherlands.

The Vatican recently denounced attempts to link the pope to the sex scandal in Germany. His former archdiocese did admit he once unwittingly approved housing for a priest accused of child abuse.

Media commentators have said that by implication, the measures addressed by the pope in his weekend letter are bound to have wider application than Ireland alone. So what the pontiff has to say will be scrutinized here and elsewhere in Europe.

In an unusual move, German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Wednesday demanded "truth and clarity" about the sexual abuse committed by priests in Germany.

Merkel, in a speech to parliament, also said it makes no sense to limit any such investigation to the church, backing the position taken by German bishops. She said child sexual and physical abuse was a broader problem affecting all of society.

"We all agree sexual abuse against children is a despicable crime," said Merkel, leader of Germany's conservative Christian Democrats. "There is only one way for society to come clean and that is truth and clarity about everything that has happened."

The head of Germany's Catholic church, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, apologized last week to abuse victims.

The scandal in Germany has also involved the pope?s brother who for 30 years ran the prestigious Regensburg choir which has been linked to cases of abuse.

Father Georg Ratzinger has admitted to repeatedly slapping boys in his Regensburg choir.

Merkel's Justice Minister Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger has accused the Vatican of covering up scandals and pressed the bishops to cooperate with prosecutors "like in Ireland."

The pope has said, meanwhile, he hopes his letter will ?help in the process of repentance, healing and renewal.?

His message is expected to express contrition for what he himself has already described as shameful and hateful behavior by some priests.

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