News



by Joshua J. McElwee

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The Vatican has announced Pope Francis will soon be sending a letter to "all the People of God" of Chile, in what appears to be a sign that the pope has made a decision about whether to accept the resignations of nearly all of the country's bishops over their mishandling of clergy sexual abuse.

In a brief statement May 31, Vatican press office director Greg Burke said the pope had written the letter personally and would be sending it formally to Bishop Santiago Silva Retamales, the head of the Chilean bishops' conference.

Burke also announced that Maltese Archbishop Charles Scicluna, a respected investigator who Francis had earlier sent to Chile to look into the local church's handling of abuse, will be returning to the country "in coming days."

Scicluna will be visiting specifically the diocese of Osorno, which is led by Bishop Juan Barros Madrid.

Abuse survivors and advocates have protested Francis' 2015 appointment of Barros to Osorno, pointing to survivors' testimony that as a priest in the 1980s and 90s Barros witnessed the crimes of notorious abuser Fr. Fernando Karadima.

Burke said Scicluna will be going to the diocese with his aide, Msgr. Jordi Bertomeu, "to move forward with the process of reparation and healing for victims of abuse."

News of the pending transmission of Francis' letter to Chileans comes nearly two weeks after the country's bishops offered their resignations en masse May 18 following three days of meetings in Rome.

Speculation since has focused on how many of the resignations the pope may choose to accept and what other decisions he might make on the matter.

Francis called the Chilean prelates to Rome in April, admitting in a letter to their bishops' conference that he had made "serious mistakes" in his handling of the country's abuse crisis.

The admission was a stunning about-face for the pope, who during a January trip to Chile had defended his appointment of Barros and twice called the allegations against the prelate "calumny."

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In a letter given to the Chilean bishops after their May 15-17 meetings at the Vatican, which was leaked by news channel Tele13, Francis told the prelates "the painful situations that have happened are indications that something is wrong with the ecclesial body."

While the pope said removing some church leaders from office "must be done," he also said "we must go further."

"It would be irresponsible of us not to go deep in looking for the roots and structures that allowed these concrete events to happen and carry on," he said.

Karadima, who was sentenced to a life of penitence and prayer by the Vatican in 2011, has maintained his innocence.

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