News



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The Australian bishop appointed to run the Adelaide Archdiocese after its archbishop was found guilty of historic neglect to report child sexual abuse says he is planning to take up his role with "great sensitivity."

Bishop Gregory O'Kelly, appointed by Pope Francis June 3 as Adelaide's apostolic administrator, said he believes people in the archdiocese need "affirmation and assurance."

"It is a very destabilizing thing when an eminent person like the archbishop suffers this verdict in the courts," said O'Kelly, speaking in a phone interview with NCR June 5.

"Therefore, there's a need for affirmation [and] also, to help remind people that the grace of God overcomes all things, that the church is a vibrant body; it is a healthy church," he said.

Adelaide Archbishop Philip Wilson was found guilty May 22 of not reporting knowledge of another priest's sexual abuse in the 1970s. While Wilson has not resigned from his post, he stood aside from day-to-day management of the archdiocese May 25.

Francis appointed O'Kelly, bishop of the neighboring diocese of Port Pirie since 2009, as administrator *sede plena*, marking a rare instance of a pontiff delegating one bishop to step in and take control of a diocese still technically belonging to another.

In his 20-minute NCR interview, O'Kelly said he received news of his appointment with "shock, certain disbelief."

"Then something of the enormity of what's being asked sets in — particularly, as … the archbishop is still in place," the bishop continued. "Therefore there's going to be a need for great sensitivity, good communication and strengthening the sense of rapport so that the archdiocese can be governed effectively and harmoniously."

O'Kelly, 76 and a Jesuit who had worked for nearly three decades in education before becoming a bishop in 2006, also spoke about how he approaches working with clergy abuse survivors.

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"If you ever deal with a victim or survivor, it's clear how enduring the pain is," said the prelate. "And it doesn't matter if it was 30 or 40 years ago, as in the case of victims I've had to deal with. The pain is still very present."

"I think any bishop who's had to encounter a victim face-to-face, he knows about the pain," said O'Kelly. "He knows the suffering. He knows the need to reach out."

"Many of the victims simply need to be recognized and acknowledged and believed," he continued. "It brings a real sense of relief to many of them, in my experience of dealing with some of the victims."

Apostolic administrators are appointed by popes to assume the role of a diocese's bishop, normally in cases where the prelate has died or become otherwise incapacitated. Such cases are referred to as *sede vacante*, or "empty seat."

The 2004 Congregation for Bishops document *Apostolorum Successores* describes the appointment of an administrator *sede plena*, or "full seat," as an "extraordinary action." In such a case, the document calls on the diocesan bishop "to cooperate in the total, free and serene fulfillment of the apostolic Administrator’s mandate."

Wilson, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in November, said he did not remember two altar boys reporting another priest's abuse to him in the 1970s. The archbishop's sentencing is set for June 19, and he faces a maximum of two years in prison.

O'Kelly, who had served as an auxiliary bishop of Adelaide under Wilson's leadership from 2006 to 2009, said he had not been able to visit the archdiocese again since being appointed as its administrator but that he is planning to do so June 7.

The bishop said that during that trip he will have meetings with Wilson and the archdiocesan vicar general and will also celebrate a Mass in Adelaide's Cathedral of St. Francis Xavier.

Port Pirie is located about 140 miles north of Adelaide, a city of some 1.3 million on Australia's southern coast. While the town of Port Pirie is relatively small, with a population of about 14,000, the diocese encompasses a vast swath of territory.

O'Kelly said that in land area his diocese spans some 380,000 square miles, a territory nearly the same size as France and Germany put together.

"I have 57 little communities scattered throughout there," said the prelate. "A lot of traveling, a lot of big distances."

"What we try to say to our people is that no matter how scattered you are, no matter how isolated, no matter how few you are, you are precious in the eyes of God and therefore in the eyes of the church," he said. "So, we will travel these miles, and we will … drive two-and-a-half days in order to say Mass and drive two-and-a-half days back."

Asked what lessons from his teaching career he drew upon in being a bishop, O'Kelly said that working with young people "enriches you with a sense of the human variety, of what a cavalcade humanity is."

"There are no stereotypes," said the bishop. "Every individual has their own knack and wit and humor and individuality. You know when you're going to encounter a group of people that it's going to be a rich experience of diversity."

O'Kelly acknowledged the challenging nature of his new appointment.

"These are difficult times," said the bishop. "I've only had the appointment three days. I still don't know what it's going to involve fully."

"I certainly will try my best," he said. "It's a learning curve, but I'm fairly trusting and reasonably calm about it. But I am praying a bit more."

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