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A man looks at a statue of the crucifixion of Christ in Ventry, Ireland. (CNS photo/Clodagh Kilcoyne, Reuters)



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Several prominent Irish clergy sexual abuse survivors are calling on Pope Francis to use his upcoming visit to their country at the end of August to admit to the Vatican's role for decades in helping cover-up abuse cases on the island.

Noting that the pontiff publicly decried a "culture of abuse and cover-up" in the Chilean Catholic Church in a letter to the people of that country in May, the Irish survivors say they are owed a similar admission about how the church sought to silence them and fellow victims.

"It would be very right if he said the same sort of things here in Ireland, because the situation in Ireland was no different than the situation in Chile," said Marie Collins, an Irish survivor and former member of Francis' clergy abuse commission.

"I think it's an opportunity with the pope coming to Ireland to be open and very clear in ... saying something about it, because that really hasn't happened," Collins said in a July NCR interview.

Mark Vincent Healy, an Irish survivor who took part in Francis' first meeting with abuse victims at the Vatican in 2014, said simply: "I think the same questions that were asked in Chile with regards to the church there would be something of the similar scrutiny that needs to be asked of the church here."

"What exactly did go on at the level of the bishops, the princes of the church?" Healy asked. "What were they doing? How exactly did they deal with these issues?"

"It's inconceivable that they knew nothing," he said. "I don't think people would believe that."

Francis is making a brief visit to Ireland Aug. 25-26 primarily to take part in the World Meeting of Families, a triennial Vatican-organized event meant to give witness to the Catholic Church's family teachings.

Much of the focus before the visit has been on how the pontiff will choose to interact with an Ireland that has changed in many ways since the last papal visit to the country, made by Pope John Paul II in 1979.



Marie Collins of Ireland, a survivor of clergy sexual abuse, is pictured in a 2014 photo. Collins was one of the founding members and the last remaining abuse survivor on the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. She left her position over what she described as resistance in Vatican offices against implementing recommendations for protecting people from abuse. (CNS photo/Carol Glatz)

Theologians, sociologists and other experts say Francis will encounter an Irish church and population very different to the one seen by his Polish predecessor, who was greeted by record crowds of 2.7 million people and a Catholic culture that permeated nearly every corner of society.

In one example of the dramatic shifts over the past four decades, an overwhelming majority of the country voted in May to repeal an amendment to the Irish constitution that made abortion illegal in nearly all circumstances. Three years earlier, a similar referendum approved same-sex marriage.

But amidst the questions over how Francis will choose to address the sweeping social changes in Ireland, survivors also want to highlight that this will be the first visit of a pope to the country since the uncovering in the 1990s and 2000s of a systemic system of abuse of children and cover-up by the church.

"The devastation to ordinary Catholics, ordinary people was huge, leaving aside survivors and their families altogether," said Collins, who resigned from the Pontifical

Commission for the Protection of Minors last year, citing frustration with the Vatican's slowness to implement the group's recommendations.

"It appears almost as though the church here is hoping it will all go away and people will recover their faith in the church and it will get back to where it was in some way," she said. "But it's not. And the contrast in such a short time in how ordinary people viewed the church and how they view it now is just extraordinary."

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"If the pope comes and doesn't speak about the history in Ireland ... or if he speaks in sort of grand terms with just apologies, which people have heard before, it won't have much effect," said Collins. "But if he actually is open and transparent and there are admissions that this cover-up happened and the church was at fault ... then it could have."

Ian Elliott, who served for six years as the head of Ireland's National Board for Safeguarding Children, agreed that in coming to the country Francis has an opportunity "to make very clear statements and also to commit the church to action in a number of areas."

"If that doesn't happen, I think it will be not just an opportunity lost," he said. "I think it will do a lot of damage. Put simply, being focused on trying to resuscitate the Catholic Church in Ireland, trying to stimulate interest in the Catholic Church again, that would not be helpful."

"[Francis] has a hill to climb," said Elliott. "There are a lot of dioceses and a lot of people who would be very suspicious about this visit, in terms of, is this just the church trying to gloss over something."

A very different church

Francis wrote to the people of Chile in May in the midst of the most serious scandal to affect his five-year papacy.

On a visit to the South American country last January, the pontiff drew outcry from abuse victims when he defended his 2015 appointment of a bishop who several survivors say had been present in the 1980s and 90s to witness their abuse by

another priest.

Over subsequent months, Francis made a dramatic turnabout. Among other actions, he called all of the Chilean bishops en masse to Rome for a series of meetings, wrote the May 31 letter apologizing to the entire country, and has accepted the resignations of five prelates, including the one he had defended in January.

As in the United States and other countries, the sexual abuse scandals have had a profound impact on Irish people's views of the Catholic Church.

While experts caution that statistical data on religious identity do not indicate the reasons people are leaving the church, the country's 2016 census found that the percentage of Irish identifying as Catholic had dropped six percent since the 2011 census, which took place after a series of governmental investigations into the church.

Although the 2016 census reported the number of those identifying as Catholic remains 78 percent, a number of other polls indicate that weekly Mass attendance has dropped from a high of 91 percent in the early 1970s to 41 percent now.



People pose July 19 during the launch of the World Meeting of Families in Dublin's Croke Park. Pope Francis will travel to Ireland Aug. 25-26 for the end of the gathering. (CNS photo/Liam McArdle, courtesy WMOF)

Fáinche Ryan, a noted ecclesiologist and former president of the Irish Theological Association, echoed others in noting that the church Francis will visit is "a very different church to the one that John Paul II came to."

"When John Paul II came, Catholicism was everything," said Ryan, director of the Loyola Institute at Trinity College Dublin. "It was the cement that held absolutely everything together. But today we're in a different time."

Gladys Ganiel, a sociologist and political scientist who has focused her research on the emerging forms of Christianity in Ireland, said the sexual abuse scandals have played a "significant part" in people's disassociation from the Catholic Church.

"The main effect of the scandals is really that people don't lose faith in God, they lose faith in the church as an institution," said the sociologist, author of the 2016 volume *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland*.

"There is clear evidence that the scandals have impacted peoples' perceptions of the institutional church, and even their willingness to go to Mass so often, especially to give money to the church," said Ganiel, a research fellow in the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice at Queen's University Belfast.

"I think the Catholic Church in Ireland is changing at an unprecedented rate," she said. "Within the next generation, I think it could be unrecognizable from what we have today currently, or what we had even as short a time ago as the 1980s and 1990s."

Information about abuse in the Irish church first came to light through a series of press reports in the 1990s.

In the late 90s and 2000s, the Irish government set up a number of inquiries into how the church had handled abuse. Two of the most prominent investigations looked into the country's system of Catholic residential schools and how the archdiocese of Dublin had handled allegations.

The Ryan report, which dealt with the residential schools and was released in May 2009, found that Catholic religious superiors in charge of the schools had created a "culture of self-serving secrecy" to hide abuse and that government inspectors had failed to step in.

The Murphy report, which dealt with the Dublin archdiocese and was released in November 2009, found that the four archbishops who led Dublin's church from 1940-2004 had each mishandled abuse allegations. It also identified at least 320 victims of abuse from an investigation of 46 of the archdiocese's priests.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote to the Catholics of Ireland in March 2010, saying he was "truly sorry" for the pain suffered by the victims. He also announced an apostolic visitation, or investigation, of the church in the country, sending five different non-Irish bishops to look into four dioceses and the Irish seminary system.

While Benedict's 2010 letter to Ireland did say part of the reason abuse had been allowed to happen in the country was due to a "misplaced concern for the reputation of the Church," it did not identify a "culture of abuse and cover-up," as Francis' letter to Chile in 2018 would.

"That did nothing at all to soothe anybody because his wording was not good," said Collins of Benedict's letter. "It certainly didn't have the same sort of content as Pope Francis' letter to the people in Chile."

Colm O'Gorman, an Irish survivor and founder of survivor support organization One in Four, said that while the Vatican has acknowledged the failings of Irish bishops it has yet to admit to its own role in covering up abuse.

"If Francis comes here and says that the cover-up of child abuse in Ireland is a stain on the record of the Catholic Church in Ireland, he's right, of course," said O'Gorman, who now heads Amnesty International Ireland.

"But that's not the point," he said. "If Francis was to do something profound — and it would be profound, and it would be welcome — it would be to honestly and simply acknowledge the truth of the Vatican's role in that cover-up."

Elliott, who now has his own safeguarding consultancy firm, said that if Francis only makes a passing reference to the abuse scandals "that's not going to hit the button."

"The wider public is used to the doublespeak, is used to the church saying one thing and doing another," he said. "So there has to be some demonstration, some very clear statement, no ambiguity."

Should Francis choose to speak about the sexual abuse scandals in Ireland, he might do so on the first day of his visit, Aug. 25, when he is to meet with Prime Minister

Leo Varadkar and the country's other political leaders at Dublin Castle and make a public address.

Or the pope could address the issue on the second and last day of the visit, when he is to speak publicly to the country's bishops after celebrating an outdoor Mass at Dublin's Phoenix Park.

The pontiff appears likely also to hold a meeting with sexual abuse survivors while in Ireland, although the Vatican does not announce those meetings in advance, citing a desire for privacy.

A matter of human compassion

To some, the most obvious evidence of the change in the status of the Irish church over the past four decades are the results from the May referendum, which amended the country's constitution to give the government power to legalize abortion.

Although the country's bishops organized against the measure, saying it would do "manifest injustice" to the unborn, people voted by over 66 percent in approval, with some 3.4 million of Ireland's population of 4.8 million taking part in the poll.

But Ryan, the theologian at Trinity College, said she thought it would be incorrect to read the result "as a vote against the church."

"I think that was a very complex vote," she said. "Many people I know who voted for reform ... did not see themselves as voting for abortion on demand, or as voting against church teaching."

Many wonder if Francis will address abortion on the visit, perhaps when he meets with the prime minister and other political leaders Aug. 25.

Fr. Joseph O'Leary, a noted Irish theologian and professor of English literature, agreed that the issues behind the referendum were complex and said he was worried the pontiff was "surrounded by people telling him that Ireland has fallen into apostasy."

"If he starts nagging people, he's completely lost the plot," said O'Leary, who has lived for decades in Japan and taught for many years at Sophia University in Tokyo.

"That's not what needs to be said now in Ireland," he said. "If the pope could tell the Irish people, 'Your recent referendum showed mature reflection and we understand this is not a black-and-white issue,' that would be sensational."



Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin speaks July 19 during the launch of the World Meeting of Families in Croke Park. Pope Francis will travel to Ireland Aug. 25-26 for the end of the gathering. (CNS photo/Liam McArdle, courtesy WMOF)

Among other issues Francis may choose to address with Varadkar are the questions around how Ireland will be affected by the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union.

It remains unclear how the exit might change the status of the land border between the Republic of Ireland, an E.U. member, and Northern Ireland, which is part of the U.K. At the moment the border is essentially open and unnoticeable, but some fear the process could lead to the re-imposition of border controls.

While some had hoped Francis might make a symbolic statement about the issue by visiting Northern Ireland on his trip, the pope has decided not to do so.

Ganiel, the sociologist at Queen's University Belfast, said Ireland's wider disassociation from the Catholic Church stems not only from the effect of the abuse scandals but also from a years-long process of economic and societal modernization in the country.

From the mid-1980s on, successive Irish governments focused on shifting from an agricultural to a knowledge economy, with particular attention on attracting high-tech industry to the island.

Where unemployment was once 20 percent, it was reported at 5.1 percent by the government's Central Statistics Office in June. The average full-time salary is now 45,611 Euro, according to the latest figures from that office.

"Generally, when there's a process of modernization that includes more economic prosperity traditional indicators of religiosity in terms of church attendance ... tend to decline," said Ganiel. "I think you've got those general processes of modernization at work."

The sociologist, who is co-author of the 2014 volume *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity*, said women joining the workforce in greater numbers also affected the church.

"A lot of historians and sociologists would have seen the Irish mother as the main person responsible for passing the faith on to the next generation," she said. "When women started having fewer children and working outside the home, that mechanism for perpetuating Catholicism broke down as well."

In remarks at an event July 19 for the launch of the program Francis will take part in at the World Meeting of Families Aug. 25, Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin said the pontiff knows how to recognize change.

"[Francis] realizes that there are many dimensions in the long tradition of Irish Catholicism and Irish missionary endeavor that have diminished," said Martin. "He recognizes that there is no way in which the realities of the past can be replicated today. The visit of Pope Francis will not be a re-hash of 1979."

Ryan, who has written volumes on Christian anthropology, the Eucharist and the late Jesuit theologian Fr. Karl Rahner, said the Irish church of the 21st century needs to "think differently, and we need to ask questions."

"We've been Christian for a long time in many different ways. I think we have problems today and it's good that people are voicing those problems."

"It's important that Francis has actually chosen to come here," she added. "He probably is coming because he wants to give us hope, and to show us possibilities. He can show us many paths forward, because he's open to all the questions."

Healy, who was abused at a Dublin school run by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, said he hopes Francis just acknowledges one thing while in Ireland: that for those who were victimized by clergy, the scandal of abuse never ends.

"It's not over," he said, as his voice quaked with emotion. "I wish ... he would come with heart and compassion, to reach out, to meet with us, to find that suffering and address it."

"It's not a matter of social protest," said Healy. "This is a matter of human compassion."

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