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Retired Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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Dublin — September 7, 2023

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The Irish prelate credited with being among the first to tackle the clerical abuse crisis head-on said he did not believe there will be women priests in the Catholic Church in his lifetime.

He also warned that synodal consultations could lead to "frustrated expectations" when people realize that the process will not lead to a radical change in church teaching on hot-button issues such as the ordination of women.

Retired Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin also said that he believes that St. John Paul II was guilty of "bad theology" when the pontiff said during the AIDS crisis that it was not permitted for Catholics to use condoms to halt the spread of the virus.

Regarding sexual abuse, Archbisop Martin, who was on the front line of facing this in Ireland, said the scandals had "badly damaged the church," especially "the faith of young people."

Archbishop Martin made the comments in an interview with Irish national broadcaster RTÉ Sept. 3 in the 100th episode of "The Meaning of Life" program.

When the presenter asked the retired prelate if he felt what St. John Paul said on the usage of condoms during the AIDS crisis was a "bad judgment," retired archbishop of Dublin replied, "I think it was bad theology."

"It's this idea of an extraordinarily narrow, dogmatic understanding of bringing principles," he continued, "and not looking at the broad circumstances in which a situation is taking place, and the struggles that people have to face."

Archbishop Martin said that in his opinion this approach "was one of the problems with the church in Ireland. You know, we learned the rules before we learned who Jesus Christ was."

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On the hot-button issues, many of which came up in the synod consultations, the RTÉ presenter asked Archbishop Martin the question of women's ordination.

"I don't see in any way that women priests will be something we will see in my lifetime," he replied.

The archbishop also used the interview to caution fellow bishops about synodality. "I think I'd be very worried about consultations which lead to frustrated expectations, which don't take place," he said.

"And I would not be honest to say that it's going to happen overnight," he said.

Speaking in the context of Ireland's referenda on same-sex marriage and abortion, which saw huge margins supporting liberalization of these laws, the archbishop was asked about the fact that the church has been on the losing side on both controversial issues.

The archbishop replied, "The church has got so caught up in the dogmatic rights and wrongs, absolute rights and wrongs, that it's lost the context."

He praised Pope Francis for, in his view, rebalancing this. "This is the great thing about Pope Francis. Pope Francis says he's not changing the church's teaching – but

he's being different with people."

He warned that "if the church appears only as a rule book, then they have lost Christianity. That isn't what Christianity is about."

The archbishop also praised the ministry of priests, while insisting that there is a much greater need for lay participation in mission.

"There are so many of these extraordinary good priests out there – not the famous ones –  and, and I think we've got to get many, many more laypeople prepared to come in and do something and give this witness to the real God, not to the God of the rule books."

Archbishop Martin, a Dublin native who worked as a papal diplomat for many years, returned to the Irish capital in 2003 as coadjutor to the embattled Cardinal Desmond Connell. The cardinal had been the subject of scrutiny over the church's handling of abuse allegations going back to the 1950s. A later judge-led inquiry ruled that the reputation of the Church and the avoidance of scandal had routinely been put ahead of the needs of victims of clerical sexual abuse.

In the RTÉ interview, the prelate revealed that in his study of the actions that his predecessors took on abuse, he believed that around the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) the church adopted a more lenient attitude toward abusive clergy.

"This was one of the problems. After the Second Vatican Council people said that canon law shouldn't be punitive – it should rehabilitate people," he said.

"And they (church leaders) did exactly the wrong thing with sexual abusers," he said.

Archbishop Martin said he also was upset about the vast damage the abuse scandals did to the faith of young people.

> "If the church appears only as a rule book, then they have lost Christianity. That isn't what Christianity is about."
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"One thing that people don't talk about: It (abuse) has damaged the faith of young people. Young people weren't out protesting on the streets, but they were disgusted."

He recalled many young people in Ireland were upset that their parents still went to Mass. He also admitted that a big mistake of church leaders was not to listen to the mothers, who were the first to sense the scale of the sexual abuse.

"Do you know who understood the harm pedophilia did?" he asked. "Ordinary, working-class Dublin women. They saw the mess that their child got into, they saw in some cases how their child took their own life, and they went to bishops and they weren't listened to."

In an emotional recall of when he arrived in Dublin as coadjutor archbishop in 2003, he said he "wasn't prepared" for the scale of the abuse crisis he later saw.

He was asked what he would say to God upon the last judgment. In reference to the number of files handed to the Murphy Commission when it investigated the Archdiocese of Dublin's mishandling of allegations of abuse, he said: "The only phrase I have is, when you've got that weighing scales there, take the 80,000 files I gave and that might bring me the right way."