News

A student at Catholic Holy Cross Primary School is pictured with her parents returning for the first day of school in North Belfast, Ireland. The Irish government is to set up an official commission of investigation into sexual abuse at schools run by Catholic religious orders after a preliminary inquiry, released Sept. 3, 2024, highlighted widespread complaints over decades. (OSV News/Paul McErlane, Reuters)

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The Irish government is to set up an official commission of investigation into sexual abuse at schools run by Catholic religious orders after a preliminary inquiry highlighted widespread complaints over decades.

"This report concurs this isn't just a church problem, but a society problem — there are wider cultural norms in play, not just religious ones," said Gerard Gallagher, spokesman for the Dublin-based Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland, or AMRI.

"But we've been dealing with scandals involving the church for the past 30 years, and we've always encouraged the fullest cooperation with investigations," he said.

The lay Catholic was reacting to the government-commissioned inquiry report, detailing 2,395 abuse claims at 308 order-run schools since the 1960s.

In an OSV News interview, he said the association had been asked to ensure its 135 member-orders complied with the inquiry, while continuing to work on abuse claims with the Vatican.

The Scoping Inquiry, led by barrister Mary O'Toole, was launched in 2022, after a documentary by Ireland's RTE public radio exposed abuse at Dublin's prestigious Blackrock College, one of five schools run by the Holy Ghost Fathers, or Spiritians.

Its 802-page report, published Sept. 3, lists 884 religious and lay staffers accused of abuse, from 42 out of 73 religious orders involved in education.

The victim total would be higher than currently documented because of under-reporting, the report cautions, and could reach 15,300 men and 26,000 women, according to the country's Central Statistics Office.

Orders facing most accusations included the Congregation of Sisters of Mercy, Presentation Brothers and Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, the report says, although claims were also made against Carmelites, Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits and Christian Brothers.

Many of the 149 people submitting testimonies cited "ferocious violence," the report said, while abuse was "so pervasive" that survivors believed "it could not possibly have gone unnoticed by other staff, and the members and leadership of the religious orders."

Victims described mental health problems and "unhealthy coping mechanisms" involving alcohol and drugs, with problems extending into adulthood through confused sexuality, relationship difficulties and lost career opportunities.

"Many said their childhood stopped the day the abuse started," the report says.

They felt the power of the Catholic Church permeated their lives in every way, while there was no one they could tell, including their parents.

"Many described becoming alienated from religion and church-related services to the extent that some avoided attending a parent’s funeral or other family event, as they could not enter a church."

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Ireland's education minister, Norma Foley described the scale of abuse revealed in the "harrowing document" as "truly shocking," and told the Sept. 3 press conference it was vital the "needs of survivors" remained uppermost in responses to the report.

Meanwhile, in a Sept. 3 statement, AMRI said it was "deeply sorry," and "acutely aware" that "sharing personal, sensitive and traumatic experiences can cause additional pain and suffering."

"We encourage anyone needing support to contact the individual Religious Orders and Congregations to get the help they need," the association added. "It is critical to

restate that rigorous child protection structures are in place in all Catholic schools to maximize the safety of every student."

The report is the latest of several since the 1990s to examine abuse in the Irish church, which established a National Board for Safeguarding Children in 2006.

In May 2009, a 2,600-page government-ordered report cited abuse testimonies against 200 Catholic schools and dozens of church institutions, prompting a letter of apology from Pope Benedict XVI and an apostolic visitation to the country.

Continued accusations against Catholic clergy, however, are widely believed to have eroded the traditional influence of the church, to which 69% of Ireland's population of 5.15 million claimed to belong in a 2022 census.

The Scoping Inquiry report says abuse survivors called for a public commission of investigation and redress scheme "as quickly as possible," to "prevent any cover-up," and to "establish what had been known by religious orders and school management at the time and what actions had been taken."

However, it warned that restricting investigations to Catholic schools only would be "arbitrary and difficult to justify," and said the upcoming commission should look at all Irish schools, if need be using a "sampling approach."

In its Sept. 3 statement, AMRI said all order-run schools were now following government child protection procedures, revised in 2023, and reporting any abuse allegations to police.

It added that religious orders had safeguarding procedures in place, "monitored and reviewed" by government officials and compliant with "relevant laws and guidance of the State."

However, the AMRI spokesman Gallagher said experts from his association were studying the Scoping Inquiry report with a view to further action, adding that individual orders would also use the findings to strengthen their own rules and procedures.

"Judging by media reactions, many people have positive impressions of the cooperation now underway — but this is only the beginning of a whole process of investigation," the lay Catholic told OSV News.

"As for the likely long-term effect on the Catholic Church's position in Ireland, this will depend on the terms of reference of the future commission of investigation."

The Communication Office of the Irish bishops' conference did not respond to OSV News requests for a church comment on the new report.