

Pope, Irish bishops to meet about sex abuse

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Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, Ireland and Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, Northern Ireland, address the media just outside St. Peter's Square in Rome Dec. 11. (CNS/Paul Haring)

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI has convened Ireland's bishops for a two-day meeting at the Vatican to discuss the ongoing fallout from the priestly sex abuse scandal in the country.

The meeting will take place Feb. 15-16, and was expected to include the heads of major Vatican agencies.

The Vatican press office confirmed the meeting, but did not specify what would be on the agenda.

According to sources in Ireland, the pope will address the bishops and each bishop will have seven minutes to offer his views on the crisis. The meeting was expected to produce some concrete proposals, with final reflections by the pope.

Each bishop was then to return to his diocese for Ash Wednesday liturgies Feb. 17, addressing Catholics on how the church intends to move forward.

The Vatican meeting was announced as the pope was preparing a special pastoral letter to Irish Catholics on the sex abuse cases and the damage it has inflicted on the church. Bishops said they expected the papal letter to outline several initiatives, including public services of repentance for Irish bishops and priests.

Last November, a report by an independent Commission of Investigation, headed by Judge Yvonne Murphy, looked at the handling of 325 sex abuse claims in the Archdiocese of Dublin in the years 1975-2004. The report concluded that during those years, rather than being concerned about the victims, Catholic leaders were more interested in "the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal, the protection of the reputation of the church and the preservation of its assets."

The report caused widespread indignation among the Irish faithful and criticism of church leadership, as well as calls for the resignation of some bishops.

In December, the pope discussed the situation with Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, Northern Ireland, president of the Irish bishops' conference, and Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin. In a statement afterward, the Vatican said the pope shared "the outrage, betrayal and shame" felt by Irish Catholics over the sexual abuse

cases and announced his intention to write a pastoral letter.

Since then, four Irish bishops who were named in the Murphy report have offered their resignations.

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Contributing to this story were John Thavis in Rome and Michael Kelly in Dublin.

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