

## Irish bishops, pope begin summit on sex abuse

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Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, celebrates a Mass for Irish bishops in front of St. Peter's tomb at the Vatican Feb. 15. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano via Reuters)

**VATICAN CITY** -- Pope Benedict XVI and the bishops of Ireland began a two-day, closed-door meeting to assess responsibility in the Irish church's handling of priestly sex abuse cases and explore ways to heal the wounds left by the scandal.

Each of the 24 bishops was scheduled to speak for seven minutes, in effect giving the pope "an account of themselves" and their own actions, Bishop Joseph Duffy of Clogher told reporters on the eve of the Feb. 15-16 summit.

The pope convened the bishops in response to the continuing fallout from the scandal, following an independent report that faulted the church for its handling of 325 sex abuse claims in the Archdiocese of Dublin in the years 1975-2004.

"I would admit quite frankly what everyone else knows, and shout it from the housetops: that the church has been seriously wounded, and we're in a very serious situation, that this has done immense damage to the authority of the church," Bishop Duffy said.

"And our business is to try to repair that damage and to restore confidence, because confidence has been lost not only in the bishops, but by the bishops themselves," he said.

Bishop Duffy said that "the casualty in all this has been the truth," and added: "The fullness of the truth must come out; everything must be laid on the table."

"This is not just a cosmetic exercise, as some people might seem to think. It's very serious," he said.

Joining the pope and the bishops at the summit were 10 leading Vatican officials who deal with doctrine, church law, bishops, clergy, religious life and seminaries.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, set the tone of the meeting at an opening Mass Feb. 15

with the Irish and Vatican participants. He said the most difficult trials for the church were internal ones, especially, as in this case, when the church sees "some of its own men involved in particularly abominable acts."

The cardinal said renewal can be the outcome of this trial, as long as people take responsibility for their failings.

Cardinal Bertone compared the church to a ship in a storm, and said the prelates need to put their trust in Christ. The "more dangerous storm," he said, was "the one that touches the hearts of believers, shaking their faith."

There has been widespread indignation among Irish Catholics following the revelations of the sex abuse cases and the way they were handled by the bishops. The report by an independent commission headed by Judge Yvonne Murphy concluded that bishops often protected abusers and were more interested in maintaining secrecy and protecting church assets than in helping the victims.

After Pope Benedict held a preliminary meeting with two Irish bishops in December, the Vatican said the pope shared the sense of "outrage, betrayal and shame" felt by Irish Catholics, and that he would write a special pastoral letter on the subject.

At the beginning of the Feb. 15-16 summit, the Vatican said the pope's letter would be discussed at the meeting but that there was no date set for its publication.

Bishop Duffy, who is chairman of the Irish bishops' communications commission, said a primary concern of the discussions was how the church can respond to the survivors of abuse and "the enormous injustice and cruelty they have suffered."

He said that while the question of resignation of bishops was not formally on the agenda, it could come up in the talks. Four bishops criticized in the Irish report have offered their resignation, but so far the pope has officially accepted only one of them. Bishop Martin Drennan of Galway, also named in the report, has rejected demands by Catholic groups for his resignation.

Asked if the bishops would try to shield the pope from details of the sex abuse cases, Bishop Duffy said the meeting "would be a complete flop if that were to happen."

"It's meant to be frank and open, and if it's not either of those it will not have succeeded," he said.

Bishop Duffy added that he was convinced that Pope Benedict was already aware of the gravity and complexity of the sex abuse cases.

"It's my information that the pope is very well clued in on this whole issue, that even before he became pope, he had access to the documentation, that he knew exactly what was in the documentation, and that he wasn't living in a fool's paradise," he said.

At a Mass for the Irish bishops in St. Patrick's Church in Rome Feb. 14, Bishop Colm O'Reilly of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise said the prelates were especially aware this year of the Lenten call to confession and repentance.

"It is a time for undoing, insofar as this is possible, the damage our sins have done, for what is done and what we have failed to do. It is a time for a new beginning," he said in a homily.

**[Editor's note:** This story was corrected Feb. 22 to reflect that Bishop Drennan was not criticized in the Murphy report.]

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