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Irish abuse victims disappointed, angered

by Michael Kelly by Catholic News Service



Irish bishops hold a press conference at Vatican Radio Feb. 16 following their two-day meeting with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

DUBLIN, Ireland -- Victims of clerical child sexual abuse and groups representing them reacted with a mix of anger and disappointment to a Vatican statement issued after a papal meeting with Irish bishops.

Marie Collins, who was abused by a Dublin priest, told Catholic News Service that she thought it was "pathetic" that the statement was "so far away from accepting that there was a policy of coverup."

"I wasn't expecting much from the meeting, but the fact that the resignation of bishops was not even on the agenda had been insulting," she said.

Irish bishops visited Rome Feb. 15-16 for a summit with Pope Benedict XVI and senior officials from the Roman Curia. Following the meeting a Vatican statement said "together they examined the failure of Irish church authorities for many years to act effectively in dealing with cases involving the sexual abuse of young people by some Irish clergy and religious."

Christine Buckley, who was abused in a home run by the Sisters of Mercy, said in a statement that the meeting was "an absolute and utter charade from beginning to end."

"It was a pretend slap on the hand from Pope Benedict," she said.

Buckley said she had hoped the pope would announce that he was coming to Ireland to meet with victims of institutional and sexual abuse.

"He has washed his hands of it," she said, appealing to Pope Benedict to include a visit to Ireland in his itinerary when he visits Britain in September. "I really thought he would have said that all bishops who knew about abuses had to resign. And to reinforce this, he was coming to Ireland and (would) meet victims and abusers. But none of this happened. We got absolutely nothing from it."

Michael O'Brien of Right to Peace, a group for victims of clergy sexual abuse, told CNS that his first reaction to the news from Rome was one of disbelief.

"It's unbelievable what we heard today from the pope," he said. "This is the man who is in charge of the Catholic Church worldwide and he hadn't even the gumption to say he was sorry for what happened to us."

"All he's done now is to add salt to the wounds, and this is very hurtful," he added. "We were expecting something and we got nothing."

The Vatican statement said Pope Benedict called sexual abuse of children and young people "a heinous crime" and "a grave sin which offends God and wounds the dignity of the human person created in his image." The statement said the pope "challenged the bishops to address the problems of the past with determination and resolve and to face the present crisis with honesty and courage."

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Father Patrick McCafferty, who as a boy in Northern Ireland was abused by a priest, said he was trying desperately to take something positive from the meetings.

"There's such raw and deep hurt that it's going to take a long, long time to ever recover what's been lost," he said.

Father McCafferty said there was no hiding place in the church for anyone who wanted to cover up child abuse. The church hierarchy, right up to the pope, would have to be made accountable for past actions, he said.

The revelations of the bishops' handling of sex abuse cases in the Dublin Archdiocese was described in a November report by an independent commission headed by Judge Yvonne Murphy.

Four bishops criticized in the report have offered their resignations, but so far the pope has officially accepted only one of them. Bishop Martin Drennan of Galway and Kilmacduagh, also named in the report, has rejected demands by Catholic groups for his resignation.

Responding to criticism of the fact that the Feb. 16 Vatican statement did not contain an apology, Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin said "there comes a time when repeating the word apology may even be empty."

He said "if victims feel dismayed, they have a right to feel dismayed," but he said he did not agree that the meetings were a wasted opportunity.

He also said the bishops and Vatican officials agreed beforehand that they would not discuss bishops' resignations. The archbishop said that was a matter between those who have offered their resignations and the pope.

After the summit, a spokesman for Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen said the government was "considering the (Vatican) statement" and recognized the great progress the church has made in safeguarding children.

Alan Shatter, Irish opposition spokesman, said it was "regrettable that the press release did not refer to the failure of the papal nuncio and the Vatican to cooperate with the Murphy commission's investigation into the manner in which the church has dealt with child sexual abuse."

Shatter also criticized the fact that the papal nuncio to Ireland, Archbishop Giuseppe Leanza, has refused to appear before a parliamentary committee to discuss the failure of his office to respond to queries from the judicial commission.

"I am repeating my call on the Vatican and the Irish hierarchy to bring about a change of attitude and to engage in constructive, transparent dialogue with regard to the manner in which the church has dealt with the issue of clerical child abuse and the failure of the Vatican to provide assistance to the Murphy commission when it was sought," Shatter said.

[**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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