

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 19, 2010 at 3:38pm

Irish sex abuse victims said to be close to despair

by Cian Molloy by Catholic News Service



Pope Benedict XVI meets with Irish bishops at the Vatican Feb. 15. (CNS)

DUBLIN, Ireland -- Victims of clerical child sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Dublin said they are close to despair because the church will not take full responsibility for covering up the abuse.

Clergy abuse survivors met with Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin Feb. 19 to discuss the outcome of the meeting of Irish bishops with Pope Benedict XVI and senior officials from the Roman Curia. The Feb. 15-16 Vatican meeting reviewed a November report by an independent commission that investigated how the Dublin Archdiocese handled complaints of clerical child sexual abuse between 1975 and 2004.

The commission, headed by Judge Yvonne Murphy, "found that the church deliberately covered up allegations of child abuse, but the only senior person who seems to accept that is Archbishop Martin," Maeve Lewis, director of the One in Four abuse survivors' group, told Catholic News Service.

She said that in the statement issued by the Vatican Feb. 16, the pope only accepted "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."

"That is not good enough," she said, adding that the abuse survivors want "complete acceptance by the pope of the findings of the Murphy report."

"Archbishop Martin also told us that there was a chance that the pope wouldn't accept the resignations of the three auxiliary bishops named in the report who have offered him their resignation. If that would happen, the victims would find it unbelievable, they really would despair," she added.

Four bishops criticized in the Murphy report have offered their resignations, but so far the pope has officially accepted only one of them.

Asked about the idea of the pope meeting survivors, Lewis said: "Without a meaningful dialogue it's hopeless. The pope would have to listen to survivors and accept what they say before there could be some kind of reconciliation, but that seems to be an unlikely proposition given the way meetings between the pope and survivors of clerical abuse were handled in Australia and the U.S."

Another survivor, Marie Collins, told RTE News that she was "totally depressed by what transpired at the meeting" with the Dublin archbishop.

She said Archbishop Martin "seemed like a defeated man. He told us he had passed on our concerns to the pontiff, but that none of them were addressed."

Collins was among the survivors who reacted with a mix of anger and disappointment to the Vatican statement about the papal meeting with Irish bishops. She told CNS she thought the statement was "pathetic" and "so far away from accepting that there was a policy of cover-up."

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"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.

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 when he visits Britain in September.

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 after the Vatican statement was issued Feb. 16. "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."

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.

Shortly after the meetings, in response to criticism of the fact that the Vatican statement did not contain an apology, Archbishop Martin said "there comes a time when repeating the word apology may even be empty."

He also said the bishops and Vatican officials agreed beforehand that they would not discuss bishops' resignations.

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.

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Contributing to this story was Michael Kelly.

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Editor's Note: The full text of the final statement is here: Final statement of pope-Irish bishops meeting

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