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The Irish Catholic House of Cards

by Michael Kelly



Kevin Flanagan, center, a survivor of clerical abuse, arrives at the archbishop's house in Dublin, Ireland, Feb. 19 for a meeting between survivors and Archbishop Diarmuid Martin. (AP/PA Wire/Julien Behal)

Analysis

DUBLIN, IRELAND -- Just days after the crisis summit at the Vatican between Pope Benedict XVI and the Irish bishops to address the issue of clerical sexual abuse, the event appears to have somewhat backfired. Following the Feb. 15-16 meeting, victims and children's rights groups reacted with a mixture of anger and disappointment. While the meeting was billed as an attempt to foster unity among divided Irish bishops, some victims believe that the Rome meeting effectively represented a rebuke to Dublin's Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, popularly seen as the vanguard of Irish prelates when it comes to combating clerical abuse.

Ever since 2003, when Martin, a career Vatican diplomat, was sent back to take charge of his native diocese amid revelations of decades of mishandled abuse allegations, tensions have emerged among the hierarchy.

A television documentary had fatally wounded the career of Martin's predecessor, Cardinal Desmond Connell, when it revealed his failure to address abuse allegations properly. Martin, however, immediately began engaging with victims and even fought Connell in the High Court over the latter's attempt to conceal documents from a state inquiry into the handling of abuse in the sprawling Dublin archdiocese. Under pressure, Connell eventually withdrew his legal challenge and Martin proceeded to hand over some 66,000 files. Martin's robust treatment of his predecessor, a highly respected member of the Irish hierarchy, led to some rumblings among the once fiercely united Irish bishops' conference.

While Martin's transparent approach has won him plaudits from many, including victims and senior politicians, reaction within some church circles has been decidedly cooler. That division became more pronounced before Christmas when the Irish government commission published the Murphy Report, which found that for four decades senior church leaders in Dublin put the avoidance of scandal and the preservation of the name of the church ahead of the protection of children.



While Martin initially appeared to support his fellow bishops who

were mentioned (but not criticized) in the report, within days he was calling on them to 'be accountable.' Commentators and church sources immediately interpreted this a thinly veiled call for resignations. Like a house of cards, the hierarchy began to collapse: Four bishops had tendered their resignations to Rome by Christmas Eve. Only the resilient bishop of Galway, Martin Drennan, who served as an auxiliary in Dublin during the 1990s, refused to go, saying that Martin had wrongly called Drennan's integrity into question. Despite growing pressure from victims, the Galway bishop has still held out, insisting in the weekend following the Vatican meeting, for example, that Martin 'has no direct responsibility for me.'

Andrew Madden, a high-profile victim of clerical abuse, said he believes Martin 'had his wings clipped' during the Rome meeting -- referring to a perception that Martin has been somewhat subdued in his demeanour since the meeting.

Martin denies this: 'I follow my own conscience. Sometimes I'm in agreement with people, sometimes I'm not.'

Where his fellow bishops were concerned, Martin said: 'There are times when my views are different to others.' He added, 'There is obviously isolation. There are criticisms of me in all your papers and media by people who disagree with the way I addressed the Murphy Report. I stand over that.'

Following their Rome meeting, Cardinal Seán Brady, primate of all Ireland, announced that the bishops would make some form of pilgrimage. A number of senior prelates have indicated that the churchmen will spend a period of days at Lough Derg, a penitential island where tradition holds that St. Patrick prayed for guidance when his mission to evangelize the Irish was not going as well as he had planned. Renewed, Patrick returned to the mainland filled with zeal. Whether or not such a pilgrimage by Patrick's modern successors will lead to a similar renewal of zeal remains to be seen.

There is much talk about reform in the Catholic church in Ireland. Perhaps unsurprisingly, ideological considerations often dictate the kind of reform recommended. The progressive wing of the church sees more independence from Rome as the way forward. On the other side of the fence, traditional elements argue that a collapse in discipline and order in the church is at the heart of the crisis.

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Some bishops could see their bishoprics evaporate. Influential theologian Fr. Vincent Twomey, a former student of and close confidant of Benedict, has suggested the idea of dramatically reducing the number of dioceses, a move also mooted by at least two senior Vatican cardinals during the meeting, who suggested that eight rather than the current 26 Irish dioceses might be a step in the right direction. However, that kind of reform seems more long-term.

Statistically things look fairly good for the Catholic church in Ireland. Recent surveys indicate that 47 percent of Irish people attend Mass weekly, and the figure rises to 60 percent for those who attend Mass at least once a month. While dramatically down from the 1980s, when more than 90 percent of Irish Catholics attended Mass weekly, the figures are significantly higher than virtually anywhere else in Western Europe. The overwhelming majority of Irish parents also continue to choose a Catholic education for their children.



According to a spokesman for the Irish Bishops' Conference, the

pope's pastoral letter to the Irish church is expected in mid-March (possibly to coincide with St. Patrick's Day on March 17). It is unlikely, however, that the pope's letter will go as far as some people (particularly victims) want.

It seems likely the document will include some form of apology to victims as well as pointing toward the future direction of the Irish church. However, it will take more than a letter from the pope to renew Irish Catholicism. Some theologians have mooted the idea of some form of national assembly or synod. The idea is particularly popular among the country's religious, notably among them former Jesuit provincial Fr. Gerry O'Hanlon, who says such a gathering is necessary to give voice to the anger felt by many Catholics. Some bishops have already held diocesan assemblies. Often heralded as opportunities for renewal, they have frequently descended into seemingly endless and fruitless gatherings.

The Irish bishops are scheduled to meet for their next plenary assembly in late March to discuss their response to the pope's letter. However, it's been 23 years since the bishops first started discussing the urgency of the crisis, and with yet another judicial inquiry going on into the handling of abuse in the Cloyne diocese, no one expects the dreadful mess to be sorted out any time soon.

[Michael Kelly is deputy editor of *The Irish Catholic*, an independent weekly publication based in Dublin.]

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