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Bishop: Must 'reform and renew' church

by Michael Kelly by Catholic News Service

DUBLIN -- An Irish bishop has called on parishioners to "reform and renew" the Catholic Church toward a future that is more transparent and in which leaders are accountable.

Bishop Noel Treanor of Down and Connor, the diocese based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, launched a new "listening program" across the 88 parishes of the diocese Feb. 8. The program is aimed at giving laypeople a chance to have their say about the church.

"The history of the church includes moments when the people of God are called to reform and renew the church," Bishop Treanor said. "This is one such moment."

More than 50 parishioners have been commissioned to lead listening sessions in anticipation of a diocesan assembly at Pentecost in 2013.

While the process is seen as a response to the widespread sense of disappointment and anger felt by Irish Catholics in the wake of the child sexual abuse scandals, Bishop Treanor insisted that "even if the scandals didn't happen, even if there were just as many priests now as there were 50 years ago, this process would still be necessary."

"We have been grappling since the 1960s with the whole idea of how we make the church more participative," he explained. "This will be a step toward that, a step toward a church that is more open, transparent and where there is accountability."

Bishop Treanor said he wanted "to live in a church where someone can feel free to say exactly what they think to a bishop and where a bishop can be free to say exactly what he thinks."

The bishop, who worked as the Catholic Church's representative to the European Union in Brussels for 20

years before being appointed bishop in 2008, said he was "greatly inspired by the faith of people in difficult times."

"What you notice on the one side is the obvious feeling of disenchantment and disappointment -- sometimes horror -- at the scandals in the area of child sexual abuse and the nonmanagement, inadequate management and sometimes cover-up, but at the same time, and often in the same people, an amazing commitment to living out the faith in God incarnate," he said.

Although young people are encouraged to participate in the listening process, special sessions are also being organized for teenagers, young adults and for those who feel estranged from the church, the bishop said.

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