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Irish priest says Vatican visitation offers hope

by John L. Allen Jr.



Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley is pictured during a press conference at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington in this Feb. 26, 2009, file photo. (CNS photo/Archdiocese of Toronto)

Despite recent media reports suggesting that an American cardinal running a Vatican visitation sees the Catholic church in Ireland "on the edge of collapse," the leader of a reform-minded group of Irish priests says the visitation has actually left him and other priests "far more positive" than they were just a few months ago.

Fr. Tony Flannery, a founding member of the Association of Catholic Priests launched last September, told *NCR* that his group's experience is that the visitors are "really listening," that they grasp the "depth and urgency" of the crisis in Ireland generated by revelations of decades of sexual abuse and cover-up, and that they have placed "no restrictions" on the conversation about reform.

Flannery spoke to *NCR* by phone Feb. 16.

Pope Benedict XVI called for an apostolic visitation of Ireland last year, in response to the sexual abuse

crisis that has rocked the country. The process began in earnest in January and February of this year.

Benedict named four top English-speaking prelates to lead the review: Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston for the Dublin archdiocese; Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of England for Armagh; Archbishop Thomas Collins of Toronto, Canada, for the Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly; and fellow Canadian Archbishop Terrence Prendergast of Ottawa for the Tuam archdiocese. Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York was tapped to head a visitation of Irish seminaries.

A fairly apocalyptic tone about the results was struck Feb. 14, when media reports quoted O'Malley as saying that the Irish church is nearing "collapse." Those reports were based on a public talk given by Flannery, in which he relayed the substance of his group's private meeting with O'Malley.

Both Flannery and sources close to the visitation, however, said the "edge of collapse" sound-bite misrepresents what O'Malley meant to say. The point was not so much to predict disaster, they said, as to stress that O'Malley and the other visitors "get it" in terms of the seriousness of the situation.

Flannery said the line "wasn't quite fair to what O'Malley said." The point O'Malley was trying to make, he said, was that the visitors understand there are "very deep and real problems" exposed by the sexual abuse crisis, and that "just papering over cracks is not going to deal with them."

O'Malley declined a request to comment, citing the confidentiality of the visitation. Sources close to the process, however, told *NCR* on background that he's actually fairly bullish about the prospects for the Irish church.

Those sources say that O'Malley believes Irish Catholicism is undeniably at risk, but it still has a fighting chance to avoid the more extreme forms of secularization found in other Western European societies. Flannery also said the context for O'Malley's remark was a longtime source of anxiety in Irish Catholic circles, which is whether Ireland is destined to follow the path of runaway secularization.

The ferment generated by the present crisis, according to that logic, could provide Irish Catholicism a "window of opportunity" to renew its energies, rather than entering a long period of inexorable decline.

Sources also said that O'Malley wanted to stress to the priests that the visitation will be more than window-dressing, which won't produce any real results. Instead, they said, O'Malley has vowed to make an honest report to Rome based on everything he sees and hears.

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Given his background in Boston, sources said, O'Malley hasn't been particularly surprised by the widespread anger and sense of betrayal in Ireland. Instead, they say, he's been more struck by the number of people who, despite the deep hurt the crisis has caused, seem willing to try to repair the damage.

Flannery said the tone set by the visitors, especially O'Malley and Prendergast, has provided a sense of hope.

"I think it's fair to say that our initial response to the visitation was negative, bordering on cynical," he said. "But so far our experience has been good."

"Lots of priests who aren't members of our group told me that the opportunity to meet a senior cleric and speak openly to him, without their bishop being present, was something they welcomed greatly," Flannery

said.

“Many said it was the first time in their lives as priests that they were able to speak openly about their views of the priesthood and the church to someone in authority and be listened to,” he said.

Flannery cautioned, however, that mere listening isn’t enough. The acid test, he said, will come when the visitors make their report to the Vatican and decisions have to be made about how far the reform process can go.

“If it goes into the Vatican and a response comes back that’s inadequate, or we get no response at all, it will be an awful pity,” he said. “The future is at risk.”

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR*’s senior correspondent.]

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