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Irish archbishop repents for clergy sex abuse at service

by Michael Kelly by Catholic News Service



Boston Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley and Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, Ireland, lie prostrate before the altar during the "Liturgy of Lament and Repentance" at Dublin's Pro-Cathedral Feb. 20. (CNS photo/John McElroy)

DUBLIN -- Repenting for the crimes of priestly sex abuse does not mean that the Irish Catholic Church can return to business as usual, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin told abuse survivors during a Feb. 20 prayer service joined by an American cardinal.

However, seeking forgiveness can be an important step toward healing and overcoming the pain that survivors feel, he added as Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley of Boston listened during the "Liturgy of Lament and Repentance" at Dublin's Pro-Cathedral.

Both prelates offered apologies for the church's failure to respond to reports of abuse during the afternoon service attended by 1,000 survivors and their families and supporters.

Many in attendance were visibly moved when Martin and O'Malley washed the feet of eight survivors as a sign of humility.

"The Archdiocese of Dublin will never be the same again," Martin said. "It will always bear this wound within it. The Archdiocese of Dublin can never rest until the day in which the last victim has found his or her peace and he or she can rejoice in being fully the person that God in his plan wants them to be."

O'Malley was in Dublin conducting an apostolic visitation of the archdiocese in the wake of a scandal that found church leaders doing little to investigate abuse claims and working to keep abuse reports under wraps to protect the clergy involved and the church's reputation. Other prelates also visited various Irish dioceses and religious congregations as part of the visitation.

"On behalf of the Holy Father, I ask forgiveness for the sexual abuse of children perpetrated by priests and past failures of the church's hierarchy, here and in Rome, the failure to respond appropriately to the problem of sexual abuse," O'Malley told the congregation in his concluding remarks.

"Publicly atoning for the church's failures is an important element of asking the forgiveness of those who have been harmed by priests and bishops, whose actions -- and inactions -- gravely harmed the lives of children entrusted to their care," he said.

Planned principally by survivors, the service began with the two prelates lying prostrate in repentance before a silent congregation. A handful of protesters gathered outside insisting they could "neither forgive nor forget" the abuse.

Marie Collins, who was abused as a 12-year-old in 1960 and was one of the first survivors in the archdiocese to go public, told Catholic News Service that the ceremony was "to ask God's forgiveness for sins and crimes of sexual, physical, emotional and spiritual abuse perpetrated in the Catholic Church against the young."

"Conscious of ourselves as members of the body of Christ we collectively repent of these great evils," she said.

Martin paid tribute to the survivors who had the courage to raise their voices and not be silenced by the church.

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"Some of you in your hurt and your disgust will have rejected the church that you had once loved, but paradoxically your rejection may have helped purify the church through challenging it to face the truth, to move out of denial, to recognize the evil that was done and the hurt that was caused," he said.

"I, as archbishop of Dublin and as Diarmuid Martin, stand here in this silence and I ask forgiveness of God and I ask for the first steps of forgiveness from all of the survivors of abuse," he said.

Excerpts from judicial reports that uncovered the extent of abuse suffered by children in church-run institutions and parishes were read aloud during the service. The pain still felt by many survivors was on display not only in the reflections of those involved in the ceremony but also when proceedings were interrupted on three separate occasions by survivors who wished to share their experiences and sense of betrayal.

Cardinal Desmond Connell, retired archbishop of Dublin who was heavily criticized in judicial reports for his handling of abuse cases, sat quietly at the back of cathedral and heard Archbishop Martin denounce the church's response to abuse as "a silence which is a failure of courage and truth."

O'Malley said that during his visit he discovered "there is a window of opportunity for the church here to respond to the crisis in a way that will build a holier church that strives to be more humble even as it

grows stronger."

"While we have understandably heard much anger and learned of much suffering, we have also witnessed a sincere desire to strengthen and rebuild the church here. We have seen that there is a vast resource, a reservoir of faith and a genuine desire to work for reconciliation and renewal," he said.

Near the end of the service, a "candle of protection" was blessed and lit from the Easter Candle as a sign of hope for the future. It will remain "as a sign for all who worship" in the cathedral, Martin said.

Speaking to CNS after the service, the archbishop described the event as "very moving."

"You'd really want to have a hard heart not to be moved by the honesty and dignity of the survivors," he said.

O'Malley told CNS he hoped that his "presence would underline just how seriously the Holy Father is taking the need for healing and renewal in Ireland."

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