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Irish church pledges millions for abuse victims

Michael Kelly Catholic News Service | Mar. 21, 2011

DUBLIN -- Ireland's Catholic leaders have pledged a further 10 million euros ($14.2 million) to provide support services for victims of clerical abuse and announced plans for spiritual support to people whose faith has been damaged by the abuse.

In a pastoral letter, "Towards Healing and Renewal," the bishops also acknowledge that "the inadequate response (to abuse) by some church leaders has left a deep wound that may never be fully healed."

While reiterating an earlier apology for the suffering of survivors, the letter said: "No apology, no gesture of repentance or sorrow can ever make up for the hurt that has been caused to those abused and to their families: They have been grievously harmed and let down by people who professed the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

"We are deeply ashamed of this and we are profoundly sorry for any failures on our part," said the letter, released March 19 to mark the first anniversary of Pope Benedict XVI's letter to the Catholics of Ireland dealing with the abuse crisis.

The bishops' conference and the Conference of Religious of Ireland, which represents 136 religious congregations, agreed to fund the "Towards Healing" counseling service for another five years. They already have spent 20 million euros on the service over the past 14 years.

In addition, the bishops said they would set aside the first Friday of every month to pray and fast in reparation for the sins and crimes of abuse, and they encouraged the faithful to do the same. Plans were also unveiled for a new program of spiritual support for "survivors whose faith has been damaged and who want to work through this particular consequence of their abuse."

Initially, this service will be located throughout the island of Ireland. However, church officials are considering extending this service to Irish survivors who live in Britain. As many as 6 million people in Britain were either born in Ireland or had a parent or grandparent who was.

The bishops renewed their commitment to continued dialogue with survivors of abuse as well as "lay faithful, priests and religious about how the church in Ireland can inspire present and future generations to a new vision of faith."

Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, Northern Ireland, said the letter "represents part of a wider response and longer journey by the church in offering its support to survivors of abuse on their journey to healing and peace and in committing itself to renewal."

The church in Ireland has been struggling to come to terms with abuse after two separate judicial reports uncovered mishandling of abuse going back to the 1950. The Murphy Report, which investigated the handling of allegations made against 46 priests in the Dublin Archdiocese between 1975 and 2004, revealed that bishops often placed the reputation of the church and the avoidance of scandal ahead of the protection of children. The

Ryan Report, which investigated institutional abuse, found that sexual abuse was "endemic" in some church-run institutions. Four Irish bishops have resigned in the past decade over claims they had failed to tackle abuse.

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