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Archbp Martin renews call to examine culture that allowed sex abuse to happen

by Tom Roberts



Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, Ireland, speaks to the media just outside St. Peter's Square in Rome Dec. 11, 2009 (CNS/Paul Haring)

MILWAUKEE -- In the early years of the priest sex abuse crisis, Catholics often expressed their frustration with how bishops handled the scandal by saying "they don't get it." Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, Ireland, may be a member of the hierarchy who begins to reverse that perception.

In a keynote address April 4 at the Marquette University Law School, Martin described the struggles he encountered in bringing to light the "disastrous situation" of abuse in the Dublin archdiocese, from assembling documentation to facing the resistance of priests and other bishops who opposed disclosing the history of abuse. "I tell these events," he said, "not to re-open history, but to illustrate just how difficult it is to bring an institution around to the conviction that the truth must be told."

Martin spoke at the start of a two-day conference titled, "Harm, Hope and Healing: International Dialogue on the Clergy Sex Abuse Scandal." The conference is the latest the law school has hosted in an annual

series focusing on restorative justice, an approach that goes beyond the traditional judicial system's emphasis on punishment and involves both perpetrators and victims of crimes.

The Dublin archbishop has been a rare voice in the Catholic hierarchy in his blunt description of the damage the abuse scandal has caused and in his call for the church to divulge the details of abuse, to reach out to victims and to examine clericalism and other elements of church culture that may have contributed to the scandal's longevity.

Archbishop Martin said what many Catholics want to hear, and they haven't heard it from their Catholic leaders. **NGRip, April 15, 2011** Geske, a professor at the law school who heads its Restorative Justice Initiative, following Martin's talk.

"I have not heard anything like that from the American bishops," said Amy Peterson, victim assistance coordinator for the Milwaukee archdiocese. She said she was impressed with Martin's deep understanding of the nature of Jesus' of view, his humility and his willingness to hold the institution accountable.

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All institutions have an innate tendency to protect themselves and to hide their dirty laundry," said Martin, who became archbishop of Dublin in 2004. "We have to learn that the truth has a power to set free which half-truths do not have."

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He repeated what he said during a recent "liturgy of lament" in Dublin that was planned primarily by victims of abuse. "The truth will set us free, but not in a simplistic way. The truth hurts. The truth cleanses not like smooth designer soap but like a fire that burns and hurts and lances."

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That observation may have been spoken, at least in part, from personal experience. When Martin took over as archbishop, a complaint about a priest came across his desk. He investigated to see if prior complaints had been made about the priest. Somewhere in the file he found a note: "Father X seems to be back to his old activities."

"Clearly there was knowledge of 'old activities' but no clear understanding that these activities indicated an ongoing serious pattern of grooming which should clearly have raised red flags," he said. The archdiocese took action, notified civil authorities and removed the priest from ministry.

That experience, however, caused Martin to be suspicious of previous reviews of files so he mandated a review of all personnel files by an independent outside expert to examine whether there were signs of other worrisome behavior by priests.

As that investigation was underway, the Irish government formed a commission known as the Murphy Commission to begin its own investigation of sexual abuse by priests in the archdiocese. The commission "had the power to request discovery of any documentation that the diocese possessed regarding any priest against whom allegations had been made or about whom suspicions existed," said Martin.

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The commission, headed by Judge Yvonne Murphy, produced a report based on a review of thousands of pages of documentation that severely criticized the church for being preoccupied with "the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal and the preservation of its assets."

?All other considerations,? said the report, ?including the welfare of children and justice for victims, were subordinated to these priorities. The archdiocese did not implement its own canon law rules and did its best to avoid any application of the law of the state.?

The record keeping in Dublin had been ?superb,? said Martin during a question and answer session. The result was ?a remarkable archive of criminal behavior.?

He handed over to the commission nearly 70,000 documents. ?I believed I was doing the right thing and I was more and more convinced I was doing the right thing the more I read those documents and as I met with some of those who were the victims of abuse and their parents and their spouses and their children.?

When the report was finally issued, he said, the emotion he most experienced was anger ? at what had been done to children; at the grief of parents; at the fact that ?the church failed its weakest?; and ?at those who still seem to be in denial.?

Other church leaders opposed Martin?s willing handover of documents. Martin said some among the clergy sent out a letter that was leaked to the press saying, ?Archbishop Martin was out of the country when all this was happening. He has no right to speak. Had he been here, he would have done the same things as we did.?

Martin, a native of Dublin, had served most of his career at the Vatican. In 1976 he was appointed to the Pontifical Council for the Family. Ten years later he was named under secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and secretary of the agency in 1994. In 2001 he was named Permanent Observer of the Holy See in Geneva at the United Nations and the World Trade Organization.

Perhaps he would have acted as the others had, said Martin. Given the ?horrors? revealed in the report, he said the least he expected was acknowledgment ?that the decisions taken were the wrong ones and that they should be recognized as having been wrong. I still cannot accept a situation that no one need assume accountability in the face of the terrible damage that was done to children in the church of Christ in Dublin and in the face of how that damage was addressed,? he said.

For the church to move toward healing, said Martin, it has to take stock of itself. ?The culture of clericalism has to be analyzed and addressed. Were there factors of a clerical culture which somehow facilitated disastrous abusive behavior to continue for so long? Was it just through bad decisions by bishops or superiors? Was there knowledge of behavior which should have given rise to concern and which went unaddressed?? he asked.

?In Dublin one priest built a private swimming pool in his back garden to which only children of a certain age and appearance were invited,? Martin recalled. ?He was in one school each morning and another each afternoon. This man abused for years and there were eight priests in the parish. Did no one notice? More than one survivor tells me that they were jeered by other children in their school for being in contact with abuser priests. The children on the streets knew, but those who were responsible seemed not to notice.?

While most of the cases appear to have taken place in the 1970s and 1980s, immediately after the Second Vatican Council, he said, the problem existed ?long before the council and some of the serial abusers identified in the Murphy report were ordained and were abusing long before the Second Vatican Council.?

The church?s handling of the scandal may have something to do with a post-conciliar culture that tended toward mercy rather than penalties. But that reaction ?was a false understanding of human nature and of mercy,? he said.

In the future, seminaries need to develop formation programs that foster "rounded human beings, not just in the area of human sexuality but in overall mature behavior and relationships," Martin said.

He said he fears that some seminarians today are more concerned with finding "some form of personal security or status" in the priesthood than a life of service.

Martin said he has begun establishing programs that end the segregation of priests from lay people studying for ministry. The intent, he said, is to have future priests "establish mature relationships with men and women" and avoid developing "any sense of their priesthood giving them a special social position."

He said he perceives "signs of renewed clericalism" among seminarians and young priests "which may even at times be ably veiled behind appeals for deeper spirituality or for more orthodox theological positions. What we need are future priests who truly understand the call of Jesus as a call to total self giving" based on prayer and "continual conversion."

The secrecy in the clerical culture that was used to avoid scandal backfired and eventually caused in the church "one of the greatest scandals of its history," he said.

"It is hard to turn around the culture of an institution," said Martin. A new culture can be created within the church through a restorative justice approach "which admits and addresses the truth in charity."

[Tom Roberts is NCR editor at large. His e-mail address is troberts@ncronline.org.]

Editor's Note: Tom Roberts has more reporting from the Marquette University Law School's conference on restorative justice and the sex abuse crisis in the church. Watch NCRonline.org for more.

For full video of Martin's talk, visit **the page on the Marquette University's Web site**. You will need to download Microsoft's Silverlight plugin.

The full text of **Archbishop Martin's talk is here**.

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