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Ferment in Ireland as new report on sex abuse looms

by John L. Allen Jr.



Pope Benedict XVI greets Bishop John Magee, then head of the diocese of Cloyne, Ireland, at the Vatican in 2007. (CNS/Catholic Press Photo/L'Osservatore Romano)

DUBLIN, IRELAND -- As Ireland prepares for yet another damning government report on the Catholic church's handling of the sexual abuse crisis, this one focused on the rural southern diocese of Cloyne, anger in this once almost homogenously Catholic nation continues to fuel calls for fairly sweeping reform.

A conference on the sexual abuse crisis sponsored by the Jesuit-run Milltown Institute in Dublin in early April, for example, heard proposals for revisions to Catholic theology of sexuality and the priesthood, democratizing authority structures in the church, and broader cooperation with civil authorities.

One speaker warned that without such reform, the Catholic church risks "moral bankruptcy."

Public outrage could be glimpsed just outside the gates of the conference site, where a small knot of abuse survivors unfurled a banner denouncing the Catholic church for fielding a "worldwide pedophile army."

In a vintage instance of truth in labeling, the group calls itself "Anti-Catholic Church Activists, Ireland."

Facing that already agitated context, observers say the pending Cloyne report represents something of a wildcard.

On the one hand, the report will almost certainly deepen popular suspiciousness of the church, as it reveals breakdowns that occurred even after the Irish bishops supposedly endorsed tough new sex abuse standards. Yet it could also be seen as a "darkest before the dawn" moment, proving that fail-safe mechanisms put in place by the church are working.

Three government commissions in Ireland have already issued reports examining aspects of the sex abuse crisis: the Ferns Report in 2005, treating the southeastern diocese of Ferns; the Ryan Report in 2009, focusing on schools run by religious orders up to the 1970s; and the Murphy Report in 2010, looking at the Dublin archdiocese.

While those studies largely focused on older cases, the report on Cloyne examines complaints made between Jan. 1, 1996, to Feb. 1, 2009. That's significant because the Irish bishops adopted a groundbreaking set of policies in 1996, among other things pledging to report alleged abuse to police and prosecutors. The new report apparently shows that those commitments were not honored in Cloyne as recently as 2008.

According to accounts in the Irish media, the report examines charges against 19 priests in Cloyne, at least some of whom continued in ministry despite accusations of abuse. Ireland's High Court ruled in early April that the report could be published, with the exception of a chapter dealing with the case of a retired priest from Cloyne currently facing a criminal trial.

Irish observers say the Cloyne report could have the same effect as a recent grand jury report in the Philadelphia archdiocese in the United States, casting doubt on official claims of "zero tolerance."

The Cloyne report is also likely to garner interest for the prelate who stands at its center: Bishop John Magee, 74, who ceded control of the Cloyne diocese to an apostolic administrator in 2009 amid controversy sparked by a church review of his handling of sex abuse cases, and who then resigned in 2010.

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Magee is a legendary figure in church circles, having served as a private secretary to three popes -- Paul VI, John Paul I and John Paul II. Especially coming around the May 1 beatification of Pope John Paul II, the critical spotlight on a veteran Vatican insider represents a further embarrassment both for the Irish church and for Rome.

Yet Irish observers also suggest a different way of reading the Cloyne report, as proof that the internal monitoring procedures adopted by the Irish bishops are functioning as advertised.

That's because the first public report on breakdowns in Cloyne came from a church body, the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church, established by the bishops in 2006. That board, headed by a Presbyterian child protection expert, launched a review of the Cloyne diocese after five people filed complaints against two priests.

The board's conclusions, published in 2008, were highly critical of the way Magee responded to the cases. Ian Elliott, head of the national board, said at the time that practices in Cloyne were "significantly deficient in a number of respects."

That indictment triggered the government investigation. In that sense, observers say, the new Cloyne report, however painful or embarrassing, is actually a product of the church's own commitment to vigilance -- in this case, exposing alleged failures even by a senior prelate with longstanding Vatican connections.

Against the backdrop of these revelations, some Irish commentators say their church needs an overhaul.



Marie Keenan, for example, is a social worker and psychotherapist at

University College Dublin specializing in child sexual abuse. At the Milltown conference, she said that clinical work with priest-abusers has shown that many live "sex-obsessed lives of terror," which is a product of the organizational culture out of which they emerged.

In fact, Keenan hinted, the church is lucky that the crisis isn't worse. Given a theology of sexuality that can fuel "self-hatred and shame," she argued, coupled with a theology of priesthood that "sets them apart in an unhealthy manner," the question isn't why so many priests abused; it's why more didn't.

Keenan offered a series of proposals:

- A new theology of priesthood that would treat the distinction between the clerical and lay states as "more symbolic and less literal";
- A new ecclesiology that would treat Catholicism more as a "moral and social proposition" and less as a "power apparatus";
- A "serious study of decision-making procedures within the Catholic hierarchy";
- Rather than creating its own child safety protection offices and review boards, which Keenan said are fast becoming "bureaucratic, legalistic and costly," the church should instead "cooperate fully with the state" and independent bodies devoted to child welfare.

Bernadette Fahy, a survivor of abuse in an Irish industrial school who went on to cofound an education and support center for victims, struck similar notes. She pointed to a pattern of "authoritarianism, clericalism and the idea of a punitive God always ready to pounce" as underlying the crisis.

Fahy referred to a 1997 letter to the Irish bishops from the Vatican's nuncio. The letter, among other things, expressed reservations about policies that would require bishops to report allegations of abuse to police and other civil authorities. She said the bishops should have seized that moment to "take a stand against Rome."

"They should have all resigned en masse," Fahy said. When the bishops did not push back, she said, "many survivors concluded that all they have suffered does not matter to the hierarchy."

Redemptorist Fr. Cornelius Casey, acting president of the Milltown Institute, argued that revelations of the "shoddy and decadent handling" of the crisis point to a need for "a reinterpretation of the faith and the

Christian way of life.?

Casey suggested that the press for such a reinterpretation has been under way for some time, as laity and clergy alike have sought a "more participatory church." In recent years momentum in that direction has stalled, he said, but today "the prophetic voices on the crisis are asking us to resume that journey."

How realistic those visions may be remains to be seen, but they are nonetheless an indication of the ferment in Ireland.

On what is otherwise a fairly bleak landscape in terms of public perceptions of the Catholic church, many Irish observers point to one bright spot: Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, who has acquired an international reputation as a reformer on the sex abuse crisis. These days, a telling feature of Irish public discourse is that when people complain about "the bishops," they often make an exception for Martin.

During a national television program in early April, noted abuse survivor Marie Collins called Martin "the only bishop who has the support of the people."

Although Martin has won positive notice internationally and among the Irish public for his outreach to survivors, his cooperation with civil investigations, and his insistence on overcoming a legacy of clerical arrogance, Irish observers say he is sometimes a more ambivalent figure among his own priests and fellow bishops. According to Irish reports, some ecclesiastical insiders believe Martin has distanced himself from the fallout of the crisis by impugning other clergy.

Martin, a veteran of the Vatican's diplomatic corps, is scheduled to deliver a lecture on "Faith and Service: The Unbreakable Bond" at the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, D.C., on May 18.

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