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Irish government defends comments on clergy abuse

by Sarah Mac Donald by Catholic News Service



Ireland's Prime Minister Enda Kenny speaks during a news conference in Brussels in late July. (CNS photo/Eric Vidal, Reuters)

DUBLIN -- The Irish government has stood by comments by Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny, who charged that the Vatican attempted to "frustrate an inquiry in a sovereign, democratic republic as little as three years ago."

In a one-page statement issued late Sept. 8, five days after the Vatican refuted the accusation, the government also welcomed the Vatican's expression of regret over the suffering of abuse victims.

The government struck a less conciliatory note in its defense of Kenny, saying his comments in July "accurately reflect the public anger of the overwhelming majority of Irish people at the failure of the Catholic Church and the Holy See to deal adequately with clerical child sexual abuse and those who committed such an appalling act."

The government also reiterated that a 1997 letter to Irish bishops from Archbishop Luciano Storero, the apostolic nuncio at the time, "provided a pretext for some members of the clergy to evade full cooperation with the Irish civil authorities in regard to the abuse of minors."

After the Vatican released its response, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin called on the government to explain its assertion that the Holy See had attempted to "frustrate an inquiry" as recently as 2008. Describing it as a "very specific allegation," the archbishop said, "I would like to know what he (Enda Kenny) is referring to."

The government's statement did not provide a specific answer to that question.

However, Alan Shatter, Ireland's minister for justice, equality and defense, said on RTE Radio Sept. 9 that the comments referred to the Vatican's efforts to frustrate the investigative work of the Murphy Commission looking into sex abuse by clergy in the Dublin Archdiocese and the Cloyne Diocese. He said Archbishop Giuseppe Leanza, papal nuncio, who failed to furnish information requested by commission members as recently as 2008.

"Very substantial assistance could have been provided by the Vatican," he said. Instead of supplying information, he added, the nuncio simply informed the commission that his office did not determine the handling of cases of child abuse in Ireland and was unable to assist in the matter.

Shatter said the nuncio also "used the diplomatic ploy of refusing to deal with the matter because the request did not come through the Department of Foreign Affairs," a technical detail which he suggested did not recognize that the commission was independent of the Irish government.

A few days later after Kenny's comment, the Vatican took the unusual move of recalling Archbishop Leanza, saying it signaled how seriously the Vatican took the government criticisms of its handling of abuse allegations.

The Vatican forcefully refuted Kenny's accusations Sept. 3. In its response, the Vatican denied that it had sought to interfere with Irish civil law or impede civil authorities in their work.

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The Vatican also said Kenny's accusation was unfounded and that he "made no attempt to substantiate" his claim.

Responding to the Irish government's statement, a spokesman for the Irish bishops' conference said late Sept. 8 that, "in light of the government's statement, the Catholic Church restates its commitment to best practice in safeguarding children and to working with state authorities in achieving this. The focus should now be on the future."

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