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Ireland unveils new report on Catholic child abuse

AP (14.07.2011) / HRWF (30.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - — A new investigation into the Catholic Church's chronic cover-up of child abuse found Wednesday that a rural diocese and its bishop ignored Irish church rules requiring all suspected molestation cases to be reported to police — and the Vatican encouraged this concealment.

The government, which ordered the two-year probe into 1996-2009 cover-ups in the County Cork diocese of Cloyne, warned its findings suggest that parishes across Ireland could pose a continuing danger to children's welfare today.

Justice Minister Alan Shatter pledged to pass a new law making it an imprisonable crime to withhold knowledge of suspected child abuse as he published the investigation into the Cloyne diocese in southwest Ireland.

Shatter said previous pledges by Irish church leaders to place Irish civil law first and report all abuse cases dating back to 1995 had been "built on sand."

The 341-page Cloyne report is the fourth such government-ordered probe into how church leaders for decades protected their own reputation — and their own pedophile staff members from the law — at the expense of Irish children. The previous reports and scandals since 1994 have decimated the church's reputation and standing in this once-devoutly Catholic nation.

Wednesday's report by an independent panel of investigators found that former Cloyne Bishop John Magee, who resigned last year without admitting he'd covered up crimes, and senior aides failed to tell police anything about most abuse reports from 1996 to 2009 and withheld basic information in all cases.

It documented a catalog of errors in the church's suppression of information on 19 suspected child-abusing priests, only one of whom is currently facing criminal charges.

Shatter and Children's Minister Frances Fitzgerald called Magee's failures particularly shocking because they were so recent and followed a series of Irish church initiatives to protect children from abuse.

"That's the most horrifying aspect of this document. This is not a catalog of failure from a different era. This is not about an Ireland of 50 years ago. This is about Ireland now," Fitzgerald said.

The primate for Ireland's 4 million Catholics, Cardinal Sean Brady, and the official who replaced Magee in Cloyne, Archbishop Dermot Clifford, issued immediate apologies and pledged greater openness and cooperation with state authorities. Brady himself last year admitted he helped to conceal the crimes of one serial-rapist priest from Irish authorities in the mid-1970s but rejected calls to resign.

Magee, a former senior Vatican official and private secretary to Popes Paul VI, John Paul I and John Paul II, said he took "full responsibility" for what he called "the flawed implementation of the church procedures."

"I now realize that I should have taken a much firmer role in ensuring their implementation," said Magee, who was the fifth Irish bishop to resign amid accusations they encouraged the endangerment of children.

But Irish government leaders and abuse-rights advocates said the Vatican also bore heavy responsibility particularly for encouraging the most recent known cover-ups.

They and the investigators emphasized that Ireland's bishops formally agreed in 1995 to begin reporting suspected child-abuse cases to police in rules that became valid Jan. 1, 1996. The Irish church took that step after the first abuse victims went public with their lawsuits, a development that opened the floodgates for more than 13,000 such cases.

But a confidential January 1997 letter from the Vatican's diplomat in Ireland to the Irish bishops warned them that the Irish church's child-protection policies were invalid under Catholic canon law; those internal church laws must be respected foremost; and any accused priests were likely to have any punishments successfully appealed in Rome.

That letter from the late Archbishop Luciano Storero, then Pope John Paul II's ambassador to Ireland, dismissed the Irish policy as representing "a study document." The Associated Press was the first media organization to publish that letter in full in January.

Shatter said the Vatican's criticisms of the 1996 child-protection initiative "was entirely unhelpful, giving comfort and support to those who dissented from the guidelines. We want to say as clearly as we can that this approach, when the state was entitled to rely on assurances about the operation of the guidelines, was wholly unacceptable."

The Vatican offered no immediate response.

In his 2010 pastoral letter to Ireland's Catholics condemning pedophiles in the ranks, Pope Benedict XVI faulted bishops for failing to follow canon law and offered no explicit endorsement of Irish child-protection efforts by the Irish church or state. Benedict was widely criticized in Ireland for failing to admit any Vatican role in covering up the truth.

Religion class must be easy to opt out of, says report

By Katherine Donnelly

Irish Independent (25.05.2011) / HRWF (30.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Dublin, Ireland - Religion classes in church-run schools should be confined to the beginning or end of the day to make it easier for pupils to opt out, a new report states.

Changes to education legislation to ensure that schools avoid any inadvertent indoctrination or proselytism -- attempts to convert people to another point of view -- are also sought.

They are among 13 recommendations the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) has made to Government to reduce the stronghold of religion on education.

The commission warns that change must start soon if the Government is to escape a rebuke when the United Nations reviews the country's human rights record later this year.

The IHRC report, 'Religion and Education: A Human Rights Perspective', is concerned that education systems must meet the rights of parents and children of the majority Roman Catholic religion, those of minority religions, and also those with no faiths.

About 97pc of primary schools in Ireland are church-run, mostly by the Catholic Church, although societal changes and immigration have led to demand for greater choice.

Diversity

The commission's main recommendation is to increase the diversity of school type, at primary and second level and in urban and rural areas, but says interim action is needed while waiting for that to happen.

The IHRC report is likely to find favour with Education Minister Ruairi Quinn, who has already set up a Forum on Pluralism and Patronage to advise on a handover process for Catholic primary schools to other patrons.

Mr Quinn has also made no secret of his desire to see the teaching of religion taken out of the school day altogether .

A spokesperson for Mr Quinn said that the IHRC would be meeting with the forum to discuss the report.

Launching the IHRC report, commission member Professor William Binchy said that if choice was not possible, there should be a place available for a child that did not offend their religious or non-religious convictions.

The Department of Education inspectors should have a role in monitoring the teaching of religion to ensure that indoctrination and proselytism did not take place, he said.

Where choice does not exist, consideration should be given to moving religion class to the start or end of the school day.
