

COMMUNIQUE AT BEGINNING OF APOSTOLIC VISITATION IN IRELAND

VATICAN CITY, 12 NOV 2010 (VIS) - The Holy See Press Office today published the following English-language communique at the beginning of the Apostolic Visitation in Ireland.

"On 19 March 2010, following a meeting with the bishops of Ireland, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI issued a Pastoral Letter to the Catholics in Ireland. The Letter expressed his deep sorrow and regret regarding abuse perpetrated by priests and religious and the way in which such cases had been responded to in the past. It also called for an Apostolic Visitation of certain dioceses in Ireland, as well as seminaries and religious congregations. Pastoral in nature, the Visitation 'is intended to assist the local Church on her path of renewal' and is a sign of the Holy Father's desire, as the Successor of Peter, to offer his pastoral solicitude to the Church in Ireland'.

"In the months following the publication of the letter, preparatory meetings were held with the appointed Visitors, representatives from the Holy See, the Irish episcopate and the Conference of Religious Superiors of Ireland (CORI) in order to lay out a clear plan for the Visitation.

"The Visitation will identify whether the mutual relationship of the various components of the local Church, seminaries and religious communities is now in place, in order to sustain them on the path of profound spiritual renewal already being pursued by the Church in Ireland. It also has the goal of verifying the effectiveness of the present processes used in responding to cases of abuse and of the current forms of assistance provided to the victims. It will not be an investigation into individual cases of abuse nor a trial to judge past events. The Visitors will have to identify the explicit problems which may require some assistance from the Holy See.

The Visitation will in no way interfere with the ordinary activity of local magistrates, nor with the activity of the 'Commissions of Investigation' established by the Irish parliament nor with the work of any legislative authority which has competence in the area of prevention of abuse of minors. The Visitation does not seek to replace the legitimate authority of the local bishops or religious superiors, who maintain responsibility in the handling of cases of abuse.

"It is important to remember that the Visitors are not expected to receive allegations of new or old cases of abuse. If any were to arise, such allegations must be reported to the respective ordinaries or major superiors who have the duty to inform the competent civil and ecclesiastical authorities, in conformity with the current civil and ecclesiastical laws".

Regarding the Visitation of the Four Metropolitan Archdioceses

"As previously announced, the Visitors of the four Irish metropolitan archdioceses will be: Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor for Armagh; Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley O.F.M. Cap. for Dublin; Archbishop Thomas C. Collins for Cashel and Emly; Archbishop Terrence T. Prendergast S.J. for Tuam. The Visitors may bring with them some people, approved by the Congregation for Bishops, who can serve as assistants.

"In respect of and in conformity with local civil law, the Visitors will make themselves available to meet with those who have been deeply wounded by abuse and who wish to be met and heard, beginning with the victims themselves and their families. They will be received in the same fatherly

manner in which the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI has on several occasions greeted and listened to those who have suffered the terrible crime of abuse.

"The Visitators will monitor how well the guidelines of 'Safeguarding Children, Standards and Guidance Document for the Catholic Church in Ireland', commissioned and produced in February 2009 by the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church, are functioning and how they may be better implemented and improved.

"The Visitators may also meet with the other bishops of the province, and they should listen to, besides the local ordinary, the vicar general, the episcopal vicars, the judges of the ecclesiastical tribunal, the chancellor and other officials of the Curia, members of the presbyteral councils, members of the College of Consultors and of pastoral councils and, above all, those responsible for the office of protection and prevention of abuse at the diocesan and parish level. Finally, Pastors and other priests, the lay faithful and individual men and women who wish to be received by the visiting prelates may request this in writing. The Visitators will meet people individually or as a family.

"If possible, it is recommended that each archdiocese, embracing the penitential sentiments expressed by the Holy Father in his Letter, organise a penitential service or some other similar gathering in the presence of the Visitor with the approval of the local ordinary. This will correspond with the penitential activities already promoted by the Irish Episcopal Conference, which include prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

"With the aim of ensuring confidentiality, all those who wish to write to the Visitators should address letters to them by name using the mailing address of the apostolic nunciature.

"In order to facilitate access for those who would like to meet with them, the address of the respective Visitor will be communicated by the archdiocese. In co-ordination with each Visitor, their availability, the days they are already occupied and those still available for meetings with various people will be communicated".

Regarding the Visitation to the Irish Seminaries

"The Apostolic Visitor for Irish seminaries is Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York. He will be assisted by some clerics, approved by the Congregation for Catholic Education, whose main duty will be to help to conduct the one-to-one interviews with the seminarians.

"Archbishop Dolan will visit five institutions: St. Patrick's College, Maynooth; the Pontifical Irish College, Rome; Saint Malachy's College, Belfast; All Hallows College, Dublin; Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy, Dublin (this will be visited only in regard to its academic programmes).

Prior to each Visitation, the Visitor will receive copies of all necessary documentation. Moreover, each staff member and student will be granted the possibility to express to the Visitor in a signed statement his opinion about the seminary. Such letters should be addressed to the Visitor using the mailing address of the apostolic nunciature.

"The Visitor will examine all aspects of priestly formation. He, or his assistants, will conduct private interviews with all staff members, all seminarians and, where applicable, other parties normally involved in the life of the seminary. It is not his task to meet with victims of abuse who, as noted above, may be instead received by the Visitators of the four metropolitan archdioceses. Furthermore, each priest who has graduated from the seminary in the previous three years will be given the opportunity for a private interview.

"In conducting his examination of each institution, the Visitor will follow the directives set out by the documents of the Holy See and of the local Church concerning priestly formation and the protection of minors".

Regarding the Visitation to Religious Houses

"Sr. Sharon Holland I.H.M., Fr. Robert Maloney C.M., Sr. Mairin McDonagh R.J.M. and Fr. Gero McLoughlin S.J. have been appointed to serve as Apostolic Visitors of those institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life with houses in Ireland.

"The first phase of this Visitation will consist in responding to a questionnaire which seeks information regarding the involvement of institutes in cases of abuse, the responses offered to victims, and the compliance of the institute with the protocols contained in 'Safeguarding Children, Standards and Guidance Document for the Catholic Church in Ireland'. The questionnaire also seeks to ascertain how each community is dealing with the revelations and their consequences. Additionally it asks what is being done, in the light of past experiences, to assist members in their primary mission of radically witnessing to Christ's presence in the world.

"The Visitors will meet afterwards to assess the responses to the questionnaire. They will then make recommendations to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life regarding the next steps to be taken in the Visitation process.

"When the Apostolic Visitation is complete, the Visitors will submit their findings to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. After having carefully studied the report of the Visitors, the Congregation will determine what further steps should be taken to contribute to a revitalisation of consecrated life in Ireland".

Conclusion

"Given the delicate nature of the subject matter and out of respect for persons involved, the Visitors will exercise great discretion and will not grant interviews during the first phase of the Visitation.

"The Congregations for Bishops, for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Catholic Education concur with the Secretariat of State that the first phase of the Visitation - the inquiry concerning the four metropolitan archdioceses, religious houses and seminaries - should be completed if possible by Easter 2011. At that time the Visitors should submit the results of their enquiries so that they can be studied during the month of May and a plan for moving forward can be discussed. Then the Holy See will announce, with a proper statement, the next steps that have to be taken.

"When the Visitation is complete, the Holy See, after reviewing all the material submitted by the Visitors and offering suggestions for the spiritual renewal of the archdioceses, seminaries and religious houses, will issue a comprehensive summary of the results of the Visitation".