



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

Dublin rocked by abuse scandal



Cardinal Desmond Connell

The scandal shaking the Roman Catholic church to its foundations, in many other parts of the world, has broken forth in Dublin with a vengeance. There have, of course, been incidents in the past, such as those involving Bishop O'Casey, who reluctantly acknowledged that he had fathered an illegitimate son, and the infamous child abuser, "Father" Brendan Smyth, who terrorised Roman Catholic children for nearly 30 years before he was brought to justice and jailed. However, fingers are now pointing at the leaders of Irish Roman Catholicism and allegations of a "cover-up" of abuse by them have resulted in reactions from the Dublin government and the Irish police.

Cardinal Desmond Connell has come under severe pressure to answer questions about allegations that he concealed details of sex abuse cases. A Roman Catholic Canon Law expert specialising in dealing with abuse by priests, "Father" Tom Doyle, when interviewed for an RTE television programme, has dubbed Dublin one of the worst cities in the world for covering up clerical child abuse. The programme, 'Cardinal Secrets,' detailed the abuses committed by eight priests in the Dublin diocese over four decades. It also accused Dublin Archbishop Connell of: initially covering up the defrocking of two priests after internal inquiries found them guilty of sexual abuse; failing to give information he had about them when allegations were being investigated; writing a "clean" reference for a priest accused of child sex abuse.

According to the programme, six bishops had knowledge of allegations of child sex abuse by priests, including Bishop of Killaloe Willie Walsh, Bishop of Dromore John McAreavey, Bishop of Limerick Donal Murray, Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin Jim Moriarty and former auxiliary bishops of Dublin James Kavanagh (now dead) and Dermot O'Mahony (retired). The Canon lawyer, Tom Doyle, said that there was no excuse for the way the Dublin Diocese handled the allegations and the way it had been covered up was "appalling" and "disgusting". He had been asked by the programme to com-



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pare the scale of the problem in Dublin — where 450 separate civil cases are pending in relation to clerical sex abuse by diocesan priests and those in industrial schools — and other countries. He said that the figures put “Dublin right at the top of the heap. You know there is something radically wrong,” he said. There was no immediate reaction to the programme from the Dublin diocese.

Michael McDowell, the Irish Minister for Justice, has told the Irish Parliament that he is not afraid of the bang of a crozier and that he was prepared to go anywhere and do anything to pursue those guilty of child abuse. He said that any religious organisation whose members came into contact with young people, owed those minors a duty to save them from violation and degradation.

He said it was in relation to that duty and whether or not it was complied with, that might be the proper subject of an inquiry. The Minister said he would not be rushed in his consideration of the issues, as there were a number of options open to him. He also told the Dáil that an additional Chief Superintendent and extra Gardaí personnel would be made available to the Gardai’s Sexual Violence and Assault Unit, to deal with allegations of child sex abuse. Mr McDowell earlier criticised an interpretation of Catholic Church law authorised by Cardinal Desmond Connell, which discouraged bishops from threatening paedophile priests with dismissal.

The Minister said he found elements of Canon Law disturbing. He referred to certain passages in a book by Monsignor Gerard Sheedy titled “The Canon Law, letter and spirit” published in 1995, which he said had the approval of Cardinal Connell. The Irish Minister for Health, Micheál Martin, met representatives of victims of clerical sex abuse in the Dublin Archdiocese as part of Government preparations to deal with the issue. Mr Martin has ordered the establishment of a non-statutory inquiry into abuse in the Diocese.

Meanwhile, the Vatican has incensed many Roman Catholics in USA and further afield by rejecting a “zero tolerance” policy proposed by Roman Catholic bishops in the United States for dealing with cases of child sexual abuse. The American policy was drawn up in June in response to a series of scandals across the US involving paedophile priests which has provoked a crisis in the Church. It says a bishop should dismiss a priest if there is a “credible” accusation that he had sexually abused a minor. The policy in effect rules out rehabilitation for offending priests and says they will be re-



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moved for “even a single act of sexual abuse - past, present or future”. The “Holy See,” in a response to a US request for formal approval of the rules, said that the plans were vague and “could be a source of confusion and ambiguity”. Five days after voicing reservations about the US bishops’ policy, the Vatican named the four US prelates and four Vatican officials assigned to bring the plan swiftly into accord with canon law.

Three of the four Vatican appointees have expressed views at odds with the public position of US bishops on the abuse issue. Two of those have said that Roman Catholic officials in the United States should not inform the civil authorities about priests who molest children. In addition, the senior Vatican official among the four, Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, has yet to rule on a 1997 request from the bishop of the Tucson diocese that the Vatican suspend a monsignor accused of multiple acts of molesting minors, according to sealed court records obtained by the USA newspaper, “The Boston Globe”. One of the four US bishops who will join in a revising of the “zero tolerance” proposal has already voiced reservations about it. He is the senior prelate among the four, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago. In June, George expressed reservations and after its adoption, he met with accused priests to advise them that they could appeal their removal.

Archbishop Herranz, the Vatican canon lawyer, said in an April speech in Milan that the large settlements paid to abuse victims by the US church were “unwarranted.” He also criticized the US media, saying they were trying to “sully the image of the church and the Catholic priesthood” with “tenacious, scandalistic” reporting. In the same address, Herranz called the demand that bishops report abusive priests to the law enforcement agencies an “unwarranted simplification” and said he believes church law “provides all the trial and punishment tools necessary” to handle priests who abuse children.

Similarly, Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, another of the Vatican four, argued in a February interview that priests should be able to confide in their bishops without fear of legal consequences, saying that priests’ “professional secrecy” must be respected by civil authorities.

It is little wonder that victims of priests’ abuse, and their legal representatives, are concerned that the Vatican may force a significant dilution of the “zero tolerance” policy. One national organisation that represents victims of abusive priests expressed dissatisfaction with the American appointees to the panel. “None of these bishops is a particularly strong advocate for vic-



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tims," Mark Serrano, an official of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, said in a statement.