

Church leaders meet Pope as abuse report rocks Vatican

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By John Cooney

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THE Irish clerical abuse scandals soared to the top of the Catholic Church's agenda last night when Pope Benedict XVI held confidential talks with Ireland's two leading churchmen.

They met as the Vatican braced itself for even more horrific revelations from a report into the Archdiocese of Dublin.

Cardinal Sean Brady, the Primate of All Ireland; and the Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, reported directly to the Pontiff in the Apostolic Palace on the damaging loss of public trust in the Irish Church in the wake of the Ryan Commission's report.

It highlighted systematic abuse of children in institutions run by religious orders. Last night, church sources stressed that Pope Benedict was primarily concerned about the first-hand assessments of his two chief prelates in Ireland, and their prescriptions to give absolute priority to implementing the highest standards of child protection in church-run schools and hospitals.

This exceptional access to the Pope came after days of top-level briefings by the Cardinal with senior figures in the Curia, the papal administration.

Meetings

Cardinal Brady is understood to have met the papal secretary of state, Cardinal Bertone, the Pope's prime minister, as well as Cardinal Levada, the head of the Vatican's doctrinal watchdog, the congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Cardinal Brady was joined at the papal meeting by Archbishop Martin, who was in Rome for other Church business.

But a key element of last night's talks was a briefing by Archbishop Martin of the need for Rome to brace itself for even more shocking revelations of abuse in the report of the Government's investigation into the Archdiocese of Dublin, which is still being finalised.

Last night's meeting was a dramatic U-turn for the Vatican's policy of no comment on the clerical abuse scandal. Up to a few days ago, Vatican spokesman Fr Frederico Lombardy was telling reporters that it was a national problem for the Irish bishops to deal with. Now the Irish problem is officially a papal dilemma.

Last night's encounter with the Pope was signalled to the Irish Independent on May 23 when the Pope's representative in Ireland, Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Giuseppe Leanza, told this newspaper of Pope Benedict's determination to rid the Catholic Church of paedophile priests.

Archbishop Leanza pointed specifically to an instruction given by Pope Benedict to the Irish bishops at a meeting in Rome in 2006 -- after the publication of the Ferns Report -- of their duty to clean up the Irish Church of any vestiges of abuse.

At a meeting in Maynooth last Monday week, Cardinal Brady suggested that the Vatican would have to be fully briefed on the Ryan report.

Pressure

At that meeting, the Cardinal piled pressure on the religious orders to pay more to the victims of abuse than the €128m fund which they had agreed to in 2002.

The Pope's meeting with Cardinal Brady and Archbishop Martin came ahead of plans by survivors of abuse to seek an audience with him as part of their strategy of receiving an apology from the Holy Father.

- John Cooney