

Pope Offers Apology, Not Penalty, for Sex Abuse Scandal

By RACHEL DONADIO

VATICAN CITY — Faced with a church sexual abuse scandal spreading across Europe, [Pope Benedict XVI](#) on Saturday apologized directly to victims and their families in [Ireland](#), expressing “shame and remorse” for what he called “sinful and criminal” acts committed by members of the clergy.

But the pope did not require that Roman Catholic leaders be disciplined for past mistakes as some victims were hoping, nor did he clarify what critics see as contradictory [Vatican](#) rules that they fear allow abuse to continue unpunished.

“You have suffered grievously, and I am truly sorry,” the pope said in a long-awaited, eight-page pastoral letter to Irish Catholics. “Your trust has been betrayed and your dignity has been violated.” He also criticized Ireland’s bishops for “grave errors of judgment and failures of leadership.”

The letter was written in language that was at once impassioned, personal and sweeping. And the pope did take the relatively rare step of ordering a special apostolic delegation to be sent to investigate abuse in unspecified dioceses in Ireland.

But even that decision raised questions among many who wondered what the investigators might unearth beyond what the Irish government found in two wide-ranging and scathing reports released last year. One report found systemic abuse in church-run schools; another said the church and the police in Ireland had systematically colluded in covering up decades of sexual abuse by priests in Dublin.

The pope has apologized before for sexual abuse scandals, most notably when meeting with victims in the United States in 2008. But the letter once again showed the difficulties facing Benedict, as a problem that he felt he had already decisively addressed appears to be intensifying, with hundreds of new allegations of sexual abuse surfacing. The crisis also stands to damage Benedict’s central goals of fortifying the church and fighting secularism in Europe.

The letter was especially anticipated, coming after weeks of damaging reports in several countries that brought [the scandal](#) close not only to the leader of Ireland’s church, but also to the pope himself.

Last week, a psychiatrist who treated a priest decades ago in a German archdiocese run by the future pope said he [had repeatedly warned](#) that the priest, who was accused of sexually abusing boys, should never work with children again. The priest was re-assigned to parish work almost immediately after his therapy began, and one of Benedict’s deputies at the time has taken responsibility for that decision. Less than five years later, the priest was accused of molesting other boys, and in 1986 was convicted of sexual abuse.

The pope did not address that case in his letter to the Irish, nor did he call for Cardinal [Sean Brady](#), the head of the Irish church, to resign. Cardinal Brady said last week that he would step down if the pope asked, after revelations that he took part in a church investigation in 1975 in which two children were forced to sign secrecy oaths.

The letter also remained tightly focused on Ireland — to the dismay of many victims’ groups around the world — even as the crisis has widened to include Catholics in Austria, the Netherlands and Germany.

"I find that deceitful because we know that this is a global and systemic problem in the global church," said Colm O'Gorman, the co-founder of a victims' group who said he was sexually abused by a priest as a teenager in Ireland in the early '80s. "It's all about protecting the institution and, above all, its wealth."

"The greatest contribution the pope could have made was to stop the abuse of victims, and he's not even done that," he added.

In recent years, the Catholic Church in the United States has paid over \$2 billion in abuse settlements. In Ireland, some parishes have said they may have to take up a Sunday collection to help fund abuse settlements.

For many Catholics, the letter offered a critical test of whether the pope can stem a crisis that has shaken the credibility and authority of the Roman Catholic Church in other parts of the world. Even as Benedict urged Irish clergy to cooperate with civil justice authorities, the abuse scandals have put to the test a Vatican culture of protecting its own even in the face of crimes against civil and canon law.

While many Irish Catholics were hoping for concrete measures after the government reports that criticized Vatican norms for dealing with the abuse, Benedict instead offered a prescription for how to renew their faith. He urged all Irish clergy to go on a spiritual retreat and suggested that dioceses set aside special chapels where Catholics could pray for "healing and renewal."

"There's a strong tendency to approach this as a problem of faith, when it is a problem of church management and a lack of accountability," said Terrence McKiernan, founder and president of BishopAccountability.org, which tracks church records on abuse cases.

In a statement, the group said the "most glaring" omission in the letter was Benedict's "failure to acknowledge his own culpability," adding that, "he pointedly does not include himself in his criticism of church leaders."

In a news conference on Saturday, the Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, defended the pope's statements, saying the document was intended as a pastoral letter, not an outline of "administrative or juridical measures."

Indeed, Benedict spoke movingly and directly to the pain of victims. "Many of you found that, when you were courageous enough to speak of what happened to you, no one would listen," the pope wrote.

He added, "I know some of you find it difficult even to enter the doors of a church after all that has occurred."

The pope told abusers to "submit yourselves to the demands of justice, but do not despair of God's mercy."

The letter is to be read aloud in churches across Ireland on Sunday.

In a homily Saturday after reading the letter, Cardinal Brady made no reference to the possibility of resigning. "Let us pray that the Holy Father's pastoral letter will be the beginning of a great season of rebirth and hope in the Irish church," he told worshipers at a morning Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh, Northern Ireland.

Beyond revealing decades of abuse, the Irish government's reports issued last year found that the church did not routinely inform civil authorities about priests who had committed felonies. Four Irish bishops offered their resignation in the wake of the publication of the report on Dublin in November, but the pope has accepted only one.

As reports of abuse cases have spread, many questions have been raised about the line between Vatican secrecy and civil judicial process.

Some Irish church officials have said the problem has been deepened by confusion over the interpretation of a 2001 directive by Benedict, then a cardinal, reiterating a strict requirement for secrecy in handling abuse cases. The directive also gave the authority for

handling such cases to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; Benedict was prefect of the congregation from 1982 until becoming pope in 2005.

Some see an inherent contradiction between the directive and the Vatican's telling local dioceses to cooperate with civil justice. The Vatican says that its secrecy norms help protect the victims.

In his letter, Benedict spoke of "a well-intentioned but misguided tendency to avoid penal approaches," to violations of canon law.

The pope attributed that problem in part to "a misplaced concern for the reputation of the church and the avoidance of scandal." And he said that bishops should "continue to cooperate with the civil authorities in their area of competence."

In the case in Germany in 1980 that made headlines recently, Benedict, then Archbishop Joseph Ratzinger, allowed a priest who was accused of molesting boys to move to Munich for therapy. The diocese he oversaw did not notify civil authorities of the sexual abuse allegations.

Reporting was contributed by John F. Burns and Eamon Quinn from Dublin, Alan Cowell from Paris, Nicholas Kulish from Berlin, and Laurie Goodstein from New York.



Parishioners at St. Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh, Northern Ireland, read an extract from Pope Benedict's letter on Saturday

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