

## *Summary*

### *of the Pope's Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland*

The Pope has written a Pastoral Letter to all the Catholics of Ireland, expressing his dismay at the sexual abuse of young people by Church representatives and the way this was addressed by local bishops and religious superiors. He asks that the Letter be read with attention and in its entirety. The Holy Father speaks of his closeness in prayer to the whole Irish Catholic community at this painful time and he proposes a path of healing, renewal and reparation.

He calls on them to remember the rock from which they were hewn (cf. *Is* 51:1), particularly the fine contribution made by Irish missionaries to European civilization, and to the spread of Christianity in every continent. Recent years have seen many challenges to the faith in Ireland, in the wake of fast-paced social change and a decline in adherence to traditional devotional and sacramental practices. This is the context in which the Church's handling of the problem of child sexual abuse has to be understood.

Many factors have given rise to the problem: insufficient moral and spiritual formation in seminaries and novitiates, a tendency in society to favour the clergy and other authority figures, and a misplaced concern for the reputation of the Church and the avoidance of scandal, resulting in failure to apply existing canonical penalties when needed. Only by careful examination of the many elements that gave rise to the crisis can its causes be properly diagnosed and effective remedies be found.

During their *Ad Limina* visit to Rome in 2006, the Pope urged the Irish bishops to “establish the truth of what happened in the past, to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent it from occurring again, to ensure that the principles of justice are fully respected, and above all, to bring healing to the victims and to all those affected by these egregious crimes.” Since that time he himself has met victims on more than one

occasion, listening to their stories, praying with them and for them, and he is ready to do so again in the future. In February 2010 he called the Irish bishops to Rome to discuss with them the steps they are taking to remedy the problem, with particular reference to the procedures and protocols now in place to ensure the safety of children in church environments and to respond swiftly and justly to allegations of abuse. In this Pastoral Letter, he speaks directly to a series of different groups within the Irish Catholic community, in the light of the situation that has arisen.

Addressing the victims of abuse first of all, he acknowledges the grievous betrayal they have suffered and he tells them how sorry he is over what they have endured. He recognizes that, in many cases, no one would listen when they found the courage to speak of what happened. He understands how those in residential institutions must have felt, with no way of escape from their sufferings. While recognizing how hard it must be for many of them to forgive or be reconciled with the Church, he urges them not to lose hope. Jesus Christ, himself a victim of unjust sufferings, understands the depths of their pain and its enduring effect upon their lives and relationships. Yet his wounds, transformed by his redemptive sufferings, are the very means by which the power of evil is broken and we are reborn to life and hope. The Pope urges victims to seek in the Church the opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ and to find healing and reconciliation by rediscovering the infinite love that Christ has for each one of them.

In his words to priests and religious who have abused young people, the Pope calls upon them to answer before God and before properly constituted tribunals for the sinful and criminal actions they have committed. They have betrayed a sacred trust and brought shame and dishonour upon their confreres. Great harm has been done, not only to the victims, but also to the public perception of the priesthood and religious life in Ireland. While summoning them to submit to the demands of justice, he reminds them that they should not despair of God's mercy, which is freely offered to even the greatest of sinners, if they repent of their actions, do penance, and humbly pray for forgiveness.

The Pope encourages parents to persevere in the demanding task of bringing up children to know that they are loved and cherished, and to develop a healthy self-esteem. Parents have the primary responsibility for educating new generations in the moral principles that are essential for a civilized society. The Pope invites children and young people to find in the Church an opportunity for a life-giving encounter with Christ, and not to be deterred by the failings of some priests and religious. He looks to the younger generation to contribute to the renewal of the Church. He also urges priests and religious not to be discouraged, but rather to dedicate themselves anew to their respective apostolates, working in harmony with their superiors so as to offer new life and vitality to the Church in Ireland through their living witness to the Lord's redeeming work.

Addressing himself to the Irish bishops, the Pope notes the grave errors of judgement and failure of leadership on the part of many, because they did not correctly apply canonical procedures when responding to allegations of abuse. While it was often hard to know how to address complex situations, the fact remains that serious mistakes were made, and they have lost credibility as a result. The Pope urges them to continue their determined efforts to remedy past mistakes and to prevent any recurrence by fully implementing canon law and cooperating with civil authorities in their areas of competence. He calls upon the bishops, moreover, to rededicate themselves to the pursuit of holiness, setting an example themselves, and encouraging the priests and the lay faithful to play their part in the life and mission of the Church.

Finally, the Pope proposes some specific steps to foster the renewal of the Church in Ireland. He asks all to offer up their Friday penances, for a period of one year, in reparation for the sins of abuse that have occurred. He recommends frequent recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation and the practice of Eucharistic adoration. He announces his intention to hold an Apostolic Visitation of certain dioceses, religious congregations and seminaries, with the involvement of the Roman Curia, and he proposes a nationwide Mission for bishops, priests and religious in Ireland. This being the international Year for Priests, he holds up the figure of Saint John Vianney as a model and intercessor for a

revitalized priestly ministry in Ireland. After thanking all who have worked so hard to deal decisively with the problem, he concludes by proposing a *Prayer for the Church in Ireland*, to be used by all the faithful to invoke the grace of healing and renewal at this difficult time.