

Apostolic visitation on Irish church response to sex abuse begins

VATICAN CITY – The apostolic visitations of four Irish archdioceses, Irish seminaries and religious orders in response to the scandal arising from sexual abuse of minors by clergy officially began Nov. 11, the Vatican said.

A Vatican statement said that apostolic visitors appointed by Pope Benedict XVI would begin their investigations into the widespread problem that Irish government reports said had gone on for decades within a “culture of secrecy.”

The pope announced the apostolic visitation in March when he wrote a pastoral letter to Irish Catholics expressing deep sorrow and regret at the abuse children suffered at the hands of the clergy and at the lack of response from Catholic leadership. He has promised repeatedly to root out the problem.

The Vatican statement said the visitors would not deal with new allegations, which, should they arise, must be reported to civil and local church authorities.

However, the church officials appointed by the pope will “make themselves available to those who have been deeply wounded by abuse and who wish to be met and heard,” it said.

Those victims and their families, the statement said, will be received “in the same fatherly manner in which the Holy Father has on several occasions greeted and listened to those who have suffered the terrible crime of abuse.”

The visitors will monitor how the guidelines established in 2009 by the Irish church to prevent further abuse of children in Catholic schools and parishes are being followed and if they are effective.

“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,” the statement said.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, said that the rules and guidelines had been issued “at the highest level” and had been approved by Pope Benedict. They are the result, he explained, of earlier meetings at the Vatican between Irish bishops, the visitators and leaders of several Vatican offices, including the Vatican Secretariat of State.

Father Lombardi told reporters that beginning Nov. 11 the visitators would begin to organize their own schedules as they arrive in their assigned archdioceses. The visitators are British Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor, retired archbishop of Westminster, who will conduct the visitation of the Archdiocese of Armagh; Cardinal Sean P. O’Malley of Boston, who will visit the Archdiocese of Dublin; Archbishop Thomas Collins of Toronto, who will conduct the visitation of the Archdiocese of Cashel; and Archbishop Terrence Prendergast of Ottawa, Ontario, who will visit the Archdiocese of Tuam.

The pope also appointed New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan to conduct a visitation of Irish seminaries to ensure that screening policies and procedures as well as educational programs to improve child protection were in place. The archbishop is scheduled to visit five seminaries, including the Pontifical Irish College in Rome.

Four visitators, including two nuns and two priests, will investigate religious houses in Ireland.

The Vatican statement said visitators would meet and listen to other church figures, including other bishops, the vicar general of the archdioceses, judges of the church tribunals.

Anyone wishing to meet with the visitor – including pastors, priests, lay faithful and any other individual – may request an appointment or submit a statement in writing through the office of Vatican nuncio in Ireland, the statement said.

Each archdiocese is encouraged to organize a penitential service with the visitor; in his March letter to Irish Catholics, the pope recommended penitential services to complement the prayer, fasting and other penitential activities being organized by the Irish bishops’ conference, the Vatican statement said.

The “first phase of the visitation,” the meetings set to begin Nov. 11, should be completed by Easter 2011, the Vatican said. Father Lombardi said it was likely that the visitors and the Vatican congregations involved – the congregations for bishops, for religious and for education – would meet again in the spring to devise the next phase of the “path to renewal.”

Irish bishops met with the pope in February after an independent study known as the Murphy Report said the church operated with a “culture of secrecy” in dealing with charges of abuse by victims and their families in the Archdiocese of Dublin from 1975 to 2004.

Other reports showed the problem was widespread throughout other dioceses and often involved the complicity of Irish authorities.