

Irish prelate in Nigeria withdraws from ministry after abuse charges

DUBLIN, Ireland – An Irish archbishop who serves in Nigeria has withdrawn from active ministry while the Vatican investigates allegations of sexual abuse.

The St. Patrick's Missionary Society, known as the Kiltegan Fathers, said Oct. 25 that the allegations against Archbishop Richard Burke of Benin City, Nigeria, are being investigated by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The charges came from a Nigerian woman, Dolores Atwood, 40, who now lives in Canada, where she is married and has run for public office.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, refused to comment on the issue Oct. 26.

The newspaper Irish Mail on Sunday reported Oct. 25 that Atwood claimed she had been attacked by Archbishop Burke when she was a 14-year-old hospital patient in Warri in 1983; he is said to have continued to have sexual relations with her until 2003.

Atwood lodged a formal complaint against the archbishop last year, and Kiltegan Fathers Gary Howley and John Marren met with her in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in December. Afterward, in a summary of what was discussed, Father Marren wrote: "Her allegation was very credible and was supported by corroborative evidence. ... She is a very capable person."

The Irish Mail on Sunday also published a statement from the Kiltegan Fathers expressing "the deep sorrow and regret of the society for the suffering the complainant and her family are going through."

"We affirmed the society's commitment to child protection," the statement said. "We assured her that the society's child protection policy and procedures would be adhered to. The society offered to provide counseling for the complainant."

Kiltegan Father Seamus O'Neill met with Archbishop Burke in Rome in January and

wrote Atwood three days later, saying that “the society has accepted your statement as a credible allegation and we are now applying our society’s policy and procedures for the protection of children.” Father O’Neill said the archbishop had said he would not make any contact with Atwood while an investigation was taking place.

The Irish Mail on Sunday said Archbishop Burke reportedly contacted Atwood only hours after his meeting with Father O’Neill in Rome; the transcript of his phone conversation was published by the newspaper.

“I know that you have been hurt very deeply. And I accept full responsibility,” the transcript quoted him as saying.

Archbishop Burke was named coadjutor bishop of Warri in 1996 and became bishop in 1997; he was transferred to Benin City in 2007.