

U.S.-based child protection expert says Irish church at ‘tipping point’

DUBLIN – A leading international expert on child protection warned that the Catholic Church in Ireland is at “tipping point” and appealed for bishops and religious superiors to fully cooperate with the church’s own watchdog.

U.S.-based Monica Applewhite, who has worked with church groups in many countries, spoke to Catholic News Service after a recent visit to Ireland, where she advised the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church. Her comments came after the CEO of that body, Ian Elliott, admitted that he had considered resigning over a lack of church cooperation.

“I don’t think the rest of the Catholic world is aware that there are still battle lines being drawn within the church in Ireland. Most people assume that with the publication of such detailed and painful governmental reports, that there must now be a universal desire to operate with transparency,” she said.

“I believe we are at that tipping point in the Irish church. The time has come for every leader within the Irish church to choose where he or she stands – who will emerge for transparency and change and who will stay in hopes of maintaining the status quo? One can no longer sit on the fence in Ireland, those days are long gone,” she added.

In its most-recent annual report, published in May, the safeguarding children board revealed that after it had completed reviewing just three dioceses, the remaining dioceses and religious congregations withdrew cooperation with a child protection audit, citing legal advice over data protection concerns. These legal concerns have now been addressed and the audit is continuing.

Applewhite appealed to church leaders to put pastoral concerns before legal advice.

“It saddens me that there are still leaders in the church who elect to follow the advice of attorneys rather than listening to their own pastoral instincts or hearing the encouragement of the faithful to embrace a new era of accountability and

openness,” she said, citing an example from the United States earlier this year.

“The Philadelphia grand jury report once again highlighted the tragic mistakes that are made when concerns for civil liability and personal reputations take priority over the protection of the vulnerable. Some may not realize that virtually every mistake made in the U.S. Catholic Church was made with the advice of counsel. I find it deeply disturbing to hear the same words again, a decade later – in a different country.”

Following the publication of the report critical of the church’s lack of cooperation, Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin – who has won praise for his forthright handling of abuse and work with state inquiries – criticized the board for giving a negative impression and ignoring the good work that has been done in child safeguarding in Ireland.

He also said he was disappointed that the board presented concern over data protection as “a form of obstructionism on the part of the bishops, the religious and the Irish Missionary Union.”

Archbishop Martin said it was actually the board’s lawyers that discovered that data protection presented a problem.

Applewhite also urged Catholics to support and encourage their bishops and religious leaders to move in the right direction.

“Initiatives to create and maintain transparency should not be construed in any way as opposed or against the Catholic Church,” she said.

“Those of us who love the church in spite of its failings are the people who most desire systems of accountability – so that faith and trust in the church can be restored in a manner that is both legitimate and sustainable over time.”

Applewhite said: “It is essential that we all support and encourage movement in the right direction when we see it. Leaders are human, and if every move they make is met with punishment and criticism, they ultimately slip into a kind of helplessness and just quit trying.

“Those of us interested in the promise of change have to find ways to shed light on the positive initiatives so that energy and hope for the future are not lost,” she said.

Applewhite warned “the Irish people will never accept anything short of complete transparency. That means that if the church safeguarding system ultimately fails in its efforts, then governmental entities will again be forced to step in and use their authority to obtain the relevant documents.

“As a Catholic, I have on many occasions watched with pride and hope as a Catholic leader has stepped outside his or her comfort zone and ‘risked’ full disclosure, heartfelt emotions and potential criticisms for the sake of healing our community. These are the moments that keep all of us striving toward a better day.

“Working in Ireland I have met with leaders who have and will again take these risks,” she said.