

Vatican responds to Irish government report on clerical sexual abuse

VATICAN CITY - The Vatican forcefully denied it undermined the Irish bishops' efforts to protect children from sexual abuse and characterized as "unfounded" claims the Vatican tried to interfere in government investigations regarding church handling of sex abuse cases.

The Vatican recognizes "the seriousness of the crimes" detailed in a government report about cases in the Diocese of Cloyne, Ireland, and "has sought to respond comprehensively," said a communique released by the Vatican Sept. 3.

The communique accompanied a 19-page formal response to the Irish government's Cloyne Report on the diocese and to statements made by the Irish prime minister and motions passed by both houses of the Irish Parliament concerning the report and the Vatican's involvement in how cases were handled.

The Vatican said the report "brought to light very serious and disturbing failings in the handling of accusations of sexual abuse by children and young people by clerics in the Diocese of Cloyne," but it said the local bishop and his vicar general were to blame.

The formal "Response of the Holy See" was hand-delivered Sept. 3 by Monsignor Ettore Balestrero, undersecretary for relations with states, to Helena Keleher, charge d'affaires at the Irish Embassy to the Holy See in Rome, the Vatican said.

The Irish government's Cloyne Report was issued July 13 and said then-Bishop John Magee of Cloyne paid "little or no attention" to safeguarding children as recently as 2008. But the report also accused the Vatican of being "entirely unhelpful" to Irish bishops who wanted to implement stronger norms for dealing with accusations and protecting children.

Addressing Parliament July 20, Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny said the Cloyne

Report “exposes an attempt by the Holy See to frustrate an inquiry in a sovereign, democratic republic as little as three years ago.”

“And in doing so, the Cloyne Report excavates the dysfunction, disconnection, elitism and the narcissism that dominate the culture of the Vatican to this day,” the prime minister said.

A few days later, the Vatican took the unusual move of recalling its nuncio to Ireland, Archbishop Giuseppe Leanza, saying it signaled how seriously the Vatican took the government criticisms and how intent the Vatican was on drafting a comprehensive response to the Cloyne Report and the prime minister’s accusations.

The Vatican’s response was drafted by the Vatican Secretariat of State and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which handles cases of clerical sex abuse, with input from Archbishop Leanza, and the congregations for clergy and bishops, said Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman.

“The point of departure,” he said, “is the recognition of the reality of what occurred, the gravity and amount of abuse committed,” and, as the Cloyne Report demonstrated, the “deplorable” lack of serious action on the part of the bishop and diocesan officials, Father Lombardi said. “The seriousness and importance of these failures is not overlooked.”

The response emphasized three points:

- The Congregation for Clergy’s observations about potential problems in the Irish bishops’ 1996 child protection guidelines did not nullify the guidelines or prevent local bishops from adopting them in their dioceses.
- Church officials, including bishops, are required to follow their nation’s civil laws regarding mandatory reporting of crimes and are free to report crimes to police even when they are not required by law to do so.
- The sexual abuse of children is a crime both in civil law and in church law.

The response began by asserting the Vatican’s “abhorrence for the crimes of sexual abuse” that took place in Cloyne and other dioceses.

“The Holy See is sorry and ashamed for the terrible sufferings which the victims of abuse and their families have had to endure within the church of Jesus Christ, a place where this should never happen,” the response said.

The Vatican also said it “understands and shares the depth of public anger and frustration at the findings of the Cloyne Report,” saying those feelings were reflected in Prime Minister Kenny’s speech, although it did take issue with some points he made.

“In this regard, the Holy See wishes to make it quite clear that it in no way hampered or interfered in the inquiry into child sexual abuse cases in the Diocese of Cloyne. Furthermore, at no stage did it seek to interfere with Irish civil law or impede the civil authority in the exercise of its duties,” the response said.

In fact, it said, the Cloyne Report contains “no evidence to suggest that the Holy See meddled in the internal affairs of the Irish state or, for that matter, was involved in the day-to-day management of Irish dioceses or religious congregations with respect to sexual abuse issues.”

The Vatican said the drafters of the report and the Irish government officials critical of the Vatican misunderstood the Congregation for the Clergy’s observations about the Irish bishops’ 1996 guidelines and they misunderstood the technical nature of what constitutes an official document of a bishops’ conference with Vatican-approved norms binding on all the bishops.

The Irish bishops never asked for formal recognition of the guidelines, so “the Holy See cannot be criticized for failing to grant what was never requested in the first place,” the Vatican said. However, it added, each of the bishops, who have the power to institute norms for their own dioceses, knew they had the authority to adopt the norms for their own dioceses.

“The basic difficulty with regard to child protection” in Cloyne, it said, stemmed not from a lack of formal Vatican recognition of the guidelines, “but from the fact that, while the diocese claimed to follow the guidelines, in reality it did not.”

The Vatican acknowledged the Congregation for Clergy had expressed reservations

about mandatory reporting of abuse accusation to police or other civil authorities.

“This response should not be construed as implying that the congregation was forbidding reporting or in any way encouraging individuals, including clerics, not to cooperate with the Irish civil authorities, let alone disobey Irish civil law,” the Vatican said.

“It should be borne in mind that, without ever having to consult the Holy See, every bishop is free to apply the penal measures of canon law to offending priests and has never been impeded under canon law from reporting cases of abuse to the civil authorities,” the Vatican said.

The response also pointed out that at the time the congregation sent its observations to the Irish bishops, the Irish government had just set aside the idea of passing a mandatory reporting law because of serious reservations expressed in several sectors of Irish society. The Catholic bishops’ committee on child protection, however, had testified in favor of mandatory reporting, the Vatican said.

The Vatican response said, “The sexual abuse of children is a crime. It is a crime in civil law; it is a crime in canon law.”

Since 1994, when U.S. bishops formally requested special norms from the Vatican to deal with the sex abuse crisis, the Vatican has made a series of changes to church law and procedure to improve the protection of children and more swiftly remove from the priesthood abuse priests, the response said.

The Vatican said it “welcomes all objective and helpful observations and suggestions to combat with determination the appalling crime of sexual abuse of minors.”

“It also recognizes the understandable anger, disappointment and sense of betrayal of those affected – particularly the victims and their families – by these vile and deplorable acts and by the way in which they were sometimes handled by church authorities, and for all of this it wishes to reiterate its sorrow for what happened,” the response said.

The Vatican said it was “confident that the measures which the church has introduced in recent years at a universal level, as well as in Ireland, will prove more

effective in preventing the recurrence of these acts.”