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Reform group urges Church to examine its structures

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Following the Pope's recent Letter to Irish Catholics, Raquel Mallavibarrena, Coordinator of the International Movement We are Church has issued a statement urging the Church leaders to examine its structures. She said: "Rather than look for external causes of this very serious problem, the Church should urgently take a deep look at its own structures, without any prejudice or fear. Its credibility is very much in question at this moment."

It is deplorable that the Pope is not willing to hold ecclesiastical structures accountable for "the disturbing issue of sexual abuse of children", but rather shifts the guilt to social trends such as "fast-paced social change" and "ways of thinking and assessment of secular realities". To cite a "false reading" of the Second Vatican Council and its "program of renewal" as one of the causes, is outrageous.

The Pope accuses society of expecting too much from members of the clergy, in ethical terms, yet summons "the mystery of the priesthood" as a superior calling, effectively establishing that priests are to be considered as a special kind of human being.

This papal document addressed to the Irish bishops will not satisfy the faithful nor the many thousands of victims who demand resignations and structural reform. It is not enough to recommend as "concrete initiatives" traditional spiritual exercises, but no structural reforms.

The strong words of the Pope to the Catholics of Ireland cannot hide the fact that the Vatican is also responsible. The letter "De delictis gravioribus" signed on May 18th, 2001 by the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF), and by Tracisio Bertone, secretary of the same board, is particularly important in this matter, as it does not invite the Bishops to report crimes to civil authorities. Indeed, it imposes a "pontifical secrecy" ("secretum pontificium") about these questions.

Thus, bishops and nuncios were only following Vatican directives, even though this does not excuse them from not exercising pastoral care. The fact that so many followed Vatican directives, however, does make the Vatican complicit and responsible for the cover-up of sexual abuse. In view of these facts, the Pope should seek forgiveness from the Church, making a new beginning possible.

The way to forgiveness

Given the thousands of cases, particularly in Ireland and the United States, the question must be raised whether the number of 3,000 accusations in 50 years, as published by a representative of the CDF on March 13, 2010, is plausible. The CDF gives a false impression when it speaks of "only" 300 cases of pedophilia "in the strict sense" (defined as up to 14 years). The other cases are accusation of "sexual attraction to adolescents". These should be condemned as seriously as strict pedophilia.

The "zero-tolerance-policy" in earlier statements and applicable in the USA demanded by the Pope, is not mentioned explicitly in the letter. The bishops of the Roman Catholic Church are morally obliged to follow this.

The Catholic reform movement considers a review of the Church's sexual teaching essential. This must

include the question of mandatory celibacy in the Latin Church, which has already been suggested even by bishops and cardinals. Even if there is no simple causal relationship between mandatory celibacy and sexual violence, the law of mandatory celibacy is a visible expression of the hostility of a male church against sexuality and women. The lack of collegial and democratic structures as a means of making the ecclesial structures accountable to the laity is also a problem that should be taken into account. Only when the structural problems are acknowledged and addressed can the Church become credible and bring about forgiveness and reconciliation.

In this Lenten season, the institutional Church is summoned to repent and reform so that the Reign of God announced by Jesus of Nazareth, can be made more visible in the structures of the Roman Catholic Church.
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