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Bishops asked to be more proactive in support of Pope

Fr Tony Flannery calls on Irish bishops to 'put their shoulders behind Francis'

The meeting of Catholic Priests' Associations and Reform Groups called on bishops in their respective countries to "courageously and publicly" support the vision and programme of Pope Francis for the church.

An international gathering of Catholic Church reform movements has called on bishops to be more pro-active in support of Pope Francis and changes he is trying to bring about in the church.

In a joint statement on Thursday the meeting of Catholic Priests' Associations and Reform Groups called on bishops in their respective countries to "courageously and publicly" support the vision and programme of Pope Francis for the church.

"A key issue will be to devolve authority away from the Vatican to local churches. Connected to this is the need to enhance the authority of the local churches, especially parishes," it said.

The statement followed a three-day meeting in Limerick hosted by silenced Redemptorist priest Fr Tony Flannery and the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP).

It was attended by 40 representatives, clerical and lay, from priests' associations and lay reform groups in Austria, Australia, Germany, India, Italy, Slovakia, Switzerland, the UK and the US.

Among those attending will be Fr Donald Cozzens, Sr Jeannine Gramick, Deborah Rose-Milavec from the US, Fr Helmut Schüller from Austria, former priest Paul Collins and his wife Marilyn Hatton of the Australian Catholic Coalition of Church Renewal, DrAstrid Lbo Gajiwala from India, Christian Weisner and Martha Heizer of We Are Church International, Brendan Butler from We are Church Ireland.

With the resignation of Pope Benedict we are at the end of an era," Fr Flannery said, "and this is our best chance to renew the church for a long time."

He called on Ireland's Catholic bishops in particular to "put their shoulders behind Francis." He was "personally disappointed" that this had not been the case.

A major topic of the three-day event was the need for "full equality of women in church life."

The statement said that "during a very open and honest discussion, it became clear that there is much pain concerning the exclusion of women from governance, leadership and ordained ministry – and how that causes division and affects the entire life of the church."

He recalled how on Wednesday the issue of womens' place in the Church "surfaced in a way that was far deeper than anything I have understood up to this." One of the consequences was that "we were unable to celebrate Eucharist together, as we had planned, and instead had a prayer service. But that bald statement does little justice to the level of sharing that went on, and to the reasons why we felt we could not proceed," he said.

The meeting also called for the church to pay particular attention to women living in poverty, oppression and violence, while exhorting next October's synod on the family in Rome to ensure there was full participation in church life of Catholics who are LGBT, divorced and remarried, are members of inter-faith families, and other marginalised people.

On church governance generally the meeting called for more accountability from the hierarchy and respect for the rights of all Catholics to take part fully in church life. They also supported "a clear recognition of social justice and ecological issues."

Fr Brendan Hoban of the ACP expressed the "extreme disappointment" of Irish priests generally at the manner in which bishops had been appointed recently in Ireland.

They "saw difficulties with the Irish papal nuncio", not least when it came to consultation prior to the appointment of bishops, and were "very unhappy" that newly appointed bishops were "being moved from one part of the country to another." Also, they were "not particularly happy with personnel appointed."

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