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On 15 and 16 February 2010, the Holy Father met the Irish Bishops and senior members of the Roman Curia to discuss the serious situation which has emerged in the Church in Ireland. Together they examined the failure of Irish Church authorities for many years to act effectively in dealing with cases involving the sexual abuse of young people by some Irish clergy and religious. All those present recognized that this grave crisis has led to a breakdown in trust in the Church's leadership and has damaged her witness to the Gospel and its moral teaching.

The meeting took place in a spirit of prayer and collegial fraternity, and its frank and open atmosphere provided guidance and support to the Bishops in their efforts to address the situation in their respective Dioceses.

On the morning of 15 February, following a brief introduction by the Holy Father, each of the Irish Bishops offered his own observations and suggestions. The Bishops spoke frankly of the sense of pain and anger, betrayal, scandal and shame expressed to them on numerous occasions by those who had been abused. There was a similar sense of outrage reflected by laity, priests and religious in this regard.

The Bishops likewise described the support at present being provided by thousands of trained and dedicated lay

volunteers at parish level to ensure the safety of children in all Church activities, and stressed that, while there is no doubt that errors of judgement and omissions stand at the heart of the crisis, significant measures have now been taken to ensure the safety of children and young people. They also emphasized their commitment to cooperation with the statutory authorities in Ireland – North and South – and with the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland to guarantee that the Church's standards, policies and procedures represent best practice in this area.

For his part, the Holy Father observed that the sexual abuse of children and young people is not only a heinous crime, but also a grave sin which offends God and wounds the dignity of the human person created in his image. While realizing that the current painful situation will not be resolved quickly, he challenged the Bishops to address the problems of the past with determination and resolve, and to face the present crisis with honesty and courage. He also expressed the hope that the present meeting would help to unify the Bishops and enable them to speak with one voice in identifying concrete steps aimed at bringing healing to those who had been abused, encouraging a renewal of faith in Christ and restoring the Church's spiritual and moral credibility.

The Holy Father also pointed to the more general crisis of faith affecting the Church and he linked that to the lack of respect for the human person and how the weakening of faith has been a significant contributing factor in the phenomenon of the sexual abuse of minors. He stressed the need for a deeper theological reflection on the whole issue, and called for an improved human, spiritual, academic and pastoral preparation both of candidates for the priesthood and religious life and of those already ordained and professed.

The Bishops had an opportunity to examine and discuss a draft of the Pastoral Letter of the Holy Father to the Catholics of Ireland. Taking into account the comments of the Irish Bishops, His Holiness will now complete his Letter, which will be issued during the coming season of Lent.

The discussions concluded late Tuesday morning, 16 February 2010. As the Bishops return to their Dioceses, the Holy Father has asked that this Lent be set aside as a time for imploring an outpouring of God's mercy and the Holy Spirit's gifts of holiness and strength upon the Church in Ireland.

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