

“Ireland Stand Up”

96,000 postcards have been sent to Ireland’s prime minister protesting the closing of country’s Embassy to the Holy See.



The Irish Government is coming under increased pressure to reverse a controversial decision to close the country’s Embassy to the Holy See.

Dozens of parliamentarians – including many from the Fine Gael and Labour coalition parties - attended a meeting in Dublin January 18 called to highlight opposition to the closure and some 96,000 postcards have been sent to Prime Minister Enda Kenny by members of several different lay initiatives and individual Catholics protesting the move.

‘Ireland Stand Up’ is campaigning for the closure of the embassy to be reversed and for the Government to issue an invitation for Pope Benedict XVI to visit the country.

Foreign Minister Eamon Gilmore announced in November 2011 that the Government had decided to close the Embassy to the Vatican citing pressure on government finances. However, it was widely regarded as a snub to the Holy See and to Pope Benedict XVI following a row over a judicial report into mishandling of abuse in the Cloyne Diocese.

The report – issued in July 2011 – said the Vatican had been “entirely unhelpful” to Irish bishops drawing up guidelines to tackle abuse. It cited a letter from then Papal Nuncio to Ireland Archbishop Luciano Storero which told Irish bishops that an insistence on mandatory reporting of allegations might contravene Canon Law.

Prime Minister Kenny made an unprecedented attack accusing the Vatican of adopting a “calculated, withering position”. During a July 20 parliamentary debate, Mr. Kenny said the “Cloyne Report excavates the dysfunction, disconnection, elitism and the narcissism that dominate the culture of the Vatican to this day,” he said.

The report, published July 13, found that Cloyne Bishop John Magee, a former secretary to three popes, paid “little or no attention” to child safeguarding as recently as 2008. It said he falsely told the Government that his diocese was reporting all allegations of clerical child sexual abuse to the civil authorities. It also found that the bishop deliberately misled another inquiry and his own advisers by creating two different accounts - one for the Vatican and the other for diocesan files - of a meeting with a priest-suspect.

Mr. Kenny’s speech led the Vatican to formally recall Papal Nuncio Archbishop Giuseppe Leanza to prepare a response but also to note “surprise and disappointment at certain excessive reactions”.

When the Vatican did issue a comprehensive 25-page response highlighting inaccuracies in the Prime Minister’s speech and pointing out that Ireland had consistently refused to legislate for mandatory reporting, it was dismissed by the Government as “too legalistic”. Within weeks the closure of the Holy See Embassy was announced.

Now, in an embarrassing twist for the Government, almost a third (82 of 226) members of parliament attended the protest meeting organised by Catholic lay group ‘Ireland Stand Up’. Minister for Europe Lucinda Creighton, who was the most senior Government figure to attend the meeting, told Catholic World Report “I think it’s important that the Government is aware that there’s a very strong, and important and sizeable amount of people who are disappointed with the decision and want to see it overturned and who clearly aren’t happy.

“I’m very much committed to ensuring that at a point in the future when we’re in a position to do it, that we will re-open our embassy to the Holy See,” she said.

Minister Creighton insisted that an Embassy to the Holy See is “very important, not just for Catholics in Ireland, but for the Department of Foreign Affairs strategy.

“Our foreign policy agenda is at one with the Vatican. When it comes to the priorities for us, human rights, hunger, all of these freedoms that we promote all over the world, particularly in Africa, we do it hand in hand, side by side with the Vatican.

“For that reason, from a strictly foreign affairs perspective, I think it would be very desirable in the future to step up our relations with the Vatican again. Now is obviously not going to be possible, but certainly in due course... At that point, I’ll certainly be one of the loud voices calling for it to happen,” she said.

Colm Keaveney, a representative for the Labour Party – who’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Eamon Gilmore made the decision – rejected the claim that the closure was necessary for economic reasons. “It’s very easy to say we can’t afford this, I believe we can afford this,” he told the meeting.

The postcard campaign, which is being coordinated by ‘Ireland Stand Up’, is also calling on the Government to invite Pope Benedict XVI to Dublin to preside at the International Eucharistic Congress which will be held in June.

The Holy See was one of the first states that Ireland established full diplomatic relations with in 1929, just seven years after winning independence from Britain. However, when the first ambassador Joseph Walshe was presenting his credentials to Pope Pius XI in 1929 he spoke of “re-establishing” the relationship. He was referring to Cardinal Giovanni Battista Rinuccini, first papal nuncio to Ireland, sent by Pope Innocent X to help the Irish Confederate Catholics in their war against English Protestant rule.

Irish Catholics have been bruised and bloodied in recent years by the seemingly endless stream of revelations about clerical sexual abuse and the often reckless mishandling of allegations by bishops and religious superiors. The hierarchy’s reputation lies in tatters. Referring to the Church in Ireland Pope Benedict himself has noted that the scandals “have obscured the light of the Gospel to a degree that not even centuries of persecution succeeded in doing”.

The energy around the campaign to restore the Holy See Embassy has surprised many. “Ordinary Catholics seem to have found a voice around this issue,” notes David Quinn of the think-tank The Iona Institute.

Mr. Quinn told Catholic World Report that “the campaign may well be evidence that Catholics realize they must stand up if their voice is to be heard”.

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, Mr. Quinn believes, “the shattered reputation of the hierarchy may succeed in convincing laypeople to become more involved in defending their faith”.

Spokesperson for ‘Ireland Stand Up’ Mary Fitzgibbon said she has been overwhelmed by the support of Catholics across Ireland for their campaign. She was also heartened by the positive reaction of so many lawmakers. “I think they are taking it very seriously. They were very much open to dialogue,” she said.

In a sign of just how serious the campaign is being taken at Government level the country’s most senior diplomat David Cooney was also present to listen to concerns, which he promised to bring to the Foreign Minister. A senior adviser to Prime Minister Kenny, John Kennedy, also met representatives from the group.

Opposition politicians are also determined that the issue will not be allowed to be ignored. Seán Ó Fearghaíl, Foreign Affairs spokesman for the main Fianna Fáil opposition party has accused the Government of “playing politics with a very important relationship”.

He said “many people throughout the country – practicing Catholics and also those who have a respect for the role the Church plays in world affairs – are hurt and offended by the closure of the Embassy to the Vatican,” Mr. Ó Fearghaíl said.

Mr. Ó Fearghaíl’s assessment is borne out by many of the people who turned up to lobby their

politicians. One woman, who wished to be identified only as Mary, said: “I’ve been a practicing Catholic my whole life. Like everyone else I’ve been annoyed and upset by the scandals, but the decision to close the Embassy to the Holy See is silly point-scoring. We have to take a stance”.

Documents recently released under Ireland’s Freedom of Information (FoI) legislation also indicate that the Government is significantly out-of-step with Irish public opinion on the issue. The records show that the decision was met with overwhelming opposition from the public with over 93% criticizing the move.

Writing on the embassy closure, one member of the public claimed Mr. Gilmore had a “raw hatred” of the Catholic Church and compared him to Oliver Cromwell who was responsible for persecution of Irish Catholics during the seventeenth century.

Another claimed the Government was using the clerical child sexual abuse scandals as “cover” to wage a “vendetta” against the Church.

Several citizens questioned the economic rationale that the Foreign Minister put forward for closing the embassy, and said Ireland’s foreign policy efforts would ultimately suffer.

The released records showed that that 93.1% of the responses were critical with 6.9% of the correspondence received being supportive.

For his part Mr. Gilmore appears to be adopting a softer line than his initial stance, with his spokesman insisting “he would have preferred if Ireland could have maintained an embassy to the Holy See.

“However, given the economic situation and a very tight budget for running such missions, it was one of the regrettable decisions that we had to make,” the spokesman concluded.

It’s too soon to say whether or not ‘Ireland Stand Up’ represents a sign of a resurgent lay faithful in Ireland. The Church in the land of saints and scholars could certainly do with a shot in the arm. Much has changed since Archbishop Giovanni Battista Montini (later Pope Paul VI) told Irish officials in 1946 “you are the most Catholic country in the world!” Ireland is currently in the grip of the same tide of secularism that is affecting most of the Western world. Bowed by a combination of the dominant secular culture and scandal the Church has struggled to find a voice. ‘Ireland Stand Up’ just might be the beginning of a green shoot of hope.

(Michael Kelly writes from Dublin.)

Michael Kelly - The Catholic World Report