

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **"Enough is Enough. We Must Now Prioritise Children in Ireland."**

#### **Barnardos Responds to the Commission of Inquiry into the Dublin Diocese**

**Dublin, 26 November 2009** - Barnardos today welcomed the long awaited publication of the Commission of Inquiry into the Dublin Diocese report, particularly welcoming the report's inclusion of strong and unequivocal statements regarding the collusion of State and Church authorities to protect institutions to the detriment of the protection of children. The children's charity renewed calls for the strengthening of children's rights and child protection across Ireland.

Speaking after the publication of the report, Fergus Finlay, Barnardos' CEO said: "Our thoughts are with the victims of clerical child abuse and their families today and indeed with all victims of abuse. We commend their courage and only they fully appreciate the full cost to them of their blighted childhood. Many have had to fight long and hard to have their experiences recognised by the institutions that protected their abusers and operated a strict 'don't ask, don't tell' policy. It is disturbing and beyond understanding that Ireland's civil authorities thought that priests were outside their remit and therefore child abusers were insulated from investigation."

"It is deeply distressing to have yet further evidence of the complete failure of the Catholic Church, the Gardaí and the State to adequately protect children. It is abundantly clear that the Church priority in all instances of complaints about child sexual abuse was the protection of the institution rather than the welfare of the children in its communities. It is truly unacceptable that children who had already experienced trauma at the hands of the clergy were then subject to treatment which compounded that trauma as their experiences were denied or fobbed off and the perpetrators moved to other communities without supervision and were allowed to prey on other children."

The report outlines some stark statistics as to the level and protracted abuse visited on the vulnerable. One priest abused more than 100 children, while another priest abused children over a 25 year period and one child victim was abused by two priests.

Norah Gibbons, Barnardos' Director of Advocacy, elaborated: "Barnardos can only agree with the Commission that the claims of ignorance by the Church is hard to accept and that the Church allowed evil to triumph over the common good and the welfare of children. A finding that the majority of priests turned a blind eye to child abuse is a telling comment on the culture of the institution and its members."

"It is very clear to us that the Diocesan report further highlights the terrible consequences of silencing children's voices and the urgent need for systems to redress this. It is imperative that Government introduce legislation to put the

Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children on statutory footing to strengthen the protection available to all children at risk of abuse, as was recommended in the Ryan Implementation Plan published earlier this year. This statutory obligation must apply to all those who work with or have care of children and must not be confined in any way. The protection of children is the responsibility of every member of society. We have to ensure that no organisation or individual can cover up or minimise child abuse. We must also ensure that every report that is made to the authorities is fully assessed and followed up in a timely and appropriate manner. Children in Ireland have had to wait far too long for adequate systems of protection from abuse. It is now time to make them the priority and to act swiftly to ensure that children are afforded all the protection that we as a society can provide and that they deserve."

Mr. Finlay concluded: "As a nation we need to seriously reflect on the societal priorities which allowed Church hierarchies to act above the law in the protection of their own reputation at the expense of children's childhoods. We must act to redress the dreadful imbalance that allowed those who deserve all the protection adults can give to be sacrificed for other agendas. Until we embed the precious nature of childhood and the fundamental importance of children's rights in the very fabric of our law and society, Ireland will continue to fail children. Children's voices must be put at the heart of policy and practice and must be reflected in the Irish Constitution. This year we have had more proof than we should ever have needed of the crucial importance of holding a referendum to include children's rights in the Constitution. 2010 must be the year we make good on this promise. Children have waited a long time and suffered enough. Now is the time to act."

In response to comments made by Government at the launch of the Commission's report, Barnardos recommended that when the new HSE audit of each Diocese of the Catholic Church is published active consideration must be given to a similar inquiry in any diocese where child protection has not been fully and properly notified to the authorities in a timely manner.

Barnardos, in recognition of the trauma caused to children by abuse in the first instance and the need to minimise any further trauma in the way that child abuse is investigated, called on the Government to consider the adequacy of our present systems to respond to child abuse and to ensure that responsive systems for child abuse victims are established in each region of Ireland. All children who suffer abuse should have access to quality, standard child protection systems at each stage of the process. In other jurisdictions the creation of specialised multidisciplinary teams to bring together law enforcement, child protection services, prosecution services, medical personnel and mental health staff has contributed to the provision of quality, standardised responses for children who have suffered abuse.

**ENDS**

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Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.