

Introduction

43.1 Fr Dante was born in 1946 in the UK and ordained in 1973. He held various appointments throughout the Dublin Archdiocese as chaplain and curate. He suffered from stress related problems and was not always active in his roles. He retired from the Archdiocese in March 2005 on the grounds of ill health. He returned to live in his family home in the UK.

43.2 Four complaints against Fr Dante are known to the Commission. Three of the allegations relate to a trip to France for altar boys in 1985 which was chaperoned by Fr Dante. The fourth is unrelated to the trip. Fr Dante has always strenuously denied the allegations made against him.

First Allegation, 1995

43.3 There are three complaints or expressions of concern in relation to a trip to France by altar boys from the parish in which Fr Dante was a curate in 1985. The first was made in December 1995 and was more of an expression of concern than a complaint or allegation. A boy who had been on this trip told the Archdiocese that, beforehand, he and another senior altar boy would spend time in Fr Dante's house organising the trip and Fr Dante would have them sit on his knee. The former altar boy was also concerned about some of the more unusual rules of the trip. One rule was that underwear could not be worn when the altar boys reached the continent, that all boys were to sleep naked and that the bathroom door was to be left open when showering so Fr Dante could "*check*" on the boys. Punishment was to be smacking on the bare bottom. The former altar boy stated that he was once punished in this way and "*something about it didn't feel quite right*".

43.4 Monsignor Dolan visited this former altar boy and spoke to him and to his father. It emerged that another parent had expressed concerns about Fr Dante's behaviour. The former altar boy also told Monsignor Dolan that the boys had to undress in front of Fr Dante at night and that a different boy had to sleep in the same bed as Fr Dante each night due to a shortage of beds. This was also allegedly used as a form of punishment.

¹¹¹ This is a pseudonym.

43.5 In March 1997, Archbishop Connell asked Bishop Eamonn Walsh to speak to Fr Dante about this expression of concern. Fr Dante denied the allegations, saying that there may have been threats made about punishment but nothing of an untoward nature occurred. Bishop Walsh concluded that the alleged incidents could be viewed as in the nature of strict discipline or containing some sort of gratification. It was seen as inappropriate behaviour rather than child sexual abuse. Monsignor Dolan interviewed Fr Dante about the specific aspects of the altar boy's statement. Fr Dante first denied having the boys sit on his knee, making the boys sleep naked or punishing on the bare bottom. However, over the course of the meeting, his account changed somewhat. He said the boys did not wear underwear in order to prevent their clothes getting wet during the day. The confined space meant clothes were hung on the bathroom door, therefore the door was left open during showering to prevent the clothes getting wet. He claimed there was always another boy present when this occurred. He conceded that he was very focused on disciplining the boys. As it was often difficult to catch them, he admitted that he may have slapped them as they ran from the shower but he could not remember doing so.

43.6 Monsignor Dolan believed these to be reasonable explanations. He noted that a print-out of the rules of the trip did not correspond to the altar boy's description of the rules. However, he was concerned that Fr Dante had given an altered account of his approach to discipline as their meeting progressed and there were, at this stage, two independent allegations of sitting on the priest's knee (the second one is the second allegation described below). Monsignor Dolan concluded that the case did not pass the threshold of suspicion of child sexual abuse but he suggested, among other things, that an assessment would be appropriate.

43.7 Shortly after the meeting, it was confirmed to Monsignor Dolan that Fr Dante would be attending the Granada Institute. Fr Dante believed this would be better for him and the diocese as it would help him cope with his stress problems. He was treated in Granada for the following seven months. A psychological report issued in August 1998 stated that, while Fr Dante suffered from stress and was pre-disposed to depressive moods, there was *"no evidence to suggest that [Fr Dante] is erotically attracted to children"*.

The report concluded however that it would be prudent for him not to minister to children given the nature of the allegations. Fr Dante was allowed to return to ministry and was appointed curate in another parish from 1 September 1999. He did not take up the appointment due to “*severe stress*”. He was receiving medical attention for his health problems and was living in diocesan accommodation. He was appointed a parish chaplain and chaplain to a hospital in July 2000. It seems that he actually carried out relatively little pastoral work in the parish because of his health problems; he did most of his work in the hospital.

Second allegation

43.8 Meanwhile, a second allegation was made which was unrelated to the trip to France. In 1996, a woman informed Monsignor Dolan that there had been an incident with her son and Fr Dante when her son was ten years old. She alleged that approximately five years previously Fr Dante had invited her son over to his house to learn about computers. On his second visit, Fr Dante allegedly invited the boy to sit on his knee. The boy refused and there was no further contact between the pair. The mother was adamant that the matter be kept in the strictest of confidence; she did not want her son to be questioned. The Archdiocese put this allegation to Fr Dante as part of its broader investigation. He expressed surprise that he had not been informed of the allegation sooner.

Third allegation

43.9 In late 2002, a third allegation, which was the second one concerning the trip to France in 1985, emerged. At some stage in 2002, a mother had spoken to a curate in her parish about incidents with her son during the trip to France in 1985. These were similar to those already reported. In December 2002, the allegations were brought to the attention of the parish priest who immediately contacted Fr Paddy Gleeson, one of the delegates at the time. Fr Gleeson met the curate and it emerged that this mother had brought her allegations to the attention of another priest approximately four years previously, in 1998. However, at that time she had requested that the matter stay confidential and so the Archdiocese had not been made aware of her complaint. The other priest confirmed that she had brought the matter to his attention. The curate had offered her the Faoiseamh helpline number and she in turn gave this to her son.

43.10 Fr Gleeson met the mother in January 2003. She alleged that, even before the trip to France, concerns had been voiced among the parents about Fr Dante's behaviour around children. She made the same allegations regarding the rules of the trip as were made in the first allegation but also spoke of one specific incident when Fr Dante had allegedly been aroused while disciplining her son. She claimed that all the boys ceased being altar servers after the trip. Her son was interviewed the following day. He reiterated his mother's allegation and added some further information. He, like the second complainant, claimed that he would be invited to sit on Fr Dante's knee when using the computer. On these occasions, Fr Dante's hands would be "*all over the place*". He alleged that, even before the trip to France, Fr Dante would be around the boys at football training watching them undress and checking if they were wearing underwear by pulling down the front of their shorts. He said the boys were aware of Fr Dante's habits before going to France but they really wanted to go on the trip.

Fourth allegation

43.11 In January 2003, while the third allegation was being investigated, the parish priest spoke to the father of another altar boy. The father asked his son if he had seen anything on the trip to France. His son alleged that the boys had slept two to a bed and were made to sleep naked. He further alleged that Fr Dante had always slept with one of the boys. On a separate occasion when this boy was staying with Fr Dante, he had to undress in his presence. This was not investigated as a separate allegation by the Archdiocese as no formal complaint was made but it did strengthen the credibility of the other complainants.

The garda investigation

43.12 The Archdiocese informed the Gardaí of the third allegation in January 2003. In a follow-up letter Fr Gleeson asked, at the request of Cardinal Connell, that the Gardaí not contact Fr Dante until the diocese had informed him of the new complaint as the Cardinal was concerned about his unstable health. The Gardaí were also told of the other allegations/expressions of concern in relation to the trip to France.

43.13 The Gardaí began their investigation as soon as Fr Dante had been informed of the new complaint. They notified the HSE of suspected child sexual abuse in early March 2003. They interviewed the third complainant in April 2003 but he refused to sign his statement saying that he did not want to pursue the matter; he merely wanted to bring it to the attention of the Gardaí. His mother was also interviewed. In addition to what she had told Fr Gleeson, she informed Gardaí that, before the trip, Fr Dante had called to the house with a list of rules saying that he would collect the boys' clothes at night to prevent them getting out and that he had the right to punish the boys and hold their pocket money. In May 2004, the Gardaí concluded that no criminal offence had been disclosed as the third complainant would not make a formal complaint. However, the Gardaí did express concern at the inappropriate behaviour and this was notified to the health board. The Child Protection Service of the Archdiocese was informed of the outcome of the garda investigation and the conclusion was that child protection concerns should remain.

The Archdiocese's response

43.14 Fr Dante's case was considered at a meeting in Archbishop's House in January 2003. The following day, Fr Dante was again interviewed. He now said that printed rules were given to all parents before the trip and that one boy had an accident on the trip and spent the night sleeping on the floor beside his bed as he needed to be monitored. He categorically denied the allegations of the third complainant and suggested that he and the boy had had a run-in which resulted in the boy being expelled from school.

43.15 Fr Dante was asked to step aside from ministry and he agreed to do this. He was also advised to seek legal advice. The case was referred to the advisory panel. The panel agreed that the correct procedures were being followed and it recommended that the hospital at which Fr Dante had been a chaplain should be informed. It was decided that the diocese should conduct its own investigation and, in this respect, the parish priest of his current parish should make discreet inquiries as to any further allegations. Those who had raised expressions of concern were to be informed that a formal complaint had been made. These recommendations were immediately acted upon. The health board and the hospital were informed.

43.16 Fr Dante began attending treatment sessions at the Granada Institute in March 2003. During his time in treatment, a health board child care manager sought clarification from the Archdiocese on what measures had been taken to ensure that Fr Dante was no longer a threat to children. Fr Gleeson replied, telling her that Fr Dante had been asked to step aside from ministry, had been referred to Granada for risk assessment, had been moved to alternative accommodation across the city and had been assigned a priest advisor. The matter came before the advisory panel again in August 2003 where it was noted that Fr Dante was continuing to deny the allegations but had been attending Granada, where he had suggested that he would be happy to retire from the priesthood.

43.17 A report from Granada was sent to the Archdiocese in February 2004. This showed that Fr Dante consistently denied any sexual abuse although he did accept the reasons for his ministerial restrictions regarding contact with minors. He also consistently denied any erotic interest in children. Fr Dante had told Granada that he had rigorously adhered to the restrictions imposed on him. Granada concluded that his isolation meant his health problems were entering a chronic pattern and recommended that he be allowed retire. It suggested that it would be desirable both socially and mentally for him to return to the UK to be near his family. In March 2004, Fr Dante requested retirement from the priesthood on the basis of his poor health. He asked that he be permitted to return to the UK to be near his niece who was a nurse and could monitor his health problems.

43.18 His request for retirement went before the advisory panel. It was recommended that the precept under which he was living be maintained (that is, no ministry) and the implications of providing proper supervision in the UK be considered. The Gardaí and the health board were to be asked for their views of such a move. In June 2004, the advisory panel went a step further and concluded that specific recommendations would be needed from the Child Protection Service as to the safest arrangements for his move. The health board told the Archdiocese that if Fr Dante were to move to the UK then all those with whom he would be living or would have contact would need to be informed of the allegations against him. However, Fr Dante himself would first need to be informed that this was happening.

43.19 Fr Dante was notified of the requirements of a move to the UK diocese at the end of May 2004. He resisted the notification requirements as stated by the health board and suggested he would seek legal advice on the issue. He met Philip Garland, Director of the Child Protection Service, in July 2004. Mr Garland explained that the notification requirements were essential. Fr Dante again denied all allegations made against him.

43.20 His formal request for retirement was sent to Archbishop Martin in September 2004 and was considered by the bishops. The advisory panel recommended that full retirement be supported by the Archdiocese. In early December it recommended that a formal precept be put in place which would be explicit about the need to avoid any unsupervised contact with minors and restrictions on providing any ministry for him. It also recommended that the Child Protection Service maintain contact with its UK counterpart. The Archbishop also requested that Fr Dante's niece be informed. Fr Dante did not want her informed and he said that he would inform his sister. The advisory panel recommended that his sister be fully briefed on his retirement. In this respect, the panel believed it would be prudent for the delegate to be present when Fr Dante informed his sister.

43.21 Fr Dante returned to the UK in February 2005. The Child Protection Co-ordinator for the diocese to which he was moving was informed that he would be moving to the diocese and of the child protection concerns that had been raised about him. A canonical precept was drawn up and approved by both the Dublin Archdiocese and the UK diocese to which he was moving. The precept laid down the following conditions:

- no public masses to be celebrated; he could do so in private but only those who were aware of his situation could attend;
- no permission to celebrate other Sacraments except the Sacrament of Penance in situations of danger of death;
- permission must be sought from the delegate of the Dublin Archdiocese to celebrate family occasions. The permission of the local bishop of the relevant jurisdiction should also be sought;
- no unsupervised contact formal or informal with minors;
- no clerical garb;
- must co-operate with the representatives of the relevant dioceses.

43.22 This was followed by a behavioural contract between Fr Dante and the parish in the UK in which he would be living. This specified that he:

- was not to wear clerical garb or involve himself in any liturgical activities in the parish community;
- was not to celebrate mass in public; he could celebrate in a private room and in the company of those aware of the reasons for his retirement;
- was to sit separately from children and families when attending mass in the parish;
- was to accept the advice of the parish clergy about what mass to attend;
- was to never be alone with children and must avoid any occasion where this may accidentally occur;
- was to make a conscious effort to avoid befriending those who would have regular visits from children;
- communicate any change of address or visit to another parish to the local clergy.

43.23 Shortly afterwards, the delegate in the UK diocese reported that Fr Dante was still in denial and had failed to inform his sister of the allegations. The advisory panel's concerns were vindicated. The UK delegate then briefed the sister due to his concern for her grandchildren who regularly visited. He also said that the information about Fr Dante would have to be shared with the parish deacon and the child protection representative but nobody else. The Dublin delegate responded by acknowledging the difficulty now faced by Fr Dante's family and agreeing that perhaps it should have been made a condition of his retirement that the Archdiocese be allowed to inform his family before the move to the UK. In April 2005, the UK diocese delegate told the Dublin delegate that Fr Dante's sister was shocked by the allegations; she was very angry at having been expected to look after him and she had confirmed that she would not take responsibility for being his monitor.

43.24 Fr Dante was nominated as a beneficiary of the Clerical Fund Society from 1 May 2005.

The Commission's assessment

- 43.25 The complaints were dealt with by the Archdiocese appropriately and in accordance with the *Framework Document*. The Gardaí also dealt with them appropriately.
- 43.26 There was good communications between the Archdiocese, the Gardaí and the health board. There was also good communication between the Archdiocese and the UK diocese. The advisory panel was particularly effective in ensuring that this communication occurred and was clearly very aware of the need not to rely on Fr Dante himself to communicate with relevant people.
- 43.27 This case again raises the difficulty as to how the activities of priests accused of child sexual abuse are to be monitored. In this particular case, it appears that everything possible that could be done was done but the end result is that a priest about whom there are concerns is now living in an unsupervised regime.