

DIOCESE OF PAISLEY



PASTORAL LETTER
BY

THE RT. REV. PHILIP TARTAGLIA
BISHOP OF PAISLEY

ON

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time
18th February 2007

My dear brothers and sisters,

It is with growing concern that I raise with you the issue of the religious freedom of the Catholic Church in the United Kingdom.

Genesis of the problem

Recent news coverage has brought to our attention the issue of Catholic adoption agencies. New regulations, which aim to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in the provision of goods and services, are to be introduced by the Government at Westminster, based on the Equality Act 2006. These regulations will force Catholic adoption agencies to place children with same-sex couples and thereby go against the teaching and practice of the Catholic Church. The future of these Catholic adoption agencies is now under review and the bishops are currently studying how to proceed for the best.

Heart of the matter

I want you to be clear about these 4 points especially:

1. The Catholic Church agrees that it is wrong to practice unjust discrimination against people on the grounds of sexual orientation.
2. Given that no one has the right to be an adoptive parent, Catholic Adoption Agencies base their practice on the Church's faith and teaching that the best place to bring up a child is with a mother and father who are married. Catholic agencies wish to remain free to continue that practice.
3. The Catholic Church cannot but recognise that, against our advice and against the advice of many, adoption by same-sex couples is now legal in this country.
4. The Catholic Church believes, however, that regulations which force the Catholic Church and individual Catholics to act against their religious convictions to implement this policy offend against religious freedom and against freedom of conscience.

Wider implications

We also need to be attentive to the wider issues. We cannot but sense that something sinister is happening. For the first time in the modern era in this country, the Catholic Church is facing the prospect of being forced to act against her faith and against her convictions, or else face legal challenge and possible prosecution. This is a deeply disturbing turn of events and it is not yet clear what kind of precedent this may set for other areas of the pastoral and social activity of the Catholic Church.

What can we do?

We must of course defend ourselves by all legitimate democratic means. The bishops have made and continue to make representations to those in power. It is the right and duty of the Catholic faithful to make their concerns known to their elected representatives in local government, in the Scottish Parliament and at Westminster. I strongly encourage you to write to your Councillors, MPs, MSPs and Members of the House of Lords making the point that regulations deriving from equality legislation are unacceptable if they damage religious freedom and the right of conscience.

(A sample letter is attached.)

A call to renewal of faith in Jesus Christ

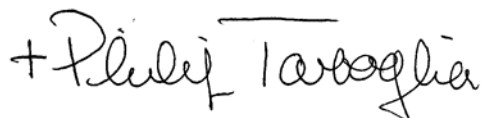
I am convinced that the Church needs to be prepared spiritually to face this new, unexpected and unwelcome threat to her freedom and well-being. We are so much at home in contemporary society that we probably have not seen this coming. Our normal and preferred way of working is to cooperate with the authorities for the common good. So we are perhaps still inclined to deny that government is acting unjustly towards us.

While we need to be realistic about the seriousness of this matter, we must also resist the temptation to disengage from the world. That would only play into the hands of those who want to push the Church to the margins of society. We must press ever forward with hope and joy to bring God's love to the world and so to lighten the burdens of our fellow human beings.

We also need to be aware that affluence, prosperity, aspiration and a pervasive spirit of relativism may tempt some to set aside the principles and values of Catholic faith and life. The present disturbing turn of events, therefore, also contains a call to the Church to a renewal of faith in Jesus Christ and of witness to his gospel.

Finally, this unfortunate episode may well herald the beginning of a new and uncertain time for the Catholic Church in the United Kingdom. We take heart, however, from the sure knowledge that, in all circumstances, favourable or unfavourable, we can count on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to console and guide his Church. May Mary, help of Christians, pray for us.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Philip Tartaglia". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Philip Tartaglia
Bishop of Paisley

Sample Letter

Dear

Sexual Orientation Regulations

I am greatly concerned that the proposed equality regulations on goods and services will force individuals to act contrary to their conscience. This is a serious assault on democratic freedom and I urge you to act to protect the freedom of conscience of all people in the United Kingdom.

Freedom of conscience is a basic human right which should be protected by all governments. Catholic citizens are committed to a just society where all are treated fairly. The new laws will now make Catholic beliefs on family life unacceptable in public life. This is a grave injustice and contrary to the claims of the government that they wish to promote equality and oppose discrimination.

I ask you to help ensure that those who believe in the traditional family values of our society will not be persecuted for failing to comply with what is effectively a government enforced morality.

Yours faithfully,

Letter can be sent to MPs, Members of the House of Lords, MSPs and Councillors

**The House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA**

**The House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW**

**The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP**