



Ms Patricia McKeever
The Editor
Catholic Truth
10 Sandyford Place
Glasgow G3 7NB

15th July 2013

Dear Ms McKeever,

The Catholic Legislators' Network is an informal, cross-party and completely independent Network, membership of which is open to any Member of either the House of Commons or the House of Lords who considers themselves to be a Roman Catholic. We enjoy excellent links with the Hierarchy of the Church whose support, encouragement and nurturing both of the Network's Mission and of the role of Catholics in public life is greatly appreciated.

Both Houses of Parliament have been called upon recently to debate and divide upon the principle and the details of the proposed legislation to make statutory provision for same sex marriage. Throughout these debates I have personally taken a high profile stand against the principle of this legislation. A large number of Catholic Parliamentarians took a similar position, but others took a different view and felt that they should either vote to support the principle of the legislation or to abstain in some or all of the divisions.

The shared experience of Catholic Parliamentarians, whichever way they chose to vote, has been that these decisions were hugely important and most difficult. I know from private conversations with a large number of Catholic colleagues that the overwhelming majority, indeed all those to whom I have spoken, reached their final position in relation to this measure only after carefully informing, intensely examining and then voting in accordance with their conscience – an approach which our Church not only permits, but in fact demands.

Indeed, the Church has always affirmed that we must not deliberately act against the certain judgment of our consciences (cf. Catechism, nos. 1790, 1800). Saint Bonaventure, the great thirteenth-century Franciscan scholar and doctor of the Church, put it this way:

"Conscience is like God's herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God's authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience has binding force."

More recently, one of the principal documents of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, devoted an entire paragraph (no. 16) to the subject of conscience. It is worth quoting in full:



“Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged (cf. Rom. 2:15-16). His conscience is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and of one’s neighbor (cf. Mt. 22:37-40; Gal. 5:14). Through loyalty to conscience Christians are joined to other men in the search for truth and for the right solution to so many moral problems which arise both in the life of individuals and from social relationships. Hence, the more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and try to be guided by the objective standards of moral conduct. Yet it often happens that conscience goes astray through ignorance which it is unable to avoid, without thereby losing its dignity. This cannot be said of the man who takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin.”

Whilst I could continue to quote extensively from the magisterium of the Church, I would cite only one more of many passages, this one from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Note on “some questions regarding The Participation of Catholics in Political Life” published in November 2002 by the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger:

“Living and acting in conformity with one’s own conscience on questions of politics is not slavish acceptance of positions alien to politics or some kind of confessionism, but rather the way in which Christians offer their concrete contribution so that, through political life, society will become more just and more consistent with the dignity of the human person.”

Colleagues have observed that in reaching their difficult and different decisions they weighed carefully many conflicting arguments, not least the observation that the measure does not affect in any way sacramental marriage as recognised by our Church.

For all these reasons, I write now to register the profound concern, bordering on the repugnance, with which I read the online petition¹ which suggests that Parliamentarians who voted in favour of the legislation in question are “manifest public sinners” who should be denied Holy Communion. I note that there is a link on the home page of your web site promoting this petition and a link on the petition to your web site.

I have also been appalled by the tone and content of a number of emails and other communications which have been sent to my Parliamentary colleagues by supporters of your initiative, including some items over your own signature, which endorse the petition and your Society, which go on to refer to my colleagues as “dissidents” and reiterate your calls for them to be denied Communion.

Quite what you were seeking to achieve by this ill-informed, confrontational and condemnatory approach I cannot imagine. What I can tell you is that by the tone and content of your communications you bring our Church into disrepute in the eyes of some Parliamentarians and of the wider community.



What I find particularly bizarre and ill-informed is that you should seek from a Scottish organisation to dictate to Members of Parliament in Westminster how they should vote in relation to a measure which does not apply to Scotland.

It is judgemental communications of the kind that you have been sending which, during the course of debates on these measures, have so negatively influenced Parliamentarians, politicians and commentators that the arguments you seek to promote on the measure itself, and which I have supported, have become increasingly dismissed. In short, it is tactics such as yours which have increased, not decreased the prospects of this measure receiving Royal Assent.

Let me be blunt, as Convenor of the Catholic Legislators' Network I can tell you categorically and unambiguously, that neither I nor my colleagues, however they chose finally to vote on these matters, will be bullied by you, or by any other extremist organisation that may seek to intimidate them.

In short, you should be ashamed of the damage you have done to our Church and its reputation.

I look forward to your retraction and apology.

Yours sincerely,

Rob Ffello

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ⁱ <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/discipline-dissenters-apply-church-law/>