

Catholics Decry Discrimination against Christians in Europe

On 10th October, the EPP and ECR Groups in the European Parliament joined up with the Commission of Catholic Bishops' Conferences in Europe, known as COMECE, to sponsor a seminar on Discrimination of Christians on the continent. Christians are feeling increasingly marginalised in Europe, said organisers of the event, citing 700 cases of discrimination against Christians over the past six years. Seventy-four per cent of Christians polled in the UK say that "there is more negative discrimination against Christians than people of other faiths," notably in the government, in the workplace and in the media.

Dr Martin Jugler of the Vienna-based Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christian in Europe commented that increased instances of intolerance and discrimination have led to the present situation of fear and discomfort of Christians in many places. Another panellist, John Deighan, Parliamentary Officer of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland, cited the example of Cardinal Keith O' Brien's nomination for "Bigot of the Year" by a prominent UK gay rights organisation as an example of public discrimination against Catholics. Speakers also noted a rise in cases of vandalism directed against Christian sites and clergy suffering various forms of violence perpetrated against them.

Seminar presenters also cited cases of legal discrimination against traditional Catholic principles, such as the Church's opposition to same-sex marriage, the adoption of children to homosexual couples and limitations on the reproductive rights of women.

Freedom of Religion

In the United Kingdom, Catholic adoption agencies have closed because of a law that required them to allow the adoption of children to homosexual couples. Although the law was promoted from an anti-discrimination point of view, some Catholics have claimed that the law itself is discriminatory towards Catholic institutions and their beliefs.

According to Mr Deighan, the last decade has seen a huge drive for legal and social change in traditional marriage, undermining traditional views of family. For instance, a 2013 bill to go before the Scottish Parliament proposes to redefine marriage as between partners, not just between men and women. Mr Deighan said that 77 000 people came out in defence of traditional marriage, three times the amount of those in support of Scottish independence. Dr Jugler also criticised decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). At the University of Milano, for example, a professor's contract was not renewed after making derogatory comments about Jesus and the gospel. The ECtHR ruled that the school had violated the professor's right to freedom of speech.

Daniel Lipsic of the Alliance Defending Freedom, Slovakia, remarked that the ECtHR must establish clearer guidelines for determining violations of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights concerning the freedom of expression. There is a difference between the expression of an idea, he said, and incitement to violence. The ECtHR must adhere to the original meaning of Article 10 "and not play the role of activist," said Lipsic, lest "they" choose "the other side."

Freedom of Conscience and Policies of Discrimination

Speakers noted pressures on Catholic officials to perform same-sex marriage, to distribute birth control and on medical personnel to participate in administering abortions. "Radical

left and feminist groups” have also attacked or obstructed Christian gatherings in several European countries, they added.

Parents have had difficulty to monitor their children’s access to certain sex education curricula which they consider to be in conflict with their Catholic faith. New laws have also restricted hiring practices of religious NGOs.

Upholding Freedoms and Respect

Seminar presenters recommend that the respect for freedom of religion, conscience and belief begins with an acknowledgement that any discrimination is negative. Far from calling for special treatment, presenters said that in today’s heterogeneous Europe, decisions must be made in such a way that considers the wide range of beliefs and identities, including those of Catholic believers.

The ECtHR is mandated to uphold the Human Rights Convention and not to create new laws or rights based on their own opinions. Presenters encouraged the development of additional rights, but these must come from EU legislation and not from the Court itself. The ECtHR cannot be held hostage by “activists” and lobbies, they said, allowing court decisions to be influenced by the latest social trends. There has also been a more recent practice to appoint former law professors as judges. Such appointees sometimes bring an ideological bias to their work, it was said, and they have limited experience in the day to day judicial process. This threatens the neutrality of the Court. Reforming the judicial appointment process, it was said, would allow more fairness in cases of discrimination against Christians in Europe, which seminar presenters considered to be quite serious in recent times.