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## **600 worship places attacked in Northern Ireland in past five years**

***Catholic, Anglican churches were targeted as were the Belfast Synagogue and Belfast Islamic Centre***



*File photo of St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, Northern Ireland (Photo by G. Lenz / Arco Images/MaxPPP)*

La Croix Intl (28.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3b9YRA9> - Northern Ireland has witnessed more than 600 attacks on places of worship in the last five years, statistics show.

According to police statistics, these include criminal damage to religious buildings, churchyards or cemeteries since 2014.

There were:

- 136 in 2014/15,
- 128 in 2015/16,
- 118 in 2016/17,

- 115 in 2017/18,
- 104 in 2018/19.

Most of the incidents took place in Belfast (173).

Catholic churches included a recent incident at St MacNissi's Church in Larne, which was targeted with a paint bomb in February 2020.

Other incidents on Catholic churches included the Sacred Heart Church in Ballyclare that had white paint thrown at it on Easter Sunday 2019; the disused Church of the Resurrection on the Cavehill Road in Belfast, which was vandalized in 2019; and St Mary's Church in Limavady, which was sprayed with paramilitary graffiti reading in 2018.

St Patrick's Cathedral in Co Armagh was also attacked in April 2018 prior to the referendum on abortion in the Republic of Ireland.

St Patrick's Church in Belfast suffered £10,000 worth of damage in an arson attack in 2017.

Anglican churches were also targeted as were the Belfast Synagogue and Belfast Islamic Centre.

The figures for the attacks were collated by Christian Action Research & Education (CARE NI) .

"More than 600 attacks in the last five years is a reminder that places of worship, which should be safe spaces for worshippers and congregants, are all too often targeted by vandalism and violence," said CARE NI policy officer Mark Baillie, reported The Catholic Universe.

"In a free and democratic society, no-one should be afraid of gathering together with those who share their faith in a place of worship", he said.

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## **Offence of blasphemy officially scrapped from Irish law**

***The offence of blasphemy has been officially removed from the Irish constitution.***

By Jack Beresford

The Irish Post (18.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2uICzdu> - Ireland voted to repeal the reference to blasphemy in the Constitution by a huge majority in a referendum held back in October 2018.

65 percent of the population, and every constituency, voted to pass the referendum, with 35% against.

It was first time each constituency has voted in favour of a referendum question since the vote to establish the Court of Appeal in 2013.

The legislation was commenced from today.

Commenting on the change, Justice Minister Charlie Flanagan said the “very notion of criminalising blasphemy, with the risk of a chilling effect on free expression and public debate, has no place in the Constitution or the laws of a modern Republic.”

“Ireland is a country of increasing diversity,” he added.

“The right to express differing viewpoints in a forthright and critical manner is a right to be cherished and upheld.”

Mr Flanagan confirmed that the legislation removes “all identified references to blasphemy” in Irish law – defined as “the publication or utterance of blasphemous matter, defamatory of any religion” - and also relates to the censorship of films released in Ireland.

Mr Flanagan was keen to “emphasise that these changes are not an attack on religious beliefs” and are not “intended to privilege one set of values over another.”

Though the law was largely overlooked, Mr Flanagan explained the new legislation is an “acknowledgement that the meaning of the concept of blasphemy is unclear in a modern State and that the concept is rooted in a distant past where fealty to the State was conflated with fealty to a particular religion.”

He also noted that while it “may seem abstract” to devote time to removing an offence not “prosecuted in practice” he said certain countries hand down severe penalties for it and use the law as justification for the persecution of dissidents.

In these instances, Mr Flanagan argued these countries have used the example of Ireland’s blasphemy laws as justification for their actions, describing it as a “very disturbing reality”.

Executive Director Liam Herrick hailed the change as an important day for freedom of expression.

“It is very positive news that we see from the Government today that they are implementing the result of the Referendum on Blasphemy,” he said.

“We are now seeing a landmark on the road towards free speech and against censorship in Ireland.”

The Irish Council for Civil Liberties also welcomed the new legislation as a “wonderful leap forward” for human rights in Ireland.