

Cardinal seeks exemption for adoptions by gay couples

LONDON - The head of the English and Welsh bishops' conference told British Prime Minister Tony Blair 13 Catholic adoption agencies in the United Kingdom would close if the government forced them to place children with same-sex couples.

In a Jan. 22 letter, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of Westminster, England, appealed to Prime Minister Blair to grant the agencies an exemption from proposed gay rights laws called the Sexual Orientation Regulations.

"This is an appeal for fair play," the cardinal said.

He said that without the exemption the Catholic agencies, which are partly funded by the government, would be forced to end a service that each year places more than 200 problem children with new families.

Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor said that closing the agencies was a "wholly avoidable" outcome. He said the bishops believed it would be "unreasonable, unnecessary and unjust discrimination against Catholics" if the government insisted that they must act "against the teaching of the church and their own consciences by being obliged in law to provide such a service."

"It would be an unnecessary tragedy if legislation forced the closure of these adoption services, thereby significantly reducing the potential resources of adoptive families for the approximately 4,000 children currently waiting for adoption placements," the cardinal said in the letter, which was also sent to each member of the British Cabinet.

Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor said the agencies have had an "outstanding record of finding stable and loving homes for some of the most disadvantaged children in society - including children who have been abused, physically, sexually and emotionally; children with disability and limited life expectancy; and large sibling groups who need a family where they can grow up together."

He said that Catholic agencies would be happy to refer homosexual couples to other adoption agencies that might be able to help them.

“There is nothing to lose, and children waiting for an adoptive family have much to gain, by our continuing successful collaboration,” he said.

The cardinal’s intervention is the most recent and most charged in a series of efforts by the bishops’ conference to safeguard the future of the agencies.

The regulations, due to be enacted in England, Scotland and Wales in April, are aimed at outlawing discrimination against gays in the provision of facilities, goods and services.

They were introduced into Northern Ireland, using direct-rule powers from London, Jan. 1. The Northern Ireland rules say people found guilty of discrimination will be fined between \$1,000 and \$2,000 for a first offense. Subsequent serious offenses could draw penalties of up to \$50,000.

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Scotland wrote Prime Minister Blair Jan. 23 urging him to amend the proposed regulations so that Catholic adoption agencies would not be “compelled to place children with same-sex couples.”

Prime Minister Blair said in a statement Jan. 25 the government was hoping to resolve the issue by announcing a decision soon and voting in February.

“I have always personally been in favor of the right of gay couples to adopt,” Prime Minister Blair said.

He said that because “both gay couples and the Catholic agencies have a high level of success in adopting hard-to-place children,” the government has “to ensure we get these regulations right.”

He asked, “How do we protect the principle of ending discrimination against gay people and at the same time protect those vulnerable children who” are being placed by Catholic agencies that “everyone accepts do a great job with some of the most disturbed youngsters?”

Prime Minister Blair said he is committed to resolving “this sensitive and difficult

decision.”

Alan Johnson, secretary of state for education, said he believed Prime Minister Blair would resist pressure from the church for an exemption.

Johnson told BBC Radio 4 Jan. 25 that he “cannot see a case for introducing legislation that protects gays and lesbians from discrimination on grounds of their sexual orientation and then allowing in terms, as part of public policy, that discrimination to continue.”

Member of the bishops’ conference refused to speculate on the issue.

“We are aware of the media reports, but we have not heard any official response from government to our representations and those of the Church of England,” the bishops said in a statement released Jan. 25. “Our concern for the welfare of severely disadvantaged children remains.”

Besides complaints from the Catholic Church, the rules have led to complaints from the Anglican bishops and the leaders of other Christian groups. Jewish and Muslim leaders also have voiced concerns.

The Muslim Council of Britain, the largest and most influential Muslim organization in the United Kingdom, issued a statement Jan. 25 saying that it “fully supports the principled stand taken by the leaders of the Catholic and Anglican churches” on the regulations.

A 2003 document from the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said it would be “gravely immoral” to let same-sex couples adopt children. Pope Benedict XVI, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, headed the congregation at that time.

Last year in the United States, the Boston and San Francisco archdioceses changed their adoption practices because of civil laws requiring no discrimination against gay and lesbian couples seeking to adopt. The Boston Archdiocese announced it would stop providing adoption services. Catholic Charities in San Francisco eliminated some of its activities - such as home studies and adoption placements - and shifted its efforts to education, outreach, information sharing and linking prospective adoptive parents to county and private adoption agencies.