

# English, Welsh bishops say Equality Bill redefines who can be priest

LONDON – The Catholic bishops of England and Wales said they could be at risk of prosecution under a proposed law unless they accept women, sexually active gays and transsexuals as candidates to the priesthood.

They made their claims in a briefing for Catholic members of the House of Lords, Britain's upper political chamber, ahead of a scheduled Dec. 15 debate on the Equality Bill, which aims to stamp out discrimination in the workplace.

The bishops said the bill defines priests as employees rather than officeholders. Under the terms of the bill, the church would be immune from prosecution only if priests spend more than 51 percent of their time in worship or explaining doctrine.

According to the briefing, a copy of which was obtained by Catholic News Service Dec. 8, the government definition will, in effect, make it "unlawful to require a Catholic priest to be male, unmarried or not in a civil partnership, etc., since no priest would be able to demonstrate that their time was wholly or mainly spent either leading liturgy or promoting and explaining doctrine."

"The bill fails to reflect the time priests spend in pastoral work, private prayer and study, administration, building maintenance, etc.," the briefing said.

"This contentious definition was drafted without consultation and has been maintained by the government despite the concerns of the bishops' conference and representations made by most religious bodies in the U.K.," the briefing added.

The bishops asked Catholic lords to try to either strike out the contentious definition or widen it to protect priests and lay employees "whose credibility ... would be fatally compromised if their personal lives were openly at variance with the church's teaching."

In a Dec. 8 statement given to CNS, a government spokesman rejected the claims of the bishops, saying that an exemption "covers ministers of religion such as Catholic

priests.”

An amendment to the bill to protect the liberty of the churches was voted down in the House of Commons in November. The bill is likely to become law early next year.

Richard Kornicki, the bishops’ parliamentary coordinator, told CNS in a Dec. 8 telephone interview that the bishops believe it is not possible to meet the criteria of the government definition of a priest.

According to legal advice received by the bishops, he said, this could lead to legal actions for sex discrimination if the church rejected women, married men, gays in civil partnerships or transsexuals who asked to join the priesthood.

“The government is saying that the church cannot maintain its own beliefs in respect of its own priests,” he said.

Neil Addison, a Catholic lawyer who heads the Thomas More Legal Centre, which specializes in religious discrimination law, said that in the worst-case scenario the church could not only be sued but bishops could face imprisonment and unlimited fines and church assets could be sequestered. He said the bill would have the effect of making it impossible for the bishops to discipline clergy who wanted to live “alternative lifestyles.”

Earlier, the bishops said the bill could force Catholic schools and health care institutions to remove crucifixes from their walls in case they offend non-Christian employees.