

Same-sex marriage could threaten religious freedom in England.



Gay marriage could signal return to ‘centuries of persecution’, - say 1,000 Catholic priests. More than 1,000 priests have signed a letter voicing alarm that same-sex marriage could threaten religious freedom in a way last seen during “centuries of persecution” of Roman Catholics in England.

In one of the biggest joint letters of its type ever written, they raise fears that their freedom to practise and speak about their faith will be “severely” limited and dismiss Government reassurances as “meaningless”.

They even liken David Cameron’s moves to redefine marriage to those of Henry VIII, whose efforts to secure a divorce from Katherine of Aragon triggered centuries of bloody upheaval between church and state.

They claim that, taken in combination with equalities laws and other legal restraints, the Coalition's plans will prevent Catholics and other Christians who work in schools, charities and other public bodies speaking freely about their beliefs on the meaning of marriage.

Even the freedom to speak from the pulpit could be under threat, they claim.

And they fear that Christians who believe in the traditional meaning of marriage would effectively be excluded from some jobs – just as Catholics were barred from many professions from the Reformation until the 19th Century.

The comments are contained in a letter to The Daily Telegraph, signed by 1,054 priests as well as 13 bishops, abbots and other senior Catholic figures.

They account for almost a quarter of all Catholic priests in England and Wales.

It comes as opponents of gay marriage launch a lobbying campaign targeting MPs in 65 of the most

marginal seats.

The Coalition is due to publish its Equal Marriage Bill, allowing couples of the same sex to wed at the end of this month.

Legal opinions commissioned by opponents have argued that teachers could face disciplinary measures under equality laws if they refuse to promote same-sex marriage once the change has been implemented.

Hospital, prison and army chaplains could also face challenges if they preach on marriage being between a man and a woman, it is claimed.

Until 1829 Catholics and other religious dissenters in Britain and Ireland were barred from entering many professions or, in many cases, even meeting to worship under a body of restrictions collectively known as the penal laws.

The priests write: “After centuries of persecution, Catholics have, in recent times, been able to be members of the professions and participate fully in the life of this country.

“Legislation for same sex marriage, should it be enacted, will have many legal consequences, severely restricting the ability of Catholics to teach the truth about marriage in their schools, charitable institutions or places of worship.

“It is meaningless to argue that Catholics and others may still teach their beliefs about marriage in schools and other arenas if they are also expected to uphold the opposite view at the same time.”

Arguing that marriage as traditionally understood is “the foundation and basic building block of our society”, they add: “We urge Members of Parliament not to be afraid to reject this legislation now that its consequences are more clear.”

Last night the Bishop of Portsmouth, the Rt Rev Philip Egan, one of the signatories, insisted that the comparison with the penal laws was “dramatic” but not an exaggeration.

“It is quite Orwellian to try to redefine marriage,” he said.

“This is strong language but something like this totalitarian.

“I am very anxious that when we are preaching in Church or teaching in our Catholic Schools or witnessing to the Christian faith of what marriage is that we are not going to be able to do it – that we could be arrested for being bigots or homophobes.”

Rev Dr Andrew Pinsent, a leading Oxford University theologian, who also signed the letter, said: “We are very sensitive to this historically because of course the reformation started in England as a matter of marriage.

“Henry VIII could have been forgiven for his adultery but he didn’t want to do that, he wanted to

control marriage and redefine what was a marriage and wasn't.

“Because the Church would not concede that point, that launched three centuries of great upheaval in English society, and from the Catholic point of view life was very difficult.

“We fear that what is happening now is that a network of laws are being put in place which would violate our freedom of conscience.”

He added: “I think people in the Westminster bubble have underestimated the level of concern in the country – at a local level there is great concern about these things.”

In recent weeks the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, and several other leading Catholics in Britain have stepped up their attacks on David Cameron's plans, echoing concern in a series of pronouncements from Pope Benedict.

But the letter is the first large scale protest initiated by local priests.

Rev Mark Swires, one of the organisers, said it had taken weeks to compile the signatures but that it showed the strength of opinion in the pews.

“This is a grass roots initiative by priests, it isn't an initiative by the hierarchy of the church.”

A Department for Education spokesperson said: “The Government's proposals for equal marriage do not change anything about teaching in schools.

“Teachers will continue to be able to express their own personal beliefs about marriage.

“Schools have a requirement to ensure they do not teach anything that would be considered inappropriate to a pupil's age, religious or cultural background and they must ensure pupils are presented with balanced, factual information about the nature and importance of marriage for family life and bringing up children.

“This will not change.”

John Bingham - The Telegraph