

Irish government may clash with church

Michael Kelly | Catholic News Service | Mar. 9, 2011

DUBLIN -- Ireland's new governing coalition adopted a legislative agenda that looks likely to put it on a collision course with Catholic leaders and other faith groups on gay marriage and plans to reduce church influence in schools.

However, at least one Catholic leader welcomed the coalition's commitments on social welfare and overseas development aid.

Fine Gael sought the support of the Labor Party after the former won the most seats but not enough to form an overall parliamentary majority in a Feb. 25 general election in which the predominant issue was the country's economic crisis.

The coalition's legislative program proposes a constitutional convention to introduce same-sex marriage and remove the crime of blasphemy from the statute book.

Commenting on the issue of same-sex marriage, John Murray of the pro-family think-tank the Iona Institute told Catholic News Service that the move "would mean there is no longer any social institution aimed at encouraging men and women to raise their children."

"Currently opinion polls indicate substantial support for same-sex marriage, but this support is likely to be soft, and much of it would evaporate when the issue is properly debated," he said.

Catholic bishops have yet to comment on the legislative program. However, before the election campaign began, Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, Northern Ireland, warned that any move to undermine the family based on marriage between a man and a woman would be likely to face a Supreme Court challenge.

In education, the coalition proposes to "negotiate" the takeover of schools owned by the 18 religious congregations criticized in the 2009 Ryan Report, which investigated abuse into church-run government institutions, such as orphanages. A spokesman for the congregations refused to comment but insisted that the congregations retained all their constitutional rights to private property. The schools are owned and operated by the religious congregations but receive 100 percent state funding.

The coalition's agenda also includes plans to change the current exemption in equality legislation that allows the churches and other faith-based organizations to refuse to employ people whom they think may undermine the ethos of the religious group or institution. Catholic bishops and their Anglican counterparts successfully fought plans to remove the exemptions in 2008 and would be likely to form an alliance against the move again.

While the Labor Party campaigned on a platform that would see the legislation of abortion in Ireland, Fine Gael, which is opposed to abortion, appears to have prevailed. The abortion issue will be referred to an "expert group" for recommendations.

Abortion remains illegal in Ireland. However, a 2010 decision of the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the country's law on the issue was insufficiently clear and needed to be clarified.

In a statement congratulating all new legislators, the Irish bishops' conference reminded them of the "obligation to defend the dignity of every human person and protect the common good."

"Strengthening the family, based on marriage between a man and a woman, as well as promoting and protecting human life at all its stages is fundamental in this regard," the bishops said.

Missionary of Africa Father Sean Healy, a prominent social justice campaigner, welcomed the coalition's commitments to stop cutting social welfare rates and to reverse the cut in the minimum wage that had been introduced by the outgoing government.

The agenda also commits to reach the target -- set for years by developing countries -- of spending 0.7 percent of the gross national product on overseas development aid by 2015.

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