

Some of you may have read an article in the York Press about a disagreement over recorded music at a funeral in St Joseph's. I will not comment on a private matter here. There is a written statement defending the policy on the website.

I would have left the matter there, but the Press also chose to comment on the situation in an editorial. You can read it in Friday's print edition and no doubt online as well. There isn't time to read it in full.

To put it briefly, the author declared that an institution that should be rooted in kindness and compassion has shot itself in the foot; that we should not be surprised at this, given the Catholic Church's archaic attitudes to women, gays, contraception and abuse; and that this is the cause of the declining numbers in church congregations.

The sad situation that occasioned these words must remain private. But a public editorial demands a public response, not for the sake of the readers of the Press - who will likely form their own opinion whatever I might say - but for the sake of Catholics whose faith might be damaged by such words. So the place for a response is here in church. The time to make it is while the iron remains hot.

When I became Parish Priest of St Wilfrid's I made - as all Parish Priests do - the Profession of Faith. This means reciting the Creed in public and adding the following words:

*With firm faith, I also believe everything contained in the word of God, whether written or handed down in Tradition, which the Church, either by a solemn judgment or by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, sets forth to be believed as divinely revealed.*

*I also firmly accept and hold each and everything definitively proposed by the Church regarding teaching on faith and morals.*

*Moreover, I adhere with religious submission of will and intellect to the teachings which either the Roman Pontiff or the College of Bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic Magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim these teachings by a definitive act.*

I take that profession of faith very seriously. It is my task to teach the Catholic faith in its fullness, including the parts that I might find personally difficult or demanding. The people have a right to hear the Church's teaching from me.

Our parish policy on music may be right or wrong. Different priests have different policies. I have defended that policy in its place.

The editorial in the Press is not really about policies. The editorial in the Press tells us that the Catholic Church is unkind and uncompassionate at least in part because what it describes as *archaic attitudes*.

I would like to know precisely what is being said here. What is being attacked? Catholic attitudes or Catholic teaching?

Fortunately, a recent statement from a government official provides a clear illustration of exactly the distinction I am making.

The government's *integration tsar*, Dame Louise Casey, recently said that it is *not OK for Catholic schools to be homophobic and anti gay marriage*. The implication is that to be against gay marriage is to be homophobic. This implication can always be denied. No doubt it would be. But the point is that when such things are said a seed is sown. The damage is done. It is very deliberate. People who know they are not homophobic begin to fear that perhaps they are. We hardly notice it, but language has

been redefined and with its social attitudes. There is an important distinction. To be homophobic is to have an attitude; to be opposed to gay marriage is to uphold Catholic teaching.

I sincerely hope that no Catholic is homophobic. But I want every Catholic to know that whatever individual Catholics may think in private, the actual teaching of the Church is that marriage is a lifelong bond between one man and one woman which is open to the procreation of children. The teaching may be archaic; that word undermines it. It is also ancient, venerable and tested; those words support it. It is this teaching - and teachings like it - which I undertook, in public and before God, to pass on to you.

To be homophobic is to be unkind; to be homophobic is to lack compassion; to be homophobic is to have an *attitude* that needs to change. But it is *not* to be opposed to what the Church, and until very recently the rest of society, has always believed. To be anti gay marriage is to accept what the Catholic Church teaches. Every Catholic has the right and the duty to accept that. They have the right to be able to do that without being made to feel as if they were guilty of an *attitude* that is unkind and uncompassionate.

That right used to be part of what it meant to live in a tolerant and liberal society.

So is the editorial in the Press attacking Catholic attitudes or Catholic teaching? Of course, it is hard to tell. If the intention is to make Catholic teaching look dated or irrelevant then it hardly matters. The unclear language has sown a seed, and planted a doubt. It is my task to try to remove that doubt.

I don't believe that most Catholics have a bad attitude to women or homosexuals or to abuse. Indeed on the last issue we now have policies which have become models for other institutions. I fear Catholics may have had bad attitudes in the past. But if anyone has those attitudes now then they need to be repented of and changed.

What cannot change is the Church's teaching. It may develop, of course; indeed it must develop and it does so over time. But the Church's teaching, however much it develops, can never contradict what was taught in the past.

So what does the Press mean when it says that Catholic attitudes are unkind and uncompassionate? If Catholic teaching is what is meant then the Press is attacking every priest who has ever made the Profession of Faith; every Catholic who has ever recited the Creed; and all the faithful members of the Church down the ages, including saints and martyrs.

As a priest I am privileged to talk to many people at significant times in their lives: those facing serious illness or death; families who have been bereaved; couples who are in love and planning to marry; parents with small babies to baptise. To all of these the Church has teachings to propose that are consoling and - yes - sometimes difficult and demanding. No doubt I am often fearful and do not say exactly what I should say. But I believe these teachings give hope because they are rooted in the truth of the revelation given by Jesus Christ and passed on faithfully by his Church.

We see numerous young men who want to be priests here. Some we even accept! I don't want anyone here with an unbending or rigid attitude. I certainly do not want anyone who is unkind or lacking compassion. I do want young men with courage and conviction to stand up for what the Church teaches and has always taught.

The Press says that numbers in churches are undoubtedly falling. That cannot be denied. I do not believe that is because of archaic teaching.

In the last three years we have received or baptised more than twenty adults of every age and from among all sorts of people. We have an RCIA [Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults] programme that does not shrink from proposing the Church's teaching in its fullness. Not all who come persevere.

Those who do persevere, who are convinced by the traditions of the Catholic Church, proclaim with pride on Easter night: "I believe and profess all that the holy Catholic Church believes, teaches and proclaims to be revealed by God." Are such people, too, condemned by the Press as unkind and uncompassionate because of what they believe?

The Press may say what it likes about me and about my attitudes. I have many failings some of which need pointing out to me. But I cannot stand here and fail to defend the teaching of the Church down the ages and the Catholics who have professed it. They may have held it shakily or entertained many doubts. (I often do myself.) They have certainly sinned - but they have also repented. (I sin and repent myself all the time.) But they have not been, nor are they now, quite so few as the York Press would like us to believe. Allowing for the odd bad day they are people - you are people, we are people - who treasure the truths handed down to us even while we are challenged by them. We are people brimming with kindness and compassion.