

challenging religious privilege

27 February 2009

The Secretary
Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP
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Dear Mr Brown

Proposed peerage for Cardinal Murphy O'Connor

The Times reports today that the Government is considering offering a peerage to Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, soon to retire as leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, adding: "The prospect of offering Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor a life peerage is understood to have been discussed during Gordon Brown's meeting with the Pope at the Holy See last week."

If this report is correct, we ask you to reconsider the proposal as we believe that the Cardinal is an unsuitable candidate for a peerage. He would bring the Vatican's reactionary, homophobic, misogynistic and manipulative agenda right into the heart of our parliament.

But worse than that, the award of a peerage would be to reward someone with a soiled record over child abuse. We are referring to Cormack Murphy O'Connor's conduct when he was Bishop of Arundel and Brighton in the 1980s.

Not only was there abuse on a massive scale, of which the Cardinal was aware, money was paid by the Roman Catholic Church to victims in his diocese to hush the matter up. I am not aware of any apology or explanation for this by the Cardinal.

He was aware that one of his priests – Michael Hill - was a dangerous paedophile but did nothing to prevent his access to children. When the abuse came to light, Hill was moved by Murphy O'Connor's diocese from one parish to another, where his activities continued. Finally, and after multiple warnings about Hill's likelihood to reoffend, Hill was moved in Murphy O'Connor's diocese to the place where he could do most harm and with the least chance of being discovered. Hill was appointed a chaplain at Gatwick airport, where he – entirely predictably – abused even more defenceless children. The police eventually brought his reign of terror to an end, but not before this monster had ruined the lives of countless children and young people, some of them disabled.

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All this could have been prevented if the Cardinal had not swept it under the carpet.

As you can see from the press reports below, it is also clear that Murphy O'Connor ignored *three* warnings that Hill was likely to offend. There have been strong suspicions that other priests in the Arundel and Brighton area had also been involved in child abuse while under the wing of Murphy O'Connor, but for some reason the investigation into the Cardinal's culpability came to an abrupt halt.

The BBC, which was investigating the matter, inexplicably dropped the story and the police enquiry fizzled out when the Catholic Church accused the media of "persecuting" Murphy O'Connor.

The victims of the crimes committed under the leadership of this man, who is slated to be given privileged access to our lawmaking body, certainly don't think he was persecuted; they think the real scandal is that he got off scot-free.

Murphy O'Connor's defence is that "the decisions he made at that time were not irresponsible and that there was a genuine ignorance among bishops, priests, and society at large about the compulsive nature of child abuse". For a bishop of an organisation purporting to be a moral authority to claim to be ignorant of something everyone else knew can only be stupidity and / or dishonesty of a stunning degree. Neither commend him for a seat in the Lords.

Before coming to a decision we request you to read the press links below, and there are plenty more in similar tone.

We ask you not to reward Cardinal Murphy O'Connor for these unpardonable actions with a seat in the House of Lords. To do so would be taken as a gesture by the Government that it did not care about the many those whose lives have been ruined as a direct result of Murphy O'Connor's actions.

Yours sincerely,

Terry Sanderson
President

Times on line <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article835213.ece>

2000: Investigation into the 1985 appointment of Father Michael Hill to the chaplaincy at Gatwick Airport

July 2002: Revealed that Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor had ignored three letters advising that Hill was likely to reoffend

November 19: Pressure on the Cardinal to resign as Hill admits further charges of indecent assault

November 20: Catholic Church revealed as paying "hush money" to people abused by priests

November 21: Cardinal acknowledges it was a mistake to appoint Hill to Gatwick chaplaincy

November 22: Hill sentenced to five years for abuse of three more boys. The Times establishes that Catholic Church enforced secrecy clauses on the victims of paedophile priests despite denial of "hush money"

Paedophilia in the Catholic Church (by Angus Stickler)

http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/reports/archive/features/paedophile_priests.shtml

An investigation by the Today Programme has uncovered new evidence that Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor the leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales failed to act appropriately when dealing with paedophile priests in his former diocese of Arundel and Brighton.

The Cardinal is currently the subject of a police inquiry over claims that he covered up the activities of one paedophile priest - Father Michael Hill. Yesterday Hill admitted abusing more children - some of them disabled.

Steven Williams' family were struggling and turned to the Church for help. Their priest was Father Michael Hill. He soon became a trusted family friend. Peter, Steven's son, was - disabled - just eight years old - and an easy target.

Steven describes his son's disabilities thus: "He had cerebral palsy and as a child, he was much more handicapped than you'd ever guess meeting him now - with a very serious limp - one leg considerably shorter than the other, damage to one arm - he was very poorly coordinated in one arm, dyslexic - this kind of thing."

Yesterday Michael Hill, who has already served a five year sentence for abuse, pleaded guilty to six counts of indecent assault against three children aged between 10 and 14 - one of them in a wheelchair.

Two years ago we revealed that Michael Hill's Bishop knew he was a paedophile but allowed him to continue working. That Bishop was Cormac Murphy O'Connor, then in charge of Arundel and Brighton, now the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal and Head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

Documents from that original investigation confirm what the Bishop knew and when. In July 1981 Michael Hill was sent to a therapeutic centre following concerns about his sexual behaviour. In letters, Cormac describes the matter as "very serious". He questions whether Hill should have the pastoral care of a parish.

Peter and Steven Williams are shocked by this. Because just a few weeks after this date, Hill was allowed to conduct a baptism at a family retreat for disabled children. Cormac, they say, was there.

After Hill's first trial in the 1990s, the then head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Cardinal Basil Hume, described the case as "extremely regrettable".

He said: "Clearly if the local Bishop had known then what is revealed now, a different course would have been taken..." According to the documents we've seen, and the parents we've spoken to, the Bishop did know - he was even warned by health professionals that Hill was a dangerous paedophile.

Peter believes that, as the Bishop in charge, Cormac's actions condemned him to four years of abuse. "I feel livid towards him. The sweeping under the carpet as it were was his doing. It put me in the danger that I was in for that whole length of time. "

We've now been told of more allegations relating to eight different priests in Arundel and Brighton - all under the wing of Cormac Murphy O'Connor. Some have been via anonymous letters sent directly to our offices - one via the charity Kidscape.

But we've also been contacted directly by victims, parents and parishioners. In the four cases we've had time to investigate, the victims and parents say they feel betrayed by the Church and the Bishop.

One family went to the Bishop in the mid '90s, after the daughter alleged that she'd been sexually assaulted by a priest. During the police investigation, another victim came forward, but, because the girl had health problems, the case was dropped.

Despite serious concerns about the priest, he returned to his old job. When he left several months later, parishioners were under the impression it was part of a standard diocesan reshuffle. The family were shocked. They say that the Police and Bishop told them that they thought the allegations were true.

This case is mirrored by one in a different part of the diocese. This time it concerns the alleged abuse of a young man with learning difficulties. He was too vulnerable to give evidence and again the case was dropped. This social worker was stunned when he found out the priest had been reinstated.

Church records list this priest at four different parishes in the diocese - he is still holding mass. These allegations were made in the mid '90s around the time when the church bought out new guidelines to deal with sex abuse cases.

Parents, victims and parishioners concede that the church authorities appeared to follow the letter of their law, but not the spirit. Yes - the Police were informed - but despite serious concerns they say the priests were allowed to continue working.

And in the 1980s this appeared to be Church policy. We were told of another priest who parishioners say moved on because of allegations of abuse. But we've also found that Cormac Murphy O'Connor allowed a paedophile from Scotland to work in his diocese.

In the early '80s Father Alan Love assaulted two young boys in Glasgow - he was charged with lewd behaviour but the case never went to court. He - like Hill - was sent away for therapy and then on to Chichester in Arundel and Brighton. Even after admitting the assaults he was

allowed to stay. A statement issued by the Church said that Father Love "enjoys the full confidence of his bishop." Peter Williams says this beggars belief.

We could only find one priest in the diocese, other than Michael Hill, who has been removed permanently from parish work - this was Father Christopher Towner who was given a two month suspended sentence for importing child porn in 1988.

Responding to our original investigation, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor issued a statement apologising to victims. In his defence he said the decisions he made at that time were not irresponsible and that there was a genuine ignorance among bishops, priests, and society at large about the compulsive nature of child abuse.

Cold comfort for the victims of paedophile priests.