

More than 1,000 priests sign letter claiming gay marriage is biggest threat to religious freedoms since the reformation

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- **It is signed by 1054 priests as well as 13 bishops and abbots**
- **Letter expresses fears that acts of practising faith will be limited**

By Anthony Bond

More than 1000 priests have signed a letter voicing concerns about how same-sex marriage will threaten religious freedoms and may even lead to Catholics being excluded from jobs.

In the letter, which is one of the biggest open letters of its type ever written, the priests claim that same-sex marriage could threaten freedoms in a way that was last seen during centuries of persecution of Catholics in England.

The letter, signed by 1054 priests as well as 13 bishops, abbots and other senior Catholic figures, expresses fears that the simple acts of practising or speaking about their faith will be severely limited.

Criticism: More than 1000 priests have signed a letter voicing concerns about how same-sex marriage will threaten religious freedoms and may even lead to Catholics being excluded from jobs.

They even claim the freedom to speak freely from the pulpit could be at risk. Published in The Daily Telegraph, the letter goes as far as to compare David Cameron's proposed changes to the meaning of marriage to those of Henry VIII, whose efforts to divorce Catherine of Aragon sparked centuries of upheaval between Church and State.

Their fear is that Catholics who believe in the traditional meaning of marriage would effectively be excluded from some jobs - in the same way as Catholics were barred from many professions from the Reformation until the 19th century.

It said: '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.'





Concerns: The letter goes as far as to compare the proposed changes to those of Henry VIII, left, whose efforts to divorce Catherine of Aragon, right, sparked centuries of upheaval between Church and State

REFORMATION DIVIDED COUNTRY

The English Reformation involved a number of events in the 16th Century in which the church of England broke away from the authority of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church.

It was based on Henry VIII's wish for the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and in part associated with the wider process of the European Protestant Reformation.

Political differences between England and Rome allowed increasing theological disputes to rise.

The split from Rome made the English monarch the Supreme Governor of the English church, making the Church of England the established church of the country.

However, the structure of the church became a matter of angry debate for many generations.

Those who remained Roman Catholic in England suffered various civil disabilities because the church organisation remained illegal until the 19th Century.

'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.' The Equal Marriage Bill, allowing couples of the same sex to marry, is due to be published this month. The Bishop of Portsmouth, the Rt Rev Philip Egan, one of the signatories, told The Daily Telegraph: '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.'

A spokesman for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport said: 'We have been very clear that our plans for equal marriage will fully protect the freedom of religions bodies to preach, teach and put into practice their beliefs about marriage.'