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## **COMMENT - Church urges Alliance MLAs to resist party whip on same-sex marriage 'even on pain of death'**

**Last night a senior Church spokesman called on Catholic politicians to resist taking the The Alliance Party could be headed for a clash with the Churches, particularly the Catholic hierarchy, over a new rule that its MLAs must pledge to vote in favour of same-sex marriage in the Assembly -**

**writes Liam Clarke in The Belfast Telegraph**

Last night a senior Church spokesman called on Catholic politicians to resist taking the pledge "even on pain of death".

"The Church points to Sir Thomas More as a model to politicians to stand up for their religious conscience against popular opposition even

under the pain of death," said Fr Tim Bartlett, secretary to the Irish Bishops Conference.

Sir Thomas More was beheaded in 1535 for opposing the marriage of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn.

Henry had unsuccessfully petitioned the Pope to annul his first marriage to Catherine of Aragon, previously the wife of his late brother, who had not borne him a son.

Sir Thomas believed that marriage was for good and also that the Church had the final say in such matters.

That creates parallels to the current argument over same-sex marriage, which is gaining ground in the polls and which has already been passed in Britain and the Republic.

Sir Thomas was made a Saint by Pope Benedict on a visit to London in 2010.

Fr Bartlett said of St Thomas: "He kept the faith to the point of martyrdom.

"Pope Benedict reminded Catholic politicians of that when he addressed them in Westminster Hall, where More was tried.

"Catholic politicians have a duty to resist this or else to explain how they can set aside their religious conscience."

In his speech Pope Benedict, who has now retired, insisted that a mere vote could not change what was morally right, only the Church could determine that.

He stated: "If the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident.

"Herein lies the real challenge for democracy."

Fr Bartlett advised Catholics to think very carefully about voting for any politicians who supported same-sex marriage.

He said: "The Church doesn't advise people how to vote in party political terms. Yet, just as a politician must consider seriously the clear teachings of the Church, based on scripture and natural reason, so a voter who claims to be Christian and Catholic must regard these issues as fundamental to how they seek to influence society, politics and law.

"The position of a politician on such issues should be a fundamental consideration in deciding how to vote."

The Presbyterian Church also opposes same-sex marriage but its reaction was more tempered.

Rev Norman Hamilton, a former Moderator and Church spokesman on social affairs, said that Presbyterianism centrally would not take any action.

But he added that local complaints could be raised in any of the churches Presbyteries.

Such a complaint was raised against David Ford, the Alliance leader, who agreed to stand down from the functions of a Presbyterian elder in Antrim after being challenged on his support for same-sex marriage.

Rev Hamilton said: "It is a matter for the local Presbytery to consider.

"There is no high or supreme court which takes independent action.

"Any member can raise a complaint but it is usually done by a Kirk session." That is the ruling committee of an individual congregation.

Seamus Close, a former Alliance deputy leader, said that if he was in the party now he would be forced to quit.

He resigned previously after coming under criticism for proposing a successful motion to prevent same-sex civil partnerships being solemnised in Lisburn Council's Cherry Room, which is normally used for weddings.

He said he would support the creation of a new party with more traditional values.

He said: "It is a big thing to put a gun to somebody's head and say you either follow this or else.

"They are saying you have to set aside your freedom of conscience if you want to be an Alliance candidate.

"I can see a need within Northern Ireland for a more socially conservative cross-community party to emerge.

"There is a requirement out there for somebody to represent these views through politics.

"I am coming 68 so I am not the person to drive it forward, but I do see the need for it," he added.

