



BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND AND WALES

Dear Head Teacher,

We are writing to you in response to questions raised by a number of Catholic schools and parishes after the decision made by Amnesty International this summer regarding access to abortion.

At the heart of our common Christian life and witness lies a passionate commitment to bring the Good News of God's justice to the poor, the vulnerable and the oppressed of our world. We believe God demands justice, does justice, and promises justice. We believe God calls us to 'do justice' in his name. Religious education in our Catholic schools and parishes should always include a thorough presentation of the social teaching of the Catholic Church, as an inspiration to work together for justice here and now.

As an effective way of working for justice and human rights, many Catholic schools, parishes and groups in England and Wales have actively cooperated with Amnesty International since its foundation by Peter Benenson in 1961.

Sadly, the new policy on abortion adopted by Amnesty International in the summer of 2007 has put Catholic schools, parishes, and justice & peace groups in a very difficult position with regard to formal membership of, affiliation to, or financial support of Amnesty International. They will wish, however, to continue and further develop their active involvement in working for justice and human rights, including simple but effective actions such as sending Christmas cards to prisoners of conscience and letters to governments on behalf of such prisoners.

We Catholics very much share the vision of Amnesty's original mandate, as well as its opposition to violence against women, and we acknowledge the vital work carried out by Amnesty over the years. However, any undermining of the fundamental right to life from its defenceless first beginnings is too important to be ignored. It deeply compromises Amnesty's campaign to 'Protect the Human'.

Although Amnesty is not planning to campaign for access to abortion as a general human right, its new policy does involve upholding the right to access to abortion in

certain circumstances, and thereby compromises the fundamental right to life. Amnesty admits that this policy will form an important part of its global campaign to 'Stop Violence against Women'.

Catholic parishes, schools and individuals might therefore consider alternative ways of continuing and developing their active work for prisoners of conscience, for men and women facing violence, torture or the death penalty, and for fair trials for all, while also giving support to people subjected to violence and oppression of any kind. Such alternatives include Action by Christians against Torture, and new groups currently being developed in the wake of Amnesty's change of policy.

Support from the Catholic community also includes practical compassion and care for women subjected to rape and other forms of violence, and for women who have been through the trauma of abortion.

It is essential that Catholic schools and parishes remain actively committed to their work for justice by putting into practice the social teaching of the Catholic Church, and to further developing effective ways to work for justice and human rights for all God's people.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols

Chairman,
Department of Catholic
Education & Formation

Bishop Crispian Hollis

Chairman,
Department of International
Affairs