

CATHOLIC UNION BRIEFING NOTE

Amendment 292E to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill

House of Lords, Committee Stage

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Background:

- Baroness Stowell has tabled an amendment to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (amendment 292E) on ministers of religion having access to crime scenes. The amendment has been placed after Clause 170 of the Bill.
- The amendment has been tabled following the tragic death of Sir David Amess on Friday 15 October and the fact that Sir David's priest, Fr Jeffrey Woolnough, was unable to attend him in person on the day he died to administer the Last Rites on account of a police cordon at the scene of the attack.
- This was a matter raised in the House of Lords during tributes to Sir David Amess on Monday 18 October by Baroness Masham of Ilton (Hansard Vol 815, column 26).
- The Catholic Union welcomes amendment 292E as a way of probing expectations of police procedure in this matter.
- Sir David was a lifelong Catholic and friend of the Catholic Union. His funeral is taking place in Westminster Cathedral on 23 November.

Last rites:

- This sacrament of the Last Rites, also known as 'Extreme Unction' or 'Anointing of the Sick', is the anointing given to those who are gravely ill and considered close to death.
- The Catholic Church teaches that the effects of this sacrament are the strengthening and comfort of the soul, the remission of sins, and the possible restoration of bodily health.
- The Rite in which the sacrament is offered includes the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist (in that order), followed by the Sacrament of Unction itself. It may be received conditionally up to three or four hours after apparent death. If the sick one is unconscious, conditional absolution and Unction are offered, without the Eucharist (known at this time as 'Viaticum' meaning 'Food for the Journey').
- The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: *"By the sacred anointing of the sick and the prayer of the priests the whole Church commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord, that he may raise them up and save them. And indeed she exhorts them to contribute to the good of the People of God by freely uniting themselves to the Passion and death of Christ."*

Sir David's Catholic faith:

- Sir David was a lifelong Catholic. He was a greater supporter of a number of Catholic groups – including the Catholic Union of Great Britain and the Caritas Social Action Network – groups that

helped him put his faith into action. A tribute to Sir David from the Catholic Union can be found here: <https://catholicunion.org.uk/2021/10/editorial-sir-david-amess-rip/>

- In 2006, Sir David established the All Party Parliamentary Group for relations with the Holy See – a group that was set up to improve relations with the Vatican and which continues its work today chaired by Sir Edward Leigh MP, who is also President of the Catholic Union.
- Sir David was instrumental in the historic visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Parliament in 2010, and in the return visit by HMG representatives to Rome the following year.
- During his address in Westminster Hall, as part of his visit, Pope Benedict said *“Religion... is not a problem for legislators to solve, but a vital contributor to the national conversation”*. Sir David put those words into practice.

Crime scenes:

- On account of the police cordon established by officers from Essex Police, it was not possible for Fr Jeffrey Woolnough to attend Sir David in person to administer the Last Rites. It should be stressed that Fr Woolnough accepted this instruction from officers and said prayers beyond the parameter of the crime scene.
- We understand that there is currently no national guidance in place from the College of Policing on ministers of religion having access to crime scenes.
- The Catholic Union is not aware of any other incidents in which priests have been denied access to crime scenes, although we welcome this debate as a way of re-establishing proper procedure and social norms in these cases.
- On 9 November, Cardinal Vincent Nichols and Metropolitan Police Commissioner Dame Cressida Dick announced a joint group to study *“the access given, or refused, to Catholic priests to scenes of traumatic violence.”* In particular, the group will consider *“whether any changes are required to the guidance issued to officers faced with such situations”*. More information can be found here: <https://rcdow.org.uk/cardinal/news/joint-group-to-assess-priests-access-to-scenes-of-traumatic-violence/>

Other settings:

- While we are not aware of any other cases involving priests being denied access to crime scenes, we are aware of other circumstances in which priests have experienced problems attending to the sick and the dying – including in hospitals, hospices, and care homes.
- We are also aware of specific problems in some hospitals and hospices which prevent data on which patients are Catholic being shared with priests or the local diocese.
- We are aware of Methodist and Baptist ministers who have also encountered similar problems.
- It is hard to provide data on the extent of these problems, but there is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that there have been problems across the country; that these problems were made worse by Covid; and that the situation varies between service providers – with some chaplains reporting very good relations with local health and care services.
- For example, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth reports that *“At the beginning of the pandemic our priests in University Hospital Southampton (UHS) were told that they could not*

attend the hospital and any interaction was to be conducted via iPad. Our understanding was that support for chaplains was very good at the Queen Alexandra in Portsmouth and variable elsewhere but absolutely restricted in UHS.”

- An email from a priest in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth describes just how upsetting situations can be: *“6th April 2020 Last night about 11pm I was called by one of the priests at Eastleigh. One of their parishioners was dying in ICU with Covid. He is a young Philipino. His wife was frantically trying to get a priest in for last rites. I called the unit and spoke with the nurse who was looking after him and she said it was up to the sister in charge to make the decision about whether I could come in. I then tried several times unsuccessfully to get the sister. I finally spoke with the patient's wife and asked her to contact the sister in charge. We texted back and forth and I said I was willing to come in any time. The last message from her about 1 am was they'll be calling you. They never did.”*
- We are aware of some NHS Trusts having procedure in place on the administration of the Last Rites, such as the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Sustainability and Transformation Partnership, but other Trusts currently have no proper procedure to follow. A copy of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICS/STP Ethics Committee Note can be found at Appendix 1.
- It should be stressed that the Catholic Church is not looking for special treatment when it comes to priests. The Catholic Union believes it is important for all people of faith to have access to ministers of religion when they are sick or dying.
- We hope this debate will help re-establish the social norm of respecting people's religious views at all stages of their lives and in all settings.

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Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICS/STP Ethics Committee Note

The Administration of Last Rites during the Covid-19 Pandemic

FINAL 29th June 2020

In the course of a serious illness or as death approaches, Catholics, some Anglicans and those of other relevant faiths, will most likely request the visit of a priest to the bedside to administer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. This forms part of what is popularly known as the Last Rites and, where the dying person is still in a position to receive them, they are also offered the Sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made this bedside presence difficult or not possible. Many hospitals have placed a moratorium on visiting as an infection control measure. There has also been significant concern over the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE).

The Hampshire and Isle of Wight STP/ICS Ethics Committee has considered the matter from the perspectives of the safety of staff and fellow patients and equitable access for all to patients in the context of limited resources, taking into account the concerns of all faiths. The committee recognises and supports the need of individual organisations to make decisions regarding this sensitive matter that are specific to their circumstances.

Organisations may wish to draw attention to two statements issued by the Holy See on 20th March. '*Note from the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the current pandemic*' seeks to reassure Catholic patients who may '*...find themselves in the painful impossibility of receiving sacramental absolution*'. The '*Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the granting of special Indulgences*' is addressed to patients and care workers alike. Both documents make it clear that in the current circumstances the physical presence of a priest, whilst highly desirable, is not absolutely essential.

The committee strongly encourages the distribution of this note to general practice and hospital chaplaincies, since there has been some evidence of distress caused by conflicting advice to and from hospital visitors. It is hoped that this note will provide patients and staff of Catholic and other relevant faiths, some comfort, when facing an admission to hospital with a serious condition in such difficult circumstances.

<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/20/200320d.html>

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/20/200320c.html>

Julia Barton (Chair)

On behalf of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICS/STP Ethics Committee

29th June 2020