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Irish bishops: Keep Catholics in police force

by Michael Kelly by Catholic News Service

DUBLIN -- Ireland's Catholic bishops have renewed their opposition to the abolition of a special fifty-fifty Catholic-Protestant recruitment policy for the Police Service of Northern Ireland later this month.

In a statement following its spring general meeting, the bishops' conference noted that "recruitment challenges remain for the PSNI as there is continued underrepresentation of Catholics in the senior ranks of the PSNI."

"The current level of 29 percent Catholic membership of the PSNI is not sufficiently representative of the community background of the workforce in Northern Ireland," the bishops said.

The equal recruitment scheme was introduced as part of the 1998 peace agreement when the Royal Ulster Constabulary was replaced by the newly formed Police Service of Northern Ireland. At the time, the Constabulary drew more than 90 percent of its membership from the Protestant community, and Catholics frequently complained of discrimination and intimidation.

Today almost three in 10 police officers in Northern Ireland are Catholic. Catholics make up approximately 44 percent of the population of the region compared to just over 53 percent for Protestants.

Britain's Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Owen Paterson said the fifty-fifty recruitment drive has created "an organization that was more representative of the region's divided community." He recently announced plans to scrap the program.

However, a church spokesman told Catholic News Service "this is not the time to convey the impression that an unrepresentative police service, at all ranks, is politically acceptable when in justice and in terms of shared community support it is manifestly not."

The bishops also expressed "grave concerns" about the makeup of higher ranks which, it says, is even more skewed against Catholics.

The bishops said that, especially in ranks above sergeant, there was still a bias against Catholics, and they called for more effort to encourage Catholic recruits into the force at these levels.

The Patten Commission led by Lord Chris Patten -- who later went on to plan Pope Benedict's 2010 visit to Britain -- recommended a raft of reforms transforming the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Before the reforms, Ireland's Catholic bishops had consistently refused to encourage Catholics to join the force.

However, the church changed its stance in 2001 and recommended young Catholics join the reformed force in a bid to rebalance the membership and ensure wider community support.

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