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Vatican criticizes European religious freedom ruling

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The Vatican on Wednesday criticized a ruling from the European Court of Human Rights that affirms employers' right to limit the expression of religious beliefs in the workplace when it conflicts with equality laws.

In an interview with Vatican Radio, Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Vatican's foreign minister, said that on "morally controversial subjects, such as abortion or homosexuality," people have the right to defend their freedom of conscience.

In what has been hailed as a landmark ruling, the European Court of Human Rights on Tuesday rejected three out of four appeals filed by Christians who had been fired or disciplined by their employers for behaviors connected to their faith.

The cases included a registrar who was disciplined for refusing to officiate the civil partnership of a same-sex couple, and a counselor who was sacked for denying sex therapy to gays.

The Strasbourg-based court also rejected the appeal of a nurse who had refused to remove a crucifix during work, while upholding the right of a British Airways hostess who had been disciplined for wearing a small cross on her uniform.

Mamberti didn't comment on the specific cases. But he said the court's rulings show how complex the issues of freedom of conscience and religion have become in a European society marked by the increase of religious diversity and "the corresponding hardening of secularism."

In this context, Mamberti added, societies face the risk of a "moral relativism" that threatens to "undermine the foundations of individual freedom of conscience and religion."

Mamberti said the Catholic church's role on these issues is to "defend individual freedoms of conscience and religion in all circumstances, even in the face of the 'dictatorship of relativism.' "

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