

## **PE1603/W**

Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Scotland  
Letter of 12 January 2017

### **Introduction**

The Bishops' Conference of Scotland enables the Roman Catholic Bishops in Scotland to work together, undertaking nationwide initiatives through their Commissions and Agencies. Within this work the Justice and Peace Commission advises in matters relating to social justice, international peace and human rights, and promotes action in these areas.

### **Our position**

Petition PE1603 (submitted by ForcesWatch and Quakers in Scotland) calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that:

1. Guidance is provided on how visits to schools by the armed forces should be conducted so that information presented to children takes account of the unique nature of armed forces careers, ensures political balance, and offers a realistic representation of the role of the armed forces and what a career in the armed forces involves.
2. Information is collected to enable public monitoring of the number and location of visits, the purpose and content of visits, and comparison with the number of visits by other employers.
3. Parents/guardians are consulted as to whether they are happy for their child to take part in armed forces activities at school.

We support the principles of this petition and are grateful for the opportunity to make a submission.

### **Concerns**

Catholic schools make up approximately 18% of the school population in Scotland<sup>1</sup>, therefore any consideration by the Scottish Government regarding which partner agencies should have access to schools/school children directly impacts on the Catholic school community.

It is the Head Teacher, in their role as chief catechist within the school who makes the decision about whether or not external organisations will add to the vision and mission of the school. As such it is expected that any visitor coming to the school should be briefed on the vision, aims, values and expectations of the school and should share, in advance, what they are going to present to the children. Further, it is parents who are the first educators of their children and best practice would suggest that they should always be informed of any input from an outside agency prior to the event, and afforded the option to withdraw their child from any activity which conflicts with their faith and moral conscience.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://scs.org.uk/catholic-schools-past-present/>

In his message for Justice and Peace Sunday 2017<sup>2</sup> Bishop Nolan stated “*the constant wars and armed conflicts show that humanity is all too ready to use violence and force as a solution to disputes and discord, to seek peace through the barrel of a gun.*”

The teaching of the Church accepts the legitimate role of the armed forces, however it is only insofar as they are at the ‘service of peace’ and that they can only act on the basis of legitimate defence. All members of armed forces are ‘called to defend good, truth and justice in the world’<sup>3</sup>. In this role the armed forces are duly respected, and gratitude sincerely expressed to all those who serve.

However, it is noted that there is evidence of a tendency with the M.O.D presence in schools to place emphasis on the adventure and opportunity presented by armed service, obscuring the risks to mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing which are an unfortunate reality of military service. This point has been raised in other submissions to this petition, and we particularly note the primary evidence presented in the submission by the Scottish Youth Parliament (PE1603/P, 21/10/2016).

The Holy See, as a permanent observer state at the United Nations signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>4</sup> (CRC) on 20 April 1990. The CRC holds that a child is any person under 18 years of age; and whilst this petition is not calling for an alteration to the age of recruitment we are mindful of the criticism levelled against the United Kingdom government concerning the recruitment of under 18 year olds, which has been raised by other submissions on this petition, including from the Children and Young People’s Commissioner of Scotland (PE1603/N, 13/10/2016).

With the intent and spirit of the CRC in mind we note the Optional Protocol to the CRC<sup>5</sup> (20 May 2000) which states:

*States Parties that permit voluntary recruitment into their national armed forces under the age of 18 years shall maintain safeguards to ensure, as a minimum, that:*

*(a) Such recruitment is genuinely voluntary;*

*(b) Such recruitment is carried out with the informed consent of the person’s parents or legal guardians;*

*(c) Such persons are fully informed of the duties involved in such military service;*

*(d) Such persons provide reliable proof of age prior to acceptance into national military service. (Article 3:3)*

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<https://www.justiceandpeacescotland.org.uk/MorePublications/tabid/87/ctl/details/itemid/2064/mid/578/justice-and-peace-sunday-8th-january-2017.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church para. 502.

<sup>4</sup> Accessible [http://353ld710iigr2n4po7k4kgvv-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC\\_PRESS200910web.pdf](http://353ld710iigr2n4po7k4kgvv-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/OPACCRC.aspx>

The teaching of the Church states that “*the use of children and adolescents as soldiers in armed conflicts — despite the fact that their young age should bar them from being recruited — must be condemned*. Obligated by force to take part in combat or choosing to do so on their own initiative without being fully aware of the consequences, these children are not only deprived of an education and a normal childhood, they are also trained to kill. This constitutes an intolerable crime. The use of child soldiers in combat forces of any kind must be stopped and, at the same time, every possible assistance must be given to the care, education and rehabilitation of those children who have been involved in combat.”<sup>6</sup>

Considering the evidence of the detrimental effect on young recruits raised by medical professionals<sup>7</sup> in a recent report we believe that whilst decisions on the recruitment of soldiers remains a matter for the MOD, any presence of the military in schools in Scotland must be accountable to scrutiny by staff and parents, and that all information presented must address honestly the risks and realities of military service.

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<sup>6</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, para. 512, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html#Disarmament](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#Disarmament)

<sup>7</sup> The Recruitment of Children by the UK Armed Forces, Medact; full report available <https://www.medact.org/2016/resources/reports/recruitment-children-uk-armed-forces/>