

# Catholic Church Closes London's Gay-Friendly 'Soho Masses'

The Catholic Church will stop **gay-friendly Masses** in the central London church that has held them for the past six years, London's archbishop said on Wednesday.

The 18th-century church in Soho, the heart of London's gay scene, has been hosting the twice-monthly Masses with the support of the local Church hierarchy, but Archbishop Vincent Nichols said in a statement that **gay Catholics** should attend Mass in their local parishes rather going to separate services.

"The Mass is always to retain its essential character as the highest **prayer** of the whole Church," Nichols said, stressing there would still be pastoral care to help gay Catholics "take a full part in the life of the Church."

The Vatican teaches that gay sex is sinful but homosexuals deserve respect.

The decision on the "Soho Masses" came after sharp criticism of **same-sex marriage** by Pope Benedict and bishops in Britain and France, where the governments plan to legalize gay nuptials.

Nichols has spoken out in recent weeks against **same-sex marriage** but Church officials and a spokesman for the Soho gay congregation said the decision to stop the Soho Masses was not explicitly linked to that debate.

"We don't see any direct cause and effect," said Joe Stanley, chairman of the Soho Masses Pastoral Council.

London's approved **gay-friendly Masses** were launched in early

2007 while the Vatican's top doctrinal official was Cardinal William Levada, the former archbishop of San Francisco, a city with a large gay community and several gay-friendly churches.

Nichols reaffirmed his support for them last February. Since then, Levada was replaced by Archbishop Gerhard Mueller, who German Catholic media have said wanted to clarify the apparent contradiction between them and Church teaching on homosexuality.

The Our Lady of the Assumption church will now become a parish for disaffected Anglicans who became Catholics in protest against moves in their churches towards allowing female and gay bishops.

Conservative Catholics in Britain have long complained to the Vatican about the Soho Masses, saying they flouted Church teaching on homosexuality, and small groups sometimes protested outside the church during the services.

The archbishop's office declined to comment on his statement or any discussions with the Vatican.

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*Editing by Robin Pomeroy*

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