

London archbishop who opposes same-sex marriage announces Catholic Church has scrapped gay-friendly Soho Masses

- **Archbishop ends gay Masses in London's Soho**
- **Church to become parish for ex-Anglicans turned Catholic**
- **Move comes amid growing Church criticism of same-sex marriage**

By Sam Web



No mass: Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols has announced that gay-friendly Catholic services in London's Soho have been scrapped

The Catholic Church has scrapped gay-friendly Masses in the central London church that has held them for the past six years, London's archbishop announced yesterday.

Our Lady of the Assumption, an 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 than 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 move has been blasted by Stonewall director of public affairs Ruth Hunt, who is Catholic. She told the **BBC**: 'Given what's happened over Christmas, where there were vitriolic and mean messages from pulpit about same-sex marriage, there has never been a more important time to provide a safe space for gay Catholics to pray.'

Archbishop Nichols has previously attacked the government's gay marriage Bill, labelling it 'undemocratic' and a 'shambles'.

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 government's plan to legalise gay nuptials.

More...

- Pope warns David Cameron on gay marriage 'damage to family' in New Year message
- It is utterly mind-boggling for Cameron to break a vow to his core voters over gay marriage while pandering to a tiny minority
- 'True nature of marriage' will be lost to schoolchildren if gay wedding plans go ahead, warns leading Catholic archbishop

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.



Holy: Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Soho, London. It hosted gay-friendly masses twice a month for the past six years

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.



Opposed: Archbishop Vincent Nichols has criticised government