

# Cypriot bishop faces hate speech inquiry over homophobic remarks

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## **Greek Orthodox cleric claimed gay men recognisable from ‘particular odour’**

Police in [Cyprus](#) have opened an investigation into homophobic remarks made by a controversial bishop.

At the request of the island’s attorney general, investigators will examine whether the Greek Cypriot Orthodox prelate, known popularly by his first name, Neophytos, violated hate speech laws after he claimed that homosexuality could be passed on when pregnant women had anal sex.

“It is, they say, a problem that is usually transferred to the child from the parents,” the bishop of Morphou said in one of a series of talks billed as “spiritual meetings of dialogue”. “And, they say, it happens ... when the parents [indulge] in erotic acts that are unnatural.”

Relating the story of a saint and a “beautiful young boy”, he said gay men were instantly recognisable because they gave off a “particular odour”.

The government denounced the comments as “insulting the dignity and equality of Cypriots.” Campaigners with Accept LGBTI, a gay rights group, called for Neophytos to face disciplinary action.

“We want to see him recant and we want to see him defrocked,” said Zacharias Theophanous, a software engineer who has said he will run for Nicosia mayor in 2021. “The church is very powerful in this country and its views often have a traumatising effect on young people struggling to find their way.”

In a letter to the attorney general, Costas Clerides, the group said the bishop’s remarks had prompted numerous people to come forward with testimonies about church officials promoting “conversion therapy” that for some had provoked suicidal thoughts.

“We hear all the time of people being subjected to conversion therapies in villages and cities,” Theophanous told the Guardian. “There are priests who will tell gay men they can be straight if, for example, they undergo hormone therapy or take Viagra or pray enough.”

Clerides has received similar complaints in the past although this is the first time he has gone so far as to order a police inquiry. Instances of homophobic hate speech by senior clergymen were reported in 2016 and 2017 but no action was taken.

Cyprus was among the last EU member states to decriminalise homosexuality, doing so in 1998 under pressure from Brussels as it prepared to join the bloc. In the four years since legislation came into force outlawing hate speech, there have been no legal proceedings in response to homophobic and transphobic comments.

Costas Gavrielides, who advises the president, Nicos Anastasiades, on issues of acceptance and diversity, said the bishop's remarks not only had no scientific basis but amounted to "artificial arguments" that fostered homophobic hatred "while insulting the parents of gay people and especially targeting their mothers".

Despite the innate social conservatism of Cypriot society, attitudes toward homosexuality have changed significantly in recent years, according to opinion polls.

In what was interpreted as backhanded criticism of Neophytos from a senior fellow cleric, the bishop of Kyrenia, Chrysostomos, issued a statement saying it was not the place of clerics "to meddle in couples' bedrooms".

Chrysostomos said he had never heard of Orthodox Christian saints making references to "such matters in such details".

But Neophytos has so far stood his ground. When asked by the Cyprus Mail why he had made the comments he said: "I expressed the position of the church and the position of the saints."

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## **Helena Smith**

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The Guardian

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