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Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor leads 4.1 million Catholics

Christianity has been "all but eliminated" as a source of moral guidance in people's lives, according to the head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

The Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor also lamented the fact people were "indifferent" to Christian values and the Church when he addressed the National Conference of Priests in Leeds.

"In our countries in Britain today, especially in England and Wales, that Christianity, as a sort of backdrop to people's lives and moral decisions - and to the government, the social life of the country - has now almost been vanquished," the Archbishop said.

He added that music, new age and occult practices seemed to be replacing Christ as something in which young people could trust.

Society had been demoralised, with people seeking transient happiness in alcohol, drugs and pornography, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor continued.

The remarks come against a background of a steady decline in attendance at mass and a worsening shortage of priests

The cardinal, who is leader of 4.1 million Catholics in England and Wales, also warned against "apathy" and "negligence" in cases of child abuse.

“
Now we know much more and are prepared to learn, act and lead the way in making the Catholic Church the safest possible place for children
”

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"We must recognise the depth and the extent of the damage done to the Church and its mission in these cases," he said.

Archbishop of
Westminster, Cardinal
Cormac
Murphy-O'Connor

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Cardinal Cormac

Murphy-O'Connor said priests, and especially bishops, had not been sufficiently aware of the "insidious" and "pathological" nature of child abuse or treated all allegations seriously enough.

But he added: "Now we know much more and are prepared to learn, act and lead the way in making the Catholic Church the safest possible place for children."

Paedophile priest

Between 1995 and 1999, 21 of the 5,600 Catholic priests in England and Wales were convicted of offences against children.

In July, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor himself acknowledged he had made a mistake after it emerged that as Bishop of Arundel and Brighton he appointed a paedophile priest as chaplain to the Gatwick Airport chapel despite concerns about his behaviour.

Father Michael Hill, who was released from prison last autumn, served three and a half years of a five-year sentence imposed in 1997 for nine sex attacks.

They included one on a boy with learning difficulties who he had met at the chapel.

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