

# Bishop says police incite football fans

Lorraine Davidson

ONE of Scotland's most senior churchmen said football fans are being "unnecessarily provoked" by police as part of a crackdown on sectarianism.

Philip Tartaglia, the Catholic Bishop of Paisley, told how he was frisked by stewards under the glare of police, filmed on video camera and made to feel "distinctly uncomfortable" when he attended a Celtic football match with two other priests in August.

Tartaglia was so affected by the experience that he raised it with Alex Salmond, the first minister, when the pair met last month.

His disclosure coincides with an admission by Strathclyde police that officers made a "mistake" when they confiscated a tartan scarf from a 16-year-old boy at a Celtic match earlier this year.

The green and purple St Ninian's scarf was designed for Pope Benedict XVI to mark his visit to Scotland last year.

"I went to a Celtic game at Pittodrie with a fellow priest," said Tartaglia.

"We were body-searched by stewards under the glare of police, and when we took our seats a police officer started intently filming the Celtic supporters and we were in the middle of them. I felt distinctly uncomfortable.

"The fans had been quiet and good-natured but I could feel the tension growing. It was an unnecessary provocation of a peaceful crowd."

He added: "It was an almost hostile surveillance. It was as if they were saying, 'We've got the power, we can identify you and put you in jail.' Suddenly, there was a change in the atmosphere and the focus was on the police, instead of the game."

Tartaglia said he felt that the police were being put in "an impossible position" but admitted he was worried that a growing mistrust between them and football fans was taking root.

"One of the priests I was with was from a different country and he was completely mystified as to why we were being filmed," added Tartaglia.

"It felt like an unnecessary intrusion into our privacy. I felt like saying, 'What are you doing, go away.'"

It has emerged that the Catholic church demanded a meeting with Strathclyde police after a tartan scarf was confiscated from a teenage fan in April.

The force initially defended its officers' actions, insisting in correspondence with the church that "certain flags and banners depicting eminent individuals or historical scenes, while completely legal, can, in a volatile football environment, cause an increase in tension between opposing fans".

Last night, however, it admitted a mistake had been made. "A scarf was removed from a boy at a football game held at Ibrox and we acknowledge that this was a mistake on our officers' part," said a spokeswoman for Strathclyde police.

"This matter was raised at a recent meeting with the Catholic church and a full explanation was given by police, which was accepted."

Tartaglia's intervention follows figures published by the Scottish government showing that almost 700 people were charged with sectarian crimes last year. More than half of the episodes were anti-Catholic, at 57.5%, with Protestants targeted in 36.5% of cases.

Neil Lennon, the Celtic

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## Bishop claims fans are riled up

►► Continued from page 1 manager, has been forced to issue a plea to sections of the Celtic support to stop singing offensive songs as the club faces a Uefa probe into the issue.

"We want the minority of people to stop the offensive singing, and if they don't then there will be action taken against them," said Lennon.

The Catholic church said it felt many incidents were not reported to police and that it intended to set up a unit to record sectarian incidents in Scotland.

Football fans in Scotland have strongly opposed the government's proposed anti-sectarian law, which which could lead to five-year jail terms and bans from football grounds.

The SNP has been accused by opposition parties of failing to answer more than 20 questions posed on the controversial plans.

"I urge the SNP government to stop, take a breath, and talk to other parties, to the clubs, and to the many others concerned about these proposals rather than abusing their parliamentary majority to force through flawed legislation that risks doing more harm than good," said James Kelly MSP, the Labour shadow community safety minister.

A source close to Roseanna Cunningham, the community safety minister, said: "Labour have totally misjudged their approach to this bill. It is needed and fills clear gaps in the law."

A spokesman for the Catholic church, said: "There appears to be an attempt by the police to widen out the crackdown into something it was never intended to be. An example is the confiscation of a Pope Benedict scarf

"We are concerned that the police action pushes the

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