

UNITED KINGDOM

Isabel and Fr Sean acquitted but praying for life remains risky

LIFE AND BIOETHICS

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“Not guilty”. This is the final verdict for Isabel Vaughan Spruce and Father Sean Gough who were arrested, interrogated and charged as criminals for praying silently in their minds outside the BPAS Robert Clinic covered by a Public Space Protection Order (PSPO)

in Birmingham, UK.

That there was no legal substance to the case from the start was confirmed by Isabel when she spoke to the Daily Compass immediately after the verdict. Describing what happened in the joint hearing in Birmingham Magistrate's court on Thursday February 16, she said, "it was over very quickly". "The judge asked the Crown Prosecution for their evidence. They said they had no evidence. The judge then asked us how we intended to plea, we replied not guilty and the judge read the sentence, 'not guilty' and that was it".

Isabel Vaughan Spruce, director of March for Life UK, was confronted by police on December 6, when she was standing on the street outside an abortion facility in Kings Norton, covered by a PSPO designed to prevent anti-social behaviour by putting a boundary of 150 metres around a specific location. A video of her being searched and arrested after saying she "might be" praying went viral and sparked a fierce debate on "thought crime".

Similarly, Father Sean Gough, was charged for praying and holding a sign reading 'praying for free speech' within the same censorship zone on February 7. An additional charge was made for parking his car in the area with a small 'unborn lives matter' bumper sticker on it. After his acquittal yesterday, he said, "I'm pleased that I've been cleared of all charged today and to have cleared my name". "I stand by my beliefs, unborn lives do matter. But whatever your views on abortion, we can all agree that a democratic country cannot be in the business of prosecuting thought crimes."

Yesterday's verdict is an important victory, not least because it signifies that Isabel and Father Sean have been acquitted and no-longer have a criminal charge hanging over their heads but also for pro-life activists. Initially, the Crown Prosecution had stated that the criminal charges against both of them for "protesting and engaging in an act that is intimidating to service users" had been "discontinued" but could be renewed in the future pending new evidence. This is what prompted Isabel and Father Sean to seek a clear verdict and to clear their names with the legal support of **Alliance Defending Freedom** (ADF). They achieved that yesterday and are proudly celebrating the end of legal proceedings today.

"I am glad I have been vindicated of any wrongdoing. But I should never have been arrested for my thoughts and treated like a criminal simply for praying on a public street" said Isabel. Whereas, Jeremiah Igunnubole, Legal Counsel for ADF UK, commented, "this court case is of great cultural significance". "This isn't 1984, but 2023 –

nobody should be criminalised for their thoughts, for their prayers, for peaceful expression on a public street”.

Paradoxically, this significant legal victory which establishes that thought cannot be criminalised carries no weight for future cases. The broad terminology in the law on praying means the police can still be called to arrest and charge peaceful individuals who pray silently in these “censorship zones” even though such cases are judged not to meet the “full code test” for prosecutors. It also means pro-life supporters will be faced with expensive and gruelling court cases to fight to clear their name. “We must stand firm against this and ensure that these most fundamental freedoms are protected, and that all our laws reflect this”, said Isabel.

For many the law is a form of intimidation to stop those wishing to exercise true freedom of thought and freedom of speech in public spaces. But it could be the bitter taste of what’s to come and soon. The **Public Order Bill** under debate in the House of Commons and close to being ratified, would allow buffer zones to be rolled out around every abortion clinic in England and Wales. “If the government imposes censorship zones around every abortion facility in the country, as they are considering doing with the Public Order Bill currently under discussion, who knows how many more people will stand trial, even face prison, for offering help, or for praying in their mind?”, said Father Sean. “I call on the government to look into the overwhelming positive work that pro-life groups do to support vulnerable women at their point of need, before censoring the streets of the UK and allowing good people to be criminalised for acts of love.”

Curiously, yesterday morning while Isabel and Father Sean were in court, pro-abortion supporters were protesting in Parliament square with large posters to draw attention to their cause. Remembering the five people killed when Khalid Masood drove his car into crowds on Westminster Bridge and then stabbed a policeman outside the Houses of Parliament on 22 March 2017, one wonders why this area isn’t covered by a PSPO or does the law serve to silence just a select few?