



We proclaim a crucified Christ
1Cor1.23

Monday 7 December 2020

Statement re Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020
Most Rev Peter A Comensoli
Archbishop of Melbourne

Last weekend I wrote to the clergy of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne expressing concerns regarding a new government bill, tabled in Parliament.:

<https://content.legislation.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/bills/591143bi1.pdf>

<https://content.legislation.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/bills/591143exi1.pdf>

The bill purports to protect vulnerable people from harm through what has been called ‘conversion therapies’. In faith communities, ‘conversion’ has a meaning of positive change, upholding human freedom and dignity.

I encourage every action to protect people from harm. A bill that protected people would have my full support.

The problem is this bill doesn’t merely do what it claims. It targets prayer, and appears to impose silence on people of faith from sharing their beliefs in an open, honest and faithful way. The bill imposes on the right of parents and children to speak plainly and honestly with one another. It robs adults from seeking whatever guidance and pastoral support they seek concerning deeply personal matters.

No government has an interest in what a person prays for, who they pray to, who they pray with, or what conversations happen between members of a family.

Despite affecting religious communities in such a direct way, faith groups were afforded little consultation and were not shown a draft of this bill before its publication.

It is not clear that parents in Victoria have been told clearly that this bill affects what they can say and how they say it with their own children.

This looks like a dramatic over-reach of the state into family life, private matters, pastoral contexts of conversion, prayer and spiritual accompaniment.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne has a range of questions for which we seek resolution – some of those questions are attached to this statement.

The ultimate outcome of this bill may not actually be to protect anyone who is vulnerable, but to silence people of faith from expressing a view.

Most Rev Peter A Comensoli
Archbishop of Melbourne

Unresolved questions regarding the Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020:

- On what basis can the government propose legislation that directly impacts on 'conversion' (a normal and everyday practice for Christians and others) or prayer?
- The bill imposes restrictions on what people can and cannot say to one another, even if they are adults of a shared cultural or religious identity. How is this not harmful to free speech in a liberal democracy?
- In the Catholic context, we value chastity for everyone, and we invite some to celibacy. The bill is so broad and vague in its definitions that in both categories people could now be criminally liable for showing restraint and self-control in their relationships and sexuality. Is this really the intent of the government?
- Christian leaders are expected to model good behaviour and leadership in their religious context of the people they teach, form, and serve. Will encouraging self-restraint among those leaders and staff now be a criminal offence?
- If a married adult is struggling with their sexuality and asks a priest to pray for them and bless them so they can keep sexual expression to their marriage, are they now performing a 'change or suppression practice'?
- The Bible calls for conversion and for sexual abstinence on occasion, as well as restriction of sexual activity to marriage only. Will showing someone the relevant passages in the bible now be a 'change or suppression practice'?
- A pre-pubescent child requests hormonal treatment and preparations for gender-reassignment surgery, but their parents, who know and love that child with great care and devotion, encourage he or she to 'wait' and be patient, and see how they feel after a few years of maturity and growth. Are those parents now embarking on a 'change or suppression practice'?
- Sexual identity is one of a number of ways for a person to understand and explain their personal identity, which is often complex and changes over time. For people of faith, their religious identity is far more important. For those wishing to curtail their sexual behaviour in line with their religious identity as a priority, and they seek counselling and pastoral help to achieve this, how are they not conducting a 'change or suppression practice' according to the bill?
- Catholic schools in Melbourne and elsewhere have strict and robust policies to protect individuals in situations in which a student identifies as transgender. This bill interrupts policies of safety and empowerment by forcing restrictions on what can and cannot be encouraged in normal pastoral practice. How can we be asked to support a bill that might cause further harm to children facing gender dysphoria who, according to science and therapeutic experience need less pressure, more time and space, and room to develop through adolescence as they shape their identity? They need support, not a forced lockdown into their identity at some fixed point of time.
- Pressures to enact hormonal treatment and surgery in adolescence can cause long-term harm that is regretted in later life. Forcing parents and carers from being able to offer children alternative options for their care and wellbeing is irresponsible.