



WATCH AND ACT

Dear Friends in Christ,

"The price of freedom," as the old saying goes, "is eternal vigilance." As I write, there are three current proposals for new laws which could, in various ways, impact on religious freedom. Conscientious Catholics should be vigilant and exercise their duties as citizens in a respectful and intelligent way.

1. The Seal of Sacramental Confession

This comes from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. It recommends that the law be changed to compel priests to reveal what they have heard in sacramental confession, if that relates to sexual abuse of minors.

The Catholic churches and organisations in Australia, routinely and faithfully, already comply with the strict laws and regulations that now govern reporting of this grievous crime; and support the work in strengthening their effectiveness. The effect of this proposal of the Royal Commission would be of no foreseeable practical benefit to that.

It is worth noting that the Commission has not made similar proposals regarding the protection of privileged conversations between psychiatrists or lawyers and their clients. There are good reasons for such protections, which can be understood even by those who may not fathom what religious belief and practice mean. The same practical reasons apply to the seal of confession, which for us also has a sacred significance.

The recommendation, it seems to me, stumbles over a boundary into a world where governments may attempt to monitor and manage the internal life of religious communities: even, as in this case, sacramental ministry. We have seen this before in authoritarian and totalitarian states, but not in free societies like ours.

I hope that our parliaments will recognise the threat to religious liberty that this proposal represents and reject it. My own position is well expressed in the simple and eloquent statement of the Catholic priest and lawyer Frank Brennan sj: "I would rather break the law than break the seal."

2. Assisted Suicide/Euthanasia

On 14th September this year, legislation will be introduced in the NSW Parliament to allow assisted suicide, under certain conditions.

For Catholics and others who respect the sanctity of human life, no conditions could make euthanasia or assisted suicide morally acceptable.

However, whatever conditions and restrictions may be put in place initially, the experience in other places has been that, in practice, the conditions gradually expand and the restrictions gradually are relaxed.

Moreover, as we have seen in other countries, pressure also gradually mounts on health care professionals and institutions to co-operate with procedures that violate their values.

Some people do suffer unnecessary pain and distress in dying, even in our world class health system. Governments could deal more constructively with this by providing increased resources for palliative care both for patients, as well as their families and friends, who suffer their own distress. Medical and nursing schools need to bring courses in palliative care, not only for specialists, but for general practitioners too, in from the margins to the centre of their training.

3. Changing the Definition of Marriage

Finally, there is the question of changing the legal definition of marriage to include committed same sex relationships. This is not a simple question. Regrettably, there has been only superficial engagement in debate between the two sides. In fact, many promoting a “yes” vote say they do not want a debate.

It does not help informed discussion that we are being asked to vote in a postal survey without so far knowing the detail of the legislation proposed. This creates reasonable concern about how well any implications for religious freedom may be handled.

This is a political decision with social consequences. Like all such decisions, different people, including Catholics, may come to different prudential judgments about its likely beneficial or detrimental effects.

It is not a referendum on Catholic teaching. No secular law could change that. Our teaching on marriage is clear. It is set out in the pastoral message I sent you in June 2015, which may be accessed again here: <https://goo.gl/C8GceC>

I invite you to give prayerful consideration to these three matters and urge you to speak and act as true followers of Christ as we speak the truth in love.

+Michael McKenna
Bishop of Bathurst

22nd August 2017