

23/07/2020

Dear Legislation Committee,

I am writing with concerns relating to the Children and Community Services Amendment Bill 2019 and the free practice of religion here in Western Australia. There are great repercussions with the proposed breaking of the seal that is not openly discussed. Breaking of the seal of confession infringes on the freedom of a person from practicing his or her religious beliefs. Christianity is already the most persecuted religion in the world.

Persecution come in many forms including genocide (Christians are being wiped out in Middle East), burning and bombing of churches (Sri Lanka and France recently), witch hunt of our leaders like George Pell and now persecution of state of victims of sexual abuse who find healing and counselling from priest during the sacrament of confession.

Seven sexual abuse victims including James Parker from Perth have spoken out on how confession and the seal of confession has helped them heal from their abuse and bring about justice by reporting the perpetrator. Their testimonies can be found on True Identity International videos. On their testimonies, the seal of confession allowed them to disclose their abuse and empower them to report their abusers. James Parker was abused in his teens and is a non-Christian when he approached a Catholic priest knowing he can trust and that any information he says will not be divulged as the priest has sworn to seal of confession. James found healing through confession and through healing he was able to get justice by reporting the abuser. Many victims like himself turn to priests knowing they vowed to keep secrecy. These victims' journey back into life would never have started if the Seal of Confession has been policed as the bill before Parliament presently suggests. Priests are highly trained and are true unsung heroes who have helped people in the community find healing and relationship with God. The government must protect victims at all costs and therefore protect the Seal of Confession that allows victims to share openly and start healing through telling their stories.

Our priests will be persecuted and our freedom to practice our religion will be affected by loss of leaders. I have spoken to priests and it is untrue that perpetrators of abuse are first in the line to confess their sins to the priests. Perpetrators confess their sins when they are already in prison and is repenting, essential for their healing journey. Many priests I know would rather go to jail than break the seal of confession. Under this proposed legislation, our church leaders would be jailed if they choose to follow the laws of the church and promise secrecy of confessors. This is another form of persecution against Christianity as our churches will be stripped out of leaders and role models. Another negative outcome of these is that our priests will be framed with unproven allegations. In the last few years, media has tarnished the name of Cardinal Pell who was trialed for child sexual abuse claims. He was imprisoned unjustly due to a biased jury who has prejudice against religious people and was only freed after a re-trial by judges at Australia's highest court overturned the conviction. If a cardinal like George Pell, a high-ranking priest was unjustly punished, how easy would it be for our local priests to be targeted by false accusations.

The church teaches us to follow the law of the land. This includes cooperating with police if sexual abuse is suspected. WA now have the best safeguarding guidelines to protect children in Catholic churches. The Catholic Church of Australia has implemented 79 of the 80 recommendations put forward in the Royal Commission's' Final report, except for/ bar the recommendation relating to breaking the seal of confession. The Archdiocese of Perth has successfully rolled out a Safeguarding Programme that has been adopted as a model across Catholic dioceses throughout Australia. No

other organisation outside the Catholic Church of Australia has a similar or as large-scale a programme for the safeguarding of children as exists in Western Australia. The church is the safest place a child can be at surrounded by his or her family and the support of the wider community.

Personally, my overall wellbeing, which includes my spiritual wellbeing is nourished by confessing my sins, knowing full well that the Lord has forgiven me and that I am given another chance of living a life like Jesus. Confession has allowed me to become a better daughter to my parents, a better sister, friend, a better person for my community, a better nurse to my patients, a better parish councillor/ youth leader to my church and ultimately, better citizen of Western Australia. We need your help to protect the Seal of Confession for the victims, preservation of religious freedom and for the betterment of our society.

Thank you for your service ensuring the best laws rule our State.

With gratitude,

Ms Kendall Diaz