

SUBMISSION OPPOSING CHILDREN AND COMMUNITY SERVICES AMENDMENT BILL 2019

As a grandmother of young children and a committed Catholic, I fully support measures taken by government and other institutions, including and especially the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth's Professional Standards Office, to safeguard the safety and well-being of children in our community.

However, I strenuously reject the Children and Community Services Amendment Bill 2019, specifically, Clause 51 to Clause 53, arising from recommendations 7.3 and 7.4 of the Final Report of the Royal Commission, which do not further the cause of protecting children in our community but instead violates my religious freedom and unfairly singles out Catholic priests for mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse.

Violation of my religious freedom

These two recommendations strike at the very heart of my Catholic Faith – my belief in the love and mercy of God, who gave me an instrument to confess and make penance for my sins, receive forgiveness and be reconciled with Him. This Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, as it is called, helps me to live as Jesus Christ taught us – to love God and love our neighbour in the Christian way – through kindness, forgiveness, helpfulness, charity - all the qualities that make me a better person for the benefit of my family and the wider society. To receive the Sacrament, I make a regular examination of my conscience to see where I have failed to love God and my neighbour and seek my trusted priest to make my confession. In facing up to my faults and failings and receiving God's forgiveness, I am able to make a change for the better. Which is why I consider this Sacrament life-giving. When I unburden myself of the words, thoughts and actions that have hurt others – and thereby God – and hear the words of God through the priest forgiving me, I am healed of the pain and guilt that weighs me down. I feel powerfully the love and mercy of God and I can start afresh to show that love and mercy to all I meet.

The priest, by virtue of his Holy Orders, has the power to forgive all sins "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". He is Christ's appointed representative and is *"bound under very severe penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins that his penitents have confessed to him. He can make no use of knowledge that confession gives him. This secret, which admits of no exceptions, is called the "Sacramental Seal"."

* Catechism of the Catholic Church Article 1467

The amendment, which requires the priest to betray the secrecy of confession breaks my trust with the priest. The words I spoke to him were from my heart and meant for God's ears only. The priest receives them only as God's representative. If he is required by law to make use of that knowledge, it destroys the sanctity of the Sacrament. It would have a devastating effect on my ability to receive and trust in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, a primary pillar of my Catholic faith. I believe the above stated Amendments violate my freedom to practice my faith without interference from the State.

Catholic priests unfairly singled out for mandatory reporting -

The bill addresses only one of the five recommendations for mandatory reporting by The Royal Commission. In targeting ministers of religion and the Confessional, ie Catholic priests, but not the other four groups, the amendment is discriminatory not just against priests but all Catholics who are impacted by this, as I have detailed above. There are 177 Catholic priests in WA and some 500,000 Catholics, all of whom will have their religious rights diminished by the Bill.

I submit that the other four groups mentioned in the Royal Commission's recommendations for mandatory reporting, namely:

- Out-of-home care workers, excluding foster and kinship/relative carers
- Youth justice workers
- Early childhood workers
- Registered psychologists and school counsellors

have consistently and considerably more day to day contact with young children. Yet, why is the state government picking on only one group - people in religious ministry? Isn't the safety of the children who are in contact with the abovementioned groups just as important? Why has Minister Simone McGurk stated that they would call for reviews and public comment on the other four groups but there has been no apparent public consultation process in regard to ministers of religion or the Seal of Confession.

In conclusion, may I draw your attention to the fact that the Archdiocese of Perth was the first of Australia's Catholic dioceses to establish Safeguarding Officers across its network of parishes. The Safeguarding Office is responsible for ensuring the safety of children, young people and the vulnerable within the confines of the Catholic Church across the Archdiocese of Perth. It educates the Catholic community on child protection and protective behaviours. The Catholic Church and the entire Catholic community is fully committed to the safety of children and young people. Catholic Professional Standards Office stands ready to assist anyone with allegations of sexual abuse by Church personnel.

I sincerely urge the Committee to take into account my submission that I and my 500,000 fellow Catholics, have the right to practice my faith in its fullness. I urge the Committee to veto the unjust and uncalled for Bill that deprives us of that right.

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