

Dear Legislation Committee,

I am writing with concerns relating to the Children and Community Services Amendment Bill 2019 and the free practice of religion in Western Australia.

The reason I have been led to write to you today is to express my concerns regarding the removal of the Seal of Confession within the Catholic Church. The removal of the Seal of Confession is not a change that can be made by the Australian Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is a universal Church. This means that the governing authority is not held by the bishops in Australia, but the *Holy See* in Rome. By introducing and enforcing this law in our state, you limit all Catholic's, especially a priest's, expression of free religion by disallowing them to follow the authority of our governing body in Rome.

The Royal Commission's Recommendation 16.26 has not been adequately explored. The Royal Commission recommended that the Australian Catholic Church seeks clarification from the Vatican on "whether information received from a child during the sacrament of reconciliation that they had been sexually abused would be covered by the seal of confession"; and "whether absolution could and should be withheld if a person confessed to perpetrating child sexual abuse, until they report themselves to civil authorities".

The Catholic Church in Australia, and any part thereof, does not hold any power or authority in changing the Seal of Confession. The Royal Commission's Recommendation (in Volume 16 of the Final Report) 16.26 has not been sufficiently explored. Changes to law **should not** occur until this has been completed.

There are existing measures to safeguard children within the Catholic Church. We, as a Church, strive to prevent and protect children from the horrors and life-altering impacts of sexual abuse within our institution. The Catholic Church in Australia has implemented 79 of the 80 recommendations put forward in the Royal Commission's Final Report, except for that pertaining to breaking the Seal of Confession, which as stated above, the bishops cannot change or rule on. The Catholic Archdiocese of Perth has implemented exemplary measures in the safeguarding of children. One of such measures is the appointment of 'safeguarding officers' in each parish. My mother is a safeguarding officer in my local parish. She has educated children, parents and parishioners in our community about child protection and prevention of sexual abuse to the young and/or vulnerable. She has undergone extensive training for this roll.

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. Rather than force the Church to break a sacred practice through the implementation of mandatory reporting, the Government should instead consult and work collaboratively with the Church to implement and improve practices that are within the Australian Church's power to implement.

I wish nothing more than to look after the children within the Church. However, I do not believe that breaking the seal of confession is the best or correct way to do so. I hope that you may consider an alternate solution in protecting the children of Western Australia.

I am grateful for the role you are to play in protecting our children.

Yours faithfully,  
Veronica McShane