



We proclaim a crucified Christ

1Cor1:23

5 December 2020

*All Clergy,
Archdiocese of Melbourne*

Dear Bishops, Fathers and Deacons,

My prayerful greetings to you in this Season of Advent, and on this joyful day of ordinations to the priesthood. Please keep Jude, Simeon, James and Jude Thaddeus in your prayers.

You may have seen a bill, quietly tabled by the State Government last week, called the **Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020**.

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

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

With scant consultation over the past twelve months, and little discussion in recent weeks, the bill was tabled without religious communities having the opportunity to see exactly what was being proposed, and to be frank, it raises serious concerns and questions.

The basic problem is not the announced intention, which appears to be about preventing harmful and coercive practices that would damage human dignity. This I would support. The problem however, is the content of the bill itself and its explanatory memorandum (links above), which looks like a dramatic over-reach of the state into the contexts of prayer, conversion, pastoral conversation, spiritual accompaniment, family life and the freedom of individuals to change and to seek advice and direction of their own choosing to make their own decisions.

Since the bill was made public I have given some time to reading and understanding it, and have sought a range of advice. While more consideration will need to be given to it, I have to be clear with you that I oppose this bill as it currently stands. It is expected that the bill will be

debated and brought to pass in the lower house as early as next week, and brought back to the upper house early next year.

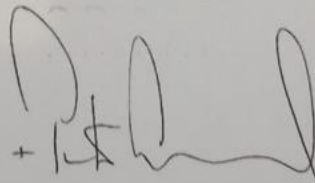
Can you please make your own people aware of the bill and its possible implications, and encourage them to phone their local Member of Parliament to express their view. Because the bill has not been widely publicised, many parents and families, clergy and people of faith are currently unaware of the contents of this proposed legislation, which might have a chilling effect on the ability of Victorian people of faith to express a view, share their faith, or talk about biblical teaching without fear of state interference.

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

If outstanding questions can be answered comprehensively, and time given to public debate and discussion, it is possible such concerns could be resolved, but in the meanwhile I will give some public attention to this issue, alongside other faith leaders. Attached to this letter is a set of unresolved questions legislators in Victoria ought to be able to answer. You may wish to use these as discussion points with your people, and as points they might raise in their conversations with local Members.

I am pleased for you to circulate this letter and pray we can find a fair and equitable approach to this issue, strangely appearing just weeks before the celebration of Christmas.

Yours fraternally in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter A. Comensoli'. The signature is stylized and includes a small cross symbol to the left of the main text.

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.