



Speaking the truth in love

Eph 4:15

To the priests of the Archdiocese of Sydney

15 August 2017

The Assumption of Our Lady

Dear brothers in the ministry of mercy

The Royal Commission's Report on *Criminal Justice* issued yesterday is more than 600 pages long, with 85 recommendations, and will take quite some time for Church leaders and their advisers to digest, let alone the rest of the community. But we understand it recommends that the civil law no longer privilege what Catholics and Orthodox Christians confess to God through their priest in the Sacrament of Confession.

Australia has always recognised the freedom of the Christian Churches and other serious faiths to practice their sacraments and other rituals unimpeded. I believe we should continue to give people of faith that space.

One in four Australians belongs to a church – Catholic or Orthodox – that believes in Confession. Some came to this country from Communist Vietnam or totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe, precisely to enjoy the freedom to practice that religion in Australia. What is now proposed would be a grave interference with the practice of their faith.

Child sexual abuse is a terrible crime. It is very, very rare for a perpetrator to confess it, as sadly perpetrators do not accept how evil their deeds are. If trust in the “seal” or absolute confidentiality of Confession is diminished, then it is less likely that the rare perpetrator who does approach a priest will be encouraged to face the evil of their actions, to report to the authorities, and to take appropriate action to cease the offending.

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Moreover, If a perpetrator or a victim of abuse tells a Confessor of this crime in Confession, the Confessor is free to ask the penitent to repeat this to him outside Confession so that they can resolve together what further action might be taken.

It is also noteworthy that the Royal Commission report does not propose removing the legal privilege currently recognised for confidential communications with lawyers or psychiatrists. Nor does it examine the non-institutional settings where most child abuse occurs. Why should priests be the only ones targeted here?

I understand that some people purporting to speak for the Catholic Church have welcomed the proposed change in the law, or suggested that contrite penitents might be refused absolution until they self-incriminate, or claimed that what victims of abuse report in Confession need not be treated as confidential. I do not agree.

Like Archbishop Hart (whose statement I attach), I believe the spiritual encounter between a penitent and God must remain inviolable and that Catholic priests and penitents should not be threatened with a criminal offence for practising their religion. The proposal to abolish the confessional seal will help no child. We should focus on measures that really will protect children and I fully support every effort by the Royal Commission and others to do that. We should not interfere with a practice core to the religious belief of so many Australians.

In the meantime I exhort all priests to maintain an absolute seal on everything they learn from beginning to end of each Confession. And I thank you, dear brothers in the ministry of mercy, for persevering in generously offering your people opportunities to participate in this sacrament.

Yours fraternally in Christ



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