



18 July 2024

Ms Anita Dow MP (Chair)
Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools
Parliament of Tasmania
Parliament House
HOBART TAS 7000

Archdiocese of Hobart Submission to Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools

Dear Committee members

This submission to the important inquiry into bullying and discrimination in education, is made in addition to the submission by Catholic Education Tasmania (CET) to outline the approach of the Archdiocese of Hobart (AoH) to the issues around bullying and discrimination generally, and to respond to some of the concerns and misrepresentations of the recent Pastoral Letter *"We are Salt to the Earth"*. The submission of CET will go into more detail about how our Catholic schools seek to lovingly care for all the children in our schools, though this submission will also deal with that issue, albeit in less detail.

The Catholic Church in Tasmania

The Catholic Church in Tasmania consists of 71,000 people in 27 parish communities. The Church, together with its associated agencies, is one of the largest employers in the State, and contributes around \$700 million annually to the economy delivering tangible impacts to the lives of around 200,000 Tasmanians.

The Church is involved in education, health, social enterprises, family violence services, social and affordable housing, social welfare, drug and alcohol services, care for the elderly and at-risk young people. We deliver these services and care for the most vulnerable because this is at the heart of our faith in Jesus Christ.

As stated in the Pastoral Letter *We are Salt to the Earth*, it is because we believe in the dignity of every human person, that we especially care for "the vulnerable, the most insignificant, the outcast, the oppressed, the discarded, the poor, the marginalised, the unlearned, the sick and those downtrodden".

This care is undertaken regardless of the race, religion, sex, sexuality or any other attribute. Our first and primary concern is the wellbeing and flourishing of every person who engages with our services. We also believe in objective and verifiable truth. We do not impose but rather we propose this truth to all who we come into contact with. Our final motivation is our belief in God as a God of love. Jesus called on us to love God and to love our neighbour.

When it comes to the education of around 17,000 students in our 38 Archdiocesan schools, we seek to proclaim that truth for the benefit of all. If we are unable to proclaim the Catholic faith in our Catholic schools then those schools will cease to be Catholic, and Tasmanians will be denied their human right to choose a school which reflects their religious and moral values (as outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights).

Our schools offer a vision for human flourishing. It is important that parental rights, and freedom of religion, speech and association are respected. Parents in our schools sign up to their child being taught the Catholic faith. Just as parents should be free to choose a Catholic education for their children, they are also free to reject such an education by choosing other educational options.

Our schools strive to show love to everyone with zero tolerance for bullying and harassment. Indeed, we know that many parents who are not Catholic choose our schools for their children specifically because of our strong and proven commitment to comprehensive pastoral care.

That unique pastoral approach is also rooted in our faith. In order to maintain the very attributes which attracts so many to our schools, we must be able to build a community of faith with people who either share our faith or at the very least are not openly hostile to it.

Misleading Statements

Having read the record of the parliamentary debate, it is clear that at least part of the motivation for the establishment of this committee is to respond to the Pastoral Letter *We are Salt to the Earth*.

It is hoped that the important issue of bullying and unjust discrimination is not used to attack Catholic education and the freedom to articulate the Christian faith. However, the nature of some of the statements made by Members of Parliament could lead people to draw that conclusion.

In any case, given part of the debate focused on the pastoral letter, it is appropriate to respond to some of those statements.

A number of members, including Dr Woodruff, Mr Bayley and Ms Johnston either implied or directly asserted that the letter condemned divorcees, people in de facto relationships, those who are LGBT or those who's views on abortion differ from the Catholic Church. This is simply false. No one is condemned in the letter, but rather the church's longstanding teaching on issues including family, marriage, sexuality and the dignity of every human person is illustrated.

Putting aside the misrepresentation of the church's position, the suggestion that simply expressing the long-held views of the Catholic Church to a Catholic school community can be construed as 'an abuse' 'wholly inappropriate', 'dangerous' and 'causing immense harm' is itself an extraordinary attack on freedom of religion. The role of church leaders is to proclaim the Gospel, and to teach the Catholic faith. It appears that there are members of Parliament, including members of this committee who would like that to stop, potentially by force of law, from proclaiming parts of the Catholic faith which they happen to disagree with. This is a chilling development which

needs to be forcefully called out by all those who value freedom of speech and freedom of religion, regardless of whether they share the views which have been expressed.

If people of faith are not free to express their religious views in a religious school, then freedom of religion is dead. If we are only free to express our religious views when they are universally popular then both freedom of speech and freedom of religion do not exist in Tasmania.

Conclusion

Members of this committee are urged to do all they can through this process to hold all parts of the education system accountable for the protection of children in schools and to ensure that bullying and harassment and violence are not tolerated.

Members of this committee are also urged to reject efforts by some to use the important issue of bullying, and harassment and unjust discrimination as a trojan horse to attack faith-based schools, to deny freedom of speech and to ultimately deny parents in Tasmania a genuine choice about the religious and moral formation of their children.

Yours sincerely,

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For the Archdiocese of Hobart