



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE FROM THE PRESIDENT

10 August 2018

Mr Richard Pye
Clerk of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
clerk.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr Pye,

Regarding the proposal to replace the parliamentary prayer with an invitation to prayer or reflection.

This submission is from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC). The ACBC is a permanent institution of the Catholic Church in Australia and the instrumentality used by the Australian Catholic Bishops to act nationally and address issues of national significance.

The Catholic community is the largest religious group in Australia, with more than one in five Australians identifying as Catholic. The Church provides Australia's largest non-government grouping of hospitals, aged and community care services, providing approximately 10 per cent of health care services in Australia. It provides social services and support to more than 450,000 people across Australia each year. It has more than 1,730 schools enrolling more than 760,000 Australian students.

The ACBC seeks to participate in public debate by making reasoned arguments that can be considered by all people of goodwill.

The ACBC appreciates the opportunity to make a submission.

The Proposal

Senator Lee Rhiannon's motion to create this inquiry proposes that the Senate should abandon formal prayer, with its long tradition and richness of language, and replace it with a bland statement inviting senators to private reflection and prayer. Its motivation seems ideological and its effect will be to diminish the work of the Senate by stripping from it the larger context which public prayer provides. Everything is reduced to the individual. Senator Rhiannon's proposal for inquiry was in part that the inquiry investigate:

(a) the following proposed amendments to standing order 50:

(i) omit the heading, substitute, "50 Prayer or reflection and acknowledgement of country", and

(ii) in the first paragraph, omit all words after "following", substitute:
"invitation to prayer or reflection: Senators, let us, in silence, pray or reflect upon our responsibilities to all people of Australia, and to future generations"

Standing order 50 is as follows:

50 Prayer and acknowledgement of country

The President, on taking the chair each day, shall read the following prayer:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy special blessing upon this Parliament, and that Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper the work of Thy servants to the advancement of Thy glory, and to the true welfare of the people of Australia.

Our Father, which art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

The President shall then make an acknowledgement of country in the following terms:

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples who are the traditional custodians of the Canberra area and pay respect to the elders, past and present, of all Australia's Indigenous peoples.

Silent prayer and reflection is available to senators at any time, but a public prayer and acknowledgement of God is otherwise relatively rare and is valued by people of faith, as well as by others. The prayer, including the Lord's Prayer, contains important reminders to senators to look beyond their own needs to the welfare of others. Jesus taught this as a prayer which among other things asks God:

- "Thy Kingdom come" which includes helping us to work with others to bring peace and justice to the world,
- "Give us this day our daily bread", which includes looking after those who are hungry, who are poor, by sharing what we have, and
- "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us": forgive our sins, but only if we forgive others.¹

The prayer, which Jesus taught, is the most inclusive and least confessional of any of the great prayers the past has bequeathed to us. The aims which it expresses are among those which all parliamentarians could endorse, whether they are people of faith or not.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. St Paul's Publications, Strathfield, 1997. #2704, 2820, 2831, 2838.

Given that Senator Rhiannon has not proposed an alternative form of public prayer which she might judge more acceptable to all, it appears her objective is to ensure that senators who have a faith cannot have formal prayer in the Senate and that their constituents cannot have the value of their faith publicly acknowledged.

The Value of Prayer

Prayer is important because it is how people of faith establish and develop their relationship with God;² it acknowledges the truth of the human being before the infinite. Prayer can also summon people to a common purpose which is greater than the cut-and-thrust of daily life in the parliament, acknowledging that there is a greater truth. Democratic process stripped of transcendent truth risks becoming a soulless process where majorities decide issues based on power rather than the consideration of truth and the common good.³

Pluralism

Those wishing to ban public prayer in the parliament claim that the prayers do not reflect the diversity of Australian religious life.⁴ Thirty per cent of Australians do not identify as followers of a religious tradition, it is true; but a majority identify as Christian and one in five as Catholic. A total of sixty per cent of Australians have a faith.⁵

Valuing the diversity of the Australian community does not mean eliminating difference but recognising and appreciating the different perspectives people bring to public life. A vital expression of religious belief is prayer and to dismiss that is to dismiss the beliefs of the 60 per cent of Australians who acknowledge their religious faith. It is also to diminish the implicitly spiritual search of many who would not see themselves as believers in a formal sense.

Australia is a pluralist – not a secular – society; and inherent in a pluralist society are different views, beliefs and traditions, as well as the challenge of accommodating those different approaches to public life. This challenge can be met with good will. Excluding the practices of people who have a religious faith or discouraging their views not only risks impoverishing public life but is also unjust. Part of recognising beliefs is to honour them in practice.

When talking about people of faith, governments are talking about their own citizens, whether from a Jewish, Christian, Muslim or other religious tradition. Religious believers are still the majority of Australians by a considerable margin.

Therefore, a parliament closed to prayer would not represent all Australians. Nor would it be alert to the full scope of political decision-making.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. St Paul's Publications, Strathfield, 1997. #2558, 2564, 2565.

³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Values in a time of upheaval*. Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006. Pages 56-58.

⁴ Senator Lee Rhiannon, Senate supports Greens motion change to opening prayers. Media Release, 27 June 2018; Beck, L, Official prayers in federal parliament are divisive and unconstitutional, and should be scrapped. *The Conversation*, 22 August 2017.

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Religion in Australia: 2016 Census Data Summary*. 28 June 2017. See: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Religion%20Data%20Summary~70>

Parliamentarians should never be forced to pray, but neither should formal prayer be banned for parliamentarians who value public prayer, not just for themselves but for the institutions of government. Section 116 of Australia's Constitution is designed to protect Australians with a faith from the interference of the federal government. It is not to purge public life of religious belief or practice.

Conclusion

Australia's rich religious diversity is not a reason to purge public prayer from the Senate, but a reason to examine how we can continue to reflect in the public forum the beliefs of Australians. Prayer is an important part of the life of 6 in 10 Australians and probably of more in one way or another. It is also part of Australia's rich cultural and religious heritage, to say nothing of the roots of the political institutions we have inherited. This needs to be acknowledged and respected in the practices of the Senate, even if the archaic language of the current prayers might be revised.

I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have, and I can be contacted via Mr Jeremy Stuparich, Public Policy Director at the ACBC on 02 6201 9863 or at policy@catholic.org.au

Yours sincerely,

Mark Coleridge
Archbishop of Brisbane
President