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Bishop of Parramatta

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Pastoral letter to the pastors, parents and the faithful of the Diocese of Parramatta on the proposed Parental Rights Bill

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta recently made a submission to the NSW Legislative Council's inquiry into the *Education Legislation Amendment (Parental Rights) Bill 2020* (introduced by the Hon. Mark Latham, NSW State Leader of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party). I felt it was important to write to reassure you that the decision to oppose the Bill was guided both by our strong Catholic faith and teachings, and concern for the wellbeing of our students and their families.

Our Catholic schools remain resolutely committed to our Catholic values which are at the heart of teaching children and young people. This means approaching these matters with sensitivity, compassion and truth, acknowledging at all times the dignity of each person. Dedicated staff respond to the needs of each student in an age-appropriate way.

As the Bishop of Parramatta, with oversight of Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta, I take seriously the trust you have placed in us to educate your children and will uphold that trust with an education based on Catholic Scripture, Tradition and Values. Parents' role in education is vital, necessary and sought after at all times because parents are their children's first teachers (Canon 793 §1). This is made very clear in Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta's submission to the parliamentary inquiry.

At issue is whether or not certain sensitive or challenging topics such as consent, sexuality, gender et cetera can be discussed in the classroom. Some have quickly made a judgment that our Catholic education system panders to dangerous ideology. I can assure you that we take all the vital questions of our culture seriously and reflect on them through the prism of Jesus' solidarity with the marginalised.

As a Catholic community, we believe that all students - including those who identify as gender diverse - should have the opportunity to reach their potential, to learn with their peers and feel a sense of belonging in their school. The Bill prohibits the schools from affirming and supporting these children who are already at risk of marginalisation. We have to remember that at times the teachers are the only people these children might trust in helping them in these sensitive matters. By banning their discussion, the school community is unable to address unhealthy and discriminatory attitudes that may exist in their learning environment.

I emphatically reject the notion of gender ideology. What I advocate for is a compassionate, respectful, inclusive, Gospel-centred learning environment and a deep commitment to the wellbeing of all students, particularly those at risk. Their lives must not be made more intolerable by unjust laws such as elements of the “Latham” Bill that I have articulated above.

We have nothing to fear from a respectful and intelligent dialogue with our sons and daughters, with our deeply committed teaching staff, and in a caring Catholic environment. Life can be complex; but the Church is not a cult that refuses to engage and challenge our contemporary culture. I believe when faced with a choice, we need to acknowledge and stand with those who are ostracised rather than consigning them to the margins of society.

Catholics believe all people are made in the image and likeness of God. As our Holy Father, Pope Francis, reminds us, the Catechism of the Catholic Church invites us to accompany all people. As the parable of the Gospel’s Good Samaritan tells us, we are called to walk with and care for everyone in our community.

As always, I welcome respectful discussion and acknowledge the good intentions of many of those with an interest in this important issue. Yet I ask that the dignity of each person be maintained at all times, regardless of the view being expressed. Thank you for working with us in partnership for the best outcomes for children and young people.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in green ink, reading "Vincent Long Van Nguyen".

**Most Reverend Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv
Bishop of Parramatta**

*Given at Parramatta on 27 April 2021
Tuesday of the 4th Week of Easter*