

People of faith deserve hope, not exile: Archbishop Comensoli

Sunday was not a great day for people of faith in Victoria, but it should have been.

In announcing the next step of Victoria's COVID-19 road map, the government eased some restrictions. People were ready for glimmers of hope, but there was not much hope offered to people of faith.

We weren't expecting a great opening up of every sector. However, it was noticeable that additions to step two restrictions allowed for a return to pet groomers, swimming pools and locations 25km from your home, but no return to your place of worship in any meaningful sense.

Presently, in step two of the COVID-19 road map, Melbourne's doors of faith are closed. Churches, synagogues, temples and mosques are shut, pending a government announcement that they can open again.

These are not places of mere formality, but of lively and attentive care to vulnerable people, and of support to those facing sickness, loneliness, grief and death. They are places of hope and wellbeing, and of spiritual friendship.

Sadly, what is worse is that when we look ahead to step three there is very little for faith communities. Parity with other sectors seems denied even when we reach COVID-normal. The spectre of our places of worship remaining closed except for "private prayer" leaves our people feeling exiled and pushed outside.

And frankly, given our weather sometimes, Victorian people of faith aren't too pleased at being forced to stand outside the doors of their sacred places to celebrate the most important dimensions of their fundamental beliefs and commitments.

If they are gathering outside in the wind and rain, looking over at their locked doors, it's pretty hard to explain why the doors of the cafe across the road are invitingly open.

People of faith have joined in the common work of co-operation with COVID restrictions at every stage this year. We've proven ourselves to be fair-minded and civil, patient and prepared.

We've worked closely with the health department, local police, government authorities and other faith leaders to be safe and responsible. We have been publicly recognised for these efforts.

Churches may not be licensed premises, but they are highly regulated spaces, especially during times of worship.

It is now seven months since people of faith have been able to gather together in prayer. Like every other sector of life, this has had a major impact on the wellbeing of a very large sector of our community. For many of those who are affected, this is one of their principal opportunities for social interaction and personal activity.

Why would pool water shared by 30 swimmers at a time be considered safer than baptism water poured over one infant child?

Why would sitting down without a mask and socialising informally with up to 40 strangers inside an eatery be considered less risky than the formalised, masked and appropriately spaced gathering of a faith community?

Why would public health advisers tell the government that religious worship is an inherently higher risk than other sectors?

It is a relief for all of us that our places of sporting, hospitality and community gathering are being allowed to open. It is just that none of this passes the pub test (literally!) when it comes to places of worship remaining closed.

I have been inundated with calls for accountability on the COVID road map and of answers to obvious questions. Profoundly, some of the loudest voices in my own archdiocese have been from our young people.

While our elderly and more isolated parishioners have suffered from being closed out of their churches, young people have been speaking on their behalf, concerned for their wellbeing, requesting that the government show us a measure of fairness and equality in each step of restrictions.

Our young people and young priests are looking to the future, and they can see that closing off churches is cutting off a source of spiritual care that cannot be overlooked, and of social and mental health supports that nobody else can provide.

For us, prayer with others is essential. It is a powerful help in our troubles that has nothing comparable in the secular and medical parallels of a visit to the doctor, however important that is.

If there really is health advice suggesting places of worship are inherently riskier, I respectfully request to see it.

If there is data that backs up the suspicion being thrown on communities of faith in this pandemic, I am only too pleased to sit down and talk it through with experts. We can manage all the steps required to be COVID-safe.

The quiet and patient prayers and hopes of people of faith have been constant this year. But now they deserve the opportunity to step forward hopefully.

This piece appeared in the Herald Sun on the 19th of October 2020