

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS AND THE NATIONAL CHRISTIAN COUNCIL ON THE PROPOSED LEGISLATION TO BAN CONVERSIONS

The attention of the Catholic Bishops' Conference and the National Christian Council in Sri Lanka has been drawn to the bill titled, " Prohibition of forcible conversion of Religion " published in the Gazette on 31st May 2004 and to the fact that the Cabinet has approved another suggested draft to ban conversions.

We do recognize that for some time now there has been growing anxiety and agitation over " unethical conversions". This could well be part of the rationale behind these bills. We do not condone any unethical practices or any form of compulsions and do categorically denounce them. We reiterate our call to work together as leaders of all religions in our country to address this situation. We are always ready and willing to participate in any process that would ease religious tensions, identify practices that injure the religious susceptibility of any community and work towards greater religious harmony in our country. However, whilst acknowledging the problem and offering to participate in meaningful ways to redress these issues, we strongly believe that enacting legislation will not solve the problem. On the contrary, it will create problems of its own. Apart from the serious violation of personal freedoms, it will pave the way for the oppression of minority religions in the country. In these circumstances, we have little option but to collaborate in finding other democratic ways to deal with our inter-religious tensions.

Having carefully studied these drafts we wish to state that if they are enacted into legislation the freedom of thought, conscience and religion of all Sri Lankans will be seriously eroded. We are also of the opinion that these drafts contravene the fundamental human rights of our people enshrined in our Constitution as well as accepted prevailing international conventions and norms. Consequently, we have grave concerns that such possible legislation, given today's political climate will destroy the freedom of choice and the character of pluralism, both essential pillars of a modern democratic society. The repercussions of this on our international image will be disastrous.

We are therefore compelled to caution our political leaders and inform all Sri Lankans that this trend could well be the beginning of an invasion of the right to personal choice. Our already oppressed people simply cannot be burdened with more restrictions of this nature.

We also take this opportunity to clarify our position on religious and personal freedom. All the four religions in our country have cherished and exercised that right to propagate their religion throughout the world. The fact that missionaries are being sent out from Sri Lanka to propagate religion in other countries demonstrates our appreciation and our exercise of that fundamental right in other countries. Therefore, we see no reason why a fundamental right enjoyed by us in other countries should be denied in our own. We affirm our commitment to protecting the individual's freedom to have or adopt any religion or belief of his or her free choice. No fetters should be placed in the path of the exercise of that freedom by legislative or other means. All religions teach their adherents to perform works of charity and all such works of charity cannot be criminalized on the assertion that they serve as allurements. It is both a basic feature and duty of all religions to teach and propagate their faith, for in doing so they spread the highest human values.

For these reasons we disapprove the moves to enact legislation to prohibit or restrict conversions and call upon all people of goodwill to stand up for the free exercise of religious freedom and freedom of conscience for all.



Signed by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka on 29th June 2004

Rt. Rev. Dr. Vianney Fernando - President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka & Bishop of Kandy.

Most Rev. Dr. Oswald Gomis - Archbishop of Colombo.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Rayappu Joseph - Vice President - Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka & Bishop of Mannar.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Marius Peiris - Secretary General, Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka & Auxiliary Bishop of Colombo. (2004) of

Rt. Rev. Dr. Frank Marcus Fernando - Bishop of Chilaw (2004).

Rt. Rev. Dr. Thomas Savundranayagam - Bishop of Jaffna.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Kingsley Swampillai - Bishop of Trinco – Batticaloa.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Raymond Peiris - Bishop of Kurunegala.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Elmo Perera - Bishop of Galle.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Winston Fernando SSS - Bishop of Badulla.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Harold Anthony Perera - Bishop of Ratnapura.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Norbert Andradi OMI - Bishop of Anuradhapura.

Signed by the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka

Rt. Rev. Kumara Illangasinghe - Chairperson – National Christian Council of Sri Lanka & Bishop of Kurunegala, Church of Ceylon.

Rt. Rev. Duleep de Chickera – Bishop of Colombo, Church of Ceylon.

Rt. Rev. Dr. S. Jebanesan – Bishop of Jaffna, Church of South India.

Rev. Noel Fernando – President, Methodist Church Sri Lanka.(2004)

Rev. W.P. Ebenezer Joseph - General Secretary, National Christian Council of Sri Lanka.

Rev. W. Warshamanage – President, Sri Lanka Baptist Sangamaya.

Colonel Roy Frans – Territorial Commander , The Salvation Army.

Rev. C.N. Jansz – President, Dutch Reformed Church.

Rev. George Stephen – Moderator , Presbytery of Sri Lanka

