



THY KINGDOM COME (Mt. 6:10)

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ON

MAHARASHTRA FREEDOM OF RELIGION BILL 2026

Dear Rev. Fathers, Brothers and Sisters,

Thy Kingdom Come!

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

The Maharashtra Legislative Assembly has now passed the Freedom of Religion Bill on 16 March 2026 and it will be legally binding in the State in the course of time. The Maharashtra is the tenth State to introduce such a Bill. The crux of the Bill is that conversion of religious faith of a person through fraud, force, inducement or promise of marriage is illegal and punishable under law. Those who help in the process of conversion of religious faith also come under the purview of the law as punishable.

A keen study of the Bill elucidates that it is not only anti-constitutional but also misrepresenting the official teaching magisterium of the Church. 'Faith' and 'Religion' are one's personal choice (Art - 25). It is private and the State has nothing to do with it. The Constitution of India affirms that 'faith' or 'religion' shall not be imposed on anyone by fraud or force or inducement (Art. 19-28). The Constitution of India categorically assures every citizen of our country the freedom to choose and profess any religion whereas the Bill in the present form undermines the freedom the Constitution of India guarantees.

The Catholic Church has consistently opposed forced conversions. The Canon Law of the Catholic Church explicitly requires that an adult seeking baptism must do so freely and after proper instructions (CCEO 688 & CIC 865 §1). Number of Church documents too categorically states that forced conversion is not at all Church's policy: *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965) by Pope St. Paul VI states that, "in spreading religious faith and introducing religious practices everyone ought at all times refrain from any manner of action which might seem to carry a hint of coercion or a kind of persuasion that would be dishonorable or unworthy especially when

dealing with the poor and uneducated people. Such a manner of action would have to be considered an abuse of one's right and violation of the right of others" (#4). *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943), by Pope Pius XII declares that, "it is one of the major tenets of Catholic doctrine that man's response to God in faith must be free; no one therefore is to be forced to embrace the Christian faith against his will" (#104 & DH #10). So, Christians by virtue of their faith and principles, bound to refrain from forceful conversions. Christians in India are not scared of Freedom of Religion Law in several States, lately in Maharashtra, for, it is their policy too, but rather of its misuse and misinterpretation of the law by the people with hidden agendas and malicious intentions.

Proclamation of the Good News is the great divine command (Mt. 28:19-20) and we are called to do it fearlessly. The conversion of the person is the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul corroborates his mission when he declares that, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the gospel...." (1 Cor. 1:17). Paul wrote this to emphasize the priority of preaching the gospel and it is the duty of every Christian. Christ emphasized the importance of preaching while he chose the twelve disciples: 'Jesus appointed the twelve apostles for three main purposes: to be with him, to sent out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons' (Mk. 3:14-15). So, as missionaries of Christ, we are called and appointed 'to be with Christ, to preach the good news and to serve everyone irrespective of caste, creed, or ethnic differences'. The zeal of St. Paul should engulf our life: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16). "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel" (Rm. 10:15). The Church by her very nature is missionary – 'sent out to preach' (*Ad Gentes* #2).

In this context, I wish to invite and exhort all my co-missionaries in Chanda to continue Christ's mission fearlessly and with zeal, simultaneously also 'be prudent and innocent' (Cf. Mt. 10:16). It reminds us of a certain amount of shrewdness and integrity in our mission. A missionary of Christ is not only to be vigilant and alert to dangers but also to be gentle and not adopting corrupt tactics of enemies. It is a call to balance careful discernment with pure and ethical behaviour. The present political environment in the country is inimical towards all our activities; we are presented with new challenges one after another – whether it be anticonversion law, amendment in FCRA registration or 12A renewal process etc. These and many others pose trails, hurdles and struggles. We shall continue the good works we have commenced, for Jesus went around doing good in villages and towns (Cf. Acts 10:38, Mt. 9:35). Peter the apostle comforts us when he says: "If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God" (1 Pet. 2:20; 3:17; 4:19). "The Divine Word witnesses that the patient suffering has profound value before God by producing endurance, character, and hope rather than being meaningless" (Cf. Rm. 5:3-4, Rm. 8:18, 1 Pet. 1:6-7; 2 Cor. 4:17; Jas. 1:2-4). God always rewards innocent sufferings (Mt. 5:10-12). Nevertheless, we shall pray and do our best to overcome these hurdlers in our missionary endeavours.

God bless everyone of you,



Yours devotedly in Christ,

†Ephrem Nariculam
Bishop, Diocese of Chanda

NB: It may be good to bring home to the attention of our people very prudently the content of this circular so as to make them aware of the present political scenario of our country connected to the practice of faith of Christians in India