

Quebec bishops protest threat to cut off debate on religious symbols bill

Quebec's 31 Catholic Bishops are protesting the provincial government's threat of closure to pass laicity Bill 21 without hearing from affected religious organizations.

The Coalition Avenir Quebec government wants to make sure the bill that would prohibit the wearing of religious symbols by public service employees is passed before the National Assembly rises for the summer.

The Assembly was technically supposed to rise on June 14, so debate on the passage of that bill and one concerning immigration is scheduled for the weekend of June 15-16.

In a statement released June 14, the Quebec bishops objected to ramming through the bill that affects workers like teachers, police officers and judges.

The legislation that strongly polarizes Quebec society and could limit individual rights significantly must be studied rigorously and without being rushed, the bishops said.

The government has the responsibility to contribute, through its laws and actions, to the respect for the rights of each of its citizens, and to encourage the peaceful living together, the bishops said.

Respect for equal treatment of persons and for the value of individual liberty has shaped Quebec's history, they said.

Quebec society is characterized by peacefulness, hospitality and tolerance, notably its respect for religious difference, something that has emerged gradually through frank dialogue.

The recent state of the debate over Bill 21 seriously forgets the heritage of this tradition, the bishops said.

The bishops affirmed the principle of the secularity and religious neutrality of the state. They said they agreed with the prohibition of the wearing of religious symbols by state employees who exercise coercive authority and have a strict dress code, but the measures regarding teachers showed a misunderstanding of the religious fact in society and its cultural connotation.

This misunderstanding seems to be nourished by prejudices and fear, the bishops said. Rather than defuse them, the proposed measures will only exacerbate them,

they warned.

While Christianity does not require any outward symbols, some traditions do as a sign of humility, they said. These outward signs are misinterpreted as a propaganda tool designed to convert others.

The bishops said they believe prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols by teachers will increase unjustified mistrust. It would be better to combat prejudice and fear of the other in rational ways that educate people about the diversity of religious, spiritual and cultural traditions, they said.

While the bishops welcomed the effort to clarify the definition of religious symbols, they said it has only created more confusion because it includes subjective criteria and obliges secular state representatives to judge the religious or non-religious character of many objects. This is totally contrary to the bill's stated objective of secularism and the neutrality of the state, they said.

The government of Quebec must develop and promote a better understanding of religions and a better social and professional integration of religious and cultural minorities, the bishops said.

Bill 21 feeds fear and intolerance rather than contributing to social peace, they warned. They urged the government and Quebec citizens to promote important amendments that would seek to welcome and not exclude, to understand and not to reject.

The bishops denounced the repercussions Bill 21 will have on the employment and social integration of young people belonging to religious and cultural minorities.

The bishops called for a reduction in the social polarization in the debate over the bill and called for dialogue.

The bishops noted that in Quebec's recent history they have sought to be active and engaged partners in constructing a modern, welcoming and open society than in defending their own interests.