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MEDIA RELEASE

REV. FRED NILE STANDS WITH METROPOLITAN NEKTARIOS OF CORFU

For immediate circulation

Rev Fred Nile MLC continues to champion the interests of Christians, both here and overseas. In an Adjournment Speech delivered to the Legislative Council yesterday, he made reference to the struggle of the Greek Orthodox community and the trial of Corfu Metropolitan Nektarios, who defied the corona restrictions to celebrate the liturgy. Below is an extract of Rev Nile's speech extracted from the Parliamentary *Hansard*.

COVID-19 AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE (17:36:18): I speak on the subject of religious freedom in the time of coronavirus. Throughout Australia the coronavirus-related lockdowns have been in place for most of this year in various forms. In some States, like Victoria, they are severe; thankfully in others, such as our State, they are more relaxed. However, the ongoing crisis continues to intervene on the civil liberties of our citizens. Recently I read a report on orthochristian.com about the trial of the Greek Metropolitan of Corfu, His Eminence Nektarios. Members will appreciate that the New South Wales Christian Orthodox community is a robust one. Many of those citizens are my constituents. They look with trepidation at what is happening in Corfu. The Metropolitan is being put on trial for the crime of breaching the coronavirus restrictions imposed throughout Greece. I am mindful that similar restrictions are applied to religious groups and gatherings here in New South Wales.

Recently I asked the health Minister for statistical information about this matter, which I look forward to receiving in due course. The Metropolitan's breach involved the celebration of the Divine Liturgy during Palm Sunday this year. Justifying his actions, the Metropolitan said:

... if we disconnect Holy Communion from the Sacrament of the Divine Liturgy, then we abolish the mission of the Church.

That is very true. While some may not understand this, the celebration of a mass, which is Holy Communion, particularly on high feast days, is integral to the practice of the faith for many Christians, especially Orthodox Christians. Similarly, for Catholics for example, participation in the sacraments is inseparable from their identity. It is more than a lifestyle choice; it is part of their personal identity. Christians are among the most law-abiding people in society. Nobody can dispute that fact. But when laws start to interfere unjustly on the exercise of human rights, such as religious worship and services, then we are treading on difficult ground. Orthochristian.com reports that Metropolitan said:

We are accused of the crime of having communed with believers ... for having respected the voice of our conscience, and although we did not endanger public health, we did our highest duty to God, the Church and our people. We obey God's orders. We feel sad because there is a general climate of fear, submission, and the abolition of freedom.

When is there a perception that legal restrictions of religious gatherings are illegitimate? It is when there is a perception that some groups are favoured over others. We have seen this in the soft way that some political protests have been treated by the authorities or by the facilitation of non-Christian religious festivities, while churches remain subject to severe constraints. The longer this situation lasts, the greater the risk that significant sections of the public will continue to lose their faith in their secular leaders. I call on the Government to give consideration to exemptions on restrictions for religious groups, particularly church services.

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