

**Bishop: Peaceful Assembly Bill is vexatious**  
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**by Terence Netto**

Catholic Bishop Dr Paul Tan Chee Ing described the new conditions imposed before a police permit is granted for Christmas carolling groups to visit households as making the country "very nearly a police state".

"The Peaceful Assembly Bill 2011 is vexing if things have come down to this," opined the head of the Catholic Church for the Malacca-Johor diocese, who is also president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia.

Up to now, priests of churches that send carolling groups to visit Christian homes in the prelude to Christmas are merely required to apply for a police permit for the visits. Approvals were never a problem.

However, provisions of the recently passed and highly controversial Peaceful Assembly Bill require priests to furnish the names of the main occupants of homes the carollers intend to visit.

"If parish priests have to furnish the names of the main tenants, then we have become very nearly a police state," said Tan.

"This is a bureaucratic requirement that is so vexing," added the Jesuit-trained prelate.

Buffer zone between citizens and the state

"We are a church that periodically conducts a census of our members, but we do not go around asking our members details of where exactly they stay and if they own their residences or are merely tenants," he said.

"We generally know where they stay but we don't keep a ledger of their addresses.

"We don't snoop and we respect the privacy of individual members of our congregation. We don't believe we should be Big Brother or Nanny to them," Tan said.

The prelate said a valued insight of Catholic social teaching was the necessity of a mediating space between the state and ordinary citizens.

"That space is the area in which bodies such as the church and others play a role. It's a kind of buffer zone between the citizen and the intrusions of state. The width of that space is taken to be a barometer of the health of a society.

"With this Peaceful Assembly Bill, the government is intruding into an area that is not theirs, unduly burdening the people in the process. This is worse than the ISA that can put suspects into detention without trial," asserted the bishop.

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