



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Senator André Jacque, Chair
Members, Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families

FROM: Kim Vercauteren, Executive Director, Wisconsin Catholic Conference

DATE: January 21, 2021

RE: Support for Senate Bill 7, Prohibitions on Places of Worship Closures

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) appreciates the opportunity to offer testimony on behalf of the Roman Catholic bishops of Wisconsin in support of Senate Bill 7, which prohibits local health officers from closing or forbidding gatherings in places of worship during the current pandemic.

Faith is essential. As a people of faith, we are called to serve God and all who are made in the image and likeness of God. For this reason, faith is social. It is a shared communion with our neighbor and cannot be practiced in a vacuum or in isolation. Worship with others is the necessary exercise of faith and protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

As Catholics, we are obligated to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that “Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice.” (CCC no. 2181) In the early months of the pandemic, serious health concerns, coupled with limited knowledge regarding the coronavirus’s transmission, compelled our parishes to dramatically alter how individuals could participate in the Mass and other religious gatherings. As a people of faith, we quickly had to find ways to balance our obligation to attend Mass with the duty to care for our neighbor. Religious in-person gatherings were of limited capacity, more services were provided through online platforms, and the Roman Catholic bishops of Wisconsin instituted dispensations for those who could not attend Mass in person.

Over the past ten months, Catholic dioceses and parishes throughout Wisconsin have been able to resume public worship by adhering to strict safety standards and by restricting access to services for those who are symptomatic, sick, or at risk of serious illness. We know that as we meet the challenges of this pandemic, we have a responsibility to provide a means of worship and religious expression that does not endanger the health and safety of others. Indeed, we have demonstrated that we can provide this public and necessary ministry while making modifications to preserve public health and safety.

Allowing public health authorities to close places of worship is a drastic measure that fails to recognize the great need that many have for mental and spiritual care, especially during these challenging times. The Mass is more than a religious obligation. Catholics find solace in the Mass. As this pandemic continues and the frailties of our social order become ever more evident, there is an increasing need for worship, the Eucharist, and prayer, especially for those

mourning the loss of a loved one. We urge you to support Senate Bill 7 and make certain faith leaders can continue to minister to those most in need of solace during times of strife.

Finally, please know Wisconsin's bishops remain committed to assisting those stricken by this pandemic and to serve all in our state during these trying times. The people of Wisconsin, and those who diligently serve them, remain in our thoughts and prayers. As one body in Christ, we will overcome the present moment and restore our communities.