



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Senator Van Wanggaard
Members, Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety

FROM: Barbara Sella, Associate Director, Wisconsin Catholic Conference

DATE: May 6, 2021

RE: Support for Senate Bill 78, Expungement of Certain Crimes from Records

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 78, which would give more individuals the opportunity to have their criminal records expunged.

Others today will speak eloquently about how this bill will reduce recidivism and expand our workforce. What the WCC would like to emphasize is how this bill helps create a more balanced approach to criminal justice. In their 2000 statement on crime and criminal justice, the U.S. bishops described what they termed the “paradoxical Catholic teaching on crime and punishment”:

We will not tolerate the crime and violence that threatens the lives and dignity of our sisters and brothers, and we will not give up on those who have lost their way. We seek both justice and mercy. Working together, we believe our faith calls us to protect public safety, promote the common good, and restore community. We believe a Catholic ethic of responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoration can become the foundation for the necessary reform of our broken criminal justice system.¹

Our Catholic teaching holds that punishment should not be viewed as retribution, but rather as a means of protecting public safety while also serving as “an instrument for the correction of the offender.”² But for punishment to be an instrument of correction, the offender must be given hope.

Pope Francis has spoken often about the importance of hope and acted in ways to convey hope. Twice a month, on Sunday afternoons, he speaks for an hour on the phone with the student-inmates at the Centre for University Students of the Federal Penitentiary Complex of Ezeiza in

¹ *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2000), <https://www.usccb.org/resources/responsibility-rehabilitation-and-restoration-catholic-perspective-crime-and-criminal>.

² COMPENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH, no. 403, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

Argentina.³ This prison has for over thirty years enabled inmates to take courses through the University of Buenos Aires. In 2017, Pope Francis sent the student-inmates a video message in which he stated, “that for punishment to be fruitful there must be a horizon of hope; otherwise it remains closed in on itself and is simply an instrument of torture; it is not fruitful.”⁴

By making expungement more attainable, Senate Bill 78 gives those with criminal records a horizon of hope. It is this hope that will help them reintegrate into society and enable them to embrace opportunities for advancement.

The WCC strongly urges you to support this bipartisan bill. It is an important step in making our criminal justice system more just and merciful. Thank you.

³ “Pope Francis sends message of encouragement to imprisoned youth” (August 25, 2017) Catholic News Agency, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-sends-message-of-encouragement-to-imprisoned-youth-59694>.

⁴ Pope Francis, Video Message to the Centre for Student Inmates at the Prison Complex of Ezeiza (Argentina), (August 24, 2017), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170824_videomessaggio-penitenziario-ezeiza.html.