



May 26, 2022

Representative Shane Wilkin
Chair
Government Oversight Committee
77 South High Street
13th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

Representative D. J. Swearingen
Vice Chair
Government Oversight Committee
77 South High Street
13th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

Representative Richard D. Brown
Ranking Member
Government Oversight Committee
77 South High Street
14th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

Catholics for Choice Urges Opposition to HB 598

Dear Chair Wilkin, Vice-Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the Ohio House Government Oversight Committee:

Catholics for Choice is a nonprofit organization that encounters, educates, and emboldens people of faith who support reproductive freedom. Since 1973, we have worked in the United States and around the world to ensure that all people everywhere can freely determine their sexual and reproductive destinies with dignity, respect, and affirmation. That same year, the Supreme Court issued its landmark ruling in *Roe v. Wade* cementing the constitutional right to abortion. Should this decision and nearly fifty years of affirming precedent fall, Ohio HB 598 would effectively eliminate access to essential abortion care in the Buckeye State. On behalf of the overwhelming majority of pro-choice Catholics and Ohioans who support reproductive freedom, Catholics for Choice urges you to oppose this dangerous and unconscionable trigger ban.

The leaked draft opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* made abundantly clear the Justices' intent to complete their side of this equation, decimating *Roe* and robbing people who can get pregnant of our God-given moral and bodily autonomy. This callous decision would allow 26 states to ban abortion entirely and jeopardize access to care for nearly half the country — 36 million women of reproductive age, plus trans men and non-binary people. HB 598 would firmly place the Buckeye State amongst the most hostile to abortion, immediately outlawing all abortion care overnight for the over 2 million Ohio women of reproductive age. This includes all treatments for ectopic pregnancy, all abortion care related to severe fetal anomaly, and threats to the health or life of the pregnant individual.

Ohio legislators must think clearly and realistically about what life in a post-*Roe* world will be like and take seriously the immense suffering that will be endured by women, people who can get pregnant, and their families if our freedoms are taken away. The decision of whether and when to become a parent is deeply personal — the proper province of patients and their providers and support networks — and is deeply interconnected to many other policy issues: workers' rights, protection from domestic violence and abuse, immigration policy, a safe and clean environment, adequate education, comprehensive healthcare, and access to childcare. As such, the Supreme Court's decision will impact every single Ohioan, regardless of their ability to get pregnant. But the people most harmed by the fall of *Roe* will be those who already face structural barriers to accessing abortion, particularly Black, Indigenous, and people of color; young people; immigrants; those working to make ends meet; people living with disabilities; and LGBTQIA+ people.

In Good Conscience

As Catholics, we are taught a theology of social justice that compels us to center the lives of marginalized people who are too often denied the basic human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, to have or not have children, and to parent children in safe and sustainable communities. The Catholic Church has a long history of care and concern for those who are the most vulnerable — the very same people who are most impacted by abortion bans and restrictions like HB 598. Our faith values demand that we dismantle sinful structures of oppression such as systemic racism, gender inequality, economic insecurity, and immigration restrictions so that people can freely choose how best to build and care for their families. On the other hand, restricting access to abortion is antithetical to the Catholic tradition of community care and to the principles of equality, liberty, and justice that our nation was founded upon.

The tenets of Catholic social justice further counsel that to deny anyone reproductive healthcare of any kind is to strip them of their inherent humanity and dignity. Abortion access advances the common good, allowing people to make their own choices about their reproductive healthcare, to participate equally in society, and to thrive in their communities with dignity. Conversely, immoral bills like HB 598 jeopardize patient health, well-being, and lives, forcing providers to risk prison time or the loss of their medical licenses to treat patients. This is simply unacceptable to Catholics who treasure the life and dignity of every single human person. Nobody should be afraid to seek any kind of healthcare in their communities for any reason, and medical professionals should not be punished for simply doing their jobs. There is absolutely nothing “pro-life” about forbidding providers from caring for patients in life-threatening medical crises until after fetal demise or from offering abortion services to those facing mental health complications during pregnancy or threatening to harm themselves as a result of the pregnancy. Pregnant people are fully realized human beings created in the image and likeness of God and deserve safe healthcare services, as well as support and kindness from us, their fellow community members — not judgment and shame.

Indeed, Catholics honor all individuals as a moral agents, free to make their own personal decisions about their bodies, families, and futures according to their own consciences, beliefs, and circumstances and without political or religious interference. The role of individual conscience — which includes knowledge of ourselves, awareness of our moral principles, and the urge to act — is at the very core of our faith. The Catechism of the Catholic Church plainly states that “A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his [sic] conscience. If he [sic] were deliberately to act against it, he [sic] would condemn himself [sic].” We regard conscience as both a sacred gift and a responsibility: we are called to follow our conscience and respect the right of others to do the same.

To that end, Catholics value the separation of church and state and cherish religious pluralism and diversity. The Second Vatican Council issued a declaration affirming that “[t]he right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself.” Religious freedom is an expansive rather than restrictive idea, encompassing both freedom of religion and freedom from religion. Giving people the space to follow their own consciences in what they believe and practice is especially important when making critical, deeply personal reproductive health decisions as almost every religious tradition espouses their own unique view on the question of when life begins. Some believe it begins with conception, others look to viability, while still others believe it does not begin until birth. Catholic social teaching understands that, while people have the right to their own religious beliefs, everyone also has the right to be free from the religious beliefs of others. Our faith and our country’s Constitution demand that no one impose a single religious viewpoint about when life begins or about the morality of abortion on all through civil law or regulation.

Unfortunately, the Catholic hierarchy has spent years redefining religious liberty by pursuing religious freedom protections for large institutions and by imposing their religious views not only on all Catholics — including those who disagree with them — but also on people of diverse religious traditions and people of no faith. Despite what the Catholic Conference of Ohio would like legislators to believe, the majority of Catholics, including many past and present theologians, feel that abortion can be a moral choice. St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, both Doctors of the Church, believed that the fetus did not become a person (or become “ensouled”) until later in the pregnancy. For much of the church’s history, Catholic popes made a clear distinction between ensouled and un-ensouled fetuses. The Vatican’s total ban on abortion was not codified until 1917 and, although the Vatican does not condone abortion, it has said definitively that it does not know when a developing life becomes a person.

This history demonstrates that Catholic tradition is more than the teachings written down by popes and theologians. The Roman Catholic hierarchy, however well-financed and powerful it may be, is not the sole moral arbiter on matters where sexuality and reproduction intersect with religion and faith. The truth is that the majority of Catholics — who make up 18 percent of Ohio’s population — disagree with the Catholic Conference's support for this bill and want their representatives in Columbus to protect the right to access the full range of reproductive healthcare services, including abortion care, in the Buckeye State. In fact, 68 percent of Catholics support the protections for abortion access enshrined in *Roe* and 56 percent of Catholics think abortion should be legal in all or most cases. We do so because of our faith, not in spite of it. In contrast, the hierarchy’s position — opposing abortion in every instance, even in cases of rape, incest, or when it is necessary to preserve a pregnant person’s health or life — is only shared by only 14 percent of Catholics.

People of all faiths and no faith have abortions — they always have and always will, regardless of the dictates handed down by the courts, bishops, and politicians. Ultimately, one in four abortion patients in this country is Catholic, and for many of them and their families, access to equitable, compassionate reproductive healthcare is a blessing. Catholics believe deeply in the values of dignity, compassion, and justice and want all of their neighbors to be able to access the care that they decide is right for them — no matter who they are, what identities they hold, what insurance they have, or how much money they make. I implore you to start listening to those who want and need access to abortion care and to demonstrate moral leadership by rejecting HB 598 and other anti-abortion legislation. It is simply the right thing to do and, given the nationwide abortion access crisis, it is more urgent than ever.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me at srussell@catholicsforchoice.org or to Marlee Breakstone, State Policy Associate, at mbreakstone@catholicsforchoice.org with any questions or for further information.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shannon Russell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Shannon Russell
Director of Policy, Catholics for Choice