

CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO

March 3, 2022

Proponent Testimony HB 504 Regarding Sacred Spaces House Criminal Justice Committee

Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, my name is Jerry Freewalt. I am the Executive Director of the Catholic Conference of Ohio. The Conference is the official representative of the Catholic Church in matters of public policy. We believe HB 504, the Sacred Spaces Act, is necessary and timely to protect Catholic religious services such as the Holy Mass and religious services of all faiths in Ohio from intentional disruption. We thank Representative Johnson and former Representative Carfagna for introducing this legislation.

Those who are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and all our brothers and sisters in the faith community understand what it means to gather together to worship. For us Catholics, the Mass is our highest form of communal worship. It is when we raise our hearts and mind to God in thanksgiving and encounter the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist which is the source and summit of the Christian life.

We know that Ohioans of all faiths have houses of worship where they go for prayer. These are spaces where each of us shares the human emotions of gratitude, in a space you can be open, vulnerable, humble, thankful or ask for forgiveness. These are spaces we share with family, friends, and strangers. We celebrate and mourn in these sacred spaces, we say goodbye and welcome new life in these sacred spaces, and we come together in these sacred spaces.

On January 22, 2021, at St. Joseph Cathedral in downtown Columbus, the 23-county Catholic Diocese of Columbus held the annual Respect Life Mass. Assembled in the cathedral were clergy, families with small children, school students, and the elderly. The Mass was livestreamed to Catholic schools across the diocese and on St. Gabriel Catholic Radio.

I recall the main message of the bishop's homily. On this anniversary date of the U.S. Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision, he stressed the importance of respect for human life, respect for each other, especially unborn children, their mothers, and the most vulnerable. He talked about prayer, peace, and nonviolence.

It was during his homily, I saw a group of protesters enter the cathedral with signs shouting, "2, 4, 6, 8. This church teaches hate." As they burst into the main body of the church, the protesters knocked over and broke a table. As the table fell to the ground with a loud crash, a stack of Mass programs flew off the table.

The protesters proceeded to the front of the church directly in front of the congregation. We asked them to respectfully leave but they resisted. A priest positioned himself at the front of the altar steps to serve as a protective barrier between the protesters, the altar, and the clergy. We were afraid they might become

violent. As a special duty police officer and diocesan officials attempted to escort the protesters out of the church, they shouted obscenities. At one point, the special duty officer was in clearly in distress and radioed for help.

I could see members of the congregation shocked, frightened, and disturbed. It was a jolting disruption during what was a very peaceful prayer setting in our house of worship, our sacred space. Many parishioners immediately knelt to pray the Hail Mary. I also observed protesters approach parishioners as they were praying and shout vulgarities in faces. I along with diocesan officials outstretched our arms as to not touch the protesters but shield them from the congregation to keep them safe as they were escorted out of the church.

I followed the protesters out the front door of the cathedral to the steps. The protesters stopped halfway down the steps of the cathedral, turned towards us and repeatedly shouted obscenities to me and whoever was behind me.

I immediately turned around to shut the cathedral doors. I wanted to make sure they would not enter the cathedral again and further disrupt the Mass. I also wanted to prevent anybody from the inside interacting with the protesters that point forward. As I stood on the cathedral steps, I took a deep breath and calmly prayed to God with my hands folded as the protesters repeatedly shouted at me. After several chants, they stopped.

I then calmly said, "We are here in peace. We are here out of respect. We love you. I love you." One protester said to me, "We hate you." I was glad that at least the remarks were directed at me and not the congregation at that point. I wanted to stabilize the situation in a nonviolent way and return their words with a message of Christian love and respect, which in fact was the central message of the Mass. Soon after, several police officers arrived at the cathedral.

While we welcome anyone, non-Christians and atheists included, to attend a Catholic Mass, Ohio law should make clear that intentional disruption of a Catholic Mass or any other religious service bears consequence.

We understand that people have the right to protest, the right to free speech, and we understand that there are spaces in which we as citizens can exercise that right. I have done it myself, and I know all of us in this room cherish that freedom.

But inside St. Joseph Cathedral is not that place. Mosques are not that place. Synagogues are not that place. Online religious reservices are not that place. The Catholic Conference of Ohio is in support of HB 504 not only because these events happened to us, but also because these events should not happen to anyone who attends a religious service. People should be able to worship in peace. Other states such as New York, South Carolina, Massachusetts, and California have enacted laws to specifically address the interruption or disturbance of religious services. It is our hope this bill will send a message to Ohioans that our state will not tolerate the disruption of sacred spaces.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.