



CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO

November 15, 2022

**Proponent Testimony HB 504
Regarding Sacred Spaces
Senate Judiciary Committee**

Chair Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Brian Hickey. I am an Associate Director of the Catholic Conference of Ohio. The Conference is the official representative of the Catholic Church in matters of public policy. We thank Representative Johnson and former Representative Carfagna for introducing this bill.

Our Jewish, Muslim, and Christian brothers and sisters of all denominations understand the importance of gathering together to worship God. Ohioans of all faiths have houses of worship where they gather for prayer. These are sacred spaces where Ohioans express gratitude, vulnerability, and humility with family, friends, and strangers. Many celebrate and mourn in these sacred spaces and regard these spaces as opportunities to experience transcendence and escape the constant noise of the world.

For Catholics, the Mass is our highest form of worship. The Mass is when we raise our hearts and minds to God in thanksgiving and encounter the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, which we consider the source and summit of all Christian life. Last year, at St. Joseph Cathedral in downtown Columbus, the 23-county Catholic Diocese of Columbus held its annual Respect Life Mass. Clergy, families with small children, school students, and the elderly from the 23 counties joined together for Mass in the Cathedral. The Mass was live-streamed to Catholic schools across the diocese and on St. Gabriel Catholic radio.

During a homily focused on prayer, peace, and nonviolence, a group of protestors loudly entered the Cathedral and proceeded to break a table and march to the front of the congregation. The protestors shouted obscenities and vulgarities at parishioners as diocesan staff and a special duty officer attempted to escort them out of the Cathedral peacefully.

The Catholic Church welcomes anyone, non-Christians and atheists included, to attend a Catholic Mass. Ohio law, however, should make clear that intentional disruption of a Catholic Mass or any other religious service warrants consequences. Ohio citizens must have the right to protest and express their free speech, but churches, mosques, synagogues, and other places of worship are not places designated for that right.

The Catholic Conference of Ohio views HB 504 as necessary to protect the rights of Ohioans to worship in peace. States such as New York, Massachusetts, and California have laws specifically addressing the interruption or disturbance of religious services. We ask that Ohio joins other state efforts to protect our sacred spaces.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.