

February 22, 2019

To: Montana House Judiciary Committee

From: Matthew C. Brower, Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference

Re: Testimony in opposition to HB 465

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I currently serve as the Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference. I submit this testimony in opposition to HB 465 on behalf of the Roman Catholic bishops of Montana.

All persons regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation deserve the respect and dignity that is theirs as human beings and should be treated with the same compassion and love to which all persons are entitled. At the same time, we also affirm religious freedom and rights of conscience as foundational principles of a just society.

While the Roman Catholic Church opposes unjust arbitrary discrimination in all its forms and there are some points in this bill that we would affirm, there are significant provisions with which we cannot agree. To cite one example, the bill does not appear to provide adequate protections for those who might object to celebrating, by their actions, situations that run contrary to their deeply held beliefs. This fundamental failure to provide adequate safeguards for the protection of conscience rights is troubling and something we cannot accept.

We realize this is an emotionally-charged issue. However, respect and cooperation among people with legitimate differences of opinion is what makes Montana great and allows us to tackle divisive issues with grace, peace and an eye toward the common good. There is no place for hate, name-calling, or stereotyping by people on either side of these issues or this specific bill. What is desperately needed is a de-escalation of the neuralgic rhetoric that threatens to sabotage a rich opportunity for persons of greatly differing views to come together in dialogue. We are confident that together we can craft a nuanced and finely-tuned policy approach that adequately respects the rights and dignity of all persons in our pluralistic society.

True dialogue, constructive dialogue, ought to be marked by charity, a true desire and willingness to understand “the other,” confidence in the process, and a commitment to understand and pay due attention to the sensitivities of all parties involved. The words of a well-known saying, once used by Saint John XXIII, can serve as a good guide and reminder to all of us: “In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.”

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, on behalf of the Montana Catholic Conference, I recommend a “do not pass” on HB 465. Regardless of the ultimate fate of this bill, I stand ready and willing to engage with others to help chart a policy course that respects the rights of all Montanans.