



OFFICE OF THE  
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## DIocese OF BRIDGEPORT

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### **Testimony before the Judiciary Committee**

**Wednesday, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

Good morning Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Nancy Matthews. I am the Chancellor of the Diocese of Bridgeport which is led by Bishop William Lori. I appreciate the opportunity to speak this morning on behalf of all three Roman Catholic Dioceses in Connecticut and address our concerns about H.B. 7408, An Act Concerning The Risk Assessment Board, The Dissemination of Registration Information of Sexual Offenders and the Sexual Abuse of Children.

All three Bishops are relatively new to Connecticut and all three have vigorously implemented programs to provide outreach and healing to victims of sexual abuse. In 2003 Victims Assistance Programs, each with a victim's assistance coordinator, were established in all three dioceses as a resource for healing and assistance for victims of abuse as minors. All victims are offered a deep, heartfelt apology, an opportunity to meet with their Bishop and outreach that includes, as appropriate, offers to assist with mental health counseling, financial assistance and referrals for support groups, healing retreats and spiritual assistance. This assistance is offered as a matter of pastoral concern regardless of whether or not a claim is barred by the statute of limitations.

Our safe environment programs, established and rigorously followed in all three Dioceses, have educated over 140,000 clergy, employees and volunteers on the early warning signs of abuse and how to make a report so that abuse is prevented. Our child safety programs in our schools and catechetical programs are exemplary. Sexual Misconduct policies and Standards of Ministerial conduct are in place in all three dioceses for the protection of children. Clergy, lay employees, volunteers and independent contractors receive extensive criminal background checks. More than 40,000 clergy, employees and volunteers who work for the Catholic Church have undergone a criminal background check. We work in close cooperation with parents, civil authorities, educators, schools and safety organizations to create and maintain the safest possible environment for all children.

There is no other Church, educational institution or other organization for that matter that has responded to the broad societal problem of sexual abuse in the comprehensive manner of the Catholic Church.

So why are we here today?

We are here because every day, across the State of Connecticut, thousands of clergy and laity, employees and volunteers, spend countless hours engaged in the charitable works of the Roman Catholic Church.

We do so through our parishes, schools, and ministries, including Catholic Charities. Catholic Charities of the three Dioceses provides over 40 million dollars worth of social services to the most vulnerable and needy. As Catholics we believe in the sanctity of life, of the dignity of each individual, from the moment of conception until death. We feed the hungry, administer to those sick in mind and or body, help the newly arrived among us find their way, educate thousands of children, and, for many of your constituents in poor urban areas with failing schools, provide their only chance to learn to read, write and advance to higher education. And we do all this, not because those we serve are Catholics – many are not- we do this because we are Catholic.

The bill before you threatens to deplete the resources- human and financial- that support the charitable works of the Church. The current law, passed in 2002, has already resulted in the additional payment of millions of dollars not just to victims but to the attorneys who represent them. Our counsel, Attorney Colbert, will speak to the practical impossibility of defending against allegations that date back to the early 1960's against priests who are deceased and where possible witnesses are either deceased or their whereabouts unknown. Statutes of limitations are neither legal technicalities nor loopholes- they are there so that the parties involved have the ability to get to the truth of the matter, what actually happened, how bad it was, the nature of the damage. The ability of the plaintiffs to establish their case and the ability of defendants to defend diminishes with the passage of time. Our system of jurisprudence seeks to avoid stale claims precisely because of their inherent unfairness. H.B. 7408 extends the historical period such that we will be trying to evaluate claims from the 1950's. This will be about suits against dead priests who can not defend themselves.

Certainly the trial lawyers' benefit- there is very little discovery to take when all the witnesses are dead, missing or have no recollection of events of so long ago. The fact is that the vast majority of the cases settled in the Church for sexual abuse of minors occurred over 30 years ago.

Those who will be injured most by this extension of the statute will be the poorest and neediest among us. Resources that would otherwise be used for their benefit will be diverted to adjudicate claims that may or may not be valid. The Church is not an economic bottomless pit. We have paid past claims from insurance proceeds and sale of undeveloped land. This statute will fast deplete any remaining available assets not involved in our ministries. Then we will be forced to scale back or eliminate the social services, educational and pastoral programs that benefit hundreds of thousands of children, families, men and women across Connecticut. Clergy, parishioners, children and members of the faithful will pay the price for acts alleged to have occurred long before any of them were in positions of authority or even alive.