



Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland

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Testimony of Suzanne Lafreniere, on behalf of the Roman Catholic Diocese *in support of*

LD 1432: An Act to Remove Consideration of Gender Identity from the Maine Human Rights Act

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, my name is Suzanne Lafreniere and I represent the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland in support of the above listed LD. The Diocese has a population of over 279,000 Catholics* or one-fifth of the total population of the state of Maine. In addition to its 141 churches organized into 48 parishes, it has eight elementary schools, one private elementary school, one diocesan high school and one private high school. It also includes one Catholic college, Saint Joseph's College of Maine in Standish. Within the diocese, there are also seven subsidized housing units, four rehabilitation and residence facilities, and two child-care centers. There are three Catholic hospitals operating independently of the diocese as well as Catholic Charities Maine, the state's largest social service agency, which operates as a separate corporation.

The Diocese of Portland advocates for enacting and enforcing laws that create safe communities and promote the common good. This issue is important to Catholics because as people of faith a primary concern is the moral and ethical considerations that should be at the root of our decision making. We all are created in God's image. We all – each of us – possess a basic human dignity. The Catholic Church teaches that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the underpinning of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundational principle of Catholic social teaching.

The Catholic faith teaches the inherent dignity of every person, created male and female in the image and likeness of God. Our tradition holds that the unity of body and soul is fundamental to human identity, and that biological sex is not arbitrary but is a gift, good and willed by God. Gender identity theory, which separates gender from biological sex and bases identity on subjective perception, is inconsistent with this understanding.

Most importantly, confusion about how we are made, and our true nature, inhibits our ability to properly relate to one another and, indeed, the whole of creation. As Pope Francis stated in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*:

“Human ecology also implies another profound reality: the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment. Pope Benedict XVI spoke of an ‘ecology of man’, based on the fact that ‘man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will’. It is enough to recognize that our body itself establishes us in a direct relationship with the environment and with other living beings. The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it, and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way, we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it.” (No. 155)

While we affirm the belovedness and dignity of all individuals, including those who experience gender incongruence, enshrining gender identity as a protected class in law has undermined the truth of the human person and compels institutions-including faith-based schools, healthcare providers, and charities-to act against

their deeply held beliefs. This not only threatens religious liberty but also the ability of parents and educators to accompany children with compassion and clarity, rooted in both faith and reason.

In fact, there is an example of this currently in the town tuitioning program for the State of Maine. This program allows families who live in rural school districts to educate their children at private schools where there is no public school nearby. Unfortunately, the state has excluded religious schools from the program for decades, shutting out families who want both strong academics and a faith-based education for their kids.

For decades, Catholic schools like St. Dominic Academy offered rural families a vital education through Maine's tuition assistance program. But in 1982, the state barred all religious schools. Though the Supreme Court overturned this ban in 2022, Maine preemptively revised its human rights law to exclude schools holding Catholic beliefs on marriage and family. Now, while Maine funds students attending out-of-state girls' schools exempt from its law, it denies rural families the choice to send their children to schools like St. Dominic.

Maine's new law from 2022 gives the Maine Human Rights Commission—not parents or the school—the final word on admissions, conduct, speech, and policies upholding Catholic beliefs regarding marriage, gender, and family life. As a result, faith-based schools with traditional beliefs are still being excluded from the state program to help rural families.

Removing consideration of gender identity from the Maine Human Rights Act would be a major step in fixing this fatal defect in the law.

Please vote this bill Ought to Pass. Thank you for your consideration.

*www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/maine/