

February 17, 2021

To: Montana House Judiciary Committee

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

Re: Testimony in support of HB 399

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Matt Brower and I currently serve as the Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference. I speak today on behalf of the Roman Catholic bishops of Montana.

I am here today to voice our support for House Bill 399.

The Montana Catholic Conference does not question that youth who commit violent crimes need to be held accountable for their crimes and, when appropriate, confined for their safety and that of society. That being said, we do not support provisions that treat juveniles as though they are equal to adults in their moral and cognitive development. We believe that House Bill 399 represents a step toward acknowledging certain inherent truths with regard to the criminal capacity of youth offenders.

The Catholic Bishops of the United States, in their statement *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice* stated:

“We bishops cannot support policies that treat young offenders as though they are adults. The actions of the most violent youth leave us shocked and frightened and therefore they should be removed from society until they are no longer dangerous. But society must never respond to children who have committed crimes as though they are somehow equal to adults—fully formed in conscience and fully aware of their actions.”

Pope Francis, too, in his historic speech to the Joint Session of Congress in the fall of 2015 said, “a just and necessary punishment must never exclude the dimension of hope and the goal of rehabilitation.”

Life without parole destroys hope for incarcerated juveniles and ignores the inherent possibilities for rehabilitation. It is imperative that we recognize the vulnerability of youth offenders and provide them proper reasons for hope and motivation for rehabilitation.

House Bill 399 reflects restorative justice principles that are the root of Catholic teaching on criminal justice. While the teaching of the Catholic Church recognizes that the state has a necessary role to play in defending its citizens from harm, a Catholic approach to crime would not abandon those who offend the law, but would rather uphold and affirm their dignity while calling them to account.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, on behalf of the Montana Catholic Conference, I urge a “do pass” and thank you for your time.