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**IN GOOD CONSCIENCE**

May 1, 2018

Committee on Administration of Criminal Justice  
Louisiana House of Representatives  
Box 94062  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70804

Dear Chairman Mack, Vice Chairman Pylant, and esteemed members of the committee:

On behalf of Catholics for Choice, I urge you to oppose SB 181 and its sweeping restrictions on women's access to safe, legal abortion. For more than forty years, Catholics for Choice has served as a voice for the majority of the faithful in the Catholic church who support access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare. Throughout the world, we strive to be an expression of Catholicism as it is lived by ordinary people, including your constituents, and to advance sound public policy rooted in respect for individual conscience and moral autonomy.

There are few decisions more personal than choosing whether and when to become a parent. As Catholics, we recognize that each woman is a moral agent, with an incontrovertible knowledge of her unique circumstances and needs. Only she is able to make these decisions, with the people she chooses to involve. We are called to show compassion, support and respect for her choices about what is right for her and her family, according to her own beliefs and conscience.

The Louisiana Catholic Conference and its conservative allies suggest that they speak for all Catholics who call this state home, but they do not. In fact, only 14 percent of Catholic voters agree with the bishops' position that abortion should be illegal in every circumstance.<sup>1</sup> Catholic women seek abortion care at the same rate as other women<sup>2</sup> and 99 percent of sexually experienced Catholic women have used a form of birth control that the bishops oppose.<sup>3</sup> When asked in 2014, six in ten Catholic voters believed that abortion can be a moral choice and a majority of respondents believe it should be covered by all health insurance plans in a number of circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

These statistics are not surprising given Catholicism's deference to the individual conscience as the keystone of moral decision-making. It is both a gift and a responsibility that we are called upon to follow our consciences and respect the rights of others to do the same. It is not our role, nor that of our legislators, to supersede the moral autonomy of the women of Louisiana as they make decisions about abortion and their own reproductive futures.

SB 181 seeks to do just that. This bill would substantially interfere with women's ability to access the care that is right for them, adding further restrictions to an already burdensome process and binding the hands of medical professionals who seek to provide comprehensive reproductive healthcare to their patients. Arbitrary gestational limits on abortion interfere with doctors' ability to use their advanced training and medical judgment to prioritize the health and wellbeing of women under their care.

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Furthermore, such limits do not account for the economic, emotional or environmental factors that may lead a woman to seek an abortion. It is critical that every woman has as much time as she needs to make the best decision for herself and her family, without the fear of arbitrary time restrictions. When a woman is denied an abortion later in pregnancy, the consequences on her life and her family can be far-reaching. Healthcare that does not include access to later abortion does not completely serve the economic, medical or emotional needs of women as a whole.

Our Catholic tradition of social justice guides us to advocate for policies that empower those marginalized in our communities. Whenever bans or other severe restrictions to abortion are enacted, those most negatively affected are women without the financial resources to access safe care elsewhere. Abortion bans like SB 181 only compound the difficulties facing families in our communities who are already struggling to make ends meet. The women of Louisiana, particularly those who already struggle to provide for themselves and their families, deserve more than to be pawns in a political game.

Finally, as Catholics we honor religious freedom, a cherished principle of our American democracy. Catholics celebrate the value of a pluralistic, secular democracy where every person is assured both freedom of and freedom from religion. The proper role of government in the United States is not to privilege one set of religious views over others but to protect each person's right and ability to make decisions according to her own beliefs. Legislation like SB 181 has the practical effect of imposing one religious belief on all Louisiana women by establishing as law a particular view on abortion. This bill does not reflect the religious freedom protections that are guaranteed to every individual by the Constitution, rights that are never more vital than in the private decision-making of a woman and her family.

I urge you to vote no on SB 181 and any further attempts to impose a particular political agenda on the reproductive health decisions of your constituents. No woman should be coerced into a decision that runs counter to her beliefs, including whether to become pregnant or continue a pregnancy, or prevented from receiving the best advice from her doctor. No doctor should be forced to act against their conscience and best medical opinion.

Instead, I call upon you to enact policies that respect conscience and moral autonomy, promote access to comprehensive healthcare and bolster the self-determination of Louisiana women.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jon O'Brien". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "J".

Jon O'Brien  
President

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<sup>1</sup> Belden Russanello Strategists, "Catholic Voters' View on Health Care Reform and Reproductive Health Care Services: A National Survey," September 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Guttmacher Institute, "Characteristics of US Abortion Patients, 2014 and Changes Since 2008," November 2014, <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/characteristics-us-abortion-patients-2014>.

<sup>3</sup> National Survey of Family Growth 2006-2010, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Belden Russanello Strategists, "A national opinion survey of Catholic voters conducted for Catholics for Choice, Call to Action, DignityUSA and Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER)," November 2014.