



**The Catholic Diocese
of Jackson**

237 East Amite Street
Jackson, MS 39201

•
Most Reverend Joseph R. Kopacz, D.D.
Bishop



**The Catholic Diocese
of Biloxi**

1790 Popps Ferry Road
Biloxi, MS 39532

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Most Reverend Roger P. Morin, D.D.
Bishop

March 1, 2016

We, the undersigned, Most Reverend Joseph R. Kopacz, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson, and Most Reverend Roger P. Morin, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Biloxi, are writing on behalf of the Catholic Church throughout Mississippi with regard to HB 1523. This bill seeks to encode in State law the right to freedom of conscience and protections to religious individuals and groups. We are concerned that without this protection our mission to serve in a manner that is faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Church's cherished tradition to educate, and to serve society's vulnerable populations, will be in jeopardy.

Our Catholic Charities are very active in the areas of adoption, foster care, and unaccompanied refugee minors. These programs provide a critical service to children and families throughout the State of Mississippi. It is our hope that we can continue to serve those in need, while at the same time be faithful to our mission through the placing of these children with parents in traditional marriages, male and female. It would be detrimental to our Church's mission, as well as to the common good of our State, to be compelled to choose between our beliefs and our service.

Likewise, our Catholic School System throughout Mississippi has a stellar reputation for education that reaches back before the Civil War. Our teachers provide a first rate education to Catholics and to students of all faith traditions. Moreover, our educators are also ministers of the gospel who witness to the teachings, beliefs, and values of the Church that have their origin in the words of Jesus Christ to go and teach all nations. It is our hope that we can safeguard this cherished mission that has been a wellspring of life for the Church and for the population of Mississippi, without prejudice, for 169 years.

As you weigh whether or not to vote in support of HB 1523, it is important that you do so with knowledge of what the bill actually does, and not with the distorted, inaccurate claims from the bill's opponents. It is our opinion that HB 1523 does not violate the Free Speech, Establishment, or Equal Protection Clauses of our Constitution. In fact, laws that afford similar protections to religious individuals and groups have been repeatedly upheld by the Supreme Court. Thus, the legislature would be acting consistent with the protections guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution if it passed HB 1523.

We thank you for your attention to this critical bill that is before you. May the Holy Spirit enlighten your deliberations and decisions to choose wisely on behalf of the people of Mississippi.

Respectfully yours,

† Joseph R. Kopacz

Joseph R. Kopacz
Bishop of Jackson

** Roger P. Morin*

Roger P. Morin
Bishop of Biloxi