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Good afternoon.

The Catholic Bishops of Canada are troubled by clause 14 of Bill C-51 which proposes to repeal Section 176 of the Criminal Code. What gives rise to this concern?

As mentioned in our submission, we believe attacks on religion are not like other attacks against public safety — they are not only more grave but threaten the essence of democracy itself. This is because religious freedom is the cornerstone of human rights. We all ask questions about the meaning and purpose of life. Sometimes this includes questions about God or the divine. In all cases, we want to know the truth and when we believe we have found it we want to hold on to it and even to speak about it. The human person understood as a seeker of truth is the basis, thus, for religious freedom, for freedom of conscience, and indeed for freedom of speech. Where religious freedom abounds, democracy flourishes.

While religious freedom has special protection in Canada thanks to *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, Section 176 of the Criminal Code is a deterrent and educator concerning particular threats with which faith communities can be faced. If the recent rise of hate crimes and prejudice against religious believers in Canada is any indication of the dangers that lie ahead, the removal of this clear and unequivocal section of the Criminal Code will make it harder to protect millions of Canadians who are active members of their faith communities.

Section 176 emphasizes and reinforces our shared belief in and respect for the freedom of religion and maintains an indispensable link between the Criminal Code and the protection of fundamental human rights.

Are other sections of the Criminal Code capable of providing the protections that Section 176 extends? I would answer no. Even Section 175, which prohibits causing a disturbance in a public place, fails to do so adequately. The very specific items named in that section actually exclude a whole range of conceivable acts which could constitute the disruption of a religious service. Furthermore, as regards ministers of religion, to protect them from being obstructed in the performance of their duties or from assault is not to protect some ostensible elite status; it is to protect the community of faith by ensuring that the exercise of religious freedom is not impeded by acts of violence or threats which are directed against its faith leaders.

In Canada people of many different faiths can live together (*vivre ensemble*) and gather for worship without threat, hindrance, or intimidation. In order to preserve this kind of society, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops urges Parliament to amend Bill C-51 so as to retain Section 176 of the Criminal Code.

Thank you.