

Statement on Georgia House Bill 605

From: Wilton D. Gregory, Archbishop of Atlanta

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

When I am called to stand before our Heavenly Father to make a full and final accounting of my priestly life and ministry, I will first humbly ask His Mercy for all the times I've fallen short in my service to Him and to His people. If I'm asked what I did to bring people to Him, I'll recall the countless Sacraments I've celebrated with so many of you, the faith-filled social interactions we have shared, the remarkable opportunities to teach and to lead and to be present during moments of incredible joy and incalculable sorrow.

And when He asks me that for which I am most thankful in my service to His Church, it will have been my work in restoring trust to His people, assuring safe environments in Catholic settings that serve as examples to the wider community, and helping to bring about healing and hope to those in our faith family who have been sexually abused by members of our Catholic clergy – work I still wish more than anything on earth had never been necessary, work that we can never call complete.

In our Archdiocese of Atlanta, the [Office of Child and Youth Protection](#) helps us carry on our [Promise to Protect and Pledge to Heal](#) by creating and maintaining safe environments and walking alongside survivors of sexual abuse on their journey to healing. The efforts of this office, along with all dioceses in the United States, are [audited](#) on a yearly basis by an independent firm who verifies compliance with the [Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People](#). Our [Victim Assistance](#) director ministers to those who have suffered abuse without question, no matter when or where the abuse took place. Our [Office of Safe Environment](#) ensures compliance of all individuals working with children, youth, and vulnerable individuals by offering comprehensive abuse prevention training and background checks. We continue to operate a 24-hour hotline (888-437-0764) for anyone, Catholic or not, who has been abused by a member of the clergy, a man or woman religious, or a lay associate. I am pleased to say our child and youth protection program is among the most robust anywhere – within the Catholic Church or outside it – and our audit record for the past two decades speaks for itself.

With that commitment to safety and healing in mind, I write to inform you of an extraordinarily unfair bill currently pending in our state legislature. If passed, House Bill 605 could drastically damage our ability to carry out the mission of our Catholic Church in the state of Georgia because of the following:

- HB 605 would allow lawsuits against churches, private schools, businesses and non-profit organizations for actions asserted to have occurred many decades ago, potentially as far back as the 1940s, and the accused are very often deceased. Recognizing that these lawsuits can be very difficult if not impossible to defend, and risking grave injustice, the vast majority of states simply do not permit them.
- HB 605 discriminates between the Church and the state. All governmental agencies – park districts, public school districts, care facilities, and so forth – are inexplicably immune from the potential devastating effects of these lawsuits. Churches, religious and private schools, non-profits and businesses are affected.
- We have always fully supported criminal prosecution of and lawsuits against any individual abuser of children, no matter how long ago the abuse is alleged to have occurred. Additionally, for the past two decades the Catholic Church in Georgia has had what may be the strongest safe environment

program, non-profit or otherwise, in the state. Our Church and our schools have strict zero tolerance policies regarding sexual abuse of any vulnerable person. HB 605 does not protect anyone. Rather, innocent people and the organizations to which they belong will be radically impacted based on allegations against individuals who may no longer even be alive and cannot speak for themselves.

In short, HB 605 represents a policy that is bad for the citizens of Georgia. As your Archbishop, I implore you to contact your state senator and other elected officials to let them know you join me and over one million of your fellow Catholics in opposition to HB 605.

How can you get involved?

- Contact your state senator and let him/her know you oppose HB 605. Locate your district's state senator here: <https://openstates.org/ga/>.
- Email Governor Nathan Deal and ask him not to sign this bill into law: <https://gov.georgia.gov/webform/contact-governor>.
- Contact Lieutenant Governor Casey Cagle and ask him not to allow this bill to reach the Senate floor for vote: <https://ltgov.georgia.gov/contact-lt-governor>.
- Stay informed. Follow this issue in *The Georgia Bulletin* and at www.georgiabulletin.org.