



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Representative John Spiros, Chair
Members, Assembly Committee on Justice and Public Safety

FROM: David Earleywine, Associate Director

DATE: January 11, 2024

RE: Support for AB-37, Expungement of Certain Crimes from Records

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), the public policy voice of Wisconsin's Catholic bishops, appreciates the opportunity to testify in support of Assembly Bill 37, which would give more individuals the opportunity to have their criminal records expunged.

Others today will speak about how this bill will reduce recidivism and expand our workforce. The Wisconsin Catholic Conference would like to emphasize how this bill helps create a more balanced approach to criminal justice. In their statement on crime and criminal justice, the U.S. bishops described what they termed the “paradoxical Catholic teaching on crime and punishment”:

We will not tolerate the crime and violence that threatens the lives and dignity of our sisters and brothers, and we will not give up on those who have lost their way. We seek both justice and mercy. Working together, we believe our faith calls us to protect public safety, promote the common good, and restore community. We believe a Catholic ethic of responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoration can become the foundation for the necessary reform of our broken criminal justice system.¹

Our Catholic teaching holds that punishment should not be viewed as retribution, but rather as a means of protecting public safety while also serving as “an instrument for the correction of the offender.”² But for punishment to be an instrument of correction, the offender must be given hope.

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, [*Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*](#) (2000).

² Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, [*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*](#), no. 403. See also [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2nd ed. (2000), no. 2266: “The efforts of the state to curb the spread of behavior harmful to people’s rights and to the basic rules of civil society correspond to the requirement of safeguarding the common good. Legitimate public authority has the right and duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense. Punishment has the primary aim of redressing the disorder introduced by the offense. When it is willingly accepted by the guilty party, it assumes the value of expiation. Punishment then, in addition to defending public order and protecting people’s safety, has a medicinal purpose: as far as possible, it must contribute to the correction of the guilty party.”

As Pope Francis noted in 2022, “It is right that those who have done wrong should pay for their mistake, but it is equally right that those who have done wrong should be able to redeem themselves for their mistake. ... Any sentence must always have a window of hope.”³

By making expungement more attainable, Assembly Bill 37 gives those with criminal records a horizon of hope. It is this hope that will help them reintegrate into society and embrace opportunities for advancement.

The WCC strongly urges you to support this bipartisan bill. It is an important step in making our criminal justice system more just and merciful. Thank you.

³ Pope Francis, [*General Audience*](#) (January 19, 2022).