



ARCHDIOCESE OF BALTIMORE † ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON † DIOCESE OF WILMINGTON

**January 26, 2021**

**Senate Bill 173  
Family Law - Emancipation of a Minor and Authorization to Marry**

**Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee**

**Position: SUPPORT**

The Maryland Catholic Conference represents the mutual public-policy interests of the three (arch)dioceses serving the state of Maryland: the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Archdiocese of Washington, and the Diocese of Wilmington, which together encompass over one million Marylanders.

We offer this testimony in support of **Senate Bill 173**, which would raise the legal age of marriage to age 17, ensure the minor is emancipated, and that the age difference between the couple is four years or fewer.

Like other advocates for the bill, we believe this legislation will provide an important means of preventing the exploitation particularly of young women through human trafficking and coercion by older partners and even family members. In fact, we can think of no circumstance under which the Church would encourage a person under the age of 18 to marry.

Preventing the real-life situations of abuse and coercion that proponents of this measure have highlighted provides the most compelling reason to raise the legal age of marriage. Additionally, it is important to consider the potential impact the bill can have on preventing two young persons from entering a legal commitment without the needed maturity to understand the serious and lifelong impact that their decision to marry carries with it.

It has been the constant teaching of the Catholic Church that marriage is a "...covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses..."<sup>1</sup> The Church believes that this "covenant" is not the result of a happenstance meeting or pure chance, but rather, the result of God working in the lives of two people, bringing them together for a divine purpose according to the Almighty's divine plan for them.

Senate Bill 173 is a critically important measure in preventing the tragedy of young women being coerced or exploited through a marriage imposed on them against their will. It is also an important measure in preventing young people from mistakenly entering one of the most serious commitments of their lives, only to later suffer the negative consequences that the breakup of that marriage would likely have on both the partners and any children born of the marriage.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on **SB 173**.

---

<sup>1</sup> Canon 1055. 1983 Code of Canon Law