

**Hearing before House Committee on Environment and Transportation**  
**Maryland General Assembly**  
**February 23, 2022**  
**Constitutional Amendment – Environmental Rights (HB 596)**  
**Position: Favorable**

Dear Chairman Barve and members of the committee:

As a member of Maryland Catholics for Our Common Home, a group of lay and religious Maryland Catholics who are advocating for care of the Earth, our common home, which also means care for the poor who are harmed most and first by environmental degradation and climate change, I am registering a “FAVORABLE” opinion on HB 596, *Constitutional Amendment - Environmental Rights* (HB 596).

The language of HB 596 echoes key themes in Catholic social teachings and is in harmony with various elements of Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* (LS). Its emphasis on an “inalienable right” to a healthy environment fits squarely with Catholic social teaching on the dignity of the human person and our responsibilities for future generations. Its description of “natural resources” echoes the Church’s teaching that the “gifts of the earth belong to everyone” (LS, p. 71). Likewise, the Amendment addresses the important issue of accountability (LS, p. 61) by ensuring that matters of environmental justice can be legally addressed by all of Maryland’s diverse citizenry.

As I am sure you know, environmental pollution and degradation, with their attendant poor health outcomes, have been inequitably concentrated in communities of color and low-income neighborhoods across Maryland. This is precisely the matter of social justice that Pope Francis has in mind when he couples his plea to “hear the cry of the Earth” with his plea to “hear the cry of the poor.”

So, you have my prayers to be of good courage in passing this bill, as it may be a heavy lift politically, given that those who are despoiling our environment and degrading our climate, and who thus are stealing the future from our children (sadly even their own children), are short-sighted but powerful people. They will oppose this Amendment with spurious arguments that it will open the floodgates to litigation or be bad for business and the economy. It will not. Such amendments in other states have not had that impact. Opponents of the Amendment can nevertheless be expected to resist yielding power to the people being harmed by their industries.

Therefore, the people of Maryland must count on their legislators to stand up for them. Maryland citizens must be afforded the opportunity by their legislators to go to the polls in November to codify in law a right they already possess as human beings, as creatures made in the image and likeness of God. We need to create a constitutional check on the raw power of those who are despoiling our air and water, laying waste to our natural resources, and making Marylanders sick, in some cases sending them to an early grave, all for private profit. The polluters have historically had an unfair advantage in shaping the laws to legalize the harms they cause and put the burden of remediation on Maryland citizens and taxpayers. They have more time and money available to push for their economic interests. They are happy to deal and trade in piecemeal

regulations that amount to a permission to pollute rather than being confronted with the proposition that all human beings possess an inalienable right to clean air, clean water and the protection of the climate and ecosystems that sustain their lives. Any worthy legislation that truly cares for our common home must be rooted in this fundamental human right.

Who can be against codifying in law a right we already possess as human beings, having been endowed with this right by God our Creator? Would Amendment opponents dare to say out loud that their constituents do not have such a right?

Thank you for reading and may God bless all your efforts to care for the only home we have.

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