MINNESOTA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

January 8, 2016

Hon. David H. Senjem
Co-chair
Art Subcommittee
Minnesota Capitol Preservation Commission
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
State Office Bldg., Room 113
St. Paul, MN 55155-1206

Dear Senator Senjem:

Peace be with you. The Minnesota Catholic Conference, the public policy voice of the Catholic Church in Minnesota, writes to express concern about proposals to remove historic artwork from the State Capitol. In particular, we are concerned about the desire of some to remove the painting of Fr. Louis Hennepin from the Governor's Reception Room. Though we believe that there may be opportunities to better accommodate the perspectives of some of those who do not like the painting, we oppose the removal of this painting from a prominent location within the State Capitol.

The paintings within the Governor's Reception Room, like many around the State Capitol, depict important moments early in the State's history. Though the specific historical accuracy of some features of the painting are in dispute, what is clear is that the painting depicts an important moment in Minnesota history: the arrival of Christianity to Minnesota (at least what is today the Twin Cities) and the blessing of the area by Fr. Hennepin with the Cross of Jesus Christ.

The painting thus stands as a symbol of an important legacy of the State's history: the many contributions of individual Christians and Christian churches, particularly the Catholic Church, to the development and well-being of the State of Minnesota. By contrast, removing the painting entirely from a prominent place in the Capitol may, not unreasonably, be interpreted as a symbolic statement that the arrival of Christianity was to the detriment of both Native Americans and the subsequent development of the State as a whole—a viewpoint with which we would strongly disagree.

We recognize that the legacy of Christianity in Minnesota, or any place, is not without its sins. Like all of us, Fr. Hennepin himself was not perfect, and his writings show that he was a man of his time. And Christian missions among Native Americans have not always been conducted in Christian charity.

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We also recognize that some Native Americans may feel that they are depicted in the painting in a way that denigrates their dignity. Their concerns should be taken seriously. Perhaps there are other constructive ways to address those concerns and offer fuller context than simply removing the painting.

Furthermore, we acknowledge that the history of our State is one that continues to be written. New ethnic and religious communities continue to arrive in Minnesota and enrich our public life together. Undoubtedly, there are opportunities to tell that story within the Capitol, perhaps even updating some of the existing artwork.

Still, we are deeply concerned that removing the Hennepin painting would create a symbolic precedent that important aspects of our State's Christian history may be hidden because they affront the sensibilities of some within our community today. There are many monuments in Minnesota that memorialize Fr. Hennepin's arrival and blessing of this land. Would a decision to shelve the painting communicate that others should follow suit?

There are two extreme positions in this conversation: one that would banish the painting to the attic never to be seen again, and another that says "Do nothing. History is history, warts and all." Our position is not the latter. Though we oppose the removal of the painting from a place of prominence in the Capitol, we are open to solutions that reasonably address the legitimate concerns of some of those who do not like the painting's continued residence within the Governor's Reception Room. Such alternatives could include better resources to contextualize the art, or slight modifications to the original artwork; even a new painting depicting the same historical moment could be installed as an alternative.

Thank you very much for your consideration and for distributing this letter to the full committee. Please let me know if we can be of further assistance in this conversation.

Respectfully yours,

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CC: Art Subcommittee