

To Be Argued By:
Aaron M. Woskoff
Time Requested: Ten Minutes

COURT OF APPEALS
STATE OF NEW YORK

In the Matter of

VICTOR O. IBHAWA,

Appellant,

-against-

NEW YORK STATE DIVISION OF HUMAN
RIGHTS; DIOCESE OF BUFFALO,

Respondents.

APL-2023-0019

Appellate Division
Docket No. CA 22-00060

Erie County Index No.
806837-2021

BRIEF ON BEHALF OF RESPONDENT
NEW YORK STATE DIVISION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

JOHN P. HERRION
Acting General Counsel
NEW YORK STATE DIVISION OF HUMAN RIGHTS
One Fordham Plaza, Fourth Floor
Bronx, New York 10458
Tel. No.: (718) 741-8398
aaron.woskoff@dhr.ny.gov

AARON M. WOSKOFF
of Counsel.

Date Completed: May 1, 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Pages</u>
TABLE OF CITATIONS	
Cases.....	iii-iv
Statutes.....	iv
QUESTION PRESENTED.....	1-2
COUNTERSTATEMENT OF THE CASE	
INTRODUCTION.....	3-5
BACKGROUND.....	6-8
ARGUMENT	
POINT I	
THE MINISTERIAL EXCEPTION, WHICH, AS SET OUT BY RECENT UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT DECISIONS, BARS CONSIDERATION OF EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION CLAIMS BY MINISTERS AGAINST RELIGIOUS EMPLOYERS, CONSTRAINED THE DIVISION TO DISMISS ALL OF IBHAWA’S CHARGES, INCLUDING THOSE RELATED TO HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT.....	9-16
POINT II	
THE APPELLATE DIVISION PROPERLY APPLIED THE CORRECT STANDARD OF REVIEW IN FINDING THAT THE DIVISION’S DETERMINATION THAT IT COULD NOT CONSIDER THE IBHAWA COMPLAINT WAS REASONABLE AND NOT	

ARBITRARY AND CAPRICIOUS.....17-19

CONCLUSION

That the Order of the Appellate Division, Fourth Department, entered June 30, 2023, unanimously reversing, on the law, the Order of the Supreme Court, Erie County, of the Honorable E. Jeanette Ogden, J.S.C., dated November 23, 2023, be confirmed in its entirety; that the underlying Petition be denied in its entirety; that the Determination and Order of Dismissal for Lack of Jurisdiction, dated March 26, 2021, on the Complaint of Victor O. Ibhawa against Diocese of Buffalo, NY be confirmed in its entirety; and for such other and further relief that this court deems just and proper.....20

CERTIFICATION OF COMPLIANCE.....21

TABLE OF CONTENTS, CONTINUED

TABLE OF CITATIONS

Cases

Pages

300 Gramatan Ave. Assoc. v State Div. of Human Rights,
45 NY2d 176 [1978].....18

Brandenburg v Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America,
2021 WL 2206486 at 3 n. 3 [SDNY 2021].....10, 11, 12

Demkovich v St. Andrew the Apostle Parish, Calumet City,
3 F4th 968 [7th Cir 2021].....13, 13-14

*Matter of Diocese of Rochester v New York State Division of
Human Rights*, 305 AD2d 1000 [4th Dept 2003].....14, 15

Elvig v Calvin Presbyterian Church, 375 F3d 951 [9th Cir 2004],
rehearing en banc denied, 397 F3d 790 [9th Cir 2005].....11-12, 12, 14

Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church & School v EEOC,
565 US 171 [2012].....9, 11, 12, 13, 15

Matter of Ibhawa v New York State Division of Human Rights,
217 AD3d 1500 [4th Dept 2023].....3

Kraft v Rector, Churchwardens & Vestry of Grace Church in N.Y.,
No. 01-CV-7871 (KMW), 2004 WL 540327, at 4 n.10
[SDNY Mar 17, 2004].....10

Mills v Standing General Com'n on Christian Unity, 39 Misc3d 296
[Sup Ct NY Cnty 2013], *aff'd*, 117 AD3d 509 [1st Dept 2014].....11

<i>Matter of Mize v State Div. of Human Rights</i> , 33 NY2d 53 [1973].....	18-19
<i>O'Connor v Church of St. Ignatius Loyola</i> , 8 AD3d 125 [1st Dept 2004], <i>lv to app den</i> 3 NY3d 610 [2004], <i>cert den</i> 544 US 1017 [2005].....	11
<i>Our Lady of Guadalupe School v Morrissey-Berru</i> 541 US ___, 140 S Ct 2049 [2020].....	10, 12-13, 13, 15
<i>Matter of Pell v Board of Educ.</i> , 34 NY2d 222 [1974].....	18, 19
<i>Serbian Eastern Orthodox Diocese for U. S. of America and Canada v Milivojevich</i> , 426 US 696 [1976].....	9
<i>Skrzypczak v Roman Catholic Diocese of Tulsa</i> , 611 F3d 1238 [10th Cir 2010].....	9, 14
<i>Shukla v Sharma</i> , No. 07-CV-2972 (CBA), 2009 WL 10690810, at 3 [EDNY Aug 21, 2009].....	10
<i>State Off. of Drug Abuse Servs. v State Human Rights Appeal Bd.</i> , 48 NY2d 276 [1979].....	18
<i>Stoudymire v N.Y.S. Div. of Human Rights</i> , 36 Misc3d 919 [Sup Ct Cayuga Cnty 2012].....	17-18

Statutes

	<u>Pages</u>
22 NYCRR § 500.9.....	5
Executive Law § 297 [2] [a].....	6

COURT OF APPEALS
STATE OF NEW YORK

-----X

In the Matter of

APL – 2023-00119

VICTOR O. IBHAWA,

Appellant,

Appellate Division
Docket No.
CA 22-00060

-against-

NEW YORK STATE DIVISION OF HUMAN
RIGHTS; DIOCESE OF BUFFALO,

Erie County
Index No.:
806837-2021

Respondents.

-----X

COUNTERSTATEMENT OF THE
QUESTION PRESENTED

Did the Appellate Division, Fourth Department, correctly hold that the determination of the Respondent NEW YORK STATE DIVISION OF HUMAN RIGHTS’ (hereafter, “Division”) that it was constrained to find that it lacked jurisdiction over the hostile work environment claims of Appellant VICTOR O. IBHAWA, a Roman Catholic priest serving as a pastor of a church under the constitutional ministerial exception doctrine was not arbitrary and capricious?

Given that case law favors an interpretation of the ministerial exception that encompasses conditions of employment beyond hiring and termination, the Division was barred from the handling Ibhawa's complaint and the Fourth Department, reversing the lower court, correctly concluded that the Division's determination was not arbitrary and capricious.

COUNTERSTATEMENT OF THE CASE

Introduction

Appellant VICTOR O. IBHAWA (hereafter, “Ibhawa”) appeals from the Order of the Appellate Division, Fourth Department, entered June 30, 2023 (R. 331¹), which unanimously reversed, on the law, the Order of the Supreme Court, Erie County, of the Honorable E. Jeanette Ogden, J.S.C., dated November 23, 2023 (R. 9) (*Matter of Ibhawa v New York State Division of Human Rights*, 217 AD3d 1500 [4th Dept 2023]).

The Division dismissed the complaint Ibhawa had brought to this agency for lack of jurisdiction. Ibhawa, a Roman Catholic priest, alleged that the Respondent DIOCESE OF BUFFALO (hereafter “the Diocese”) terminated his employment as a parish administrator because of his race and subjected him to a hostile work environment (R. 33).

The Supreme Court, agreeing in part with the Division’s determination, held:

the Ministerial Exception, which bars claims arising from, or relating to, tangible employment actions such as hiring and firing and claims relating to conduct for which the Respondent, Diocese of Buffalo,

¹ Numbers following the letter “R.” refer to pages of the *Record On Appeal*. Where a document appears in multiple places in the *Record On Appeal*, the reference shall be to a singular appearance in the *Record On Appeal*.

proffers a religious reason, applies to this case. Therefore, the Respondent, NYSDHR, did not act in an arbitrary and capricious manner nor make an error in law in dismissing most of Petitioner's discrimination claims pursuant to the ministerial exception.

(R. 10). However, the Supreme Court went on to raise "a question as to whether the ministerial exception bars Petitioner's hostile work environment claim, and the relevant law is unsettled on that issue" (R. 10).

Upon further consideration of this issue, the Supreme Court held:

in light of the fact that neither the US Supreme Court, the US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, the New York State Court of Appeals or the New York State Supreme Court Appellate Division for the Fourth Department have held that the Ministerial Exception bars hostile work environment claims, the determination of the NYSDHR was affected by an error of law and the absence of controlling authority does not constitute a rational basis to determine that the ministerial exception barred review of Petitioner's hostile work environment claim.

(R. 10-11). The Supreme Court remanded Ibhawa's Division complaint to the Division for a "proper determination . . . on the issue of hostile work environment"

(R. 11), while otherwise affirming the Division Determination (R. 31).

The Appellate Division, Fourth Department held that

[t]he [Division] determination is entitled to considerable deference given its expertise in evaluating discrimination claims' (*Matter of Meyer v Foster*, 187 AD3d 918, 919 [2d Dept 2020]; see *Matter of McDonald v New York State Div. of Human Rights*, 147 AD3d 1482, 1482 [4th Dept 2017]).

(R. 332). The Fourth Department noted that, for the question of whether the ministerial exception barred claim of a hostile work environment by a church's

pastor against their church, “there is no controlling United States Supreme Court or New York precedent and the federal courts that have addressed the issued are divided” (R. 332). It therefore reasoned “that [Division’s] determination with respect to the hostile work environment claim is not arbitrary and capricious or affected by an error of law (*see generally LeTray*, 181 AD3d at 1297-1298)” (R. 332).

Thereafter, Ibhawa timely filed a Notice of Appeal to this Court on July 20, 2023 (R. 327), together with a Preliminary Statement in accordance with Section 500.9 of the Rules of the Court of Appeals (22 NYCRR § 500.9) (R. 334).

Although Ibhawa made a motion to this Court for leave to appeal from the Appellate Memorandum and Order, to which each Respondent filed opposition, by Order of this Court, entered January 16, 2024, Ibhawa’s motion for leave to appeal was denied “as unnecessary” (*see* R. 340).

BACKGROUND

Ibhawa, a black person born in Nigeria, filed a verified complaint with the Division on November 9, 2020 (R. 33). He alleged that the Diocese terminated his employment as a “Parish Administrator of Blessed Trinity Church in Buffalo” because of his race, color and national origin, and retaliated against him for having opposed practices proscribed by the Human Rights Law. In his complaint, Ibhawa asserted that he “was unjustly terminated without cause or explanation, weeks after I reported racial discrimination against me to my employer- including the use of the racial slur “n****r” by a co-worker” (see R. 33, 41). The Division investigated the Ibhawa complaint in accordance with Executive Law § 297 [2] [a].

Based upon the undisputed fact that Ibhawa, “a priest, was the pastor of the church,” the Division’s investigator observed that the

Complainant thus comes under the ministerial exception relative to the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and the Division cannot proceed as it lacks jurisdiction over this matter. The ministerial exception grants a church/religion the right to choose (or terminate) ministers or persons who serve in a similar religious role without governmental interference, including discrimination claims.

(FIRABOD, R. 89).

The Division explained:

The New York State Division of Human Rights lacks jurisdiction over this case because complainant, a priest serving as the pastor (Parish Administrator) of a church comes under the ministerial exception

(relative to the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution). The Division cannot interfere with the right of a church or other religious group, to determine who will work for them in this type of religious role.

(FIRABOD, R. 89).

On March 26, 2021, the Division issued its Division Determination (R. 31). As the Division was constitutionally barred from considering Ibhawa's allegations, the complaint was dismissed without having been referred for an administrative hearing.

By Notice of Petition and Petition filed on or about May 24, 2021 (R. 12) and Amended Notice of Petition filed on or about May 28, 2021 (R. 67), Ibhawa commenced this proceeding in Supreme Court, Erie County. On November 23, 2021, the Supreme Court granted the Petition in part, remanding the matter to the Division for further investigation of the hostile work environment charges (R. 9).

Recognizing that the Diocese of Buffalo "is a religious institution," and Ibhawa "worked in a ministerial capacity," the Supreme Court found that "the Ministerial Exception, which bars claims arising from, or relating to, tangible employment actions such as hiring and firing and claims relating to conduct for which the Respondent, Diocese of Buffalo, proffers a religious reason, applies to this case" (R. 10). Thus, the Supreme Court concluded that the Division correctly dismissed "most of [Ibhawa's] discrimination claims pursuant to the ministerial exception" (R. 10).

With respect to Ibhawa's hostile work environment claims, however, the Supreme Court, reasoning that "the relevant law is unsettled on that issue," remanded the matter to the Division for further proceedings.

(R. 10-11).

The Division filed and served its Notice of Appeal to the Appellate Division, Fourth Department, by New York State Courts Electronic Filing, on December 22, 2021 (R. 4). The Division specifically appealed from that portion of the Supreme Court Order annulling and directing reversal and remand of the Division's Order Of Dismissal with respect to the issue of a hostile work environment, together with each and every other portion of said Order, excepting the affirming of the Division's Order Of Dismissal with respect to the issue of retaliatory firing. The Fourth Department reversed the Supreme Court, Erie County, holding that the Division's dismissal of the hostile work environment claims was not arbitrary and capricious.

ARGUMENT

POINT I

THE MINISTERIAL EXCEPTION, WHICH, AS SET OUT BY RECENT UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT DECISIONS, BARS CONSIDERATION OF EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION CLAIMS BY MINISTERS AGAINST RELIGIOUS EMPLOYERS, CONSTRAINED THE DIVISION TO DISMISS ALL OF IBHAWA’S CHARGES, INCLUDING THOSE RELATED TO HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT.

The “ministerial exception” is a First Amendment doctrine barring a court or administrative body from considering charges of discrimination brought by a minister, such as Ibhawa, a Roman Catholic priest, against a religious employer, such as the Diocese. In *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church & School v EEOC* (565 US 171 [2012]), the Supreme Court recognized

[T]he First Amendment “permit[s] hierarchical religious organizations to establish their own rules and regulations for internal discipline and government, and to create tribunals for adjudicating disputes over these matters.

(*Id.* at 187 [citing *Serbian Eastern Orthodox Diocese for U. S. of America and Canada v Milivojevich*, 426 US 696, 724 [1976]]; see also *Skrzypczak v Roman Catholic Diocese of Tulsa*, 611 F3d 1238 [10th Cir 2010]). “The independence of religious institutions in matters of “faith and doctrine” is closely linked to independence in what we have termed “matters of church government” (*Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church & School v EEOC*, *supra* at 186).

In *Our Lady of Guadalupe School v Morrissey-Berru*, (591 US ___, 140 S Ct 2049 [2020]), the Supreme Court held that under the “ministerial exception,” “courts are bound to stay out of employment disputes involving those holding certain important positions with churches and other religious institutions” (*id* at 2060). “This does not mean that religious institutions enjoy a general immunity from secular laws, but it does protect their autonomy with respect to internal management decisions” (*id*). Thus, “[w]hen a school with a religious mission entrusts a teacher with the responsibility of educating and forming students in the faith, judicial intervention into disputes between the school and the teacher threatens the school’s independence in a way the First Amendment does not allow” (*id* at 2069).

Because it derives from the First Amendment, the “ministerial exception” applies not only to employment-discrimination claims arising under federal law, but also to analogous claims under state and local law, including, as relevant here, the New York State Human Rights Law (*see, e.g., Shukla v Sharma*, No. 07-CV-2972 (CBA), 2009 WL 10690810, at 3 [EDNY Aug 21, 2009]). In *Brandenburg v Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America* (2021 WL 2206486 at 3 n. 3 [SDNY 2021]), the court, citing *Kraft v Rector, Churchwardens & Vestry of Grace Church in N.Y.* (No. 01-CV-7871 (KMW), 2004 WL 540327, at 4 n.10 [SDNY Mar 17, 2004]) held:

Just as there is a ministerial exception to Title VII, there must also be a ministerial exception to any state law cause of action that would otherwise impinge on the church's prerogative to choose its ministers or to exercise its religious beliefs in the context of employing its ministers.

(*Id.*, 2021 WL 2206486 at *3 n.3.citing (internal quotation marks omitted)).

New York courts have accepted the “ministerial exception” as a constitutional bar to considering discrimination causes of action brought by employees with religious duties against religious employers. In *O'Connor v Church of St. Ignatius Loyola* (8 AD3d 125 [1st Dept 2004], *lv to app den* 3 NY3d 610 [2004], *cert den* 544 US 1017 [2005]), the First Department held that a trial court correctly determined that, under the “ministerial exception,” it lacked jurisdiction to handle the discrimination claims of “a pastoral associate and chaplain whose primary function served the spiritual and pastoral mission of the church” (*id.*). The court in *Mills v Standing General Com'n on Christian Unity* (39 Misc3d 296 [Sup Ct NY Cnty 2013], *aff'd*, 117 AD3d 509 [1st Dept 2014]) held that an associate secretary of dialogue and interfaith relations was subject to the “ministerial exception,” which ““bar[s] the government from interfering with the decision of a religious group to fire one of its ministers”” (*id.* at 304 (citing *Hosanna-Tabor, supra*)).

As *Ibhawa* points out (Appellant's Brief, p. 15), the Ninth Circuit in *Elvig v Calvin Presbyterian Church* (375 F3d 951 [9th Cir 2004], *rehearing en banc*

denied, 397 F3d 790 [9th Cir 2005]) held that the “ministerial exception” does not preclude consideration of such claims. Recognizing that the “ministerial exception” applied to a “tangible employment action” (*id* at 961), the court explained that “[I]nsulating the Church’s employment decisions does not foreclose Elvig from holding the Church vicariously liable for the alleged harassment itself, which is not a protected employment decision” (*id* at 962).

It seems no New York court, state or federal, has considered the hostile work environment question. *Brandenburg* (*supra*) involved hostile work environment charges brought by employees otherwise subject to the “ministerial exception.” However, because the defendants did not move to dismiss those claims based upon the “ministerial exception,” the Federal District Court declined to take part in the “spirted debate” on this matter and “will assume without deciding that the Ninth Circuit’s framework applies” (*id*, 2021 WL 2206486 at *4).

As the U.S. Supreme Court set out, the purpose of the “ministerial exception” is “not to safeguard a church’s decision to fire a minister only when it is made for a religious reason,” but to “ensure[] that the authority to select and control who will minister to the faithful ... is the church’s alone” (*Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School*, *supra* at 194-195, *citation omitted*). The “ministerial exception” “protect[s] [religious institutions’] autonomy with respect to internal management decisions that are essential to the

institution’s central mission” (*Our Lady of Guadalupe*, *supra*, 140 S Ct at 2061). The language of the U.S. Supreme Court in those two decisions indicates that the First Amendment protects a religious body from a court’s or anti-discrimination agency’s examination of all managerial decisions related to the employment of a minister, not just hiring and termination.

Other courts, in the wake of *Hosanna-Tabor* and *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, have rejected the Ninth Circuit’s logic, holding that the “ministerial exception” bars all employment-related claims. In *Demkovich v St. Andrew the Apostle Parish, Calumet City* (3 F4th 968 [7th Cir 2021]), the Seventh Circuit held:

A religious organization’s supervision of its ministers is as much a “component” of its autonomy as “is the selection of the individuals who play certain key roles.” *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 140 S. Ct. at 2060. It would be incongruous if the independence of religious organizations mattered only at the beginning (hiring) and the end (firing) of the ministerial relationship, and not in between (work environment). *See, e.g., id.* (“But it is instructive to consider why a church’s independence on matters of faith and doctrine requires the authority to select, *supervise*, and if necessary, remove a minister without interference by secular authorities.” (emphasis added) (internal quotation marks and footnote omitted)) [S]egmenting the ministerial relationship runs counter to the teachings of *Hosanna-Tabor* and *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, from which we see no reason to depart.

(*Id* at 979).

The *Demkovich* Court continued:

[A]s a religious organization need not proffer a religious justification for termination claims, a religious organization need not do so for hostile work environment claims. *See Hosanna-Tabor*, 565 U.S. at

194, 132 S. Ct. 694 (“The purpose of the exception is not to safeguard a church’s decision to fire a minister only when it is made for a religious reason.”).

(*Demkovich v St. Andrew the Apostle Parish, Calumet City*, *id* at 980).

In *Skrzypczak v Roman Catholic Diocese of Tulsa* (611 F3d 1238 [10th Cir 2010], *cert denied* 565 US 1155 [2012]), the Tenth Circuit also declined to accept the reasoning of *Elvig* in dismissing the plaintiff’s hostile work environment claims under the “ministerial exception.”

[A]llowing such a claim, as Judge Trott stated in his dissent from *Elvig*, “involve [sic] gross substantive and procedural entanglement with the Church’s core functions, its polity, and its autonomy.” *Elvig*, 375 F.3d at 976 (Trott, J. dissenting) We are also persuaded that such an approach could...impinge on a church’s “right to select, manage, and discipline [its] clergy free from government control and scrutiny by influencing it to employ ministers that lower its exposure to liability rather than those that best “further [its] religious objective[s].” *Elvig v. Calvin Presbyterian Church*, 397 F3d 790, 803-04 (9th Cir. 2005) (order denying petition for rehearing) (Kleinfeld, J. dissenting).

(*Id* at 1245 (some cites omitted)).

In support of its argument that the Division is not barred from considering a minister’s hostile work environment claims, Ibhawa cites as “instructive” *Matter of Diocese of Rochester v New York State Division of Human Rights*, 305 AD2d 1000 [4th Dept 2003]. In that case, the Fourth Department declined to prohibit the Division from considering the employment discrimination claims of an employee on the basis that this agency “lacked jurisdiction to investigate the employment

decisions of a religious institution” (*id* at 1000-1001). A significant difference between *Diocese of Rochester*—decided years before the United States Supreme Court decisions in *Hosanna-Tabor* and *Our Lady of Guadalupe* established a constitutional ceiling for the employment claims an adjudicatory body could consider against a religious body—and the instant matter was that the employee in the former case was a “lay minister,” not an ordained priest (*id* at 1000). There could have been issues of the religious status of the complainant therein not present here, issues the Division could properly determine through the administrative process (*id* at 1001).

Here, there is no dispute that Ibhawa was an ordained Roman Catholic priest who served as a pastor of a church for a religious organization. Under the constitutional “ministerial exception” that the U.S. Supreme Court has established, the Division may not adjudicate Ibhawa’s discrimination claims. Although neither *Hosanna-Tabor* nor *Our Lady of Guadalupe* specifically addressed the issue of whether the “ministerial exception” bars hostile work environment claims, given the scope of activity that the U.S. Supreme Court held was constitutionally protected requires courts “to stay out of employment disputes involving those holding certain important positions with churches and other religious institutions” (*Our Lady of Guadalupe, supra, 140 S Ct at 2060*), it was reasonable for the Division to find that it could not address any of Ibhawa’s claims, even those related

to racial harassment.

POINT II

THE APPELLATE DIVISION PROPERLY HELD THAT THE DIVISION’S DETERMINATION THAT IT COULD NOT CONSIDER THE IBHAWA COMPLAINT WAS REASONABLE AND NOT ARBITRARY AND CAPRICIOUS.

The Appellate Division, Fourth Department, held that a Division determination “is entitled to considerable deference given its expertise in evaluating discrimination claims (*Matter of Meyer v Foster*, 187 AD3d 918, 919 [2d Dept 2020]; *see Matter of McDonald v New York State Div. of Human Rights*, 147 AD3d 1482, 1482 [4th Dept 2017])” (R. 332). Noting the lack of controlling authority with respect to whether the ministerial exception bars consideration of hostile work environment claims, the Fourth Department reasoned “that [the Division’s] determination with respect to the hostile work environment claim is not arbitrary and capricious or affected by an error of law (*see generally LeTray*, 181 AD3d at 1297-1298)” (R.332).

“In cases where [the Division] issues an order prior to holding a hearing, dismissing a complaint for lack of jurisdiction, the standard of review is whether the determination was arbitrary or capricious (*see Matter of Scopelliti v Town of New Castle*, 210 AD2d 339 [2d Dept 1994]) or affected by an error of law (*see Matter of Baust v New York State Div. of Human Rights*, 70 AD3d 1107, 1108 [3d

Dept 2010], *lv denied* 15 NY3d 710 [2010])” (*Stoudymire v N.Y.S. Div. of Human Rights*, 36 Misc3d 919, 920-921 [Sup Ct Cayuga Cnty 2012]).

As in the instant matter, “the [D]ivision’s action ... cannot be considered to have been devoid of a rational basis, [which is] the touchstone of arbitrary and capricious agency action (*see Matter of Pell v Board of Educ.*, 34 NY2d 222, 231 [1974])” (*State Off. of Drug Abuse Servs. v State Human Rights Appeal Bd.*, 48 NY2d 276, 284 [1979]).

[W]hen the issue concerns the exercise of discretion by the administrative tribunal: The courts cannot interfere unless there is no rational basis for the exercise of discretion or the action complained of is ‘arbitrary and capricious.’ (*Cohen and Karger, Powers of the New York Court of Appeals*, pp. 460-461; *see, also, 8 Weinstein-Korn-Miller, N. Y. Civ. Prac.*, par. 7803.04 et seq.; *1 N. Y. Jur., Administrative Law*, §§ 177, 184; *Matter of Colton v Berman*, 21 NY2d 322, 329).

(*Matter of Pell v Board of Educ.*, *supra*, 231). “Rationality is what is reviewed under both the substantial evidence rule and the arbitrary and capricious standard (*Matter of 125 Bar Corp. v State Liq. Auth.*, 24 NY2d 174, 178 [1969]; *1 NY Jur, Administrative Law*, § 184)” (*id* at 231).

Once the Division makes a determination, “[j]udicial review of the determination ..., is limited to a consideration of whether that resolution was supported by substantial evidence upon the whole record...” (*300 Gramatan Ave. Assoc. v State Div. of Human Rights*, 45 NY2d 176, 181 [1978] [cits omitted]). A final determination of the Division may not be set aside “merely because the

opposite decision would have been reasonable and also sustainable” (*Matter of Mize v State Div. of Human Rights*, 33 NY2d 53, 56 [1973]).

It is well settled that a court may not substitute its judgment for that of the board or body it reviews unless the decision under review is arbitrary and unreasonable and constitutes an abuse of discretion [citations omitted] (*Matter of Diocese of Rochester v Planning Bd. of Town of Brighton*, 1 NY2d 508, 520 [1956]).

(*Matter of Pell v Board of Educ.*, *supra*, 232).

Here, the Fourth Department found that the Division’s determination “that it lacked jurisdiction over petitioner’s complaint inasmuch as petitioner had been a priest serving as the pastor of a church and the ministerial exception barred his claims” (R. 331) was not arbitrary and capricious. Although there is no directly controlling authority on whether the First Amendment bars hostile work environment claims under the Human Rights Law, the Division’s interpretation of recent Supreme Court decisions on the ministerial exception and its consideration of persuasive authority from other jurisdictions in order to reach its conclusion had a rational basis and should be upheld by this Court.

CONCLUSION

THAT THE ORDER OF THE APPELLATE DIVISION, FOURTH DEPARTMENT, ENTERED JUNE 30, 2023, UNANIMOUSLY REVERSING, ON THE LAW, THE ORDER OF THE SUPREME COURT, ERIE COUNTY, OF THE HONORABLE E. JEANETTE OGDEN, J.S.C., DATED NOVEMBER 23, 2023, BE CONFIRMED IN ITS ENTIRETY; THAT THE UNDERLYING PETITION BE DENIED IN ITS ENTIRETY; THAT THE DETERMINATION AND ORDER OF DISMISSAL FOR LACK OF JURISDICTION, DATED MARCH 26, 2021, ON THE COMPLAINT OF VICTOR O. IBHAWA AGAINST DIOCESE OF BUFFALO, NY BE CONFIRMED IN ITS ENTIRETY; AND FOR SUCH OTHER AND FURTHER RELIEF THAT THIS COURT DEEMS JUST AND PROPER.

Dated: Bronx, New York
 May 1, 2024

Respectfully submitted,

John P. Herrion
Acting General Counsel
State Division of Human Rights
One Fordham Plaza
Bronx, New York 10458
Tel. No.: (718) 741-8398
aaron.woskoff@dhr.ny.gov

by: *Aaron M. Woskoff*
 Aaron M. Woskoff
 of Counsel.

CERTIFICATION OF COMPLIANCE

This brief was prepared on a computer, using a Microsoft Word program. The type is Times New Roman, Fourteen Point and it is double-spaced. It contains 3,927 words.

COURT OF APPEALS
STATE OF NEW YORK

In the Matter of

VICTOR O. IBHAWA,

Appellant,

-against-

NEW YORK STATE DIVISION OF HUMAN
RIGHTS; DIOCESE OF BUFFALO,

Respondents.

AFFIRMATION
OF SERVICE

APL – 2023-00119

App. Div. Docket No.
CA 22-00060

Erie County Index No.
806837-2021

AARON M. WOSKOFF, being an attorney at law licensed to practice in the State of New York, affirms the following statement to be true, under penalty of perjury.

That on May 1, 2024, he served the within BRIEF ON BEHALF OF RESPONDENT NEW YORK STATE DIVISION OF HUMAN RIGHTS upon:

Attorneys for Appellant-(Victor O. Ibhawa)

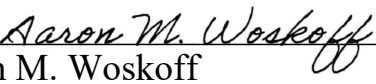
DONNA A. MILLING, Esq.
ROSANNE E. JOHNSON, Esq.
P.O. Box 1538
Buffalo, NY 14226

Attorneys for Respondent-(Diocese of Buffalo)

ERIN S. TORCELLO, Esq.
KATHLEEN H. McGRAW, Esq.
BOND, SCHOENECK & KING, PLLC
Avant Building, Suite 900
200 Delaware Avenue
Buffalo, New York 14202

by presenting true copies of the same, securely enclosed in wrappers, with proper postage affixed thereto, at the United States Post Office, Fordham Station, located at 465 East 188th Street, Bronx, New York 10458 in the County of Bronx, with directions that said wrappers be delivered to the aforesaid parties at their respective addresses as hereinabove set forth. Each wrapper contained one copy of the same.

Dated: May 1, 2024
Bronx, New York



Aaron M. Woskoff
Senior Attorney