

Pastoral Letter

Living as Catholics in the Public Square

Freedom of Religion and Conscience in Canada

By the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops



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INTRODUCTION

1. *The Catholic Church claims the right to religious freedom in order to fulfill her specific mission. In obedience to Christ's command (cf. Mt 28:19-20), she proposes the Gospel to all people, which she is duty bound to do, because Jesus Christ is "the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). All evangelization is but an effort to awaken the listener's religious freedom to desire and embrace the saving truth of the Gospel (cf. Mk 16:15-16).*¹

2. In April 2012, the Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops published a *Pastoral Letter on Freedom of Conscience and Religion*. The document showed foresight in many respects, observing certain trends that threatened robust freedom of conscience and religion.

1 Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, [Pastoral Letter on Freedom of Conscience and Religion](#), no. 6.

The trends that were discerned eleven years ago have sadly accelerated, particularly in Canada and in other Western societies.

3. In Canada, freedom of religion and conscience, with the other fundamental freedoms included in section 2 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, form the bedrock of our democratic society and reflect our common life as human beings who are bearers of the image and likeness of God. This incarnational understanding and embrace of religious freedom in our democracy and in our culture are essential for the functioning of our pluralist society. All of us – bishops, priests, deacons, members of religious communities, and the lay faithful – have a role to play not only in defending religious freedom but in publicly living out a vibrant Catholic faith.

HUMAN DIGNITY AS THE BASIS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

4. As reaffirmed time and time again by the Catholic Church and the Bishops of Canada, the exercise of freedom of religion and conscience is rooted in human dignity.² In our role as citizens, we as Catholics share in a common life with our fellow Canadians of different faiths and of no religious faith. Freedom of religion and conscience, the freedom to live out a public faith, must be affirmed as foundational to that common life. What is this freedom in its essence?

5. Freedom of religion and freedom of conscience are related freedoms that enable us to live fully as we are, as we are called to be. These freedoms bear witness to the truth that all human beings have an inherent desire to make sense of our world and to encounter God, which is to encounter Truth.

2 Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, [Pastoral Letter on Freedom of Conscience and Religion](#), no. 4.

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Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law:

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Fundamental Freedoms

2 Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

- (a) freedom of conscience and religion;
- (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;
- (c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and
- (d) freedom of association.

[\(Section 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms\)](#)

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These two freedoms bear witness to the radical equality grounded in our shared personhood. Unlike the freedoms that relate to public action, such as expression, association, and assembly, to which it is bound, freedom of religion addresses what certain thinkers have articulated as being “the metaphysical need” of the human person. In this sense, religious freedom can perhaps be more fully defined as exercising the freedom to contemplate fundamental questions of being: Who am I? Who am I in relationship to others? Who am I in relationship to the world in which I live? Who am I in relationship to God? It is only when we have the freedom to contemplate these questions, to form beliefs based on their contemplation, and then to govern our lives according to the truth once found that we can

ALL OF US HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN PUBLICLY LIVING OUT A VIBRANT CATHOLIC FAITH.



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take full advantage of the other fundamental freedoms listed in the Charter (expression, assembly, and association).

6. A frequent and mistaken postmodern assumption is that freedom of religion or conscience can be relegated in favour of upholding a broader freedom of expression or association. Yet, this approach risks divorcing thought from action and ignoring the interior life of human beings, the very bearers of human rights. To diminish the defence of religious freedom in this way is a symptom of amnesia, a forgetfulness of who we are as human beings, what our deepest longings are, and where our

true dignity lies. Indeed, the flourishing of communities, and especially democracies, requires the ability of their members to live out the fundamental human need for religious expression publicly and without hindrance. Recognizing this freedom amounts to recognizing the deep and inherent dignity of every human person.

7. Human persons exercise fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of religion, not because they are granted to them by the State or an external authority but through their inherent dignity as persons. As the Second Vatican Council's document on religious freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, states:

It is in accordance with their dignity as persons – that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility – that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth. However, men cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom.³

8. To truly exercise freedom of religion and freedom of conscience involves manifesting these freedoms in a public manner. After all, we are always free in our inner life, in which we encounter Our Lord Jesus Christ and are called to participate in the life of the Most Holy Trinity. As is revealed in the Acts of the Apostles, even at his stoning the holy martyr Stephen was still free in his inner life of faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 7:54-60). Freedom of religion and conscience, however, enables us to manifest our faith publicly through worship, through our particular vocational lives, and in our public acts. It is this freedom that is increasingly viewed as threatening to a radical secularism and its accompanying relativist ethic. When religious freedom is endangered or



The Stoning of St. Stephen – Jerusalem, around 35 AD. Icon by Philotheos Skoufos, a 17th-century Cretan who emigrated to flee persecution.

3 Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 2.

IT IS IN THE “EXERCISE” OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM THAT ITS TRUE VALUE TO SOCIETY IS MADE MANIFEST.

disregarded, the fabric of our collective and shared spiritual lives can be eroded, often with severe consequences.

9. The importance of religious freedom is not religious freedom itself but the free exercise of authentic religion. If Christians were to become cowed so as to not live a public faith, they would be effectively denying their faith, denying the Cross, and failing to respond to the great commission of Our Lord Jesus Christ to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. Avoiding this scenario necessitates a rediscovering and living out of authentic Catholic piety and lives of prayer oriented towards holiness. Furthermore, it urgently requires the employment of effective and context-specific apologetics and the embracing of an evangelical vocation that is rooted in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. The free, authentic, and courageous living out of the faith is, in the end, the most effective way to defend religious freedom, because it is in the “exercise” of religious freedom that its true value to society is made manifest.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE ROLE OF THE STATE

10. The State has an obligation, as discerned in Section 2 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, to uphold fundamental freedoms for the good of all and to foster a common life ordered towards the common good of human flourishing. Unfortunately, our Canadian public institutions, which by their nature are intended to be representative, have often not lived up to this obligation. At all

levels, these institutions have increasingly enforced not an “open” secularism as defined by the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, where the State is genuinely neutral and gives way to all forms of peacefully expressed belief, but a “closed” secularism that will not accommodate different beliefs or that only barely allows – if at all – the public manifestation of belief.⁴ This accommodation is certainly not accorded when the religious beliefs and conscientious views of persons go against the moral norms recently established in our secular society, including the unrestricted freedom to abortion, the absolute freedom to live any sexual expression or so-called gender identity, as well as euthanasia on demand.



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11. In a genuinely pluralist democracy, embracing diversity entails recognizing the right to uphold specific theological and moral stances, even when they challenge the prevailing norms of our time. As long as these beliefs are

4 James K.A. Smith and Charles Taylor, “[Imagining an ‘Open’ Secularism](#),” *Comment*, Sept. 1, 2014.

genuinely held and promoted peacefully and without violence, they should be granted the freedom to openly occupy the public square. We must reject any efforts or actions that seek to diminish human dignity and the freedom of human beings to peacefully profess and exercise their most deeply held beliefs both privately and publicly. To live a public faith is not only to manifest one's own religious beliefs in charity and truth in the public square, but to encourage others to do the same for the sake of our common life and in the service of truth.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM LIVED IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

12. *And that this may now become evident to you – (firstly) that whatever we assert in conformity with what has been taught us by Christ, and by the prophets who preceded Him, are alone true, and are older than all the writers who have existed; that we claim to be acknowledged, not because we say the same things as these writers said, but because we say true things: and (secondly) that Jesus Christ is the only proper Son who has been begotten by God, being His Word and first-begotten, and power; and, becoming man according to His will, He taught us these things for the conversion and restoration of the human race...⁵*

13. Our society needs Christ, and therefore it needs the Church to be confidently present in the public square. We must reaffirm in an age of relativism and radical autonomy that as Christians “we say true things,” as St. Justin Martyr reminds us. How, then, are we to yet again in this age turn to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to our living Holy Tradition to proclaim the message of conversion and renewal in the Risen Lord?

14. As Catholics, our faith calls us to champion in the public square what we believe to be true. As we live with those who will reject our beliefs, we must also embrace a true pluralism that respects disagreement, often profound disagreement, between people of different faiths, ideologies, and backgrounds. In no way should this inhibit our proclaiming of the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ and pursuing that evangelical mission to which our baptism calls us. In building our common life, we must live first and foremost as Catholic Christians who champion the common good so that our fellow human beings may seek what is true. In building this common life, there must be the public space to differ and not to defer in favour of what may be politically or socially acceptable. There must be the freedom to live faith publicly without being driven to privatize it in order to be accepted in the public square.

15. The public square should serve as a space where we can come together, acknowledging our different perspectives and identities, while simultaneously embracing our



Justin the Philosopher, icon by Theophanes the Cretan, painted on the wall of the Stavronikita Monastery's Katholikon between 1545 and 1546.

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5 Justin Martyr, [First Apology](#), ch. 23.

common humanity revealed most completely in the Incarnation. As Catholics, we must make the defence and upholding of religious freedom for all people a primary concern in our lives of faith. Without robust religious freedom, our other fundamental freedoms, such as assembly, expression, and association, will come under challenge, as we are already seeing on university campuses and in various professions across the country.

A CATHOLIC CONTRIBUTION TO PUBLIC LIFE

16. The freedom to practise one's Catholic faith publicly and to be present in the public square as a faithful Catholic is a freedom that implicitly advances and supports a true pluralism. This freedom enables Catholics, and other people of faith, to contribute to the public debates of this country – debates which must have as their end the furtherance of the common good. Pope Francis sums up well Catholic teaching in this area:

The Church, while respecting the autonomy of political life, does not restrict her mission to the private sphere. On the contrary, "she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines" in the building of a better world, or fail to "reawaken the spiritual energy" that can contribute to the betterment of society. . . . The Church "has a public role over and above her charitable and educational activities".⁶



Photo: Rawpixel/iStock.com



Papal Visit 2022, Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, Québec
Photo: Courtesy of Vatican Media

17. Religious faith profoundly influences the formation of one's conscience and understanding of what it means to be human. Thus, if people in our society – whether Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, or people of no religious faith – feel restricted in the practice of their faith, they will naturally see this restriction as grave indeed. The marginalization resulting from such an experience only serves to further fragment our society. Without the ability for diverse beliefs to manifest themselves, we cannot sustain a healthy common life. First and foremost, this marginalization leads to a diminishment of meaningful public discourse. Individuals with religious convictions perceive themselves and their beliefs as undervalued

6 Francis, [Fratelli Tutti](#), no. 276. Internal citations are from, respectively, Benedict XVI, [Deus Caritas Est](#), no. 28; and Benedict XVI, [Caritas in Veritate](#), no. 11.

THE FREEDOM TO PRACTISE ONE'S CATHOLIC FAITH PUBLICLY AND TO BE PRESENT IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE AS A FAITHFUL CATHOLIC IS A FREEDOM THAT IMPLICITLY ADVANCES AND SUPPORTS A TRUE PLURALISM.

and unwanted in the public square, and thus society is deprived of what they may have to offer. Secondly, and more concerning, is the likelihood that as members of faith communities feel themselves to be under attack, they will choose no longer to participate in our common life and leave the public square altogether given the unreasonable constraints placed on their conscience and faith. In its most intense forms, this withdrawal can lead to extremism and radicalisation. But even in its milder forms, such a withdrawal is always a net loss to our life in common; it is a sign that our society has failed to make space for religiously faithful Canadians.

18. As Catholics, we exercise our religious freedom in the public square to evangelize, “to make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), to fully live a sacramental life, and by our prayers and through our corporal and spiritual works of mercy to reveal the presence of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the world. Living our religious freedom also means publicly supporting and strengthening the Catholic character of Catholic schools, patronizing Catholic media, and supporting Catholic health care and Catholic social agencies which minister to the whole community through our charitable giving and good works. For some Catholics, it may also mean pursuing the common good through a life dedicated to politics, journalism, or media, keeping in mind that “charity . . . is the spiritual heart of politics.”⁷

19. Today, many Canadian provinces no longer possess any, or most, of their formerly

Catholic institutions (schools, hospitals, hospices, etc.). In the name of not promoting any particular religion, governments sometimes advocate a “closed” secularism that will not tolerate the presence of any activity or obvious religious symbol in civil institutions. It also happens that attempts are made to impose, even in those institutions that still identify as Catholic, programs or practices that go squarely against the teaching of the Catholic Church and the life of faith of practising Catholics. Such measures trample on religious



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freedom and deprive a significant portion of citizens (who adhere to the Catholic faith) of services to meet their spiritual and religious needs. These measures also go against a true secularism⁸ that makes possible the expression and manifestation of the faith of believers in the public square.

20. When we engage the public square as Catholics, we are first and foremost disciples of

7 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 187.

8 In English, this true or legitimate secularism is also sometimes denoted by the term “secularity.”

Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We do not act alone but as members of his mystical body. In the public square, we are called to confirm our faith through our words and actions, living our public faith in a responsive manner in which we seek to advance what is true and good when we see injustice, evil, and threats to human dignity and human freedom emerging

LET US NOT FEAR TO WITNESS TO OUR BELIEF IN JESUS CHRIST, THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE.

in our society. In short, when confronted by what is wrong and false, we must confess truth and, in so doing, confess Christ.

CONCLUSION

21. The declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* of the Second Vatican Council founded religious freedom upon the explicit recognition of the dignity of the human person. Human dignity must be our touchstone, for in our embrace of it we touch Our Lord Jesus Christ, who embraced our humanity for our salvation. In order to address the challenges posed to freedom of religion and conscience in our society, it is the duty and call of the Church to continue to manifest the truth of the Gospel and to profess with renewed evangelical vigour the truth of the Incarnation and Our Lord's Resurrection. It is only through these mysteries of our salvation in Christ that the People of God and all people will be guided back towards a full embrace of their human dignity. We need to champion a Christ-centred anthropology: that in our humanity we reveal a God-given dignity, a radical equality between all human persons. Let us champion the inherent human dignity of all people that reveals itself from within as we champion religious freedom.

22. This great work requires daily actions guided by love, mercy, and an unflagging commitment to truth. As we exercise our freedom so as to profess the Incarnation and Christ's Resurrection as Catholics, we embrace an asceticism of manifesting this great joy within a public square often devoid of joy and hope. In short, our posture must be that of the Apostle Peter on that first Pentecost, where his first act was to enter the public square of Jerusalem and draw people to Christ. We are called, like Peter, to give an explicit account of the faith that is within us (1 Peter 3:15), to let that faith radiate through our actions, to uphold what is true, and to love. Let us not fear to witness to our belief in Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

22 June 2023, Feast of Saint Thomas More



Saint Peter Preaching in the Presence of Saint Mark, painting by Fra Angelico (circa 1433).



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