



Pastoral Letter on Freedom of Conscience and Religion

*Permanent Council of the
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops*

■ A pressing appeal for freedom

1. We are writing this pastoral letter to men and women of good will because of our conviction that religious believers can enrich society with their innumerable contributions to culture, political and economic life, health care and education. In solidarity with our brothers and sisters, we are called to renew our commitment to building a world where every individual, every community of faith, and every society enjoys in law and in practice authentic freedom of conscience and religion.

We hope to rekindle in all Canadians an appreciation of the significance of these rights as essential for ensuring the common good, and to encourage our fellow citizens, especially those in professions where these rights may be at risk, to defend them courageously. As Catholic Bishops, we particularly wish to address those members of the faithful who find themselves in difficult situations where they may be pressured to act against their religious faith or their conscience.

2. Recent international and national events present a disturbing trend of threats to freedom of conscience and religion experienced by those who suffer from bias, prejudice, hate propaganda, discrimination and persecution because of their religious beliefs. The Catholic Church fosters and defends these freedoms which are grounded in Sacred Scripture and supported by rational reflection. In championing them, she finds common ground with everyone, regardless of their religious affiliation.

We affirm what Pope Benedict XVI states in his Message for the 2011 World Day of Peace: "It is painful to think that in some areas of the world it is impossible to profess one's religion freely except at the risk of life and personal liberty. In other areas we see more subtle and sophisticated forms of prejudice and hostility towards believers and religious symbols."¹

¹ Benedict XVI, Message for the 2011 World Day of Peace, n. 1.

■ Our freedom of conscience and religion

3. While freedom of conscience belongs essentially to individuals, freedom of religion is broader: it implies the ability to embrace and openly practice one's faith, both individually and communally, within society. It is directly related to freedom of conscience inasmuch as conscience, oriented to truth, is formed by religious faith. Religious freedom is the most meaningful freedom of all, "since it is through faith that men and women express their deepest decision about the ultimate meaning of their lives."² Indeed, the right to religious freedom is "the litmus test for the respect of all the other human rights."³ Where it is protected, peaceful co-existence, prosperity and participation in cultural, social and political life flourish. But when it is threatened, all other rights are weakened and society suffers.

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■ Rooted in human dignity

4. The rights to freedom of conscience and religion derive from the unique dignity of the human person created in the image of God (cf. Gen 1:26-27) and endowed with reason and free will. Human beings are the only creatures able to establish a conscious relationship with God. To do so freely is essential to their dignity and "is in keeping with the innate openness of the human heart to God."⁴

Conscience bears witness to the fact that people are "impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth."⁵ Conscience is not, however, an absolute placed above truth. Rather, by its very nature, conscience has a relation to objective truth, a truth which is universal and which all must seek. Freedom of conscience is justified because of this relation, inasmuch as this freedom is a necessary condition for seeking the truth and for adhering to that truth once it is sufficiently known. For this reason, each individual's conscientious search for truth must always be respected. This freedom to respond to the truth of one's nature as a being created by God and destined for fulfillment in him is essential to a democratic society.⁶

In promoting the dignity of the human person, the Church faithfully defends the freedom of conscience of all people, whatever their religion or philosophy of life. The Second Vatican Council teaches that a person "is not to be forced to act against conscience nor be prevented from acting according to conscience, especially in religious matters."⁷

2 Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 87.

3 Blessed John Paul II, Address to Participants in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (10 October 2003), n. 1.

4 Benedict XVI, Message to Professor Mary Ann Glendon, President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences on the Occasion of the 17th Plenary Session (29 April 2011).

5 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 2.

6 Cf. Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, Press Conference for the Presentation of Pope Benedict XVI's 2011 World Day of Peace Message (16 December 2010), n. 3,4.

7 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 3.

Conceded neither by the state nor by society, the freedoms of conscience and religion are inalienable and universal. Religious freedom is “the most profound expression of freedom of conscience.”⁸ Furthermore, the right to freedom of religion is pre-eminent “not only because it was historically the first to be recognized but also because it touches the constitutive dimension of man, his relation with his Creator.”⁹ Our respect for every person’s attempt to search for the truth demands that we must “safeguard the fundamental right to freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, as the cornerstones of the structure of human rights and the foundation of every truly free society.”¹⁰

■ What religious freedom entails

5. Every individual has the “the right to be able to worship God in accordance with the right dictates of his conscience.”¹¹ Other people, as well as civil society, have the corresponding duty to respect the free spiritual development of each person.¹²

Besides being free from external coercion, every one must be able freely to exercise the right to choose, profess, disseminate, and practice his or her own religion in private and in public. This includes the freedom for parents to educate their children in their religious convictions and to choose the schools which provide that formation. Moreover, the state has the obligation to protect this right by means of a legal and administrative framework and to create a suitable environment where it can be enjoyed.

Like religion itself, religious freedom has a personal, individual dimension, but it also has a communitarian, public dimension. Since human beings think, act and communicate through their relationships with others, this freedom is expressed through concrete actions, whether individual or collective, both in religious communities and in society at large. Believers must therefore be allowed to play their part in formulating public policy and in contributing to society as a way of living their faith in daily practice. When this right is truly acknowledged, religious communities and institutions can operate freely for the betterment of society through initiatives in the social, charitable, health care, and educational sectors, which benefit all citizens, especially the poorest and most marginalized. Furthermore, religious freedom entails the right of religious communities to set the qualifications judged necessary for those running their own institutions.

Religious believers should therefore be allowed to express their religious identity publicly, free from any pressure to hide or disguise it. As Pope Benedict affirmed

8 Blessed John Paul II, Message for the 1991 World Day of Peace, n. 5.

9 Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps (10 January 2011).

10 Blessed John Paul II, Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization (5 October 1995), n. 10.

11 Blessed John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, n. 14.

12 Cf. Blessed John Paul II, Message on the Value and Content of Freedom of Conscience and of Religion (1 September 1980), n. 2.

before the United Nations General Assembly, “it is inconceivable that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves – their faith – in order to be active citizens. It should never be necessary to deny God in order to enjoy one’s rights.”¹³ At the same time, believers also need to recognize that “just limits of the exercise of religious freedom must be determined in each social situation with political prudence, according to the requirements of the common good.”¹⁴

The Church’s appeals in favour of religious freedom are not based on any claim to reciprocity, whereby one group respects the rights of others only if the latter respect the rights of the group. Such an arrangement would be neither politically prudent, nor would it contribute to the common good. Rather, we honour the rights of others because it is the right thing to do, not in exchange for its equivalent or for a favour granted.

■ Proposing, not imposing

6. 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).

We are never to impose our religious beliefs on others, but always to respect individuals and cultures, honouring the sanctuary of conscience.¹⁵ The dignity of the human person demands respect for conscience, because it is “the most secret core and the sanctuary of the human person. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths.”¹⁶

It is a violation of freedom of conscience for anyone to attempt to impose his or her own understanding of the truth on others. The right to profess the truth must always be upheld, but never in a way which involves contempt for those who think differently. “To deny an individual complete freedom of conscience – and in particular the freedom to seek the truth – or to attempt to impose a particular way of seeing the truth, constitutes a violation of that individual’s most personal rights.”¹⁷

No individual, human community or state should ever forget that the truth never imposes itself by violence but only “by the force of its own truth.”¹⁸ No religion, therefore, can ever be externally imposed but must be adopted by a person “only through the process of conviction.”¹⁹

13 Benedict XVI, Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations (18 April 2008).

14 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 422.

15 Cf. Blessed John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 39.

16 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 16.

17 Blessed John Paul II, Message for the 1991 World Day of Peace, n. 1.

18 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 1.

19 Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia (22 December 2005).

■ Guaranteed by law

7. The preamble of our national Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) affirms that “Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law.” It then sets out that each citizen has certain fundamental freedoms, placing “freedom of conscience and religion” at the top of the list (Article 2). The state acknowledges and respects – *it does not grant* – the free exercise of religious belief. As Canadians we possess the right to freedom of conscience and religion, which entails freedom from coercion as well as the right to express publicly and disseminate freely our religious beliefs in accordance with the common good.

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Likewise, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) affirms: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance” (Article 18). International law recognizes that freedom of conscience and religion belongs to the essential core of natural rights which human law can never legitimately deny.

■ Contemporary concerns

8. Unfortunately, religious freedom is far from being effectively guaranteed everywhere. Sometimes it is denied for religious or ideological reasons. At other times, although it may be recognized in law, it is hindered in practice by a legal system or social order which enforces strict control, if not a monopoly, over society.

According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, more than 70 percent of the world’s countries impose legal or administrative restrictions which in practice annul the rights of individual believers and religious groups. Among these restraints are the forced registration of religious groups, prohibition of conversions, restrictions on foreign missionaries, favouring one religious group over another, fines, and harassment.²⁰

More subtle threats to religious freedom arise from the cultural predominance of radical secularism and “a subliminal relativism that penetrates every area of life. Sometimes this relativism becomes aggressive when it opposes those who say they know where the truth or meaning of life is to be found.”²¹ Paradoxically, this relativism often posits the absolute relativity of all knowledge and meaning and then seeks to impose this absolutism on others, often in violation of conscience and religious belief. Whenever and wherever the right of freedom of conscience and

20 Cf. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Global Restrictions on Religion,” (December 2009).

21 Benedict XVI, Address to Central Committee for German Catholics, Freiburg in Breisgau (24 September 2011).

religion is endangered, we are obliged to express our objections with clarity and courage, especially in cases involving the persecution of religious minorities.

■ International concerns

9. Aid to the Church in Need, in its *Religious Freedom in the World – Report 2010*, states a very troubling fact about the current international situation: today 75 percent of all religious persecution is directed against Christians. The Pope has written bluntly in this regard: “At present, Christians are the religious group which suffers most from persecution on account of its faith. Many Christians experience daily affronts and often live in fear because of their pursuit of truth, their faith in Jesus Christ and their heartfelt plea for respect for religious freedom.”²² Besides Christians, members of other religious bodies often experience violent attacks or discrimination in numerous countries, especially where they are a minority.

Among other incidents and situations, we have recently witnessed the massacre of Coptic Christians in Egypt; the bombing of churches in Nigeria; the systematic interference in ecclesial affairs by Chinese authorities; the call for the execution of converts to Christianity in Afghanistan and Iran; the consequences of the law against blasphemy in Pakistan; the measures taken against gynaecologists and obstetricians in some European countries which compel them, against their conscience, to screen unborn children for Down Syndrome in order to abort them; and the “attack on the religious freedom of families in certain European countries which mandate obligatory participation in courses of sexual or civic education which allegedly convey a neutral conception of the person and of life, yet in fact reflect an anthropology opposed to faith and to right reason.”²³

■ Concerns in our own nation

10. In the past decade in Canada there have been several situations that raise the question whether our right to freedom of conscience and religion is everywhere respected. At times, believers are being legally compelled to exercise their profession without reference to their religious or moral convictions, and even in opposition to them. This occurs wherever laws, which most often deal with issues linked to the dignity of human life and the family, are promulgated and which limit the right to conscientious objection by health-care and legal professionals, educators and politicians.

For example, some colleges of physicians require that members who refuse to perform abortions refer patients to another physician willing to do so; elsewhere pharmacists are being threatened by being forced to have to fill prescriptions for

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²² Benedict XVI, Message for the 2011 World Day of Peace, n. 1.

²³ Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps (10 January 2011).

contraceptives or the “morning after” pill; and marriage commissioners in British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Saskatchewan must now perform same-sex marriages or resign.

Conflict and confrontation occur between the rights and freedoms of some citizens and others: for example, when anti-discrimination laws – which, properly understood, include religion – clash with the right to religious freedom. Besides the courts, the Human Rights Tribunals of each province strive to strike a balance or reconcile conflicts between different rights.

All too often, however, advocacy groups use these bodies to promote new individual “rights” which often take precedence over the common good. The legal proceedings that these lobbies initiate force the defendant to become involved in lengthy and expensive court battles and thus weaken the common good.

Such acrimonious procedures would be better replaced by a civilized and respectful debate enriching to everyone, provided it gives a voice in the public forum to religious believers. If that voice is suppressed in any way, believers should view this as a restriction on their right to freedom of religion, one which should be forcefully challenged. In a constitutional democracy such as Canada’s, the system of justice must strive to protect more effectively freedom of religion and of conscience as key elements of our free and democratic society.

■ A call to engage our freedom

11. We call on all Canadians, especially the Catholic faithful, to respond courageously to the challenges to freedom of conscience and religion by renewing their determination to participate actively in every sector of public life and to make their views known where public policies and opinions are being shaped. In this way, they can witness to the truth and promote the common good by infusing a religious perspective into our cultural, social, political and economic institutions. Canada “needs lay Christians able to assume roles of leadership in society. It is urgent to train men and women who, in keeping with their vocation, can influence public life, and direct it to the common good.”²⁴

The right of citizens to participate fully *as believers* needs to be constantly upheld. We recommend the following four actions to our fellow citizens: affirm the rightful role of religion in the public square; uphold a healthy relationship between Church and state; form conscience according to truth; and protect the right to conscientious objection.

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²⁴ Blessed John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, n. 44.

■ Affirming the rightful role of religion in the public square

12. Less evident than the violent persecution of believers is what Pope Benedict XVI refers to as the “systematic denigration of religious beliefs”²⁵ in many parts of the world. For radical secularists, all expressions of religious belief must be relegated to the private sphere; they seek to deny religion any influence on society. Even in countries which acknowledge the value of pluralism and tolerance, religion is increasingly marginalized, confined to homes and churches, and considered to be insignificant, alien or even destabilizing to society.

A sign of this marginalization of religion, and of Christianity in particular, is “the banning of religious feasts and symbols from civic life under the guise of respect for the members of other religions or those who are not believers. By acting in this way, not only is the right of believers to the public expression of their faith restricted, but an attack is made on the cultural roots which nourish the profound identity and social cohesion of many nations.”²⁶ We all need to be vigilant in preserving, in a respectful manner, the religious symbols and celebrations which express the particular spiritual heritage of nations shaped in the crucible of Christianity.

Forcing religious believers to keep their convictions to themselves, while atheists and agnostics are under no such restriction is, in fact, an expression of religious intolerance. This is no way to achieve social harmony among citizens in a free and democratically plural society. Such an approach of forced “privacy of religion” is a thinly veiled way of curbing the freedom of religious believers to express their convictions publicly.

Attempts to limit expressions of religious faith to places of worship and to certain initiatives for social justice should be judged as a serious curtailment of a guaranteed right. To act and speak out publicly as a committed Christian in one’s professional life has never been more necessary. When many would like to exclude religious believers from full participation in society’s fundamental institutions is precisely the time to claim the right to do so.

■ Upholding a healthy relationship between Church and state

13. A legitimate secularism draws a distinction between religion and politics, between Church and state. But, unlike radical secularism, this distinction excludes neither religious beliefs nor communities from freely engaging in the public debate necessary for shaping civic life. Healthy secularists strive to keep the public square open to the transcendent, so that society’s laws and institutions may be informed by the religious beliefs of its citizens. As Catholics, we can affirm that “the rightful autonomy of the political or civil sphere from that of religion and the Church

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25 Benedict XVI, Message for the 2007 World Day of Peace, n. 5.

26 Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps (10 January 2011).

– *but not from that of morality* – is a value that has been attained and recognized by the Catholic Church and belongs to inheritance of contemporary civilization."²⁷ As Pope Benedict XVI pointed out in his recent address to the German Bundestag, "unlike other great religions, Christianity has never proposed a revealed law to the State and to society, that is to say a juridical order derived from revelation. Instead, it has pointed to nature and reason as the true sources of law."²⁸

Church and state in Canada have traditionally enjoyed a relationship of mutual respect and cooperation, one where believers are expected to bring their views to bear on the nation's cultural, social, political, and economic life. Their numerous contributions to building a just and peaceful society have been welcomed as a service to the common good of all Canadians. It is our hope that such cooperation will continue to mark our national life. This can only be possible, however, if religious institutions are "free to act in accordance with their own principles and specific convictions based upon the faith and the official teaching"²⁹ of their respective traditions.

Where the contribution of religious believers is excluded from public life, that life is deprived of a dimension necessary to every flourishing society: an openness to transcendence. Without this openness, "it becomes difficult to guide societies towards universal ethical principles and to establish at the national and international level a legal order which fully recognizes and respects fundamental rights and freedoms as these are set forth in the goals – sadly still disregarded or contradicted – of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights."³⁰ To diminish religion's public role is "to create a society which is unjust, inasmuch as it fails to take account of the true nature of the human person; it is to stifle the growth of the authentic and lasting peace of the whole human family."³¹

■ **Forming conscience according to truth**

14. The quality of our social life and democratic institutions also depends in large measure on a correct understanding of "conscience" and how it is formed. If the freedom to follow one's conscience means following one's subjective feelings, then we fail to understand that the essential orientation of this freedom is to act in conformity with objective truth. On the other hand, if conscience is understood as "the place in which to listen to truth and the good, the place of responsibility before God and before fellow human beings,"³² then a solid foundation is laid for the collaboration of all people in seeking the common good according to objective criteria.

27 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal Note on Some Questions regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life, n. 6.

28 Benedict XVI, Address to the German Bundestag, Berlin (22 September 2011).

29 Benedict XVI, Address at Westminster Hall, London (17 September 2010).

30 Benedict XVI, Message for the 2011 World Day of Peace, n. 7.

31 Benedict XVI, Message for the 2011 World Day of Peace, n. 1.

32 Benedict XVI, Address to Representatives of Civil Society, Political, Cultural and Business World, Diplomatic Corps and Religious Leaders, Zagreb (4 June 2011).

The right to act according to one's conscience must therefore be accompanied by accepting the duty to conform it to the truth and to the law which God has engraved on our hearts (cf. Rm 2.15). Cardinal Newman's words remain forever valid: "Conscience has its rights because it has its duties,"³³ the primary of which is obedience to the truth. Every individual has the serious responsibility to form his or her own conscience in the light of that objective truth which everyone can come to know.

15. Education plays a critical role in correctly forming the conscience. For this reason, "parents must always be free to transmit to their children, responsibly and without constraints, their heritage of faith."³⁴ A free society like Canada must always guarantee the right of parents to educate their children in matters of faith and morals, and thus to ensure the formation of their conscience. Such formation is never morally indifferent, even if some claim it to be neutral regarding moral and religious principles.

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Families and schools are the primary places of formation where young people receive a correct understanding of what is entailed in the right to freedom of conscience and religion. Parents and educators have an especially important task to fulfill in forming the consciences of the next generation in respect for their brothers and sisters of different religions. Their constant challenge is to develop in children a conscience that is truly upright and free: one that can choose what is truly good and right and thus reject what is evil.

They have the duty of helping young people conform their conscience to the truth of the moral law and to live in conformity with that truth.

Among the human and Christian virtues acquired in the family, certain ones in particular prepare today's youth to resist the attacks on freedom of conscience that they will inevitably encounter: courage, justice, prudence, and perseverance. This formative work also entails forming citizens ready to call to account any person or institution that would intrude upon their right to freedom of conscience or religion.

■ **Protecting the right to conscientious objection**

16. For individuals who wish to follow and act in accordance with the dictates of their conscience, it is sometimes necessary to resist, even in a heroic manner, the directives of the state, a court, or an organization that tries to force them to go against their convictions in matters of faith and morals. In these instances, freedom of conscience means that the person has the right to follow, according to the awareness of his or her duty, the will of God and his law.

³³ Blessed John Henry Newman, *Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, vol. 2 (London, 1910), p. 250.

³⁴ Benedict XVI, Message for the 2011 World Day of Peace, n. 4.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states this obligation unambiguously: “The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel. *Refusing obedience* to civil authorities, when their demands are contrary to those of an upright conscience, finds its justification in the distinction between serving God and serving the political community. ‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ (Mt 22.21). ‘We must obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5.29).”³⁵

For example, it is never licit for a Catholic to support the legal right to abortion or euthanasia. In fact, abortion and euthanasia are “crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead *there is a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection.*”³⁶ Since it is an expression of freedom of conscience, this right to conscientious objection should be protected in law for those in any profession where the essential principles of the natural moral law are violated “*in a serious or repeated manner.*”³⁷

17. Asserting one’s right to conscientious objection is often difficult. It entails courageously resisting those who favour or require an action contrary to one’s conscience.

Those who will not cooperate with the requirements of an immoral law must be prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to uphold the truth and to bear the suffering that results. “Indeed, faced with the many difficulties which fidelity to the moral order can demand, even in the most ordinary circumstances, the Christian is called, with the grace of God invoked in prayer, to a sometimes heroic commitment.”³⁸

Especially inspiring as a model of steadfast fidelity is St. Thomas More, the patron of statesmen and politicians. His reluctant yet willing martyrdom bore witness to the fact that “conscience is not identical to personal wishes and taste; [it] cannot be reduced to social advantage, to group consensus or to the demands of political and social power.”³⁹ Though subjected to various forms of psychological pressure, he refused to compromise his convictions. By his life and the manner of his death he testifies to the primacy of conscience by acting uprightly and without compromise in social and political affairs.⁴⁰

Those who refuse to cooperate with an unjust law or practice . . . must be prepared to suffer the consequences that result from fidelity to Christ.

35 Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2242; cf. n. 2256.

36 Blessed John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, n. 73.

37 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 400.

38 Blessed John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 93.

39 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Conscience and Truth*, Presentation at 10th Workshop for Bishops in Dallas, Texas, 1991.

40 Cf. Blessed John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio* Proclaiming Saint Thomas More Patron of Statesmen and Politicians (31 October 2000), n. 4.

The Church's vitality has often been nourished by persecution. Our era is no exception. Those who refuse to cooperate with an unjust law or practice that would oblige them to act against their conscience – and are not given the right to conscientious objection or accorded respectful accommodation – must be prepared to suffer the consequences that result from fidelity to Christ. They deserve the effective solidarity and prayerful support of their religious communities.

The bold “Be not afraid!” of Blessed John Paul II continues to ring out, giving us courage to follow our conscience in every circumstance, regardless of the cost. “Don’t be afraid to give your life to Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life.”⁴¹ Let us cast out any fear that would prevent us from answering the urgent voice of the Holy Spirit always to act according to the dictates of an informed conscience.

■ Conclusion

18. As Catholic Bishops, we feel a pressing obligation to raise our voice in the defence of the human dignity of all persons, especially religious minorities, and their God-given right to freedom of conscience and religion.

At this challenging time, we urgently appeal to all Canadians, whether religious believers or not, to reaffirm their commitment to the promotion of the precious rights of freedom of conscience and religion. Moreover, we encourage men and women of faith to participate fully in every sector of public life. Religious believers should be confident that, with God's grace, they can make an irreplaceable contribution to the common good. Furthermore, we support their right to conscientious objection as a fundamental expression of the freedom of conscience and religion.

We offer to all who are victims of violence, persecution, intolerance, or discrimination because of their moral or religious convictions the support of the Church's teaching, the solidarity of our public interventions, and the assurance of our fraternal prayers for the protection of the right to freedom of conscience and religion for all people.

41 Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass for the Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome (24 April 2005).

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