

Dear brothers and sisters,

Throughout the 50 days of Eastertide, we are reminded that the Church is to witness to God and to faith in Jesus Christ. The Scripture readings in the liturgy from Easter Sunday to Pentecost recall how the first disciples were transformed by the Holy Spirit, filled with conviction, courage and new life, and together became the community of life, hope, forgiveness and truth.

Yet today, our own Catholic community and other faiths throughout the world are experiencing a worrisome erosion of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. There are even numerous distressing attacks on both these intimately related freedoms. Sometimes this happens by overt violence. Sometimes it involves more subtle means, as in the case of legislative actions that limit the respect owed to the conscience of each person, or inhibit the right of all religions, or of their individual believers, to live their faith publicly and to follow the dictates of a well-formed conscience.

This is why the Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops is releasing its Pastoral Letter on Freedom of Conscience and Religion. The letter explains that these freedoms are essential to the common good of countries such as Canada where diversity is the norm. It also points out that these freedoms are not granted by the state, society or any human authority, but belong to all people by virtue of their humanity.

The pastoral letter, addressed to everyone of good will, calls on Catholics, all believers, and even those of no faith, 1) to affirm the right of religion to be active in the public square, 2) to maintain healthy Church-State relations, 3) to form consciences according to objective truth, and 4) to protect the right to conscientious objection. The letter also encourages all faith communities to contribute to the formulation of public policy and the common good, and concludes by exhorting believers not to compromise their convictions, but to stand up for their faith, even if they must suffer for it.

The pastoral letter is available for download at [www.cccb.ca](http://www.cccb.ca) , while printed copies can be purchased in English or French from the CCCB Publications Service at [www.cccbpublications.ca](http://www.cccbpublications.ca)

In preparing for our celebration of Pentecost, I invite each of you to consider the recent words of Pope Benedict XVI on how the Christian community is to face its moments of trial. Speaking at his General Audience, 18 April 2012, the Holy Father reminded us that the Church “does not ask for the safety of life in the face of persecution ... it asks only that it be granted ‘to speak God’s word with all boldness’ (Acts 4.29).” This is my prayer for you, as I join the Pope and my fellow Bishops in inviting all Catholics, in the words of Benedict XVI, not to “lose the courage of faith, the courage to proclaim the faith.”

Yours sincerely in Our Lord,

+Richard W. Smith  
Archbishop of Edmonton  
President  
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

May 4, 2012

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