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Rights and responsibilities of religious freedom

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Freedom of conscience and religion is the first fundamental right listed in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms [1] (1982). Yesterday, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops published a Pastoral Letter on Freedom of Conscience and Religion [2] to reiterate the importance of this right in today?s society.

Divided into 18 points, the letter seeks to ?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.? (Point 11)

As with all freedoms, limits on religious freedom, the letter states, must be ?determined in each social situation with political prudence, according to the requirements of the common good.? (5) We can propose religious beliefs but we cannot impose them, for that would violate the freedom of conscience of the other. ?The right to profess the truth must always be upheld, but never in a way which involves contempt for those who think differently.? (6)

An important differentiation is made by the bishops between ?legitimate secularity? and ?radical secularism." The former ?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.? (13)

All must have the freedom to speak out of their own convictions, whether a religious believer, atheist or agnostic. To demand that religion is kept out of the public square in a free, democratic and plural society is nothing more than religious intolerance.

The responsibility of bringing the voice of faith and belief into public discourse rests on lay women and men who, ?in keeping with their vocation, can influence public life, and direct it to the common good.? (11) Hearts and minds are more often engaged through witness and rational discourse than angry speeches, fiery sermons or threats and edicts from diocesan offices.

Religious freedom means that we all have the right to bring our faith to the table of public policy. It means that we have the right in our personal and professional lives to remain true to our beliefs in word and deed. It means we have the right to be heard, and we accept the responsibility to listen to others.

Religious freedom does not mean we have the right to bully those who do not share our beliefs.

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[1] http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/charter/CHART_E.PDF

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