

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:
Pastoral letter on freedom of conscience and religion
by the Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

In its pastoral letter, the Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCC) explains why freedom of religion and conscience is necessary for the common good of countries such as Canada where religious diversity is the norm. These freedoms are not granted by the state, society or any human authority, but belong to all people by virtue of their humanity. For this reason, when these freedoms are disregarded or repressed, the human person – and therefore human society – suffers. Freedom of conscience is necessary for seeking the truth and adhering to the truth. Freedom of religion is not merely the right to freedom of worship; it includes the right to live out one's faith in the public square.

The letter is largely occasioned by the spread in our own country of an aggressive relativism that actively seeks to force its own view of truth on others. It attempts to relegate religious belief to the private sphere, and considers religion to be insignificant, alien or even destabilizing. Legitimate secularism is open to the engagement of religious beliefs and faith communities in public debate and civic life. Radical secularism, however, excludes religion from the public square. This disfigured view of the secular is becoming more militant in attempting to silence religious believers when their views contradict its own, particularly on issues of education, human life and the family. It is highly hostile to a truly democratic and pluralist society, in that it tolerates only its own voice and tries to silence all others.

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 CCCC Permanent Council is composed of 12 Catholic Bishops from across the country. It is responsible for overseeing the activities and policies of the Conference between the annual meetings of the Plenary Assembly of all the Bishops of Canada, and approving how the decisions and recommendations of the Plenary Assembly are implemented.