



A Response to the Minister of Defence Advisory Report

Dear Chaplains and Members of the Military Ordinariate of Canada,

As you may be aware, the MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENCE ADVISORY PANEL ON SYSTEMIC RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION FINAL REPORTⁱ was recently released. The section of the report which made specific comments and recommendations concerning the “re-defining of chaplaincy” were deeply problematic and regrettable. We are expecting an official response from the Chaplain General, and are eagerly anticipating his briefing and directives to chaplains, but a response from the Catholic Military Ordinariate of Canada (MILORD) is also essential. Many of the pejorative remarks would appear to be directed to Catholics,ⁱⁱ as well as some other Christians, and amounted to mere caricatures of what we actually profess. We certainly should not expect such a report to appreciate our rich and nuanced Catholic theology, such as our anthropology of the human person, the equality and complementarity of the sexes, the nature and spousal signification of the Sacraments, or the multifaceted nature of our Gospel mission, but we should be able to expect basic respect and an attempt to dialogue and to understand. It is sadly disappointing that we received neither.ⁱⁱⁱ This has understandably caused great consternation among many chaplains and other members of the Military Ordinariate. Though it is far beyond the scope of this letter to fully address the errors and oversimplifications of the report, it is necessary to clarify a few fundamental misunderstandings. It is hoped that these reflections may help all our members to understand and respond intelligently to this challenge to our participation in the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service (RCChS), and ultimately to our religious liberty within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

The first clear misconception is of the very nature and scope of chaplaincy in the RCChS. Catholic chaplains, like all endorsed and mandated chaplains, have a three-fold mission. First, there is the mission to “care for all” (provide general support for all persons in uniform); Secondly, they are to “minister to their own” (provide pastoral services to members of our own Faith); Finally, they are to “facilitate the worship of others” (to assist all members to receive religious and spiritual support from ministers of their own faith). This distinction is critical to understand the nature of the chaplaincy and was sadly overlooked in the Advisory Report.

All chaplains are committed to inclusive, non-judgemental, and universal care of service members regardless of their religious or ethical convictions. Indeed, “care for all” constitutes the greater part of the ministry of every chaplain. This care, which includes responsibilities such as accompaniment, general counselling, ministry of presence and availability, discernment of morale and the authentic needs of members, and support for the military chain of command, specifically excludes proselytization or any imposition of religious belief. Any person, regardless of race, gender, religion or non-religion, receives this compassionate care from Catholic chaplains.



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Furthermore, there is an even deeper erroneous judgement made regarding our understanding of religious liberty. As Catholics, we believe that *“the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.”*^{iv} Catholic chaplains are required to act with deep respect for the human dignity and for the freedom of religion and conscience of every person without exception. Whether we agree or disagree with someone, everyone must be accorded this respect, as is there due. As mentioned above, it is part of the mission of chaplains to ensure that all members receive support from the ministers of their own faith. Any Catholic chaplain who displays discrimination, intolerance, or induces hatred towards any person or group would lose my endorsement as Catholic chaplains. I hope that similar respect would be afforded to Catholics.

Those expressing an interest in our Catholic Faith are always welcome and warmly received, but always in complete freedom and without any form of coercion. To do otherwise is considered by the Church herself to be “dishonorable and unworthy.”^v We are not ashamed of our Catholic Faith, and earnestly desire that our whole lives bear luminous witness to the beauty and truth of all that we profess. The Church, though with weeds sown among the wheat,^{vi} has been and continues to be a remarkable force for good in the world. We are ashamed only for the times and places where certain of the Church’s members have failed to live by Gospel Truth and Charity. Our faith is ultimately about relationship to God who is Love^{vii}, and who has manifested his saving mercy in Jesus, our Saviour^{viii}. All our means and methods of mission and ministry are to be consistent with this loving mercy. This is my expectation and the standard of the MILORD.

One of the more troubling aspects of the report was the implicit premise that disagreement with prevailing ideologies signifies discrimination or hatred for its adherents. This is simply false. It is true that as Catholics we hold to particular faith and morals. It is also true that some recent popular ideologies, such as the ideology of gender, are incompatible with Catholic Faith^{ix}. But we believe it is possible to live in mutual charity and respect, creating a community built on universal human dignity, inalienable human rights, and the common good. This was whole thrust of the recent encyclical letter of Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*. I would suggest a careful reading of this encyclical for those of us who work in this multi-faith and ecumenical milieu. We must insist that disagreement does not indicate or necessitate hate. We can and must embrace in social friendship those with whom we differ on important questions.

In addition to “care for all” in a non-confessional manner, there is the specifically religious and sacramental ministry to the Catholic faithful of the CAF, their families, and veterans. In doing so we fulfill the mission of the Military Ordinariate. As Pope Francis made clear, members of the military and their families “require specific pastoral care, a solicitude that will make them feel



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the maternal closeness of the church ...the role of the military chaplain is to accompany and support them in their journey ... You can pour on the wounds of these persons the balm of the word of God, which relieves pain and infuses hope; and you can offer them the grace of the Eucharist and of reconciliation, which nourishes and regenerates the afflicted soul”^x. Ours is an important contribution to the mission of the CAF. Recent studies have confirmed that religious belief, with a clear ethic and way of life, and especially when grounded in sacramental ritual, is profoundly beneficial to mental resiliency and the ability to flourish as whole persons in difficult, stressful, and potentially traumatic environments^{xi}. Specific religious support makes better sailors, soldiers and aviators. As the Advisory Report itself acknowledges, “the Defence Team also recognizes the importance of an individual’s potential need for effective support in ethical guidance or spirituality through the new Total Health and Wellness Strategic Framework.” In my view, our ministry is aligned, ordered, and perfectly suited to the fulfillment of this very important priority of the Defence Team.

With regard to the issues of diversity and inclusion, I feel it is important to underline the rich diversity and experience of the Catholic chaplains in the RCChS. In addition to being comprised of people from the many diverse liturgical rites and spiritualities in the Church, we have members who originate from all over Canada, Kenya, Ukraine, Italy, Ecuador, Poland, Madagascar, USA, Nigeria, Singapore, Philippines, Slovakia, Lebanon, United Kingdom, Gabon, and Syrian Arab Republic. Ethnically, culturally, and spiritually, we reflect the rich diversity of the Canadian population. Since 1983 many women have served as Catholic Pastoral Associates and immensely enrich our pastoral capabilities and effectiveness. Catholic women have earned high promotion and risen to prominent positions of leadership, to which all persons have equal access based on merit. In considering the suitability of Catholic chaplains to contribute to the Total Health and Wellness strategy of the Defence Team, and in CAF attempts to diversify, the immense range and experience of Catholic chaplains is significant. We contribute greatly to making the Forces more diverse and inclusive.

The Advisory Report makes five specific recommendations. The advisory panel seems to be unaware of the fact that three of these recommendations had already been addressed and implemented by the Interfaith Committee concerning Military Chaplaincy (ICCMC) and the RCChS. Of the remaining recommendations, it is the first recommendation which is most problematic from a Catholic standpoint:

Do not consider for employment as spiritual guides or multi-faith representatives Chaplaincy applicants affiliated with religious groups whose values are not aligned with those of the Defence Team. The Defence Team’s message, otherwise, is inconsistent.

The CAF consisting of the Royal Canadian Navy, Canadian Army, Royal Canadian Air Force, and Special Forces have a shared code of values and ethics. The ‘Key Principles’ are enunciated as follows: respect the dignity of all persons, serve Canada before self, and obey and support lawful authority. The ‘Key Values’ are defined as duty, loyalty, integrity, and courage ^{xii}. The MILORD is in complete agreement and solidarity with these stated principles and values.



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We also support efforts to address historical injustices, to diversify the CAF in harmony with the changing ethnic and religious landscape of Canada, and to be justly inclusive in recruiting and membership. In holding our religious convictions, we are certainly “obeying and supporting lawful authority.” The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the free exercise of “freedom of conscience and religion” as well as “freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression”^{xiii}. Additionally, the Catholic understanding and practice of marriage is protected by law, and prohibits sanctions against us for our adherence to this article of faith^{xiv}. Considering all this, the reports assertion of misalignment of values is bewildering. In every way the MILORD is aligned to the stated values of the CAF and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

A few other potentially misleading judgements in the report also need to be addressed. For example, it appears to suggest that equal rights for same sex couples may be imperilled by the Catholic understanding of Christian marriage. It should be emphasized that active participation in the Church is voluntary and that any person who desires it has access to civil marriage or may seek to be married within the Faith Traditions that reflect their own convictions. In addition, the Catholic Church explicitly teaches that homosexual persons must be treated and “accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided”^{xv}.

The report rightly expresses concern for the suffering of Indigenous peoples. However, it also appears to imply that our participation in chaplaincy perpetuates this suffering and various forms of discrimination. Considering that two-thirds of aboriginal Canadians identify as Christians^{xvi}, many with deeply treasured and beautifully enculturated faith, one wonders how it serves them to be deprived of spiritual support in the military.

The report further states that “exclusion of women from their priesthoods violates principles of equality and social justice.” This betrays another incorrect conception of Catholic Faith. All states of life, including Marriage, the various forms of Consecrated Life, and Holy Orders, are not ordered to power or prestige but to specific forms of self-sacrificial service and charity. Each vocation unites a person to Christ and his mission in different and complimentary ways. Holy Orders includes a particular responsibility of governance, but it is far from exclusive. Various and diverse forms of leadership in the Church, at all levels, do not require the Sacrament of Holy Orders^{xvii}. For example, Baptised lay Catholics, men and women, can be appointed to head even the dicasteries or other bodies of the Roman Curia^{xviii}. Paraphrasing a popular saying attributed to Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen seems appropriate: there are few who hate the Catholic Church, but many who hate what they wrongly perceive the Catholic Church to be.

The implementation of this recommendation would also create new problems. Commanding Officers have the obligation to provide for the religious and spiritual well-being of the serving members under their command and their families^{xix}. Should a major Faith Group, such as the Catholic Church, be excluded from the RCChS, as is proposed, it would greatly complexify the exercise of the Commanding Officers duty of care. At present an estimated 38% of serving



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members are Catholic. Current trends suggest that this number will remain stable for the foreseeable future^{xx}. That is a lot of members and families for whom they must secure alternate means of Catholic spiritual support, and a lot of members to exclude from full participation in the Total Health and Wellness strategy. Operationally, it would deprive substantial numbers of members, especially those deployed and in life-threatening or traumatic situations, of essential religious ministrations, such as the Anointing of the Sick, the Sacrament of Penance, the Eucharist, ethical guidance, spiritual counsel, and other critical spiritual support.

For all the above-mentioned reasons, I strongly believe that the implementation of this recommendation would be a grave mistake. Narrowing spiritual support does not increase diversity; Excluding the majority of Faith Traditions does not make the CAF more inclusive; Facilitating intolerance toward particular religious groups, who are believing and living in accord with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, does not make the CAF more tolerant; Historic discrimination is not overcome by new and different forms of discrimination. A CAF without the dynamic and vital presence of Catholic chaplains, ending over a century of proud and essential service, is very sad to contemplate.

In conclusion, I would exhort all of us to sincerely and wholeheartedly forgive those who have unfortunately misrepresented our Faith, to reach out with greater generosity to those who may have misunderstood our hopes and motives, and to pray fervently and insistently for the Ordinariate and the RCChS. I invite specific prayers for those carrying the burden of leadership for the CAF, especially the Chaplain General Guy Bélisle, the Chief of Defense Staff Wayne Eyre, and the honourable Anita Anand who is the Minister of Defence. With confidence we place our future in the hands of our loving and merciful Father.

In Jesus, our Risen Lord,

+Bishop Scott McCaig, CC
Catholic Military Ordinary of Canada



Feast of St. Joseph the Worker, May 1st, 2022.

Iuxta Crucem cum Maria



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ⁱ [Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination – Final Report – January 2022 - Canada.ca](#)

ⁱⁱ Within the Canadian context the references to residential schools, conversion of polytheists, priesthood being reserved to men, etc. it is difficult to interpret otherwise.

ⁱⁱⁱ At no time was the Canadian RC Military Ordinariate of Canada contacted during this inquiry.

^{iv} *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 2.

^v *Ibid.*, no. 4.

^{vi} Matthew 10:24-30.

^{vii} 1 John 4:7-21.

^{viii} 1 Peter 1:3.

^{ix} Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 56.

^x Pope Francis, Catholic News Service, Sunday, November 1, 2015.

^{xi} Many such studies are cited by Dr. David Steno, PhD., in “How God Works: The Science Behind the Benefits of Religion,” Simon & Shuster, 2021.

^{xii} Canadian Armed Forces Principles and Values.

^{xiii} Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Part I, no. 2, a & b.

^{xiv} Civil Marriage Act, S.C. 2005 c. 33. Nos 3 – 3.1.

^{xv} Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2358.

^{xvi} CBC Radio, The Current, “Majority of indigenous Canadians remain Christians despite residential schools,” April 1, 2016.

^{xvii} As noted by columnist Kim Daniels, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/02/12/sister-nathalie-becquart-pope-francis-catholic-women-leadership-240012>: “Women also exercise leadership throughout the broader church, from roles in families, parishes and schools to directing the work of major ministries ... in recent years Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Health Association, the National Catholic Educational Association and Jesuit Refugee Services have all been lead by women, and women have leading roles in dioceses large and small. Women lead many Catholic Universities, and Catholic women scholars, journalists, activists and advocates are leaders in their fields. Women religious have long been models of living out the Gospel call to serve those “lying wounded by the roadside,” and we should be humbled by and grateful for their work.”

^{xviii} “Pope Francis promulgates Apostolic Constitution on Roman Curia ‘*Praedicate Evangelium*’ » Vatican news. 19 March 2022.

^{xix} Queens Regulations and Orders, 33.06.

^{xx} Royal Canadian Chaplains Service, Called to Serve, 2020-2030.