

# 'Angst and fear' among faith leaders over threats to religious freedom

Religious freedom is still "materially operative" in Canada, but Christians are beginning to experience "an emerging level of angst and fear," an Evangelical leader told Canada's Catholic bishops.

Religious persecution always has a starting point, and like cancer it needs early detection and diagnosis, said David Guretzki, executive vice president and resident theologian of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

Guretzki addressed the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops as part of an ecumenical and interfaith panel on religious freedom.

He admitted that compared to the persecution of Christians elsewhere in the world, most of the challenges to religious freedom in Canada are "annoyances, inequities and in some cases injustices."

"They may destroy careers," but "they have not prevented the people of God, the church, from carrying out her mission," he told more than 80 bishops and eparchs meeting in plenary session Sept. 23-27.

Guretzki gave as examples the refusal of Canada Summer Jobs grants to Bible camps and pregnancy care centres, the Trinity Western University Supreme Court decision, and the injustice Ontario physicians face regarding conscience rights when it comes to euthanasia, abortion, and other morally questionable procedures.

He also decried Quebec's Bill 21 forcing public servants, teachers and other government employees to remove any religious symbols or headgear.

Those behind the policies may see them as "tests for future appetites for restrictions on religious freedom," Guretzki said. This could be "cultural preparation and normalization for a future day when formal restrictions on the practices of religion may be introduced."

Guretzki said religious communities need to challenge government on five issues: Conscience protections for those in the medical field, continued Canada Jobs funding restrictions, increased pressure on employees to participate in "ideologically driven events" against their religious beliefs, laws against "so-called conversion therapy" that may target Christian counselling and Quebec's Bill 21.

Rabbi Reuben Joshua Poupko of Beth Israel Aaron Congregation in Montreal, co-chair of the Canadian Rabbinic Caucus and co-chair of the CCCB-CRC national dialogue, told bishops it was a "profound irony" that a rabbi was speaking to

Catholics, since Christians and Catholics are “the single most persecuted group in the world.”

Noting the persecution of Christians in China and the Middle East and the lack of concern from the rest of the world, he said “If someone were to speak about my faith or the Islamic faith the way Christians are spoken about, they would be completely disparaged for their racism and bigotry.”

He called Bill 21 “an egregious assault on religious freedom,” and said when the crucifix was removed from Quebec’s National Assembly, “we mourned greatly because it guaranteed the presence of one Jew in the National Assembly.”

Bill 21 enjoys “overwhelming support” throughout Quebec, he said, and the secularism debate has “poisoned the religious environment.” For the first time in his 30 years in Quebec he has experienced people shouting at him, and the bill “has made certain elements feel emboldened.”

Imam Mohamed Refaat, President of the Canadian Council of Imams, spoke of the challenges the Muslim community faces regarding Bill 21 as well as zoning regulations that prevent building mosques in the Greater Toronto Area as well as challenges having public schools accommodate Friday prayers of Muslim students.

Father Deacon Andrew Bennett, director of the Cardus Religious Freedom Institute and program director of Cardus Law, told the bishops, “religious freedom is not simply an inherent freedom we cherish, we have a responsibility to act on it, as well as on all fundamental freedoms.”

“Even if all our institutions are taken away, even if we lose our schools, even if we lose our charitable status, even if we’re pushed to margins of polite society, even if the government no longer listens to us, we must never tire of proclaiming the Gospel,” he said.

The challenge, he said, “is not from the state or from the media,” but from “the very serious failure to take responsibility for a living public faith for the good of all.”

Bennett said Catholics are “shackled by poor formation” and “fear and anxiety about what the Great Commission calls us to do.”

“We must pray that the Holy Spirit will raise up martyrs and confessors in our country and clergy and faithful will support these witnesses to the truth,” he said