

The BIG Interview: Fr. Deacon Andrew Bennett

Fr. Deacon Andrew Bennett served as Canada's first Ambassador for Religious Freedom from 2013 to 2016. His office advocated for religious freedom internationally until it was abolished by the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Since then, Bennett continues to speak out as the director of the law program at Cardus, a Christian think tank based on Hamilton. He is also a deacon in the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church.

Grandin Media asked Bennett about the state of religious freedom in Canada, and the controversies over the Canada Summer Jobs program and Trinity Western University's law school in Langley, B.C.

Applicants for Canada Summer Jobs program funding must now attest that both the job and the organization's "core mandate" support the "right to access to safe and legal abortions," as well as the federal government's interpretation of sexual orientation and gender identity.

The Supreme Court is also hearing appeals over Trinity Western's community covenant, which bans sexual intimacy outside of heterosexual marriage. All students must sign the covenant.

What is the state of religious freedom practised openly in Canada today?

What I'm concerned about is our institutions, our secular elites in this country, are either forgetful of why religious freedom is important or perhaps even openly hostile to the idea of freedom of conscience.

If certain people hold certain views that we deem – either as the state or as elites in the country – to be unacceptable, if we allow them to have those views, then somehow we can't advance with a particular societal project we have in mind. I think that's what's happening right now.

On the other side, I think faith communities generally in this country do not know how to live a robust religious freedom. Catholics and Christians have been the worst offenders in this regard. Our baptism does not call us to a purely private faith; our baptism calls us to live a public faith.

Freedom of religion and conscience are under threat, in particular over the federal government's changes to the Canada Summer Jobs program. Why is this happening?

The role of government is not to determine what Canadians should believe or what sort of ethical, moral and religious views Canadians should be free to practise. A government that seeks to do that is nothing short of totalitarian.

What we see in this current initiative by the federal government is a fairly egregious limit on freedom of expression and by extent, freedom of religion.

What the federal government is forcing that person to do is to have a political opinion and to check or not check a box, and that is, effectively, a religious test. The government is imposing a religious test on people to take advantage of a government service that only a few weeks ago was open to anyone who presumably met the criteria for this program.

We need to be worried about this as Canadians, because regardless of where you stand on the abortion debate, on the marriage question or on gender identity, we should be defending freedom of expression.

It's a very worrying trend. Canadians of all religious backgrounds, of all belief systems, need to stand up and say 'Enough is enough.' The government cannot dictate what Canadians should or should not believe in order to access certain government programs.

Critics might say that religious freedom does not trump human rights.

As far as I'm concerned, the Canadian values that all Canadians can accept are democracy, the rule of law, justice, fundamental freedoms, human rights.

When you start to dictate below that, and that's what the government is doing with the Canada summer student program, they're saying 'You must ascribe to the rights as advanced in the Charter,' and these so-called 'underlying values.' Well, who has established those values? These are subject to serious debate.

We need to be much more conscious in Canada of respecting religious freedom, respecting freedom of expression, because – please God – we are all trying to live a common life and we have to live with one another. If we don't respect one another, it's very hard to live with one another.

What's your sense of how the Supreme Court case over Trinity Western University's community covenant will be resolved?

This will be a landmark religious freedom ruling. It will really set the stage for where we go from here.

There are also a number of other cases that are working their way through the courts. I fully expect there will be some court challenges to the Canada Summer Jobs program, but I think we can't simply focus on the legal cases.

We need to ensure that we're having these conversations outside our institutions as well as in them, so that, again, we can find points of contact between ourselves and each other to ensure we have a viable debate in this country on all of these questions.

Another issue is medically assisted suicide, especially when it comes to Catholic hospitals. How do you reconcile religious freedom with the rights of patients to have this procedure at any hospital?

There's no issue with access to this so-called service. I refuse to use the term "medical assistance in dying." Medical assistance in dying is palliative care.

We see across our country that people who are not Catholic, who are not even of a particular religious faith, want the care provided by these Catholic facilities and Jewish facilities because the care they get there treats the whole person. They can trust the care they get there is compassionate and loving to the very end of life.

One of the bywords of our era is 'choice'. So if you're truly pro-choice, then you should be able to choose how you want to be cared for in your last weeks, days, years.

The argument that's being made now is that religious freedom is an individual thing; it doesn't apply to organizations. Well, I can't think of a single religious tradition where people live it solely on an individual basis. All religious traditions are communal.

So to say that you can separate out the religious freedom of those organizations and say they can't exercise it so as to maintain their belief in the inviolability of the human person and the dignity of the human person until the very end of life, to say that should be denied, that is a gross violation of religious freedom and freedom of association. Our bishops have said as much.

Why should all Canadian taxpayers have to fund faith-based hospitals – or schools? Are they not exclusive, only providing certain services or teaching?

That is a very weak argument on many levels. First of all, there are a lot of Catholic taxpayers, Jewish taxpayers and Muslim taxpayers in this country, who have every right to have these institutions supported with their tax dollars.

Secondly, these institutions are not exclusive by any stretch of the imagination. They minister to all people and they always have.

You spoke about the secularization of society. Why is this is happening and what can we do about it?

For people of faith, and let's speak right now about Catholics, there is a call to witness and there is a call to live our faith publicly.

We may have to witness in a way that will impact our ability to advance in our careers. It may be witnessing in a way that will cause us to be shamed by people, perhaps by our own family, by our colleagues, but Our Lord calls us to this and it's for the good of the world.

Is that a tall order for people of faith?

You'd better believe it. It is not easy. But it is joyful and it is fulfilling. If we are active in the life of the Church, if we work on our prayer lives and we have an active sacramental life, we're receiving the Eucharist regularly, we're going to Confession regularly, it's the same old formula but it works.

The worst thing we can do as Catholics, the worst thing we can do as Christians, is to despair in any way. Despair is not a Christian disposition. The victory has been won. Our Lord has trampled death by death.

It seems Canada is ready for another ambassador for religious freedom, only this time the mandate would include our own country?

If we had an office for religious freedom domestically, it would have the exact opposite effect. It would pigeon-hole it. We need to have a renewed understanding of fundamental freedoms throughout our public institutions and throughout our citizenry.

I think what happened is that the current government – and I have no strong partisan affiliation; I like to say my politics is the Gospel – has an allergy to speaking about religious faith in public policy, let alone foreign policy.

You have a very different ideological view currently in the government. The decision was to get rid of the Office of Religious Freedom and instead to focus on inclusion, diversity and freedoms.

I don't bear the government any ill will, and I am very grateful for the experience I had.