

Retired Bishop Henry challenges brothers to speak out, face scrutiny, and engage media

For nearly two decades, Calgary Bishop Fred Henry was the outspoken leader of Catholics in southern Alberta.

He wasn't shy about tangling with government and media, and he was unabashed about taking on issues such as same-sex marriage, assisted suicide and most recently Alberta's Bill 10 – legislation regarding gay-straight alliances within schools.

Retired since January 2017, the Bishop Emeritus is no less direct today. He has strong views about shaking the Church out of complacency to challenge – and work with – government and media, attracting young people who have turned away from the faith, and addressing the Church's abuse crisis.

"I don't think as clergy we should be running away from this," Bishop Henry said. "Right now it is very uncomfortable to be wearing a Roman collar ... even when I'm travelling, it's much simpler to go incognito, to wear my secular clothing.

"But I've decided this is not what the Church ought to be doing. The Church ought to be saying, 'OK. I'll go there. I'll wear my collar. If you want to talk to me about sexual abuse by clergy, let's talk about it.' I'm not going to run from that sort of thing. You have to be engaged with the society."



Retired Bishop Fred Henry challenged his brother bishops to speak out on government policies. Andrew Ehrkamp, Grandin Media

Bishop Henry spoke to Grandin Media on the sidelines of the annual conference of the Canadian Chapter of the [Fellowship of Catholic Scholars](#) in Calgary Sept.

28-29. Henry was given the chapter's inaugural Chesterton Award named after the writer, philosopher and convert to Catholicism.

His address to the conference came just days after Canada's bishops approved new [guidelines](#) to deal with sexual abuse and just months after sex-abuse scandals and reports of coverups in the United States, Europe, Asia and Australia.

Rather than close ranks, Henry said bishops should be open to scrutiny, especially now that Canadian bishops have approved new guidelines to deal with abuse of minors.

He challenged bishops to speak out, as Henry himself did on government policies he felt were leading society down a dark path.

"We ought to be talking to the press. Tell them what we're doing. If they don't like it, well that's OK. We shouldn't run and hide. One of things we have to do is not be afraid of the media. Yeah, they're going to be tough on you but that's OK. They can ask the tough questions, but we've got the tough answers too."

Ironically, Bishop Henry said it's the very same media and mass communication that perpetuate a culture that sidelines religion and people of faith.

"We're dealing with a culture that is making it very, very difficult to even be open to the truth, to hear voices of the truth or to even receive moral guidance," Bishop Henry said.

"If you want to find out what's going on in your culture today, just stay at home and watch a couple of hours of television. Rarely do you see God, faith, church, religion taken seriously by anyone."



University of Calgary student Kelsey Gay

Student Kelsey Gay said it's important for Catholics to be a witness to their faith – and defend it.

“Faith has become kind of a superstition for most people, and they don't realize the intellectual depth of religion,” said Gay, who is studying to be a teacher at the University of Calgary. She graduated from the University of Alberta in Edmonton and took some of her classes at St. Joseph's, the Catholic college.

“It's my hope as a Catholic teacher in the future that I can connect students to that. It's the one-on-one conversation and that people can see you living your faith and you're able to articulate it.”

A Pew Research Centre [study](#) in June found that in 46 out of 106 countries surveyed, adults aged 18-39 were less likely than those aged 40 or older to say religion is important to them, particularly so in Canada. It poses challenges for the Church, which hosts a synod on youth and vocations this week at the Vatican.

Bishop Henry said the Church once had what he called the “Little Bo Peep theology,” that if young people were left alone eventually they would return. Instead, youth are under “enormous pressure” in a secular culture as they try to find their identity without being labelled “some kind of ‘Holy Joe’ or oddball.”

“I don't think they will come home if you leave them alone,” Bishop Henry said. “Some will find their way, but others will need some accompaniment, and they're going to need invitations from some of the people who have substance and significance in life and in faith.”

To that end, the Church must find a way to “consciously evangelize” and prepare the ground for young people.

Two years ago, Bishop Henry led the formation of a soccer team of priests who played against Catholic high schools, which led students to ask about faith and vocations.

“We have so many international priests. Now the guys are little bit out of shape and a little bit older, but they’ve got those fundamental skills,” he joked. “We go to what’s important to them, whether it’s a basketball game, a football game, to their classes to events that are intriguing to them. We have to find a way to connect.”

Bishop Henry said being a witness to the faith is critical. In his speech to academics, Henry said we should take a page from Alcoholics Anonymous: Instead of thinking our way into right action, we should act our way into right thinking.

“Let them see how happy you are doing this sort of thing. Let them pose the question in their own mind ‘What makes this person tick? Why are they doing this?’ Before very long, your actions get you into a new way of thinking ‘This Jesus is really important to them and what he says about loving your neighbour as yourself, they are trying to live this.’”