



**Statement by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
on the announcement by the Government of Canada
to close its Office of Religious Freedom**

It is with deep regret that the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has learned of the intention by the Government of Canada to close its Office of Religious Freedom. The Canadian Ambassador for Religious Freedom and the Office of Religious Freedom were an important signal to the international community and to Canadians – as well as a reminder to our civil servants and our country's diplomats – of the singular importance of religious freedom, and of the unfortunate lack of voices in society prepared to come to its defence.

Religious freedom and freedom of conscience have a pivotal status among human rights. Religious freedom is more than the right of an individual to believe and pray. It equally involves a faith community's identity as well as its interactions with society. Pope Francis reminded the world at the beginning of his 2014 pilgrimage to the Holy Land that religious freedom is “a fundamental human right” which “includes on the individual and collective levels the freedom to follow one's conscience in religious matters and, at the same time, freedom of worship”; the “freedom to choose the religion which one judges to be true”; the freedom “to manifest one's beliefs in public”; and, together with their fellow citizens, the freedom for the members of a faith community “to make their own particular contribution to the society in which they live.” (Address at the meeting with the authorities of the Kingdom of Jordan, Amman, May 24, 2014)

The Canadian Ambassador for Religious Freedom and the Office of Religious Freedom supported those voices within the world's religions which call for dialogue and for measures leading to peace, justice and true security. The Ambassador and the Office moreover recognized the perilous situation of the Christian minority in the Middle East which has been present in the region for two millennia. This minority shares the same economic, political, security and social tensions which have become part of the harsh reality of life throughout the region, but at the same time is exposed to and threatened by extremist forces from all sides – a vulnerability not often appreciated or recognized by Western governments.

Christians find themselves isolated and distrusted today in many parts of the world, and particularly in the Middle East and in parts of Africa. Yet they provide an important bridge for dialogue and collaboration, and contribute toward education, healthcare and social services, including assistance for refugees, displaced persons and the most vulnerable in society, no matter their religion or ethnicity.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops urges the Government of Canada to reconsider its decision, and to provide a plan on how it will carry out its commitment to defend and promote religious freedom as a part of its human rights agenda.

March 24, 2016