

On the Second Anniversary of the Pandemic: An Invitation to Solidarity

As we arrive at the second anniversary of the World Health Organization's declaration of the coronavirus pandemic, the Canadian Interfaith Conversation (CIC) feels it is important for all of us to pause, grieve for what we have lost, celebrate our moments of joy, and reflect on the path ahead.

The Cost of the Pandemic

Some thirty-five thousand Canadians have died of coronavirus.

Most of us have either lost a loved one or knows someone who has. The necessity of physical distancing means that many of those who grieve do so alone; they live with the guilt of having been unable to offer comfort to the dying, and they live in the bereavement of being unable to receive comfort from the living.

We have all suffered, but the worst suffering has been visited on those least able to bear the strain.

Entire families have been thrown into unemployment and poverty. The mental health of Canadians has suffered. Education has been disrupted. Employment has become insecure. Inequality, loneliness, and abuse have all grown in virulence.

Joy and Anguish

In this context, we have seen heroic acts of compassion between Canadians: healthcare workers who risked their lives to care for the sick; frontline workers and public servants who continued to serve our communities; congregations who organised to comfort the isolated; volunteer groups who rushed to aid those enduring poverty; neighbours who ensured that neighbours are not left to suffer in silence.

But as the pandemic has dragged on, we have also seen Canadians succumb to exhaustion, resentment, and anger.

Protests and Counter-Protests

Most recently, protests and counter-protests have spread across our country. Too often, the dynamics around them have brought neither care, nor comfort, nor aid, nor solace.

The right to protest is fundamental to any free society. Countless people of faith have protested against state power, and every faith venerates its martyrs who paid the ultimate price for doing so.

The agendas of these protests and counter-protests are many, varied, and conflicting. However, even as we express different positions, we should still seek to build common ground, rather than allow ourselves to be driven further apart.

In a free, democratic, and pluralistic society, we need not always agree with one another. But we do need to disagree without seeking to deny one another's dignity.

In particular, we abhor the use of hate symbols, such as American Confederate banners and the Nazi Hakenkreuz (often referred to as the Swastika). Their use recklessly trivialises and glorifies evil. It shames anyone that brandishes them, and makes hypocrites of those who do so while speaking the language of freedom. This is not protest; it is intimidation and social tyranny.

We condemn the parodying of Indigenous ceremonies and mottos, and the misuse of the Yellow Star to draw false comparisons between public health measures and the mass slaughter of six million Jews, as well as Roma, Slavs, the disabled, gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses, and dissident clergy.

We are glad that only a few people engaged in such acts, and we commend the vast majority of protestors who denounced them. We appeal to others to break their silence.

Our Call to Canada's Political Representatives

At their best, protests wake the conscience of societies and rally peoples together, rather than set them against one another.

We call on Canada's party leaders and political actors to resist the temptation to widen fault lines for partisan gain. We commend their democratic duties to broker dialogue between Canadians, to foster meetings of minds, and to help Canadians at least understand one another if we can not agree with one another. We appeal to them to transcend the forces that encourage Canadians to divide the world between "us" and "them". We remind them of our global responsibilities to work to make vaccines and care accessible to people beyond Canada's borders, especially in the developing world.

We know that like all democracies, ours is both fragile and unfinished.

We exhort Canada's political representatives to build-up the legitimacy of our democratic institutions, by demonstrating that they are open to all the people they govern, that they are welcoming of dissent, that they are capable of acting decisively in the public interest, and that their public health decisions respond to the best available medical and scientific expertise and not to ideological or political pressure. We equally exhort Canadians at large to be mindful that the rights we claim for ourselves are possible only if we meet our responsibilities towards others.

Our Call to Canadians at Large

Canadians are a people of many creeds, but still of one shared humanity. During these times of trial, we must look to one another with hope and not fear, and we must seek to understand one another as vigorously as we seek to make ourselves understood.

The CIC includes faiths that originate from across the globe, with vividly contrasting philosophies of life, and sometimes with incongruous conceptions of the divine. Yet, we all feel the same craving for justice, and we all hear the same summons to love our fellow human beings.

We know our histories are littered with instances where our institutions turned their backs on that call, when our members turned against others or turned on one another. The results were always tragic.

We would not see history repeat itself in our time or in our country.

Our Call to Canadian Faith Institutions

We propose to Canada's religious institutions that we declare 11-21 March 2022 a Canada-wide period of remembrance and reflection for those claimed by the pandemic, and a time to redouble our pastoral care for those dying and struggling with grief, and for those experiencing hardships and lasting harms from the pandemic and the consequent restrictions. We ask that we commit part of our services during that period to prayer and contemplation on how we can help heal the wounds in our society.

We will reflect on our calling to lead by example and to be a witness to the affirmation of the equal dignity of every person.

We commit to living up to our critical role in fostering dialogue, softening hearts, building mutual understanding, and celebrating our shared humanity.

We join with one another to lift our collective voices to declare that there are no enemies amongst us.

The Path Ahead

The past two years have included many sombre days, yet we have faith that we will build our path back to the light, when we build it together, in solidarity and respect with one another.

The Canadian Interfaith Conversation (CIC) is a cross-Canada alliance of faith communities, who have joined hands to advance mutual understanding between people of different beliefs and to address together issues of concern to the common good of all. Together, the CIC's forty-one member institutions embrace the majority of Canada's population.

— ends —