



Statement of the Military Ordinary on the 2026 CAF Reflection policy

On July 29 the 'Canadian Armed Forces Military Personnel Instructions 03/26 - Spiritual reflections in military settings' was released. There have been many opinions in the last week, offering either critiques or support for the instruction. As the Catholic Military Ordinariate we share many of the concerns that have been expressed.

The key premise of this new policy is stated in this way: "In military settings, spiritual reflections are inclusive public addresses to a group of individuals that nurture resilience by fostering meaning, purpose, and spiritual well-being, (Section 2)." Furthermore, "Spiritual reflections do not use religious specific language, including references to God, etc. (Section 2, note 1)."

It appears that some changes and refinements have been made in the language and application of certain aspects of the full instruction, as compared to earlier working drafts of the policy, and therefore time is required to study the details prior to issuing a formal position on this important matter. Meetings with the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and our ecumenical and interfaith partners in military chaplaincy are also ongoing. Without mentioning all of the important objections to this policy, a few critical preliminary observations can be offered.

The reason given for this prohibition of religious specific language and references to God is the requirement of state neutrality and the desire for maximum inclusivity. Though the intention is sound, the instruction is based on a fundamental misunderstanding, which ultimately negates its intended purposes. It also appears to be out of sync with the legal rationale of state neutrality.

This directive deals with a particular kind of address, namely "spiritual reflections." By the instructions' own definition, this means they deal with matters of "meaning, purpose, and spiritual well being." The instruction rightly recognizes that one can be spiritual or engage in spiritual reflection without being religious (Section 2, note 2). This is certainly true, but the instruction goes much further. It says chaplains and others giving spiritual reflections not only CAN give spiritual reflections without religious references, but that they MUST do so. For a great many people, chaplains and members alike, one cannot separate "meaning, purpose, and spiritual well being" from "God, etc." Yet they are required by this instruction to do precisely that. They are required to do so despite it being contrary to sincerely held beliefs

and the conviction of conscience. Is this not precisely the kind of coercion that the Charter is meant to protect us from?

This instruction is based on a false premise: simply because some belief systems do not profess the existence of God, or some other divine source, does not make them neutral. Atheistic systems of belief require as much assent of intellect and will (faith) as any theistic system of belief. They too profess particular beliefs about God (existence or non existence, nature, etc.), the world and its existence, values, as well as meaning and purpose. That is why Secular Humanists rightly have chaplains in the Canadian Armed Forces. They are one of many 'Spiritual Faith Traditions,' and are recognized as such by the government. There is no such thing as reflections on meaning, purpose and spiritual well being without philosophical and religious presuppositions. It is not the place of the government to adjudicate between them. That is the opposite of state neutrality.

Furthermore, this instruction appears to fail to adhere to the very rationale for state neutrality in religious and spiritual matters. As the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees, "Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms: (a) freedom of conscience and religion; (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression ..." (Fundamental Freedoms, 2). The scope of this fundamental freedom was addressed in 2015 in the Supreme Court decision "Mouvement laïque québécois v. Saguenay." The "Saguenay decision", decided that "the state must not interfere in religion and beliefs. The state must instead remain neutral in this regard, which means that it must neither favour nor hinder any belief, and the same holds true for non-belief. (I. Introduction [4])" The rationale for this decision flows thus, "The express provisions of the Canadian Charter and of the Quebec Charter, such as those regarding freedom of conscience and religion, must be given a generous and expansive interpretation. This is necessary to ensure that those to whom these charters apply enjoy the full benefit of the rights and freedoms, and that the purpose of the charters is attained."

What seems clear is that it is the favoured expression of one faith, to the exclusion of others, that is judged unconstitutional. The Court ruled in favour of an open secularism, the freedom of religious conscience and expression for all rather than limiting rights, and enforcing restrictions. In contrast, this instruction enforces a closed secularism which seeks to hinder and restrict public expressions of belief that some may find offensive. Even in this regard it fails. What of the offence given to many Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs, to name a few, who do not believe that meaning, purpose, and spiritual well being can be achieved without reference to a divine source?

It is freedom of religion or non religion that the Charter protects, not freedom from selective faith traditions that one disagrees with. Are mature tolerance and dialogue no longer values worth defending and promoting? Open secularism means allowing diverse voices, something easily achieved in a diverse interfaith chaplaincy. It fosters the free expression of the rich diversity of spiritual beliefs in our country, and chaplains are trained to do so in a respectful manner. The instruction is neither neutral nor inclusive.

I am saddened that the responsible military and political authorities consistently refused to have a substantive dialogue with concerned religious and spiritual leaders. Requests for meetings were uniformly declined for several years as this subject was under review. Other approaches from allied countries and suggestions from religious leaders were never openly discussed. A truly collaborative approach could have rendered a far more consistent and inclusive result.

As the Military Ordinariate studies the matter, I urge prayers for a fair and reasonable resolution of this issue. Please pray for our political and military leaders, for reconsideration of this instruction, and for openness to a truly inclusive dialogue.

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Ottawa, ON

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