A THREAT TO THE SUPREMACY OF CONSCIENCE

THE CATHOLIC ORGANIZATION FOR LIFE AND FAMILY'S RESPONSE

TO THE DRAFT POLICY OF THE COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS OF
ONTARIO “PROFESSIONAL OBLIGATIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS”

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario has proposed a modification in its operational principles which, if adopted, would severely restrict the rights of conscience of medical practitioners in Ontario. The implications of the proposed policy change would be devastating both for Ontario doctors who seek to inform their consciences by something other than College policy and for patients who would now find themselves compelled to confide their own care to practitioners who lack what they—as recipients of “care”—believe to be the requisite vision of the human person and the common good.

Freedom of conscience and of religion are guaranteed by Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms (section 2a). These rights, inalienable and universal, derive from the unique dignity of the human person, which constitutes the bedrock on which all human rights rest. Moral discernment demands the right use of reason, which impels us always to seek that which is right and good in order to do what we must and thus cultivate integrity and remain true to ourselves. The human person must always obey the certain judgment of his or her conscience.¹

By requiring Ontario doctors to provide information about and to facilitate access to procedures which they judge to be gravely immoral—and not in the best interest of their patients—the CPSO’s proposed policy would replace the supremacy of conscience with that of a self-appointed authority functioning outside the sphere of its competence. Let us recall that the medical establishment has often proposed practices which it subsequently repudiated—lobotomy and electric shock treatment to name two of many. The humanization of medicine has come about largely as the result of the efforts of doctors who have found themselves unable, as a matter of conscience, to uphold the medical orthodoxy du jour.
To suggest that any particular practitioner should be compelled to act in a way which contradicts his or her conscience, is to call into question the collective rights of conscience of medical practitioners in general. Taken to its logical conclusion, this position would negate any role the medical establishment itself might legitimately play in determining the ethical acceptability of a given medical procedure.

The Catholic Church articulates the necessity of upholding this universally recognized right of freedom of conscience and religion as follows: “. . . the freedom of conscience of all people, whatever their religion or philosophy of life” is to be defended; “no person [is to be] forced to act against conscience or be prevented from acting according to conscience”. Requiring medical doctors to bracket concerns informed by their particular religious or ethical views violates this fundamental principle. Furthermore, in the context of healthcare, it also risks turning them into mere dispensers of medical services whose good in a given situation is determined by persons other than themselves.

Human experience clearly demonstrates that "the effective recognition of the right to freedom of conscience and religious freedom is one of the highest goods and one of the most serious duties of every people that truly wishes to ensure the good of the individual and of society." For all of these reasons we ask the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario to reject the draft policy "Professional Obligations and Human Rights".

4 February 2015

COLF is co-sponsored by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus.

1 Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1800
2 Dignitatis Humanae (On the Right of the Person and of Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious, Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, 7 December 1965), no. 3.
3 Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, no. 553.