

2025.03 Strengthen Support for Chaplains to Provide Faith-Based Care to Members and Families of the Canadian Armed Forces

Resolved, that national council of The Catholic Women's League of Canada in 105th national annual meeting of members assembled urges the federal government to strengthen support through funding for resources, staffing and time for chaplains to provide faith-based care to the members and families of the Canadian Armed Forces through the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service and Military Ordinariate.

Brief: Strengthen Support for Chaplains to Provide Faith-Based Care to Members and Families of the Canadian Armed Forces

In an increasingly secular society, the role of chaplains within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the broader support network for service members and families has been steadily diminishing. It is not a function that can be accomplished by other mental health professionals. Chaplains in the CAF are mandated to provide spiritual, religious and pastoral care to CAF members and families, including conducting services and ceremonies of a religious nature (National Defence, Chaplain, The Royal). Documents and policies published over the past few years suggest this mandate is not well supported (National Defence, Minister; National Defence; National Defence, Spiritual Resilience). Therefore, it is important to urge the federal government to strengthen support through funding for resources, staffing and time for chaplains to provide faith-based care in the CAF through the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service (RCChS) and Military Ordinariate.

“The RCChS contributes to the operational effectiveness of the [CAF] by supporting the moral and spiritual wellbeing of military personnel and their families—domestically and internationally” (The Royal). The RCChS is recognized as integral to the mission of the CAF (The Royal). The physical and psychological injuries that can occur through military service are well known; however, moral injury and conflicts of conscience, are injuries to the spirit, which require a particular approach for healing. Belonging to a faith group can be a significant foundation for spiritual resiliency. Chaplains are a resource within the military who can foster the development of spiritual resiliency (National Defence, Defence Team; National Defence, Spiritual Resilience). They should be resourced adequately to allow for spiritual refreshment and faith-based professional development.

The Roman Catholic Church recognized the particular needs of military members and families and created a diocese led by a bishop, the military ordinary, who is appointed by the pope (Directory; Ecclesiastical). Catholic chaplains must be able to remain faithful to the tenets of the church and basic expectations of the Military Ordinariate while fulfilling the duties of a chaplain (Directory). Catholic chaplains are thus governed by the military chain of command, the chaplain general and the military ordinary.

The Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination with a focus on Anti-Indigenous and Anti-Black Racism, LGBTQ2+ Prejudice, Gender Bias, and White Supremacy – Final Report in its recommendations for re-defining the chaplaincy sees the values of the church in conflict with the value of inclusivity in the CAF such that some chaplains should not be in the RCChS (National Defence, Minister; National Defence, Review). This conflicts with the goal of equitable spiritual care for all members of the CAF. The Catholic faith tradition is represented within 39% of the Canadian population and within 27% of CAF members surveyed for the Review of the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service. Of the surveyed CAF members, 61% reported to be members of a faith tradition (National Defence, Review).

The chaplain general’s directive on spiritual reflection expresses a need to adopt the principle of state neutrality by not favouring one faith group or belief system over another (National Defence); however, one belief system should not be excluded to satisfy the principles of neutrality. “The essential work of armed forces’ chaplains of all religious and philosophical traditions must be protected and encouraged, all while upholding freedom of religion and conscience for chaplains and those whom they serve” (Bennett).

Given the importance of chaplains in supporting the operational readiness of the CAF, they require funding for necessary resources, staffing and time to fulfill the obligations of the CAF and the church to fully minister to those who serve the country.

Strengthen Support for Chaplains to Provide Faith-Based Care to Members and Families of the Canadian Armed Forces

Works Cited

Bennett, Andrew P.W. *CARDUS Presentation to the Standing Committee on National Defence, House of Commons, Regarding a Study of Canadian Armed Forces Health and Transition Services Opening Remarks*. 2023, cardus.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Cardus-Presentation-to-Parliamentary-Committee-on-Military-Chaplaincy.pdf.

Directory of the Roman Catholic Military Ordinariate of Canada. Roman Catholic Military Ordinariate of Canada, 2023, files.ecatholic.com/24851/documents/2023/3/Directory%20-%202023.pdf?t=1680052772000.

Ecclesiastical Circumscriptions Military Ordinariate. "Military Ordinariate – Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops." *Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops*, www.cccb.ca/the-catholic-church-in-canada/ecclesiastical-circumscriptions/military-ordinariate/. Accessed 23 June 2025.

National Defence. *Chaplain General Direction on Chaplain's Spiritual Reflection in Public Settings*. 2023, canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/benefits-military/health-support/chaplain/chaplain-general-direction-on-chaplain-spiritual-reflection-in-public-settings.html.

---. *The Defence Team Total Health and Wellness Strategy*. 2023, canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/total-health-and-wellness-strategy.htmlChaplain.

---. *Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination with a focus on Anti-Indigenous and Anti-Black Racism, LGBTQ2+ Prejudice, Gender Bias, and White Supremacy – Final Report*, canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/mnd-advisory-panel-systemic-racism-discrimination-final-report-jan-2022.html.

---. "Chaplain Services." *Queen's Regulations and Orders*. 2 Nov. 2018, pp. 330-37, canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/queens-regulations-orders.html. Accessed 23 June 2025.

--- "The Royal Canadian Chaplain Service." *Canada.ca*, 28 May 2025, canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/programs/royal-canadian-chaplain.html.

---. "Review of the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service - Canada.ca." *Canada.ca*, 2021, www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/audit-evaluation/review-royal-canadian-chaplain-service.html.

--- "Spiritual Resilience in the CAF." *Canada.ca*, 12 Sept. 2023, canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/benefits-military/health-support/spiritual-resilience-caf.html.

World Health Organization. "The Geneva Charter for Well-Being." *Www.who.int*, 2021, www.who.int/publications/m/item/the-geneva-charter-for-well-being.

Action Plan: Strengthen Support for Chaplains to Provide Faith-Based Care to Members and Families of the Canadian Armed Forces

1. Write letters to the minister of national defence, minister of veteran affairs and associate minister of national defence asking the federal government to:
 - reinforce the position of chaplain in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) so they can continue to foster the spiritual, religious and pastoral care of CAF members and their families; and,
 - strengthen support for the Catholic chaplains assuring that they are able to remain faithful to the guidelines of the Catholic church and the basic expectations of the Military Ordinariate.
 - retract the “Chaplain General Direction on Chaplain’s Spiritual Reflection in Public Settings” dated 11 October 2023.
 - not accept the recommendations of the *Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination with a focus on Anti-Indigenous and Anti-Black Racism, LGBTQ2+ Prejudice, Gender Bias, and White Supremacy – Final Report* regarding Part III(6) Re-Defining the Chaplaincy.
2. Educate members on the ways that the federal government has eroded the structure of the chaplaincy within the CAF and provision of support for the Catholic faithful.
3. Monitor the federal government’s response to this issue.