

## Letter to the Editor from Bishop Donald Bolen, December 2013

As Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon I have been following the discussion about prayer at civic events, reading whatever I can on the subject, and raising it as a conversation topic over the past weeks.

It seems to me we've got ourselves cornered in with this discussion, in part because we aren't asking the bigger question which would provide a framework for issues pertaining to prayer at public events. The more foundational question is this: how can religious traditions play a constructive role in a healthy pluralist society? That's a question which should preoccupy us as we look to the future.

I've read carefully the proposed 'appropriate greetings' that city officials recently discussed, and am appreciative of their efforts. If I was at a civic event, and in lieu of a prayer, someone spoke one of these words of thanks, I would be comfortable. Especially the longer greeting is inviting, in that it acknowledges the diversity of religious and philosophical perspectives among those gathered, and proceeds to rejoice in being together and to express gratitude. But I find the notion that we have a series of 'acceptable' pre-determined words of thanks - these and no others - an impoverished way to move forward, a banal way of living the rich diversity of spirituality and traditions which make up the population. I think city officials were wise not to move quickly down this path.

A few weeks ago I also read about a proposal from Mr. Solo for a pre-meal thanks, and I was comfortable with that text too, especially in its effort to draw our attention to those around us who are in need. Again, what I take issue with is the notion that this one formula might suffice for all occasions. The same news story spoke of his discomfort with a moment of silence, and quoted him as saying that silence is an attempt to get people to pray, and that it "violates the freedom from religion inherent to freedom of religion". I don't know if this quotation is in context or accurate. It would be interesting to discuss the distinction between 'freedom not to adhere to a religious tradition' and 'freedom *from* religion'. The question that immediately surfaces is how in a healthy pluralist society the freedom not to be a religious adherent doesn't trump every public expression of religion. In defending the right to religious freedom, the International Declaration of Human Rights notes that this right includes freedom to change one's religion or belief, and "freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private," to manifest one's religion or belief "in teaching, practice, worship and observance".

The bigger question facing us is, how do we live meaningfully together, building a healthy society, given our rich diversity? From a Catholic perspective, proposals coming forward seem to be working with a 'lowest common denominator' mentality. "Let's find a way to give expression to something everybody can agree on." As that set of values gets smaller and smaller, the chance of saying much of anything meaningful together shrinks.

Instead of coming up with a pre-fabricated solution which may quickly grow mundane, many people I've spoken with in recent days have encouraged that we be more intentional about addressing the larger question of the place of religion in public life. We would all benefit from creative reflection and imagining about what a healthy pluralist society with creative place for religious traditions would look like. I'm working with some representatives from diverse religious and philosophical perspectives in holding a public discussion about the subject on Monday, Dec. 9, 2013 at the public library downtown beginning at 7:30 p.m., with the hope of stimulating further public discourse about a matter which is of importance to all of us.

- Bishop Donald Bolen