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## **We must bring Christian values to public square to build just society**

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Over the past several years, many of us have noticed how each year Christmas becomes more secularized by the culture and society we live in. Decades ago, no one would blink an eye at wishing someone Merry Christmas, or referring to the break period as Christmas break, having a manger scene even in public locations, or singing familiar Christmas hymns in our public schools.

Today, in the politically charged and secular world in which we find ourselves, a few people in the media, in businesses, and among atheists and agnostics, want to impose on the vast majority a move away from Christmas and from the Judeo-Christian values which our country was founded on.

There are clear attacks today on religious freedom, as the "religion" of atheism and relativism are imposed on a society that moves away from the values of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as understood by our forefathers, to a new meaning given to those values by secularism that has no grounding in truth or in the discernment of truth.

There are even those who raise questions about the meaning of "conscience" and the primacy of conscience when it comes to the free exercise of religion and adherence to one's beliefs when they contradict the values of society or what is imposed by governments.

We have only to look at Nazism and Communism and the manner in which they violated religious freedom to see how similar it is in today's world with the desire to redefine human life and its origins to justify abortion, to redefine marriage to justify same sex unions, and to redefine medical care to justify abortion, contraception, and euthanasia and then to impose these new definitions on people of faith and diverse religious entities.

As Catholics, we have a responsibility in the words of the Gospel and quoted by the Second Vatican Council to be a leaven in society and to bring the Christian message and values to the public square in order to build a just society. Recently, at the International Conference on the Freedom of Religion and Discrimination against Christians, with participants from Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Islamic communities, it was noted that the most persecuted followers of any religion are Christians.

"The participants attributed two main reasons to the increase in attacks: the loss of Christian roots and European secularism where secular authorities are increasingly marginalizing religion from public life; and Islamic radicalism, exacerbated by aggressive missionary work by representatives of different non-Christian sects, and distortions of Christian teaching.

"Interestingly, it took a Muslim participant to highlight the role that politics also plays in igniting clashes between religions, according to the Web site persecution.org. Mufti Mohammed Gali Khuzin, of the Russian Association of Islamic Accord, noted that the two major religious conflicts of today are between Muslims and Jews and between Muslims and Christians. Instigated by third parties, these conflicts yield a lot of benefit for the secular

consumer society, which cashes in fabulously on them, he said" ("U.S. Might Turn Blind Eye to Religious Freedom While Christians Suffer More Persecution Than Any Other Faith" by Edward Pentin, ZENIT News Agency).

The bishops in the United States have set Religious Freedom as one of the main priorities for bishops to address in the upcoming years. This is due to the attempted imposition by the United States federal government to require health care plans to include prescriptions for artificial contraception which include abortifacients.

In this month's New Earth on page 20 is an ad, signed by local Catholic health care providers, addressing this matter. I encourage you to review the ad and the concerns which it addresses. Our Respect Life office, as well as the North Dakota Catholic Conference, will be addressing these concerns more in the weeks and months ahead.

I want to take this time, too, to wish all of you a very blessed Christmas and New Year. Thank you for your support of your parishes and the diocese and most especially your support for the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Church.

May we never tire or become complacent in our proclamation of the Gospel even in the midst of a hostile society. May we be more and more like John the Baptist who pointed to the true light of the world, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the solution for today's problems in our culture and in the world and for the challenges we face as we address the erosion of religious freedom.

I encourage you in the months ahead to be attentive to these concerns and to be active and vocal in expressing the truth of the Gospel and our faith. May Mary, the Mother of the Incarnate Word and our mother, intercede for you and your families during this Christmas season and throughout the New Year!