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EDUCATION - Canada's Supreme Court has unanimously ruled that Catholic schools in Quebec must be allowed to teach from a Catholic viewpoint during a state-mandated religion and ethics class.

"To tell a Catholic school how to explain its faith undermines the liberty of the members of its community who have chosen to give effect to the collective dimension of their religious beliefs by participating in a denominational school," the Canadian Supreme Court wrote in its 7-0 March 19 decision.

The province of Quebec in July 2008 introduced a mandatory religion and ethics class and required it to be taught without regard to any religion. Even in Catholic schools, teachers were barred from voicing a preference for any faith.

The rules would mean that if a student in the class asked about a Catholic perspective on a religion, a teacher would not be allowed to answer.

Additionally, the course must be taught regardless of whether a school receives state funds.

The Jesuit-run Loyola High School in Montreal challenged the law.

"This ruling makes clear that the government is on dangerous ground if it seeks to force a private organization to act in a manner completely contrary to its deepest faith convictions," Canadian attorney Gerald Chipeur, who represented the school, said March 19.

The court's decision means that "faith-based schools are free to operate according to the faith they teach and espouse."

Chipeur's law firm, Miller Thompson LLP, is allied with Alliance Defending Freedom International, the global organization of the U.S.-based religious freedom legal group.

ADF International's executive director, Benjamin Bull, said the government "cannot require a private, religious school to tell its students that their faith is no more valid than a myriad of other, conflicting faith traditions."

"All faith-based organizations must be free to speak and act consistently with their faith, or religious freedom is not at all free."

The court ruling noted that the requirement interferes with parents' right to transmit their

Catholic faith to their children, “not because it requires neutral discussion of other faiths and ethical systems, but because it prevents a Catholic discussion of Catholicism.” Transmission of religious faith is “an essential ingredient of the vitality of a religious community.”

Undermining lawful religious institutions’ character and disrupting religious communities’ vitality represents “a profound interference with religious freedom,” the court said.

While the court’s ruling against the province requirement was unanimous, the justices were split 4-3 on how to resolve the situation. The majority ruled that the matter should be sent back to Quebec’s Minister of Education, meaning that Loyola High School may now reapply to the Education Ministry for an exemption to teach the program. The ministry’s decision must be guided by the court ruling, CBC News reports.

Benoît Boucher, who represented Quebec’s Attorney General, said the ruling shows that it is should be mandatory for all students in the province to have a thorough understanding of diversity.

Source: Catholic News Agency, March 20, 2015